

Bribes, pleas and uproar as Sri Lankan parliament debates new constitution

By Nanda Wickremasinghe
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Offers of cash to defecting members of the opposition United National Party, desperate pleas from ex-socialists for support for the ruling Peoples Alliance regime and general uproar marked the opening of the debate in the Sri Lankan parliament on President Kumaratunga's devolution package on Monday.

Under the proposed constitutional changes, power will be devolved to the regions, including the Tamil-dominated North and East of the country, in a move that the Peoples Alliance (PA) regime hopes will isolate the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and bring an end to the country's 17-year civil war.

But unless there are dramatic changes in the balance of forces over the next 36 hours, the PA regime seems certain to fall short of the required numbers when the scheduled vote takes place on Wednesday.

The leader of the United National Party (UNP), Ranil Wickremasinghe, walked out of the parliament denouncing the constitutional reform package because it proposed the creation of a 10-year interim council in the Tamil majority areas, changes to the present electoral system of proportional representation and the continuation of the executive presidency for the remainder of Kumaratunga's term.

In order to pass the constitutional changes, the government must win 150 votes out of the 225-member parliament. At present it commands 124 votes, with the support of the Muslim Congress Party, members of Tamil groups, as well as UNP defectors who have crossed over to its ranks in the past few months. It is expected to also win the votes of eight MPs from the Ceylon Workers Congress. But this still leaves it 18 short.

Wickremasinghe has declared that the UNP will oppose the package, but intense efforts are continuing to ensure sufficient defections with reports of cars, cash

and houses being offered. The UNP has claimed that the bidding has gone as high as 60 million rupees (\$750,000).

When a member of the UNP crossed over to the PA, the call went up from the opposition benches: "How many millions were paid to you?"

While the horse-trading and inducements continued outside, the desperation of the government was demonstrated on the floor of the chamber in a speech by Batty Weerakone, the Minister for Science and Technology, pleading for UNP members to back the government's devolution plan.

Weerakone is the leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). Once the major working class political party in Sri Lanka, the LSSP deserted the cause of socialism and the working class in 1964 when it joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (the chief constituent of the present PA regime) in a coalition government.

Involved in that betrayal was the abandonment by the LSSP of its defence of the Tamil people against the Sinhala chauvinist policies of the two main capitalist parties.

Weerakone cut a pathetic sight as he begged UNP members to propose amendments if they did not agree with the proposed constitution, reminding them that the ruling regime had conducted patient discussions with them, and had arrived at agreement on most of the proposals.

But the minister's words could hardly be heard above the din of hecklers from the UNP side.

Weerakone's desperation was matched only by that of his cabinet colleague Indika Goonawardena of the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka. Displaying all the cynicism with which Stalinism has become synonymous, Goonawardena claimed that since Marx had maintained that the nation-state arose out of the

development of the productive forces, the PA's attempts to preserve the state of Sri Lanka had to be supported.

Accordingly, he insisted, it was “the duty of the working class to bring pressure on the UNP to collaborate with the PA”—and this in the name of the founder of scientific socialism, who insisted that the “working men have no country” and that it was necessary for proletarians of all lands to unite.

Meanwhile, the Sinhala chauvinist organisations were mobilising their forces outside the parliament. Buddhist monks, steeped in decades of racist campaigns against the Tamil people, issued an ultimatum to MPs, declaring they would not attend the funeral services of family members of those who voted for the constitution.

A joint meeting of representatives of the UNP, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and a dozen other Sinhala chauvinist groups announced that they would wage a continuous campaign against Kumaratunga's devolution package.

The government has mobilised several thousand police to the surrounding areas of the parliament and kept the armed forces on stand by.

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