

Deadline passes with no sign of any end to the Sri Lankan political crisis

By K. Ratnayake
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The deadline for a deal to end the current political standoff between the Sri Lankan president and the government came and went on Monday with no sign of any compromise.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe met on Monday for the second time in less than a week and for the fifth time since Kumaratunga precipitated the crisis on November 4 by unilaterally seizing control of three ministries and suspending parliament. But the meeting broke up and the deadline passed without even an official communiqué or an indication that the two leaders might meet again.

Moreover, there are no plans for a committee of top aides, which was set up to facilitate a deal, to meet again until next year. The committee previously engaged in marathon sessions to try to hammer out a “working arrangement” to end the deadlock. But these discussions have effectively been put on hold as senior presidential adviser Mano Tittawela and Senarath Kapukotuwa, chairman of the ruling United National Party (UNP), go on leave over Christmas.

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, government spokesman G.L. Peiris tried to put the best possible spin on the breakdown of talks. “They [Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe] have made progress on having a consensus on the economy, good governance and things like that but on the key issue of defence there is no agreement.” The president insists on retaining control of the defence ministry, whereas the prime minister demands its return to the government.

While Peiris attempted to downplay this “sticking point,” it goes to the heart of the issues at stake in the political stalemate. Kumaratunga seized control of the defence ministry, along with the ministries of the

interior and media, accusing the government of making concessions to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and endangering national security.

The military top brass put Kumaratunga under pressure by preparing a report alleging that the LTTE was using the ceasefire to build up its military forces, particularly in the Eastern Province. The report played a key role in Kumaratunga’s decision to take over the ministries in early November. At the same time, it was seized upon by Sinhala extremist groups, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Sihala Urumaya (SU) and sections of the Buddhist hierarchy, to step up their agitation against the “peace process”.

If Kumaratunga were to agree to hand back the defence ministry, she would immediately come under fire both from the military and the Sinhala chauvinists.

Wickremesinghe, on the other hand, is under pressure from the major powers and the dominant sections of business in Colombo to end the political crisis and to resume talks with the LTTE. He denies that the government has compromised national security and insists that, without full control over the defence ministry, he cannot negotiate with the LTTE.

The military played a highly provocative role during the peace talks that began in September 2002 and collapsed in April 2003 when the LTTE withdrew. On two occasions, just prior to negotiations, the Sri Lankan navy staged confrontations with LTTE vessels that resulted in their sinking. The government is obviously concerned that, with the defence ministry under Kumaratunga, the military will have a free hand to undermine any aspect of the talks to which it is opposed.

Peiris cautiously pointed to the dangers of the current impasse in an interview in the *Daily Mirror* yesterday. “We don’t have the luxury of time,” he stated. “It is

not only unsatisfactory but also potentially dangerous to have the peace process in this stagnant condition.” An editorial in the same newspaper earlier in the week bluntly warned: “What has been ignored by those involved in this controversy is the country’s steady movement towards the destructive eruption of the political volcano.”

The major powers have continued to push for a compromise. Japan’s special envoy Yasushi Akashi is planning to visit Sri Lanka for talks with the president and government leaders. Akashi co-chaired a donor conference in Tokyo with the US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage that pledged \$US4.5 billion in reconstruction aid to Sri Lanka over three years. Japan has already hinted that the aid will only be forthcoming if negotiations with the LTTE resume.

Big business is also pushing for an end to the protracted crisis. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka announced last week that the previously predicted growth rate of 6 percent was now impossible to achieve. Director of Economic Research A.G. Karunasena stated that the main factor in reducing the estimate to 5.5 percent was “the impact of the business confidence following the political crisis”.

Share prices on the Colombo Stock Exchange have sharply declined. A report this week showed that companies listed on the exchange lost around 88 billion rupees (\$US900 million) in share values between November 4 and December 17. The All Share Price Index fell by 26 percent from 1,416 on October 31 to 1,040 by December 17. The blue chip Milanka Index declined from 2,582 to 1864 over the same period.

Editorial after editorial in the Colombo press has been calling for the president and the government to end the confrontation and work together. The *Daily Mirror* even appealed to the old workers’ parties—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP)—which are in the Peoples Alliance with Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), to use their good offices to encourage a deal. The LSSP and CP dutifully responded with a joint official statement last weekend advising the president and prime minister “to realise that what is involved (in the rivalry) is essentially a political question that has to be resolved through political compromise.”

In 1964, the LSSP played a crucial role in propping up bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka by entering an SLFP

government headed by Kumaratunga’s mother. Today, like the Stalinist CP, it is nothing but a bureaucratic shell. The fact that the *Daily Mirror* called for the support of these bankrupt parties reveals that the ruling class is grasping for straws to end the crisis, particularly under conditions of growing unrest over deteriorating living standards.

On Monday, about 80,000 health workers participated in a one-day strike and may launch an indefinite strike if their demands for a pay rise are not met. Water Resources and Drainage Board workers yesterday held a strike for a pay increase. Employees from Inland Revenue and Customs are engaged in a campaign against privatisation. A few days ago, demonstrations of small farmers and their supporters against legislation to increase water charges forced the government to temporarily withdraw its bill.

Despite their sharp differences, the government and opposition showed their essential class unity by voting together to pass the defence, interior and media budgets. There had been speculation that the government would vote against funds for these areas as a means of putting pressure on Kumaratunga. The budget as a whole was then passed with token opposition from the PA. It further extends economic restructuring at the expense of the jobs and living standards of working people while increasing the already substantial budget allocation for the armed forces.

These measures will only fuel the opposition of workers, farmers and others, compounding what is already a highly volatile political situation.

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