

New Sri Lankan president confronts same impasse as predecessor

Wije Dias

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Less than a week after forming his new cabinet, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse met with senior foreign diplomats in Colombo on November 28 to try to dispel unease over his policies. The central issue is the new government's attitude toward the ceasefire agreement signed with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2002 and the fate of the peace process that has stalled for more than two years.

Rajapakse rode to power on an election platform charged with chauvinism and economic nationalism. Much of his election manifesto, entitled Mahinda Chintana (Mahinda's Vision), reflected the program of his electoral partners—the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). Both the JVP and the JHU have condemned the ceasefire agreement as a betrayal of Sri Lankan sovereignty and rejected the peace talks with the LTTE as a device to divide the country and create a separate Tamil state.

In his address to the foreign diplomats, however, Rajapakse sought to play down fears of a return to war. "I reaffirm my government's commitment to continue the ceasefire. I hope the LTTE will heed the call of the people in Sri Lanka and the international community, by fully complying with the ceasefire," he said.

At the same time, so as not to antagonise his chauvinist allies, the president added: "I should mention that, after over three and a half years of the ceasefire, it is time to look at the operation of the ceasefire agreement and how its implementation can be made more effective and enforceable, than it is now."

Having won the powerful post of executive president, Rajapakse is confronted with the same dilemma as his predecessor Chandrika Kumaratunga. She relied on an alliance with the JVP to narrowly win the general election held in 2004. Even though her campaign

centrally attacked the "peace process", Kumaratunga was forced to bow to the demands of investors and the major powers to restart peace talks and further market reforms.

Likewise, Rajapakse immediately faced pressure to step back from his election platform. In their initial congratulatory messages, the US State Department and the European Union insisted on the need to revive the peace process.

After referring to the new president's "many significant and immediate challenges", the US declared: "These include the need to strengthen the Ceasefire Agreement and bring renewed vigour to the peace process so that progress may be made towards a negotiated solution that meets the aspirations of all Sri Lankans."

In a similar vein, the EU stated: "The UK presidency of the EU calls on all sides in Sri Lanka to demonstrate their commitment to peace by maintaining the ceasefire and working together towards a peaceful settlement of the ethnic issue that meets the aspiration of all communities in Sri Lanka."

At the same time, the US and the EU both criticised the LTTE for "interference" in the ballot in the North and East. The LTTE certainly used thuggish methods to enforce an informal boycott but the issue has been cynically seized upon to heighten international pressure on the organisation. The US and Britain are no more worried about "democracy" in Sri Lanka than in Iraq. They are seeking an end to the war, not out of regard for the Sri Lankan people, but because the conflict threatens their growing interests in the region.

Reflecting similar concerns in the corporate elite in Colombo, sections of the local press have criticised Rajapakse's more belligerent statements last week. While speaking of peace talks, the president declared

that he would revise the ceasefire and scrap a joint administrative mechanism with the LTTE to distribute aid to tsunami victims. By “revision of the ceasefire”, he means strengthening the position of the Sri Lankan military—imposing conditions that the LTTE is unlikely to accept.

A *Sunday Times* editorial last weekend commented rather mildly: “There is a trace of muddled thinking discernible here. On the one hand the president is trying to play along by the traditional rules of the conflict resolution game, on the other he is trying to please the forces on whose shoulders he rode and won the presidency. He is trying to sound nationalistic without sounding jingoistic.”

Anxious about the response of the LTTE, the editorial warned: “The president has committed himself to a unitary state, and this would push the LTTE leader to probably say something strong today in his much hyped and awaited Maveerar [Heroes Day] speech.”

The LTTE, however, is also under pressure from the major powers to toe the line. In his Maveerar speech last Sunday, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran declared that he would adhere to the ceasefire and give the new president time to present “a reasonable political framework” to settle the war. Playing to growing frustration in his own ranks over the stalled peace process, Prabhakaran concluded his speech with a warning that “next year” the LTTE would “intensify the struggle” if no offer was forthcoming.

The LTTE’s main spokesman Anton Balasingham, who is known to have authored many of Prabhakaran’s speeches, made clear at a rally in London that there would be no immediate return to war. “Some people are trying to interpret our leader’s statement on giving time until next year as being one month’s notice and so on. He has not given a one-month deadline or any other specific time frame. He simply said the LTTE would give time till next year which could mean early next year, mid next year or even the latter part.”

In Monday’s speech to foreign diplomats, Rajapakse declared: “I welcome Mr. Prabhakaran’s remarks yesterday recognising my pragmatic approach and my invitation to talks as extending the hand of friendship. Let me use this occasion, to reiterate my invitation to Mr. Prabhakaran for talks.... We can resume work immediately on reviewing the operation of the ceasefire, whilst we prepare ourselves for eventual

substantive talks leading to a lasting solution. These processes can work in parallel and not necessarily sequentially.”

These comments are an obvious step back from Rajapakse’s electoral deal with the JVP signed on September 8. Clause 2 of that agreement ruled out any interim talks, stating bluntly that “the president elect would agree to hold discussion with the LTTE based only on a final political solution to the national question in Sri Lanka”.

On Monday, Rajapakse also adopted a softer line towards the Norwegian facilitators, who have been heavily criticised by the JVP and JHU for pro-LTTE “bias”. He stressed his “deep commitment to pursue the peace process through broad based consultation and with the assistance of all those friendly countries which have helped us in the past.” He added: “I have directed the Foreign Minister and the Peace Secretariat to initiate consultations with the co-chairs, Japan, United States, EU and Norway.”

Former president Kumaratunga’s alliance with the JVP lasted only for 15 months. Her efforts to use the tsunami disaster to form a joint relief body with the LTTE as a step toward the resumption of talks fell apart after the JVP and JHU condemned this limited step as “a betrayal” of national sovereignty. The minority government, which Rajapakse headed as prime minister, staggered on for another few months before the presidential election.

Having won the presidency, Rajapakse now faces exactly the same impasse as Kumaratunga. He requires the ongoing support of the JVP and JHU to prevent his minority government from falling, but at the same time cannot ignore the demands of big business, foreign investors and the major powers for the resumption of peace talks. Rajapakse’s tightrope walking will not be any more successful than Kumaratunga’s and is likely to precipitate a political crisis sooner rather than later.



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