

# Sri Lankan elections foreshadow a deepening political crisis

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More than 12 million Sri Lankan voters go to the polls today amid a continuing political crisis. Whatever the immediate outcome, the election has set the stage for an intensification of the bitter infighting within the country's political elites that led to the poll in the first place.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga took the unprecedented step of dismissing the elected government on February 7, after months of wrangling following her seizure of three key ministries—defence, interior and media—last November. Despite intense local and international pressure for a compromise, Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe were unable to reach any agreement.

The central issue at stake is the country's 20-year civil war. After coming to office in December 2001, Wickremesinghe's United National Front (UNF) signed a ceasefire with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and pressed ahead with talks on a powersharing deal based on limited autonomy for the island's North and East. The major powers and big business have backed the so-called peace process as a means of ending a conflict that has become an obstacle to their economic and strategic interests in the region.

The war, however, has created powerful entrenched interests among layers of business and the state apparatus. Pushed on by the military and various Sinhala extremist organisations, Kumaratunga has denounced Wickremesinghe for undermining national security and preparing to betray the country by handing the North and East to the LTTE. Just prior to sacking the government, Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) formed the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to contest the election.

Among broad layers of the population, there is deep-seated distrust and hostility to the political establishment as a whole. A recent opinion poll by the Centre for Policy Alternatives found that 13.4 percent of voters had not decided which party to vote for. The vast majority, 63 percent, supported the ceasefire and attempts to reach a permanent peace. At the same time, there was widespread opposition to the impact of the UNF's economic restructuring—73 percent expressed a high degree of dissatisfaction with cost of living increases, and 75 percent with rising unemployment.

Both of the major alliances have mounted expensive election campaigns in a desperate attempt to woo alienated voters. The UPFA has played down its condemnations of the "peace process" and promised to maintain the ceasefire and negotiate with the LTTE. Its candidates, particularly from the JVP, have attempted to exploit the dissatisfaction over falling living standards with a mixture of populist demagoguery and empty election promises. Kumaratunga has pledged to create 60,000 jobs within three months of coming to power and to implement a series of salary increases. Just three years ago, her government carried out a program of privatisation and restructuring along the lines of the UNF.

Wickremesinghe is parading himself as a man of peace and warning there will be a return to war if the UPFA is elected. In 2000, he did the

opposite, joining the JVP in a chauvinist campaign against Kumaratunga's attempts to organise peace talks. In the last few days, the UNF has been engaged in a frantic attempt to quell anger among workers and farmers. The government has increased the salaries of striking health workers, given permanent positions to 30,000 casual teachers and promised to reduce fertiliser prices by 300 rupees a kilogram if it is reelected. It has also reduced the cost of some essential items such as sugar by a few rupees.

Few people trust any of these promises. A plantation worker from Awissawella told Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners: "We voted in the last elections for the UNF, believing Ranil's promises that peace would be established, the high price of essential goods would be rolled back and that our lives would brighten and get better. See what has happened. We can only afford one proper meal a day. Our living conditions are going down and we are more miserable than ever."

"What has 'peace' brought for us? They say, we have peace, but our conditions haven't improved in the slightest way. Since this estate was privatised and the management changed, we have had a rough time. Some 35 of my colleagues have lost their jobs, and the small strip of land on which our children used to play has been confiscated by management, who say it is needed for cultivation."

A female worker in the Free Trade Zone near Colombo said she feared that the UPFA alliance would throw the country back into war. "I have two brothers in the army, one in Jaffna. Those who have no jobs have to join the army or go to one of the free trade zones. My parents are farmers in Veyangoda. How can they farm when the price of fertilisers and chemicals keeps going up?"

All of the opinion polls are predicting an indecisive outcome. According to one estimate, Kumaratunga's UPFA will win 101 seats in the 225-seat parliament while Wickremesinghe's UNF will have 99 seats. The remaining 25 seats will go to minor parties. If this proves to be correct there will be frantic attempts in the coming days by both major parties to form a parliamentary majority.

This will be complicated, however, by the intractable rivalries within the ruling elite. In the previous parliament, the UNF could count on the tacit support of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of Tamil bourgeois parties, which, by accepting the LTTE's claim it is the sole representative of the Tamil people, have transformed themselves into a virtual LTTE proxy.

In early March, however, an open split erupted in the LTTE, after its eastern military commander V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, criticised the LTTE leadership for failing to provide resources and administrative positions to its eastern cadre. Karuna has control of roughly 6,000 fighters, or about one third of the total LTTE force. The LTTE breakup has also split the TNA, with the majority of its candidates in the East, adhering to Karuna and renouncing the LTTE's claim to be the "sole representative" of Tamils. Just who the dissident TNA faction will support in parliament is not clear.

The split has created a tense situation in the East where the two competing factions have hundreds of fighters dug in on either side of the Verugal River. The LTTE leadership has expelled the rebel commander and declared that it intends to “eliminate Karuna from our soil.” The northern faction has been blamed for the murder of TNA candidate and Karuna supporter Rajan Sathyamoorthy, who was gunned down along with his brother-in-law on Tuesday. The killing constitutes a warning of the violent confrontation that is likely to erupt after the election. The army has stationed thousands of troops in the area, compounding an already volatile situation.

The LTTE has sought to enforce its claim to be “sole representative” by insisting that no other parties should field candidates in the North and East, and through threats and thuggery against its political opponents. Several other parties are standing in these areas, including a breakaway from the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), one of the six TNA parties. The LTTE’s anti-democratic methods and its failure to address any of the urgent social problems confronting the Tamil masses may boost the vote for the TNA’s rivals, further complicating the parliamentary equation.

