

New Sri Lankan government calls for peace talks with the LTTE

By K. Ratnayake
3 January 2002

The newly elected United National Party (UNP) government in Sri Lanka has moved rapidly to initiate peace talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—the latest in a series of attempts to end the country’s 18-year civil war. According to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, whose cabinet was sworn in on December 12, formal negotiations are likely to begin as early as March.

On December 21, the UNP declared a one-month ceasefire effective from December 24 in response to the LTTE’s unilateral cessation of hostilities two days before. Both sides expressed the hope that the ceasefire would be extended beyond the January 24 deadline. The government also announced the easing of its economic blockade against LTTE-held areas to permit the entry of basic items such as kerosene, some medicine and food such as biscuits and canned fish.

Just days later Wickremesinghe flew to New Delhi for discussions with the Indian government. A joint statement released after his meeting with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee indicated that India was “supportive of the measures outlined by the Sri Lankan Premier”. It reiterated India’s backing for the “sovereignty and integrity” of Sri Lanka, ruling out any support for the LTTE’s demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the country.

At the same time, India indicated it would not act as a formal mediator in the conflict. In 1987, under the Indo-Lanka Accord, 100,000 Indian so-called peace-keeping troops were sent to the north and east of Sri Lanka to oversee the disarming of the LTTE and a limited devolution of power to these areas. The accord collapsed as fighting broke out between the Indian force and the Tigers. The Sri Lankan government insisted on the withdrawal the Indian troops in 1990.

The UNP government is clearly seeking to exploit the Bush administration’s “global war on terrorism” to extract concessions from the LTTE. Speaking at a press conference in New Delhi, Wickremesinghe said he was hopeful of success as there was global pressure to settle such conflicts after the September 11 attack in the US. The previous PA administration had campaigned for the LTTE to be branded as a “terrorist organisation” in order to dry up its international sources of financial and political support. Over the last year, Canada and

Britain—both countries with large Tamil exile communities—joined the US in proscribing the LTTE.

Two days after returning from India, Wickremesinghe phoned the Norwegian Prime Minister Kjel Magne Bondevik to seek his country’s mediation in any negotiations. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry has confirmed that the country will contact “both sides to find out if there is a basis for resuming negotiations”.

Norway and India were the focus of a protracted effort, backed by the US, Britain and other major powers, to push the previous Peoples Alliance (PA) government to negotiate with the LTTE. The Norwegian mediation attempts folded in June when President Chandrika Kumaratunga complained that Norway’s special envoy, Erick Solheim, was biased in favour of the Tigers.

Wickremesinghe’s call for talks with the LTTE was a major issue in the December 5 election. Kumaratunga and the PA, along with their political ally—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—accused the UNP of having reached a secret deal with the Tigers to meet their demand for a separate state. The unsubstantiated allegation was a desperate attempt by the government to shore up its position by appealing to anti-Tamil chauvinism. The ploy failed, however, and the UNP and its electoral allies won a slender majority of seats. Insofar as it pursues talks with the LTTE, the UNP can also count on the support of a grouping of Tamil parties.

The PA came to power in 1994 in similar circumstances. Kumaratunga promised to end the war through negotiations with the LTTE, pointing to the record of the conservative UNP which was directly responsible for initiating and then prosecuting the war. But her attempts at peace negotiations foundered on the same political obstacle that Wickremesinghe confronts. For decades the UNP and PA have relied on Sinhala chauvinism as a means of shoring up their base of support and dividing the working class. Having fueled Sinhala extremism both parties now find any hint of concessions to the country’s Tamil minority provokes a chauvinist backlash, including in their own ranks.

The main impetus behind the UNP’s call for peace talks are the demands of powerful sections of big business. Having backed the war in 1983, the corporate chiefs have been pushing

for peace to attract foreign investment and arrest the country's deepening economic crisis. In last year's third quarter, the gross domestic product shrank by an unprecedented 3.7 percent. The shortfall in government revenue for the year is expected to reach 30,458 million rupees (\$US358 million).

Since the last general election in 2000, when the PA narrowly scraped back into power, big business had been pushing Kumaratunga to form a government of national unity with the UNP. The campaign intensified when a key government ally—the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress—crossed to the opposition benches leaving the PA without a parliamentary majority. But when, after a protracted political crisis, the PA failed to reach an agreement with the UNP and instead turned to the chauvinist JVP, the major business groups withdrew their support. A group of PA parliamentarians deserted the government, effectively forcing a fresh election.

One former senior PA minister, Professor G.L. Peiris has been put in charge of coordinating the UNP's peace initiative, along with Milinda Moragoda. Peiris was the architect of constitutional changes that were meant to form the basis of the PA's plans for negotiations with the LTTE. The plan collapsed when the package was put before parliament in 1999. The UNP withdrew its support in the face of a chauvinist campaign whipped up by the JVP, the Buddhist hierarchy and other extremist groups leaving Kumaratunga without the necessary two thirds majority to make the constitutional changes.

In view of the chequered history of "peace initiatives" in Sri Lanka, there is undoubtedly concern in ruling circles that Wickremesinghe's latest move will fall victim to the same political pressures. While the UNP won the election and holds a majority of parliamentary seats, Kumaratunga still holds the powerful post of president and is in a position to undermine the government's plans. To date the PA has yet to express a clear position on the UNP's proposals. Kumaratunga expressed her "hope" that the year would be one of peace but has made no detailed comment.

Behind the scenes, big business is no doubt pressing Kumaratunga and the PA to support the negotiations. Jagath Fernando, president of Sri Lanka First, a coalition of business groups pushing for talks, told the press: "The government has already achieved an overwhelming mandate to begin the process of achieving a negotiated settlement." Optimism in business circles over the prospect of negotiations has been reflected in the rise of the share index by nearly 20 percent from 526 points on December 5 to 621 points on December 24.

But both the UNP and the PA face continuing opposition from the Sinhala extremists. The Sinhala Urumaya party has condemned the government's announcement of a ceasefire, saying it was "absolutely foolish to respond favorably to such a move by the LTTE." The JVP has issued a statement demanding the government maintain a ban on the LTTE until it surrenders its arms and formally abandons its demand for a separate Tamil state. The party has launched a campaign

alleging the government is holding talks "to divide the country".

For its part, the LTTE, under considerable international pressure, has expressed an eagerness to enter talks with the UNP government. In a statement on December 19, it welcomed the election result as a "peace mandate" and declared that its unilateral ceasefire should be viewed as expressing a "sincere desire for peace and negotiated settlement." LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran has indicated that he would be prepared to accept a settlement that falls short of an independent Tamil Eelam. The LTTE's demand for a separate capitalist state is not based on the interests of the Tamil masses but of the Tamil bourgeoisie whose ambition is to transform the north and east of the island into a cheap labour platform for investors.

Wickremesinghe is well aware of the political pitfalls ahead. He commented in New Delhi that "there are going to be breakdowns, there are going to be setbacks" and "lots of difficulties." The UNP is yet to spell out the basis on which it proposes to negotiate with the LTTE, but it is likely to be a modified version of the devolution package presented by Kumaratunga to parliament in 1999. Like Kumaratunga, Wickremesinghe will have to secure the support of at least some opposition MPs to pass any constitutional changes.

Whatever the final form of Wickremesinghe's proposals, they will, like Kumaratunga's devolution package, be aimed at securing a deal between a powersharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ruling elites to continue and intensify the exploitation of the working class and oppressed masses. Such an arrangement will only entrench ethnic and religious divisions leading to further tensions and conflict.

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