

Sri Lanka's parliamentary crisis: vital political issues for the working class

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The prolonged crisis of parliamentary rule in Sri Lanka deepened dramatically when President Chandrika Kumaratunga authorised, on June 24, the signing of a deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the joint administration of aid to the victims of the December 26 tsunami.

In response, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) quit the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), leaving the government with a minority of just 79 MPs in the 225-seat parliament. The JVP, along with other Sinhala chauvinist organisations, had been campaigning for weeks against the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS), denouncing it as an impermissible concession to the LTTE and a betrayal of the nation.

In the past, the opposition would have presented a no-confidence vote in parliament to bring the government down. No such move has been made, however, and none of the major parties is calling for fresh parliamentary elections. They are all acutely aware that new elections would do nothing to resolve the intractable political problems confronting Sri Lanka's ruling elite.

At the heart of this crisis is a fundamental dilemma. Dominant sections of business, backed by the major powers, have been pushing for an end to the country's disastrous civil war as part of plans to restructure the economy and transform the island into a cheap labour platform. This strategy, however, has been constantly thwarted by the very communalist politics that were responsible for the war in the first place.

The tsunami disaster has intensified the underlying social and political tensions. Six months after the huge waves struck the island's coastal areas, tens of thousands of people, who lost their homes, possessions, income and loved ones, have been left to survive on little or no aid in inadequate temporary accommodation. Frustration and despair has boiled over into angry protests, while the alienation of masses of ordinary working people from the political establishment has only intensified.

Kumaratunga signed the P-TOMS agreement in the hope that international donors would release \$3 billion in promised aid. She is counting on this assistance—a sum that is completely inadequate for the task of post-tsunami reconstruction—to help bail the government out of its financial straits. For their part, the US and other major powers pushed for the P-TOMS deal as a step toward restarting the stalled peace talks. After ignoring the civil war for years, Washington now regards the conflict as a potential threat to its growing economic and strategic interests on the Indian subcontinent.

At the same time, two decades of war have created powerful vested interests among sections of the military top brass, the state bureaucracy, the Buddhist hierarchy and business that are adamantly opposed to any concession to the country's Tamil minority. They consider giving the LTTE even a limited voice in aid distribution to be a threat to Sinhala Buddhist supremacy. The JVP is also seeking to divert widespread popular discontent into the dead end of divisive communalism.

It is these political processes that lie behind the parliamentary paralysis.

Three general elections have been held in the past five years—2000, 2001 and 2004—but each has resolved nothing, simply laying the basis for a new crisis. The major political parties are unable to agree on a joint strategy and incapable of making an appeal to ordinary working people on the basis of their needs and aspirations. As a result, they are looking to end the current deadlock by resorting to extra-parliamentary means.

Preparations for autocratic rule

Kumaratunga is increasingly relying on her extensive executive powers as president. The decision to sign the P-TOMS agreement with the LTTE was taken without any debate or vote in parliament or even a meeting of the cabinet. The document itself was only made public after the signing had taken place. The immediate reasons for the secrecy lie in the fact that Kumaratunga has no parliamentary majority and is uncertain of support within her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). More fundamentally such anti-democratic methods are aimed at suppressing public debate over the tsunami tragedy that would inevitably raise social and political questions for which the Sri Lankan ruling class has no answers.

Kumaratunga has already made clear that she intends to ignore any parliamentary vote of no confidence. Speaking on national television the day after the JVP left the government, she appealed to all parties to support the government and its tsunami reconstruction plans. She then pointedly warned that “dictatorships and military dictatorships” often arose in situations like the present one. In a later interview, she declared that she had “the executive presidential powers to take all ministries under her purview”—in other words, to establish what amounts to a one-woman dictatorship.

Kumaratunga established the precedent for such a constitutional coup in November 2003. With the SLFP in opposition, the president joined with the JVP and the military top brass in denouncing the United National Front (UNF) government for “undermining national security” in its efforts to restart peace talks with the LTTE. At the height of this campaign, she seized control of three key ministries—defence, interior and information—and moved to impose emergency rule. In the event, she was compelled to pull back from taking full control under pressure from Washington and New Delhi. But in February 2004, Kumaratunga summarily sacked the government, even though the UNF had a parliamentary majority, and called fresh elections.

