

New Sri Lankan parliament descends into chaos

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The opening session of the new Sri Lankan parliament on Thursday has again exposed the deep divisions wracking the ruling elites. Convened to appoint a speaker, normally nothing more than a formality, the house descended into chaos as the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and opposition United National Front (UNF) vied for the post. After more than nine hours and three rounds of voting, the UPFA candidate D.E.W. Gunasekera, a veteran member of the Sri Lankan Communist Party, lost by one vote to W.J.M. Lokubandara from the UNF.

The vote was a crucial test for President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who arbitrarily dismissed the previous UNF government in February. The UPFA, a coalition of her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and several smaller parties, won only 105 seats in the 225-seat parliament at the April 2 election. Prior to the first parliamentary session, both the government and opposition had been engaged in a frenzied round of horse-trading to secure a majority.

The president and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa sought the support of a number of smaller parties, including the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). However, the CWC and SLMC, which are based among the country's Tamil and Muslim minorities, were hostile to joining a coalition that included the Sinhala chauvinist JVP.

The JHU, which fielded Buddhist monks in the elections and openly advocates a state based on Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy, refused to join the UPFA, but agreed to support the government from the outside. One indication of the ruthless behind-the-scenes manoeuvring was the "disappearance" of two of the JHU MPs. Kumaratunga herself had to visit the JHU office on Wednesday to placate JHU leaders and deny rumours that an SLFP leader was keeping the two incommunicado.

A considerable amount was at stake in the election of a speaker for the closely-divided house. The speaker has a casting vote in the event of a tie. Significantly, if an impeachment motion is passed against the president, it is the speaker who decides if it should be sent to the Supreme Court for ratification. The speaker also automatically becomes head of the constitutional council, which makes appointments to a series of powerful commissions that oversee the police, public service, judiciary and the elections office.

Kumaratunga is seeking to amend the constitution, including the present proportional voting system that favours small parties. Under the guise of abolishing the powerful and unpopular post of executive president, she is seeking to entrench herself as prime minister. If parliament is transformed into a constituent assembly, the speaker would become its chairman with wide powers to direct proceedings. The UNF and a number of minor parties have opposed the constitutional amendments.

These tensions underpinned Thursday's parliamentary session. After the first round of voting for the speaker resulted in a tied vote, the house descended into uproar. The two "disappeared" JHU monks had reappeared and apparently voted with the government. Government MPs attempted to persuade the remaining JHU MPs to abandon their stance of neutrality. When that failed, UPFA MPs hurled abuse and books at the JHU monks and crowded around the ballot box to prevent the opposition from voting.

The second round was declared invalid after the UPFA objected to opposition MPs showing their marked ballots to UNF leaders. In the third and final vote, the JHU directed two of its members to vote with the opposition so as to "neutralise" the vote of its two renegades. The SLMC, CWC and Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) coalition of Tamil parties, also voted with the UNF to give

Lokubandara the position.

An editorial entitled “Lajja!” [Shame] in the *Island* newspaper on Friday reflected the exasperation in ruling circles. Bemoaning the lack of parliamentary decorum, it declared: “How can a set of lawmakers who cannot at least elect their Speaker in a decent manner be entrusted with the task of controlling the destiny of a nation?... It is a supreme irony that the odious scenes that opened a new low in Sri Lanka’s parliamentary history were created by the same politicians who hardly three weeks ago promised to usher in a new political culture.”

The uproar in parliament, however, reflects more than poor manners. Under pressure from big business and the major powers, the previous UNF government engaged in peace talks with the LTTE with the aim of transforming the island into a new cheap labour platform for foreign capital. But the “peace process” has profoundly destabilised the entire political establishment in Colombo, which has relied for decades on Sinhala chauvinism to shore up its rule by dividing working people along communal lines.

Last November, urged on by the JVP and the military, Kumaratunga seized control of three ministries, including defence, accusing the UNF of undermining national security by granting too many concessions to the LTTE. After attempts to reach a compromise failed, she sacked the government. But the president now confronts the same intractable dilemmas as the previous government: how to hold peace talks with the LTTE without incurring the opposition of Sinhala chauvinist organisations on which she is dependent; and how to implement a deeply unpopular program of economic restructuring.

Moreover, the UPFA government’s position remains weak. After losing the vote for speaker, SLFP general secretary Maithripala Sirisena tried to put on a brave face, declaring it “will not affect the stability of the government.” He and JVP leader Wimal Weerawansa denounced the UNF in chauvinist terms for relying on the votes of the pro-LTTE TNA and branded the JHU as “UNF agents”. But in attacking the JHU, the government is undermining the one parliamentary faction that has promised to provide conditional support and thus prevent a vote of no confidence.

During a press conference yesterday, JHU leaders accused the UPFA of trying to woo them with money and warned that its “untoward attitude” towards their organisation would result in the withdrawal of any support for the government. Even if the JHU continues to back the government, the events of the last fortnight have

revealed it to be a highly unstable formation. The JHU executive is in the process of expelling the two monks who failed to follow party discipline.

The UPFA itself is also divided. Immediately after the election, sharp differences emerged between the JVP and SLFP over the allocation of ministries. Kumaratunga sought to marginalise the JVP by appointing a large cabinet and removing key responsibilities from the posts set aside for the JVP. The JVP responded by declaring it would not join the cabinet. No agreement has been reached and no JVP ministers have been sworn in.

As for the UNF, it is clearly in no mood for compromise. Its leaders reacted with jubilation to the victory on Thursday, declaring they were now in a position to control the government. A former UNF minister boasted: “They are at our mercy... Alliance leaders have no option but to cooperate with us.”

At the conclusion of its despairing editorial, the *Island* newspaper repeated its longstanding plea for unity between the major parties as the only way out of the present political crisis. After denouncing the proceedings in parliament, it stated rather limply: “There is a lesson for the UPFA and UNF if they are desirous of drawing any: cooperate for the sake of the country.”

For the working class, however, the message is more sinister. The breakdown of parliamentary forms of rule is giving way to increasingly autocratic methods for imposing the agenda of the ruling class. In seizing the ministries and sacking the government, Kumaratunga has already demonstrated her willingness to dispense with democratic norms. A protracted parliamentary impasse will only see the ruling elites press for extra-parliamentary measures, based on the military and state apparatus, directed above all against workers and the rural poor.



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