

A symptom of profound political crisis

# Sri Lankan government alleges opposition, military and business involvement in plot to kill the president

**K. Ratnayake, Wije Dias**  
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Less than a month after the reelection of Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga, the state-owned media on January 9 published government allegations that the parliamentary opposition, the military and big business were involved in the attempted assassination on Kumaratunga's life by a suicide bomber on December 18. The government has ordered a police investigation.

According to an article in the state-run *Daily News*: "The information gathered so far has revealed that a group of top-rung businessmen sympathetic towards the UNP are directly linked to this alleged conspiracy. They have been funding both the UNP and the LTTE... There are also reports that several army personnel too are linked to this alleged plot and there had been plans to capture power through a military coup."

Suicide bombers are the hallmark of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has been engaged in a 17-year war for a separate state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. In the politically charged atmosphere of Colombo, the accusations are tantamount to branding sections of the opposition United National Party (UNP), the military and big business as traitors. It is just the latest symptom of a government that has completely lost its political bearings and a country that is in a deep political crisis.

Neither the police nor the government has provided any evidence to back their assertions. Renuka Shanmuganathan, the wife of a wealthy businessman, was taken into police custody on January 9 and questioned by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). According to press reports, the police claim that she provided unspecified evidence about the alleged plot, but was then released—a move that is unprecedented in this type of case. The head of a state-run media institution has also been interrogated and released.

The UNP and the private media have responded by accusing Kumaratunga and her Peoples Alliance (PA) government of preparing to suppress political opposition and to gag the media. "We reject these unfounded allegations and condemn their attempts to discredit the UNP," a spokesman said.

Certainly there is a history of Sri Lankan governments using concocted plots against their opponents. Soon after his reelection in 1982, president J.R. Jayewardene threw Kumaratunga's late husband in jail for his alleged involvement in a guerrilla plot to overthrow the government. Equally, there is no shortage of cases where political opponents have been removed through assassination. As the Sri

Lankan media noted at the time, police and army security at Kumaratunga's rally last month had been remarkably lax in allowing a suicide bomber into the meeting.

But whether true or not, the accusations point to acute political tensions in Colombo, deep fractures and considerable disorientation within the ruling elites and a climate in which desperate methods are contemplated and used. This is confirmed by Kumaratunga's extraordinary twists and turns during the campaign and in the short time since her re-election.

Kumaratunga called the presidential election early in a bid to strengthen her government and prepare the ground for parliamentary elections due this year. She had won office in 1994 with a record majority as the head of the Peoples Alliance, which included the Sri Lankan Communist Party and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and promised to end the war and improve living standards.

There is now widespread hostility to her government. Not only did she fail to end the war, but after talks with the LTTE broke down, intensified it under the banner of a "war for peace". Over the last five years, soldiers have died at a far higher rate than under the conservative UNP governments. Moreover, Kumaratunga continued the UNP's program of pro-market reforms, including the privatisation of sections of state-owned industry.

She called the elections trusting that advances made by the Sri Lanka military would, on the one hand, enable her to appeal to Sinhala chauvinism, and on the other, give some credibility to her plans to force the LTTE to accept a limited devolution of powers to the North and East of the country. But those prospects collapsed when the LTTE launched an offensive in the Wannu region in November, which rapidly turned into a debacle for the Sri Lankan army.

Kumaratunga became increasingly hysterical in her political attacks. She said the UNP, military officers and the LTTE were conspiring to defeat her and accused the UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe of planning a deal with the LTTE to split the country. Wickremesinghe, responding on the increasingly insistent demands of big business for an end to the war, had pledged to hold unconditional talks with the LTTE and to allow it to participate in an interim administration in the North and East. Kumaratunga won the election last December not because she had any solid base of support but because of deep disaffection with the UNP and official politics as a whole.

During and especially after the elections Kumaratunga was under

considerable pressure from the media and sections of big business to adopt a bipartisan approach to end the war and even form a government of national unity to deal with the country's crisis. In her acceptance speech on December 22, she appealed to Wickremesinghe, saying: "I stretch out my hands to you to join this government, both you and your supporters." In an interview with the BBC on December 30 she reaffirmed this approach, explaining: "Wickremesinghe can sit around a table and work in a mature way with the government to solve the problem."

The UNP immediately stated that it was ready for a "consensus approach". Big business leaders who had backed a UNP victory became more supportive. A meeting of business chiefs on December 29 declared it was "most encouraged" that the president and opposition leader were committed to "achieving an early solution of the debilitating north-east conflict". But the optimism rapidly evaporated with Kumaratunga's abrupt about-face a few days later.