Sections of the ruling elite, who are deeply frustrated at the current political impasse, are obviously sympathetic to a presidential dictatorship. An open letter to the president in the *Daily Mirror* on June 16, under the byline “The True Patriot,” criticised her for failing to more forcefully press ahead with the P-TOMS agreement. “If President Kumaratunga wishes to be remembered in history as the second Vihara Maha Devi, a

real leader who rescued the country from a political tsunami, she must act fearlessly and with sincerity and above all firmly. If it is necessary to declare a state of emergency do so, if you need to declare a curfew do so, if you need to take the lawbreakers into custody do so. Ensure a media blackout by calling for the cooperation of the media... You are an all-powerful president, act decisively," it stated.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and his right-wing United National Party (UNP) share a similar perspective. Under pressure from business leaders and the US embassy, Wickremesinghe has supported the P-TOMS agreement and the renewal of peace talks with the LTTE—the policy he previously sought to implement. But, having being dismissed from office by Kumaratunga in 2004, in flagrant breach of parliamentary norms, the UNP leader has concluded that his party must gain the presidency for itself.

The UNP is currently conducting an "Operation Peoples Power" to demand that presidential elections be held when they are due in November. Kumaratunga insists that the poll is not due for another year on the spurious grounds that she was only formally installed a year after the 1999 presidential elections, in a second, secret oath-taking ceremony. Wickremesinghe's campaign has nothing to do with defending democratic rights. Rather the UNP, which was notorious for its abuse of the presidential powers when it held office, is offering itself as a more effective vehicle for implementing the bourgeoisie's agenda.

The JVP, for its part, is openly bidding for the support of those sections of the ruling elite who are intransigently opposed to a deal with the LTTE. While routinely referred to as "Marxist" in the media, the JVP is a petty bourgeois nationalist formation that originally appealed to disaffected rural youth on the basis of a bankrupt perspective of peasant guerrillaism and Sinhala communalism. Now it has all but abandoned its "socialist" and "anti-imperialist" demagoguery, in favour of the most extreme forms of patriotic jingoism.

The 2004 election marked a high point for the JVP. Disgusted with the two major parties—Kumaratunga's SLFP and the UNP—significant layers of voters, particularly in rural areas, supported the JVP in the hope that it would improve their social conditions. But the JVP ministers, in a coalition government for the first time, quickly broke their election promises and the party rapidly lost ground. After quitting the government last month, the JVP called for a major protest campaign that failed miserably. Many working people reject the JVP's communal agitation against the P-TOMS agreement on the obvious grounds that everyone—Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims alike—was affected by the tsunami disaster.

The JVP's appeal, however, is not primarily directed to the masses, but to the ruling class. It has called for the formation of a patriotic alliance which disaffected MPs from all parties, including the SLFP and UNP, should join. To date it has gained the support of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala supremacist party headed by Buddhist monks and other chauvinist organisations, and has launched a legal challenge to the P-TOMS agreement in the Supreme Court. At the same time, the JVP is also contemplating the direct seizure of power.

At a party congress on June 29, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe openly called on the security forces to "defy the orders given by the authorities that go against the national interest" and promised that any who take "a patriotic stance would be well compensated under a regime of its own." The JVP is well aware that there is deep hostility within the military hierarchy and, indeed, the entire state apparatus to any deal with the LTTE—even a temporary arrangement for the distribution of aid. These divisions in the state were graphically exposed on July 15 when, on behalf of the Supreme Court, Chief Justice Sarath Nanda Silva, a Kumaratunga appointee, effectively ruled against the president and granted an interim injunction to the JVP against the implementation of key aspects of the P-TOMS agreement.

In the midst of the current political crisis, it is highly significant that all the major political parties have dropped a longstanding demand for the abolition of the executive presidency. Ever since the constitution was amended in 1978, it has been standard practice for every party, in opposition at least, to denounce the anti-democratic character of the presidential powers. Now each party is calculating how best to exploit them.

An historic impasse

The present political impasse in Sri Lanka is a particularly acute expression of global economic and political processes that have been underway in every country over the past two and a half decades. Throughout that period, the globalisation of production has been accompanied by increasingly bitter competition between rival transnational corporations as they scour the globe for ever-cheaper raw materials and sources of labour. This has led to a relentless onslaught on the social position of the working class and a deepening gulf between rich and poor that has, in turn, created deep popular hostility and resentment to the official political establishment. The response in ruling circles has been an unprecedented assault on basic democratic rights, culminating in the Bush administration's global "war on terrorism".

