

Sri Lanka's president remains silent after sacking the government

K.Ratnayake
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Two days after taking the unprecedented step of dismissing the government, Sri Lanka's president Chandrika Kumaratunga is yet to make any public statement justifying her actions. Her decision, which will mean a third general election in less than four years, has plunged the country into political turmoil, triggering criticisms from business leaders, media commentators and government ministers. Yet although she initiated the crisis, Kumaratunga has maintained a studied silence.

The president made her move late on Saturday night without informing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe or any of his ministers of her intentions. At 10 p.m. one of her aides, escorted by presidential security guards, took the presidential order to the heavily-guarded government presses. The official gazette notification that parliament was dissolved was finally released at midnight.

The formal gazette notice, however, provided no explanation for the decision. It simply stated that the president was exercising her executive powers as vested under the constitution to dissolve parliament and call fresh general elections. While in opposition Kumaratunga and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) regularly denounced the executive presidential powers as dictatorial. Now, as president, she has used these same autocratic powers to dismiss the United National Front (UNF) government while it still had a majority on the floor of parliament.

To date Kumaratunga has left the defence of her actions to her advisers. D.M. Jayaratna, whom the president installed as minister for post and telecommunication just hours before dissolving parliament, told a gathering in Kegalla that she had only taken the decision "after much thought" in order to "save the nation."

The same justification was given when Kumaratunga abruptly seized control of three key ministries in November, provoking a protracted political standoff with the government. The president and her allies accused Wickremesinghe of undermining the country's security and paving the way for "dividing the country" in peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

But since then, the defence and interior ministries have been under Kumaratunga's control. Moreover the peace talks have been stalled since last April. What Kumaratunga has been responding to—both then and now—are the demands of the military hierarchy and Sinhala chauvinists who are opposed to any concessions to the Tamil minority to end the country's two decade-long civil war.

Less than three weeks ago Kumaratunga gave the go ahead for an alliance with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a party based on Sinhala chauvinism that has been denouncing the UNF government for betraying the country and demanding the president oust Wickremesinghe. In elections during the past three years, the JVP has exploited widespread popular hostility towards the major parties, both of which have implemented economic restructuring reforms that have seriously eroded living standards.

The SLFP's alliance with the JVP was explicitly based on driving the Wickremesinghe government from office. Significantly, Kumaratunga's dissolution of parliament on Saturday came just one day after the Commissioner of Elections formally registered the new JVP-SLFP formation as a political party and approved its symbol of a butterfly for electoral purposes.

The alliance was made in the face of significant hostility within the SLFP. Some 45 of its parliamentary representatives went so far as to sign a petition

opposing Kumaratunga's actions. The fact that she went ahead is a sure indication that she is basing herself less and less on parliamentary and electoral considerations and more directly upon her executive powers backed, in the final analysis, by the military.

In the face of her continued silence the *World Socialist Web Site* telephoned Kumaratunga's media advisor Janadasa Peiris for clarification. When asked why the president had failed to explain her actions, Peiris answered defensively that she would "most probably" appear on national television tonight. But he was not certain.

The president's silence underscores the fact that her Bonapartist moves are the outcome of deep divisions within ruling circles.

For the last three months, corporate leaders in Colombo have been insisting that Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe reach a compromise and cooperate in ensuring that peace talks resume and a deal be worked out with the LTTE to end the war. Behind the scenes, the major powers, especially the US, have been pressuring the president to do likewise.

On the other hand, any agreement with the LTTE is bitterly opposed by the Sinhala chauvinists, including those within her own party who demanded an alliance with the JVP, as well as powerful sections of the armed forces.

If successful, the president's latest actions will result in a SLFP-JVP government that will, in all likelihood, terminate peace negotiations with the LTTE, plunging the country back into war. Kumaratunga's quandary is how to justify this course of action to her former business backers and to the major powers, especially Washington. Little wonder it has taken her so long to make a statement.

In any event, actions speak louder than words. Kumaratunga's constitutional coup speaks volumes about the depths of the economic and social contradictions wracking Sri Lankan society. It constitutes a clear warning that the Sri Lankan ruling class is rapidly dispensing with the old forms of parliamentary democracy.



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