

Sri Lankan government on the brink of collapse

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Yesterday's decision by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to quit Sri Lanka's ruling coalition has left the government on the point of collapse and once again plunged the island into political turmoil. The United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has been reduced to a rump of just 79 MPs out of a total of 225 and is completely dependent on its long-time rival, the opposition United National Party (UNP), not to bring it down.

In the midst of this political crisis, President Chandrika Kumaratunga appeared on national television to denounce her former allies for "lying" and "misleading" the people, violating the coalition agreement and blocking her policies. She called on all parties to support her government and its tsunami reconstruction plans for at least a year and then, in a none-too-subtle threat, warned that "dictatorship and military dictatorships" often emerged in situations such as the present.

The December 26 tsunami, which devastated large areas of the island and left tens of thousands of people destitute, has heightened social and political tensions to breaking point. The JVP, which held eight ministerial posts, walked out over Kumaratunga's plans to establish a joint tsunami aid body or "joint mechanism" with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). For weeks, the JVP, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and other Sinhala chauvinist organisations have been denouncing the planned joint mechanism as a step toward a separate Tamil state and a "betrayal" of the nation.

Last week the JVP issued an ultimatum to Kumaratunga to abandon her proposal by midnight on June 15 or face a walkout. Fearful of the impact of the communal campaign in its own ranks, leaders of her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) bent over backwards to accommodate the JVP. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the UPFA secretary Susil Premajayantha and others held marathon talks with JVP leaders but to no avail. At the last minute, Rajapakse even pleaded with the JVP to extend its deadline until the end of June.

Kumaratunga, however, had little room for manoeuvre. Representatives from the US, Japan and Norway—the co-

chairs of Sri Lanka's international donor group—met in Washington on Monday and issued what amounted to their own ultimatum. While expressing support for Kumaratunga, their statement demanded "the immediate signing of the agreement [with the LTTE] in order to ensure proper flow of reconstruction aid to tsunami victims in the North and East." It also insisted on the restarting of peace talks, stalled since April 2003.

The cash-strapped UPFA government is desperate for the \$3 billion in promised aid. Moreover, it is under pressure from sections of business in Colombo concerned at the broader crisis of the Sri Lankan economy. S. Jeyavarman, chief executive officer of National Asset Management Ltd. in Colombo, told the *Bloomberg* web site: "There must be a framework to obtain these funds or else the economy is going to suffer." Referring to the country's deepening political crisis and the danger of war, he added: "[We] need harmony to attract investment, otherwise the markets are in for a rough ride."

The UPFA government now confronts a parlous situation. When contacted by the WSWs yesterday, Gihan Hettige, an aide to the chief presidential spokesman Harim Peiris, declared: "The government might carry on but no important legislation can be passed." The opposition benches in parliament are now so full that JVP MPs will be compelled to physically sit on the government side. As well as losing its majority in parliament, the UPFA lost control of seven provincial councils after the JVP pulled out.

In a letter to the JVP on Wednesday, Kumaratunga declared there was "no justification" for leaving the coalition as the final document on the joint aid mechanism had not even been formulated. Clearly seeking to woo the JVP, she played down the aid body's importance, declaring it was "purely an administrative mechanism" that would not affect "the sovereignty or integrity of the country". Its activities will be limited to coastal areas up to 2 kilometres from the sea in just six districts.

Kumaratunga's twists and turns highlight the deep crisis of bourgeois rule on the island. Economically, the ruling

class has been pressing for an end to the protracted civil war, which is an obstacle to its plans to transform the island into a cheap labour platform and to gain a slice of the investment flowing into the Indian subcontinent. Politically, however, all of the political parties—including the SLFP and UNP—are deeply mired in Sinhala chauvinism, which they have repeatedly exploited to deflect opposition and divide the working class.

None of the major parties enjoy any broad popular support. Both the UNP and SLFP are responsible for imposing economic restructuring policies that have had a devastating impact on the lives of ordinary working people. As a result, the JVP, which is based on communalism and populist demagoguery, was for a time able to win a measure of influence, particularly in poor rural areas. In government for the first time, the JVP has broken all of its promises and in the space of just over a year rapidly lost support.

All these processes have been accelerated by the December 26 tsunami and the government's failure to assist tens of thousands of victims. At the same time, a growing wave of strikes and protests has developed among workers and farmers over the loss of jobs, privatisation, rising prices and the lack of rural assistance. The JVP's chauvinist campaign against the joint mechanism is above all a desperate effort to shore up its own social base, particularly in the tsunami-devastated south.

Kumaratunga's reference to the danger of dictatorship expresses the extreme frustration in ruling circles over the exhaustion of the old mechanisms of parliamentary rule. The comment is a sharp warning to working people that the ruling elites, and Kumaratunga herself, are contemplating a turn to dictatorial forms of rule. It would not be the first time.

In November 2003, the president denounced the then UNP-led government for preparing to betray the country to the LTTE, arbitrarily seized three key ministries and moved to impose a state of emergency. She only backed away temporarily under international pressure from Washington and New Delhi. In February 2004, Kumaratunga sacked the government, formed a coalition with the JVP and called fresh elections, which the UPFA narrowly won.

Kumaratunga is now reliant on the UNP, the party that she threw out of office less than two years ago. After meeting the president on Monday, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe promised to support the joint mechanism and "not to topple the government on this issue". But there are already indications that this promise will not extend to other issues and may not last long.

The UNP has already criticised her decision to have the joint mechanism debated in parliament, declaring that she should take responsibility for the package. UNP spokesman

G.L. Peiris announced his party would abstain on any vote, compounding the government's problems.

The opposition has also called for presidential elections to be held in November. Having been thrown out of office once, the UNP wants the presidency which has broad executive powers. UNP co-secretary Tissa Attanayake told the WWSW that the party was not "interested in forming a government.... [There is] no purpose in doing so. We are concentrating on the presidential election."

The JVP's press conference yesterday was remarkably restrained. JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe told media representatives that the party had quit the government with "deep regret" and did not rule out a future alliance with the SLFP. The condition for a new coalition, he said, was "maintaining the country's sovereignty and integrity".

At the same time, however, the JVP is set to intensify its chauvinist campaign against the joint mechanism and is planning a series of strikes to re-establish its credentials. In recent weeks, as part of the government, the JVP has been shutting down protests and strikes over privatisation and wage demands. The JVP has also issued an appeal to disaffected MPs from both the SLFP and UNP to join a new coalition.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, working people throughout the island spontaneously came to the aid of victims—regardless of whether they were Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. This expressed both a profound distrust in the entire political establishment and a rejection of the communal politics that has dominated the island for decades. Both of these impulses were entirely healthy.

However, nearly six months after the tsunami disaster, not only has there been no reconstruction, but the ruling elites are preparing to plunge the country into new disasters, including dictatorial forms of rule, communal violence and war. What this experience demonstrates is the necessity of working people uniting and waging a ruthless struggle for their own independent class interests against the entire political establishment.



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