When it took office in 2001, the UNP-led coalition elaborated a grand plan entitled "Regaining Sri Lanka" for rehabilitating the island's economy, which had been devastated by two decades of civil war. The aim was to transform Sri Lanka into a South Asian version of Hong Kong: an investment gateway to the booming Indian economy.

Central to this strategy was a peace deal with the LTTE, to enable the mutual exploitation of the working class by the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ruling elites. On that basis, the government proposed a far-reaching program of economic restructuring: the slashing of social spending and privatisation of state enterprises to finance the rebuilding of the island's decrepit infrastructure and financial incentives for investors.

Four years later, the plan lies in tatters. While the ceasefire signed in 2002 is still in place, it hangs by a thread. Murders and minor clashes regularly take place in the East between the LTTE and a breakaway faction that operates with the tacit support of the Sri Lankan military. Peace talks stalled in April 2003 and have not been restarted. As a result, investment and international aid remain on hold. Kumaratunga's efforts to recommence the so-called peace process were stymied by opposition from her coalition partner, the JVP. No significant infrastructure projects have begun and the UPFA's efforts to press ahead with privatisation and restructuring have been sharply opposed by working people.

This year the Sri Lankan economy, commonly described as "the sick man of Asia", has been hit by two economic tidal waves in addition to the physical tsunami that caused damage estimated at \$1.3 billion and ruined much of the fishing and tourist industries. First, rising global oil prices have compounded the government's financial difficulties. Over the last seven months, the cost of living has spiralled. The inflation rate is running at more than 12 percent annually and in May and June, the government slashed oil subsidies sending the price of diesel and petrol rocketing by 20 percent. Second, the ending of the international export quota system known as the Multi-Fibre Agreement threatens to undermine Sri Lanka's clothing exports, which now face stiff competition from far larger manufacturers, in countries such as China.

The Sri Lankan ruling class knows it must end the civil war in order to address its economic woes. The problem it faces is that it is organically wedded to the communalist ideology that has formed the basis of its rule since independence in 1948. Through every political crisis, both the UNP

and SLFP have used anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the population and shore up bourgeois rule. It was the promotion of Sinhala chauvinism that led to the outbreak of civil war in 1983 amid vicious anti-Tamil pogroms.

In the wake of the December tsunami, Kumaratunga piously declared: "It is not possible to deal with a massive natural calamity of this magnitude separately as Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims. We must all stand together." Her position was echoed in the cynical claims of the various editorial writers that the disaster had "a silver lining", because it would bring political unity and peace. Seven months after the tragedy that took 40,000 lives and left half a million homeless, reconstruction has not even begun and bitter communal feuding continues within ruling circles.

The P-TOMS agreement itself is highly revealing. The aid mechanism is a power-sharing arrangement between Colombo and the LTTE. It has been undemocratically drawn up without even the semblance of consultation. Its main aim is not to address the suffering of the masses, but to establish the basis for a broader peace deal. The LTTE does not represent the interests of ordinary Tamil workers and farmers, but a narrow stratum of the Tamil bourgeoisie, which regards the P-TOMS agreement, and a future peace settlement, as the means by which it will consolidate its position as a junior partner to Colombo.

The JVP's opposition to the deal is likewise motivated, not by concern for the masses, but a determination by layers of the ruling elite to maintain their domination over their Tamil and Muslim rivals. In revealing comments to the *Sunday Times* of July 17, JVP propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa underscored the party's class orientation when he declared that his party's campaign against P-TOMS overrode any consideration for the plight of the tsunami's victims. "The sovereignty and integrity of the country protected by our ancestors is more important as it is not difficult to handle a question about the cost of living," he said.

When asked if the JVP's position was pushing the LTTE back to war, Weerawansa replied that it had "never stopped the war", and blamed the LTTE for the violence in the East. His comments further reveal the logic of the JVP's stand: to reignite the civil war. On July 17, the leader of the LTTE's political wing, S.P.Thamilselvan, warned of the danger of war. Frustrated by the drawn-out process of deciding on a joint aid mechanism, now held up by the Supreme Court ruling, he described the ground situation as "serious", saying "an intensified shadow war [in the East] carried out by the intelligence wing of the Sri Lankan military killing LTTE cadres... could lead to the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement".