On January 3, she appeared on the state-run television service *Rupavahini* and, in a rambling three-and-a-half hour interview, attacked the media for portraying her as a "lying, corrupt and drunkard" politician and the UNP for not giving her the support to end the war. Threatening both the opposition and media, Kumaratunga said she would use all her legal powers against the "virulent attacks" on herself and her government. She also charged that big business hated her "because they cannot make a fast buck and earn black money like during the UNP regime." To cap it off, she accused UNP of having had secret contacts with the LTTE and top army leaders of conspiring to weaken her by allowing the LTTE to succeed in its offensive last November.

The pro-UNP *Island* newspaper immediately declared that everything was "thrown back to square one". The air of crisis in Colombo was further compounded with the latest government claim of a plot to kill Kumaratunga. Expressing the exasperation and fears of sections of the ruling class, the *Island* wrote in an editorial on January 10: "The political scenario today is reminiscent of a Buddhist tale of a man hanging on a thorny creeper with snake and fire below and an elephant charging towards him, while he enjoys honey dipping from above."

The collapse of investor confidence in Kumaratunga is reflected in plummeting share values. The Millanka Index, the sensitive blue chip indicator, has fallen 133.77 points or 13.2 per cent since December 14. As the *Island* editorial commented on January 13: "This depressed stock market is obviously a reflection of the prevailing political instability. The presidential election was expected to restore the much-needed stability but so far not only are the uncertainties and doubts continuing but the end is not in sight."

One would be forgiven for concluding from the wild U-turns in Kumaratunga's plans over the last month or so that the president was completely demented. But apparent madness of Kumaratunga's political shifts are the product of deep divisions in ruling circles in Sri Lanka, where no-one has any clear solution to the pressing issue of the day—an end to the war.

Big business, supported by the US and other major powers, has been demanding for more than a year that the PA and UNP get together to pass the devolution package as the basis for negotiations with the LTTE to end the war. There is no guarantee, however, that the LTTE leaders would accept a limited autonomy for the North and East and drop their demands for a separate state.

At the same time, the military chiefs and layers of business that have profited from the war as well as Sinhala chauvinist bodies insist that

the army must continue the war. But the prospect of an outright military victory over the LTTE appears just as distant as it was 17 years ago. In fact, the LTTE offensive is continuing with military attacks in the north at the strategic Elephant Pass military camp and on the Jaffna peninsula.

Kumaratunga is increasingly a politician without a policy and without any significant base of support. She has attempted to straddle both the pro-war and so-called peace camps but that has become more and more untenable. The PA coalition is deeply divided—the LSSP and CP push for the adoption of the devolution package and talks with the LTTE, but sections of her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which has always contained some of the most chauvinist bourgeois elements, are opposed to any deal that involves concessions to the LTTE. Her political gyrations have become increasingly desperate as she oscillates between the two policies, neither of which seem to offer her the means for shoring up what remains of her support.

Kumaratunga has resorted to the stock-in-trade of all Sri Lankan bourgeois politicians in a tight corner—the whipping up of anti-Tamil chauvinism. On January 5, a leading Tamil politician Kumar Ponnambalam was assassinated in broad daylight in Colombo and a previously unknown Sinhala chauvinist group claimed responsibility. On the same day another suicide bomb attack took place outside the prime minister's office. In response, Kumaratunga in league with her security chiefs brought Colombo to a halt by imposing a 13-hour curfew on January 7-8 and detained hundreds of Tamils for interrogation. Since then hundreds of Tamils have been rounded up in towns and cities around the country on the pretext of preventing LTTE infiltration.

The dilemma facing the ruling class is compounded by the fact that there is no consensus on how to proceed within the opposition UNP either. UNP general secretary Gamini Athukorala has pressed for a legal challenge to Kumaratunga's reelection—a proposal aimed at blocking any collaboration with the PA. UNP chairman Karu Jayasuriya has publicly opposed any unity with Kumaratunga, saying it would be a betrayal of the people who voted the UNP. The UNP has now filed a challenge to the election, alleging numerous instances of ballot rigging and election malpractice.

Whatever the outcome of this highly unstable political situation, it is clear that neither the ruling class nor its political parties have any progressive solution either to the war or to the continuing decline of living standards of the working class and oppressed masses of Sri Lanka.



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