

# Sri Lankan president dismisses government in constitutional coup

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In what amounts to a constitutional coup, Sri Lanka's president Chandrika Kumaratunga used her autocratic executive powers late Saturday night to dissolve parliament and call fresh general elections—four years ahead of schedule. In doing so, she effectively sacked the United National Front (UNF) government even though it commanded a parliamentary majority. Nominations have been set for February 17 to 23 and the election—the third in less than four years—is to be held on April 2.

Kumaratunga's announcement is the culmination of a series of anti-democratic moves that began on November 4 when she seized control of three key ministries—defence, interior and mass media—prorogued parliament for two weeks and moved to impose a state of emergency. While she was compelled to retreat under the pressure of the major powers, particularly Washington, the president refused to hand back the ministries and continued to accuse Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of betraying the country in peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The result was an unsustainable standoff with the business of government in Colombo at a virtual standstill. By unilaterally dismissing the government, Kumaratunga is hoping that the recently formed alliance between her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) will win the election and break the deadlock. Such an outcome, however, carries the very real danger that the present ceasefire with the LTTE will rapidly break down and plunge the country back into civil war.

The anti-democratic character of Kumaratunga's decision is underscored by the manner in which it was carried out. She broke with the norms of Sri Lankan parliamentary democracy, which require that a no-confidence motion be moved and passed on the floor of the house where the UNF government holds an outright majority. Instead she dismissed the government late at night by presidential fiat without even notifying Wickremesinghe of her intentions.

Just an hour before she dissolved parliament, the president installed two of her top political henchmen—Lakshman Kadirgamar and D.M. Jayaratne—as minister of information and telecommunications and minister of posts and communication respectively. She has also informed Wickremesinghe that the

caretaker cabinet should be restricted to a maximum of 15 ministers—a move which means over half of the present government ministers will be dismissed. The decision strengthens her hand in the caretaker administration which she formally chairs. As a result, the key levers of the state apparatus are divided between the president and the government as the country enters a highly volatile election campaign.

Kumaratunga's actions, which she is yet to publicly explain, reek of contempt for democratic custom. In her Independence Day speech on February 4, the president gave no hint that she was about to dismiss the government. Last Friday she even sent her official Mano Tittawela to meet with the prime minister's representative Malik Samarawickrama for talks to explore an end to the three-month deadlock.

The president's decision has exacerbated tensions in her own party and with its Peoples Alliance (PA) partners over the JVP alliance. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) issued a statement last Friday criticising those pushing “the president to a hasty dissolution of parliament” as “acting solely in their narrow and sectarian interests”. It called instead for a deal between the UNF and PA to restart stalled peace talks with the LTTE.

By calling fresh elections, Kumaratunga will be compelled to rely even more closely on the political forces that backed her actions last November—the military hierarchy and the JVP, both of which are deeply hostile to the so-called peace process and any concessions to the LTTE. The election will thrust the JVP, which has been able to capitalise on growing disaffection with both of the major parties, into even greater prominence and ensure that the campaign is dominated by Sinhala chauvinism and physical violence.

The SLFP-JVP alliance seeks to appeal to the dissatisfaction and hostility engendered by the government's economic restructuring measures that have produced a growing wave of strikes and protests by workers, small farmers and students. At the same time, however, the alliance is incapable of fulfilling its promises to improve living standards and is thus compelled to resort to communal politics. Its platform begins by denouncing Wickremesinghe for betraying the nation to the LTTE and creating conditions for “the division of the country”.

The dominant sections of business have publicly opposed the

SLFP-JVP alliance and repeatedly urged Kumaratunga not to call a snap election. Corporate leaders fear not only the instability of the campaign but also the danger that an SLFP-JVP government will spell the end of the peace process and a return to war. Investment prospects and business activity in Colombo received a sharp boost following the signing of the ceasefire agreement in early 2002. This came to an abrupt halt following Kumaratunga's moves against the government last November.

Just last week, the Joint Business Forum (Jbiz), an umbrella group of Sri Lanka's commercial and industrial chambers, presented a set of proposals to the president and prime minister calling for them to reach a compromise. These included a one-year working arrangement on a "common agenda" with the president keeping the defence ministry and the prime minister retaining powers to maintain the ceasefire and conduct negotiations with the LTTE. Business leaders met with the prime minister last Friday.

With the exception of the state-owned newspapers, TV and radio, which are under Kumaratunga's control, the media has been sharply critical of the president's decision. The *Sunday Times* editorial declared that her actions were "tantamount to dictatorship." The *Island*, which in the past has promoted the JVP as a counterweight to the LTTE, also denounced the decision in strong terms. The answer to the current political crisis, its editorial stated, was "not to bring in a set of delinquent fanatics who have brought misery to the country twice before."

The reference to the JVP's record recalls its activities in the late 1980s when the party denounced attempts to end the civil war through the Indo-Lanka Accord and unleashed gangs of armed thugs on political parties and trade unions that refused to back its "patriotic" campaigns. Hundreds of workers, union officials, political leaders and others were murdered in these fascist attacks.

The major powers, which want an end to the Sri Lankan civil war to further their own strategic and economic interests in the region, have also been insisting on an end to the political crisis. The *Daily Mirror* reported on February 5, that Japanese special envoy Yasushi Akashi and US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had been calling for "swift actions" to expedite "the progress of the peace negotiations." The two met for discussions last Tuesday at the US ambassador's residence in Tokyo.

Nervous about the hostility of the major powers, Kumaratunga has in the past attempted to reassure them of her support for the peace talks. But the political logic of her alliance with the JVP means that her ability to maintain a precarious balancing act is rapidly coming to a close. She cannot continue to pledge fealty to the major powers and the peace process on the one hand, while joining the JVP and other Sinhala extremists in denouncing it as a betrayal on the other.

The government has not challenged Kumaratunga's actions

and is preparing for elections. Wickremesinghe cancelled his visit to Thailand saying he could not lead such a delegation as "caretaker prime minister." A UNF spokesman Malik Samarawickrama told Reuters "we are sure the people will give us another mandate" based on "bringing peace" and "reviving economy". The UNF is counting on widespread popular hostility to any return to war to win the election. Such a result would resolve none of the issues of the present standoff and would heighten the country's political crisis.

At the heart of the present political conflict is an intractable contradiction. For more than half a century, the Sri Lankan ruling class has continually exploited anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class and to buttress its own political base of support. Both of the major parties—the SLFP and Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP)—are mired in Sinhala chauvinism and bear direct responsibility for the events that produced the country's 20-year civil war costing at least 60,000 lives.

Having backed the war, the dominant sections of big business now regard it as an economic disaster. The conflict has left the country's infrastructure in a shambles and placed intolerable pressures on the financial system. More fundamentally, it has largely sidelined Sri Lanka while the region, India in particular, has become more closely integrated into the processes of globalised production. However, while economics may dictate the need for peace, two decades of war has created powerful entrenched interests—in the military, the state bureaucracy, the Buddhist hierarchy and the major political parties—that profit from its continuation.

Kumaratunga's decision is not simply the aberrant behaviour of an individual but reveals that the 50-year period in which the Sri Lankan ruling class relied on the methods of parliamentary combination and manoeuvre has come to a close. Such are the economic and social tensions today that the bourgeoisie is being driven to adopt openly dictatorial methods to shore up its rule.



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