At the same time, the extreme rightwing Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) is fielding Buddhist monks as candidates throughout the island and is expected to win several seats. The JHU openly advocates a communal state based on Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy and completely rejects any concessions to the Tamil minority. A coalition deal with the JHU would rule out any talks with the LTTE and pose the immediate danger of a return to war.

All of the traditional “workers” organisations and “left” parties have lined up with one or other faction of the ruling class. The Lanka Sama Samaja party (LSSP) and Communist Party (SLCP) have formally joined Kumaratunga’s UPFA, while the New Left Front (NLF) formed by the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) is tacitly backing Wickremesinghe and the UNF as the “lesser evil.”

The inability of the ruling class to resolve these deep-going conflicts within the framework of bourgeois parliamentary politics has resulted in a more and more open factional struggle for the levers of state power through other means. Kumaratunga’s seizure of three ministries and her ousting of the government demonstrate her willingness to use the extensive autocratic presidential powers contained in the constitution.

Regardless of the outcome of the election, Kumaratunga has already made clear that she intends to retain control of the key defence ministry. She told *Reuters* on March 18 that there was a “chance for her party get a majority ... but under the present electoral system nobody will ever get very much more.” The president then insisted that she “will remain defence minister no matter what the result of the election.”

But Kumaratunga’s refusal to return the defence ministry to the UNF government was the obstacle to any compromise prior to the elections. Wickremesinghe recognised that it would be impossible to negotiate a deal with the LTTE if Kumaratunga and the military were hostile to it. In 2003, the military, even under government control, staged a series of provocations that undermined the peace talks.

Wickremesinghe has warned that if the UNF wins the election it will seek to limit any presidential involvement. He declared to the *Daily Mirror*: “If people vote the UNF to office at the upcoming general elections, the executive powers of the president become invalid.” However, any attempt by a newly elected UNF government to move against Kumaratunga would rapidly involve key elements of the judiciary and state apparatus and provoke an acute constitutional crisis.

Kumaratunga has more than a year left in office. In fact, she secretly took a second oath of office in November 2000, which she claims allows her to remain as president until 2006. While constitutionally she has to wait for another year before sacking the government, she wields considerable executive powers and is likely to exploit them whatever the

election outcome—with the backing of the military.

The whole political establishment is sharply polarised. Big business, with the tacit backing of the major powers, is openly pushing for a UNF government.

In an interview in the *Daily Mirror* last week, Japanese special envoy Yasushi Akashi issued a veiled threat, declaring that donor countries, which have promised \$4.5 billion in aid, were “carefully reviewing the situation.” While insisting that he was “not partisan,” Akashi told the newspaper: “The international community should give every encouragement to the prime minister who is sincere, committed and honest in pursuing the peace process.”

The mouthpiece of Sri Lanka’s corporate elite, the *Lanka Monthly Digest* (LMD), published the results of a survey in its April issue, showing that over 90 percent of its readership thought Wickremesinghe “better equipped” to manage the economy. Some 88 percent believed the UNF would be able take forward the “peace process” and 64.5 percent counted on the UNF to implement so-called labour reforms to cut the conditions of workers.

Big business has injected money into the UNF, which, as election day has neared, has mounted a propaganda blitz, bombarding voters with public meetings, high cost TV advertisements and expensive leaflets and pamphlets. The privately owned media—both print and electronic—has overwhelmingly been on the side of the UNF, providing extensive coverage of its campaigns and frequent interviews with its candidates.

Sections of business have backed UPFA. Kumaratunga also used her control of the media ministry to insert her own loyalists who have shamelessly exploited the state-owned media to bolster the UPFA’s campaign. In a sign of what is to come after the election, a brawl over the state-owned media erupted on Monday. The election commissioner accused the management of bias to the UPFA and appointed his own official to monitor election coverage until after the poll. Kumaratunga’s appointees then took out a writ in the Supreme Court to block the action.

Fearing sharp political clashes, the police and military have mounted a massive operation throughout the island. More than 60,000 police officers have been deployed with orders to shoot if necessary to “quell” any violence. The Chief of Defence Staff, General L.P. Balagalle, has put the country’s military, comprising nearly 200,000 personnel, on standby to “help the police.”

By Wednesday evening, one estimate put the number of incidents of election violence at 1,485, with the killing of four people, including three candidates, in the eastern province. The figure is less than the 2001 elections when there were 2,735 incidents and 48 deaths, but the tensions are likely to escalate after the elections. The police announced yesterday a ban on all demonstrations and protests for a week after the polls and warned that anyone violating the order would be arrested. The police are expected to announce a curfew from tonight.

The only party standing in the elections independently of all the competing factions of the ruling class is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which is fielding a slate of 23 candidates headed by party general secretary Wije Dias in the Colombo district. SEP candidates have campaigned widely in working class areas, distributed thousands of leaflets, held a number of public meetings and appeared on TV on four occasions to present the party’s socialist alternative to war and social inequality.

To end the war and create the basis for a unified struggle of all workers against capitalist exploitation, the SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan armed forces from the North and East of the island. The party is seeking to build an independent political movement of the working class to fight for the United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the socialist reconstruction of society throughout the region and internationally. We urge all WSWS reader and SEP supporters to vote for our candidates, to seriously study

the party's program and perspective and to apply to join its ranks.



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