The political independence of the working class

Sri Lankan workers and young people responded to the December 26 tsunami very differently from the island's ruling elites. On hearing of the disaster, many people spontaneously organised to go to the worst affected areas to help the victims, or donated money and goods to the voluntary relief teams. Professionals, including many doctors and nurses, voluntarily worked long hours in terrible conditions to help the sick and injured. Very little attention was paid to whether the victims were Tamil, Sinhala or Muslim. It was clear that everyone was in the same boat.

These entirely healthy sentiments—a rejection of communalism and a profound distrust in government—do not, however, amount to a political alternative for the working class. All the major parties have proven completely incapable of addressing the needs and aspirations of working people, and are now openly considering a resort to dictatorial means of rule.

Under these conditions, the working class must establish its complete political independence from every section of the bourgeoisie and build a political movement that will fight for its own needs and aspirations. Such

a movement will become a powerful pole of attraction for the urban and rural poor seeking a way out of their increasingly desperate plight. Its aim must be nothing less than the complete reorganisation of society on socialist lines: to make the social needs of the majority, rather than the profits of the wealthy few, the overriding priority.

These ends cannot be achieved by pressuring the existing political establishment or through parliamentary manoeuvres. The working class is still suffering the political consequences of the betrayal carried out by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) when it joined the bourgeois government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. The LSSP's renunciation of socialist internationalism and embrace of communalism led directly to the rise of the influence of the JVP and LTTE and, ultimately, to civil war. Today the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party (CP) are burnt out shells. Both parties are nothing more than SLFP auxiliaries, encouraging Kumaratunga to use her executive powers to implement the government's economic and political agenda.

While formally outside the ruling UPFA, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) has wholeheartedly supported Kumaratunga and the P-TOMS agreement. This shamelessly opportunist outfit has, in the course of its existence, served as an apologist for both major bourgeois parties. In the late 1990s, the NSSP forged an alliance with the JVP, claiming that it had changed its chauvinist spots. The only constant in all these manoeuvres is the NSSP's support for the so-called peace process. As a result, it has close relations with many businesses and various non-government organisations that promote the need for a new power-sharing deal.

Driven by its orientation to the powers-that-be, the NSSP has responded to the present impasse by directly appealing to the US, Britain and other major powers for assistance. Writing in the *Lakbima* newspaper on June 26, NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne made the extraordinary declaration: "World capitalism today spends money on developing liberal democratic movements. It is correct to say that the money they spent on propaganda and secret repressive measures, in the past, is now spent on developing liberalist movements in countries like ours."

These comments not only whitewash the crimes being carried out by the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan, but promote the fatal illusion that these same imperialist powers are interested in peace and democracy and the fate of Sri Lanka's tsunami victims. While a negotiated end to the Sri Lankan civil war is currently Washington's preferred option, it would be foolish to imagine that it will refrain from using other, including military, means to remove any obstacles to its strategic and economic ambitions in the region. As for the tsunami victims, Bush and Blair only took notice of the December 26 calamity after millions of people all over the world responded to their plight.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that workers cannot afford to sit on the political sidelines as the bourgeoisie prepares new methods of rule. To fight for their own class interests, they need a political program that will unite the masses of ordinary people. This requires the complete rejection of all forms of communalism and chauvinism, and the unification of all working people, whatever their religion, language or ethnic background, in a joint struggle to restructure society on socialist foundations. That is why the SEP calls for the establishment of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader objective of the United Socialist States of South Asia.

To confront their immediate economic and social problems, working people must insist that the government immediately increase aid to the tens of thousands of tsunami victims and make available the funds needed to begin construction of high quality housing, schools, hospitals and other facilities destroyed by the disaster. No faith can be placed in the P-TOMS mechanism to carry out these tasks. In every neighborhood and workplace, workers must take the initiative to form action committees that will implement and coordinate the provision of services and facilities to the tsunami victims. These committees must elect their own national body

to supervise the spending of all tsunami aid.

These initiatives and demands form part of a program that aims at the establishment of a workers and farmers government. For the working class to take power, it must forthrightly advance and campaign for its own class solutions to all the major issues of the day. In every workplace, workers must demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the armed forces from the north and east, the annulment of all discriminatory and anti-democratic laws and the formation of a freely-elected constituent assembly to enact a new constitution that guarantees basic social and democratic rights for all.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka fights for this program as part of the international struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International to unify workers around the world on the basis of a socialist perspective. We urge workers and youth to carefully consider our program and policies, read the *World Socialist Web Site* and apply to join and build the SEP.



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