

Sri Lankan president installs unstable minority government

Nanda Wickremasinghe
8 December 2005

The minority government formed by Sri Lanka's new president, Mahinda Rajapakse, late last month is a sign of deep political instability. With only 70 seats in a 225-seat parliament, he is completely dependent on the support of the two Sinhala chauvinist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—that backed his presidential election campaign.

Significantly, the JVP, which had been part of the previous United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government, refused to join the cabinet even though it played a key role in electing Rajapakse. The party, which relies on demagogic populist appeals, rapidly lost support after joining a ruling coalition for the first time in 2004 and failing to deliver on its promises.

With the support of 39 JVP MPs and 9 of the 10 JHU MPs, the UPFA government has a parliamentary majority, even though a highly unstable one. Rajapakse's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) has only 60 parliamentarians. The remaining 10 come from UPFA coalition partners, including the Muslim-based National Unity Alliance, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL) and the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP).

The UPFA also includes a handful of individual MPs who have broken from the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). The process of “crossing over”, often with financial or political inducements, is a well-worn path in Sri Lanka and Rajapakse is well aware that it can cut both ways. As a result, his cabinet includes just about every MP in the ruling coalition, so that everyone has an incentive to remain on the government side.

Rajapakse has appointed 25 cabinet ministers, 26 non-cabinet ministers and another 29 deputy ministers—80 positions in all for the 70 UPFA parliamentarians. Of

the 60 SLFP MPs, 58 have a ministerial post of some description—several have more than one. Only two SLFP MPs have no portfolio—the first is yet to be formally appointed to the seat of assassinated foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar; the second is the president's sister, Nirupama Rajapakse, appointed to his vacant parliamentary seat.

As well as hanging onto to UPFA MPs, Rajapakse is clearly on the look out to increase the number. It would be no surprise in the coming weeks and months if Rajapakse creates even more ministerial posts to lure MPs from the opposition UNP or to encourage the JVP to formally join the government.

At the same time, the president has kept a firm grip on key cabinet posts. Having campaigned with the backing of the JVP and JHU on a more aggressive stance against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Rajapakse has nominated himself defence minister as well as finance minister. Rajapakse has also appointed his brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse as defence secretary—that is, the administrative head of the defence department.

The president has deliberately sidelined prominent supporters of the previous president Chandrika Kumaratunga—most notably her brother Anura Bandaranaike. He publicly criticised Rajapakse's agreements with the JVP and JHU in the course of the election campaign for being detrimental to the “peace process” advocated by big business and the major powers.

Bandaranaike was passed over for the post of prime minister even though the SLFP central committee had earlier nominated him for the post. He was also not reappointed as foreign minister but given the relatively minor position of tourism minister. For similar reasons, Kumaratunga loyalist Sarath Amunugama was removed

as finance minister and shifted to public administration.

After dithering for days, Rajapakse opted for Ratnasiri Wickramanayake as prime minister in an obvious bid to maintain the support of the JVP and JHU. Wickramanayake is known for his hardline stance against the LTTE and close connections to the Buddhist hierarchy. He was also assigned the important post of deputy defence minister.

Having chosen Wickramanayake, the president had to pay off key supporters who wanted the prime ministerial position. Mangala Samaraweera, who ran Rajapakse's election campaign, was nominated as foreign minister as well as to the ministries of posts and aviation. After D.M. Jayaratna complained that he had been passed over, despite being the most senior SLFP member, he was handed an additional ministry of rural economic development.

Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, another prominent figure in Rajapakse's campaign, was given the ministry of highways in addition to the ministry of trade, commerce, consumer affairs and marketing development.

No sooner was the new cabinet sworn in on November 23 than the new skills development and employment promotion minister, Sripathi Suriyaarachchi, resigned. Rajapakse immediately appointed him as deputy minister of enterprise development and investment promotion. There are four cabinet ministers with two portfolios and 12 non-cabinet ministers who have deputy ministerial posts as well.

The old, largely defunct "workers" parties—the LSSP and CP—had to be content with their previous posts. The LSSP only has an MP at all because it was granted a position from the UPFA national list after the 2004 general elections. The CP has two MPs—one elected and the other from the national list. Having been part of SLFP alliances for decades, neither party can seriously be considered an independent political entity.

Large sums of public money are required to pay for all these ministers. As well as their salaries, each has an official residence, a vehicle, private and official staff and other perks of office. All ministers are eligible for a pension at one third of their current salary. In addition, each has a bodyguard of specially trained commandos from the ministerial security division.

In an effort to appeal to popular disgust, the JVP has

previously condemned the practice of paying off MPs with ministerial posts. While JVP leaders urged Rajapakse to prune his cabinet, they have quickly shelved their criticisms, not wanting to rock the boat.

Periodically the Colombo press bemoans the venal character of MPs and their taste for ministerial posts. But the ruling elite understands that it is the price that has to be paid for a semblance of political stability.

A *Daily Mirror* editorial on December 1st noted: "President Rajapakse has not been able to prune the ministerial positions. His predicament is understandable. He had to satisfy the ambitions and aspirations of a whole range of parties and groups. He cannot afford to displease any of them particularly because it is a delicate balance to maintain his government in parliament."

The fragile character of the government stems not simply from the personal foibles of Rajapakse and his ministers but rather from the intractable political dilemmas confronting the ruling class as a whole.

The corporate elite in Colombo wants a negotiated powersharing arrangement with the LTTE to end the island's 20-year civil war and an accelerated program of economic restructuring. Politically, however, both major bourgeois parties—the SLFP and the UNP—have long relied on stirring up Sinhala chauvinism to divide the working class and maintain their rule.

Rajapakse is already walking a fine line: promising peace talks and at the same time, to appease the JVP and JHU, taking a tough stance against the LTTE. The UPFA government is under pressure from business along with the World Bank and IMF to continue its program of privatisation and spending cutbacks, which has already generated widespread hostility.

It is unlikely that this large unstable government will be long lived.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact