

Sri Lankan prime minister passively accepts his dismissal

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28 February 2004

For anyone who believed that Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe would challenge the undemocratic dismissal of his government by President Chandrika Kumaratunga on February 7, his performance last Sunday would have been a disappointment. Speaking before the convention of his right-wing United National Party (UNP) in central Colombo, he mildly criticised the president's actions but insisted that the party could do nothing but participate in the snap election on April 2.

Kumaratunga's decision to sack a government with a parliamentary majority was unprecedented. As well as dissolving parliament, she installed two of her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leaders in the caretaker cabinet and removed 39 non-cabinet ministers. Her actions followed months of political deadlock after she arbitrarily seized control of three key ministries last November, claiming the United National Front (UNF) coalition government was endangering "national security" through peace negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

After hearing of his government's dismissal while at a holiday resort, Wickremesinghe reportedly shouted: "The lady must be crazy." But for 10 days, he made no public statement. As the *Sunday Times* political columnist noted: "The UNF has still hardly been able to react to the dissolution in a cohesive way except to issue few statements here and there and that too at the behest of a few persistent press reporters."

Wickremesinghe finally broke his silence when he appeared on private TV channels on February 17 and then at the UNP convention on February 22. He complained that his attempt at "cohabitation" rule with Kumaratunga after his government took power in December 2001 had failed. When Kumaratunga seized the three ministries in November, he said, she had tried

to win over government ministers. When that did not happen, she dissolved the parliament.

"It was an anti-democratic action," the prime minister declared. "She didn't have any democratic rights as the government got the latest mandate in the 2001 election." But Wickremesinghe made clear that he would not challenge Kumaratunga's actions in any way—either through the courts or by mounting a political campaign against his ousting. He feebly appealed to voters to give his UNF coalition another mandate to form a stable government.

Wickremesinghe did not answer the obvious question: even if the UNF wins a majority at the April 2 poll, what is to prevent Kumaratunga dismissing the government again? She has established a formal alliance with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has mounted a chauvinist campaign against the so-called peace process and is opposed to any deal with the LTTE. If the UNF is returned and attempts to restart stalled talks with the LTTE, it will face the same accusations of "betrayal" and calls for its removal.

Wickremesinghe's passive acceptance of Kumaratunga's actions does not signify a personal failing, as some media analysts have suggested. Rather it reflects a recognition throughout ruling circles that, under conditions of acute social and political tensions, the old forms of parliamentary rule have been exhausted. Wickremesinghe fears that any campaign against Kumaratunga could unleash social forces that would rapidly slip out of the control of both of the major parties.

These concerns have been reflected in media commentary that has praised Wickremesinghe for his stance. An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* entitled "Emulate Premier's example" hailed the prime minister for avoiding "vitriolic attacks on his

opponents” and “his policy of cultured politics”. “The country desperately needs maturity and statesmanship, from its politicians. Only then will the people be spared such meaningless political thunder and fury,” the newspaper commented.

The UNP is no more committed to democratic rights than Kumaratunga and the SLFP. The autocratic powers used by Kumaratunga were entrenched in the constitution in 1978 by a UNP government headed by President J.R. Jayewardene. And it is just as mired in Sinhala chauvinism as the SLFP and JVP. As a result, even though the UNF has pursued peace talks with the LTTE at the behest of big business and the major powers, it is acutely sensitive to charges of “betraying the nation”.

Wickremesinghe boasted to the UNP convention that the government had “restored the country” and was “just about to build the country” before being thrown out of office. He declared that if reelected he would create “a new Sri Lanka” in six years. “In 2004 we will create new jobs not only in private sector but also in public sector... We want to help farmers, education,” he said.

Knowing that the overwhelming majority of the population does not want a return to war, Wickremesinghe paints the UNF as the “peace party”. It should be recalled, however, that the UNP was not only directly responsible for fomenting the anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 that precipitated the conflict, but conducted the war for more than a decade. Kumaratunga was able to win the 1994 election by promising peace, improved living standards and an end to the UNP anti-democratic methods. None of the pledges were carried out.

Moreover, the so-called peace process is intimately bound up with the IMF and World Bank’s demands for sweeping economic restructuring. After two decades of war, big business and the major powers want peace in order to transform the island into a cheap labour platform for global capital. The market reforms carried out under the previous Peoples Alliance government led by Kumaratunga have been extended under the UNF, leading to a deepening social divide between rich and poor.

The UNF government has continued to privatise and downsize the state sector, destroying tens of thousands of jobs. Expenditure on public health and education has

been cut and subsidies for fertilisers ended, severely affecting poor farmers. Even as the poorest sections of society have been hit by skyrocketing inflation, the government has given tax concessions and amnesties to the rich. The UNF mobilised the police and military in an effort to defeat strikes by workers in the public hospitals and railways.

These policies, which have been pursued by both of the major parties, have produced a social and political time bomb in Sri Lanka. Neither Kumaratunga nor Wickremesinghe can satisfy the basic needs and aspirations of ordinary working people. The widespread hostility to the two parties has been exploited by the populist demagogues of the JVP to foment communal hatred and create the climate for a return to war.

In these conditions of crisis, Kumaratunga, with the backing of the entire political establishment, including Wickremesinghe and the UNF, is turning to extra-parliamentary methods of rule, which will above all be directed against the working class.



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