

A sign of crisis: two major Sri Lankan parties to form a grand coalition

K. Ratnayake
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The decision of the two main Sri Lankan parties—the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and opposition United National Party (UNP)—to establish an alliance is a sign of the island’s deepening political crisis amid a renewed civil war.

A formal memorandum of understanding (MoU) is due to be signed on October 23, after weeks of discussions between the two parties. The agreement was announced last Thursday after UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe met with President Mahinda Rajapakse. The UNP’s main policy body—the working committee—signed off on the plan on Monday.

For years, sections of the media and business have called for a grand coalition of the two parties to find a means for ending the island’s protracted civil war and to press ahead with economic reforms. But as UNP and SLFP leaders understand, such a coalition always carries the political danger that other parties will gain from the inevitable opposition to the government.

The resort to an SLFP-UNP alliance for the first time is an indication of political weakness, not of strength. UNP deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya bluntly told this week’s *Nation*: “Today, the country is burning and therefore, bold decisions have to be taken by political leaders to leave behind a country for the generation yet unborn.”

Last weekend’s *Sunday Times* political column commented: “President Rajapakse seems politically beleaguered. He will need more support to face guerrilla threats, rising international protests over human rights issues and above all to cope with an economy that is facing a severe strain. The coming weeks no doubt are crucial.”

Just how the coalition will operate is not clear. The MoU identifies six broad and rather vague areas of the cooperation, including electoral reforms, good governance, economic development, nation building (education reform), social development and the “ethnic conflict”—in other words, the civil war.

President Rajapakse invited the UNP to join the cabinet “to effectively carry out the agreed program”. But it is not clear whether the UNP will accept the offer and, if it does, on what basis. One proposal reportedly made would be for

the UNP to accept a number of cabinet posts, but remain on the opposition benches—indicating the UNP’s fear of becoming too closely associated with the government.

The policies to be carried out are also unclear. Rajapakse campaigned in last November’s presidential election against Wickremesinghe by forming an alliance with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to take a more aggressive stance against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Wickremesinghe, however, called for a continuation of the ceasefire, which he had signed as prime minister in 2002, and a return to negotiations to end the conflict.

After Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency, the military and associated paramilitaries embarked on an escalating war of attrition against the LTTE in the North and East. Talks between the two sides in Geneva in February virtually collapsed, after the government negotiator attempted to push for a major revision of the ceasefire agreement. On Rajapakse’s orders, the military began a series of major offensives to seize LTTE territory, while claiming its actions were “defensive” and “humanitarian”.

In recent weeks, under international pressure, the government and the LTTE have agreed to new talks in Geneva at the end of the month. The fighting, however continues with the government security forces continuing to encroach on LTTE territory, including a major offensive on the Jaffna peninsula last Wednesday. On Monday, the LTTE responded with a huge suicide bombing that claimed the lives of 115 people, mainly sailors, near the town of Habarana.

Rajapakse’s determination to pursue the war is most clearly demonstrated by his lengthy negotiations since early July with the JVP to form a coalition. The JVP’s 20-point program, which included the abrogation of the 2002 ceasefire and dismissal of Norway as the formal facilitator of peace talks, was tantamount to a formal declaration of war. The SLFP only broke off talks with the JVP on October 3.

The main problem for Rajapakse was that embracing the JVP would compel him to drop his empty posturing as a man

of peace. Even as the military has escalated the war against the LTTE, the government has not formally abandoned the 2002 ceasefire. It has attempted to cover up its aggression with a barrage of lies. Rajapakse has repeatedly declared his support for a negotiated peace, even as the security forces have carried out one provocation after another.

The reasons behind the government's posturing are two-fold. Firstly, despite the barrage of propaganda in the Colombo media, the war is immensely unpopular among ordinary working people who have been forced to bear the brunt of two decades of conflict. A recent survey entitled "People's Opinion on Peace" by the Marga Institute in Sri Lanka found that 79 percent of respondents support negotiations for a political solution.

Secondly, if it openly declares war, the government risks alienating the major powers, which, until now, have tacitly supported its military actions against the LTTE. By forming an alliance with the UNP instead, Rajapakse calculates that he can enlist international support to force the LTTE back to the negotiating table on the government's terms. Already Britain, Norway and Japan have welcomed the SLFP-UNP deal. The major powers supported the "peace process" as a means for ending a conflict that cut across their increasingly important economic and strategic interests in South Asia.

For its part, the UNP has abandoned its mild criticisms of Rajapakse's aggressive approach. Its support for the 2002 ceasefire was never out of concern for the impact of the war on ordinary people, but reflected the concerns of big business that the conflict had become a barrier to Sri Lanka's integration into the global economy. The UNP now supports Rajapakse's war as a means of forcing the LTTE back to talks.

Leading UNP figure G.L. Peiris, approvingly told the *Hindu* recently: "The president has consistently articulated the view that he does not believe that the war is going to provide the country with a final solution. However, there is a role for the military activity, consistent with the inalienable obligation of the state. But he has made it clear that what he wishes to do is to bring the LTTE back to the negotiating table after their strength has been eroded to some extent."

At the same time, the new coalition will undoubtedly accelerate economic restructuring and seek to suppress the growing opposition from workers and farmers over deteriorating living standards. While the government boasts about a projected growth rate of 8 percent for 2007, military spending has shot up by 20 billion rupees (\$US200 million) and inflation has increased to 15 percent.

The government has halved its target for foreign investment to \$500 million after a sharp drop in the first half of the year. Outgoing Asian Development Bank country director Allesandro Pio told a press conference last Friday:

"Presently foreign investors have been reticent in making Sri Lanka a meaningful haven for investment because of prevailing unsettled conditions which have stifled opportunities and held back new funding."

It is no surprise that business has welcomed the announced SLFP-UNP coalition. Sri Lanka First, an alliance of business and industrial groups, issued a statement declaring that the "signing of this historic MoU within the next few days will bring an end to confrontationist politics." Another business leader, Nawaz Rajabdeen, enthused: "Never before have the two major parties come to an agreement or proposed to come together in the interest of peace and development."

For all the self-congratulations in ruling circles, there is also an air of nervousness. An intensifying war combined with a new onslaught on the social position of the mass will inevitably provoke opposition. Already there is profound alienation with the entire political establishment and widening protests against the government's economic policies by workers in the state and private sectors. Over the past two weeks, rice farmers in the north-central province have held protests over the government's broken promises to ensure they receive a decent price for their produce.

For all its empty populist bombast, the JVP is widely distrusted among working people because of its record in government in 2004-2005 and its open support for war. The concern in the political establishment about the new grand coalition is that popular opposition could turn to the left and take more radical forms.



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