

Rifts open up in new Sri Lankan government

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Even before Sri Lanka's new minority United Peoples Freedom Party (UPFA) government has begun to function, sharp differences have emerged between the two major coalition partners—President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

An incipient split was on public display last Saturday when the JVP boycotted the formal swearing in of cabinet ministers. JVP leaders have accused the SLFP of failing to consult under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding that established the UPFA. The eight ministries and deputy ministries set aside for the JVP remain unfilled.

The immediate issue that sparked the tensions was the reallocation of key departments previously under the control of ministries earmarked for the JVP. Kumaratunga herself took over the state-owned Film Corporation, which had been part of the Ministry of National Heritage and Cultural Affairs. Unaware of the decision, JVP MP Vijitha Herath, who had been named as the new minister, gave an interview published in the *Sunday Lankima* expounding his views on the development of the film industry in line with national culture.

In addition, the large-scale Mahaveli irrigation scheme was removed from the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Irrigation and assigned to an SLFP minister in charge of a newly-created river basin development ministry. The irrigation project covers parts of the central, north central and eastern provinces where tens of thousands of small farmers live. The JVP wanted control of the scheme to extend its influence in these areas, which were a hotbed of protest against the previous United National Front (UNF) government. To add insult to injury, the livestock department was also hived off to another ministry.

The disagreement is not simply about the allocation of ministries and departments, but concerns the direction of the new government. From the outset, Kumaratunga has been determined to ensure that she and the SLFP are firmly in charge. In the April 2 elections, the JVP won 39 parliamentary seats compared to the SLFP's 57, but has been largely pushed to one side since then.

Disagreements first emerged last week over the appointment of Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister. Rajapakse has a long history of antagonism to the JVP and opposed the formation of the UPFA coalition, arguing instead for a grand alliance with the UNF. As an alternative, the JVP pushed for former foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, but was completely ignored.

Attempts were made to resolve the conflict over the cabinet prior to Saturday's swearing-in ceremony. Two meetings were held—one at the president's house and another at the residence of her brother, Anura Bandaranaike—a key SLFP figure and a major

broker in creating the alliance with the JVP. But no agreement was reached.

According to the Colombo media, JVP leaders complained bitterly over the lack of consultation and the lop-sided character of the cabinet. While 62 of the 66 MPs from the SLFP and other UPFA partners received posts, only eight of the JVP's 39 MPs are in the cabinet. Moreover, the president disregarded the JVP in appointing chairmen to key state corporations such as the Ceylon Electricity Board, the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and the Board of Investments.

Speaking at a rally on Saturday, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe warned the SLFP of serious consequences if it did not act properly. "If this is not happening, people should use their power of organising against such things by way of protests." He claimed that the JVP had won more than 50 percent of the vote for the UPFA at the elections. According to the *Daily Mirror*, the JVP Politburo met over the weekend and resolved to remain outside the cabinet unless the party's demands are met.

While the two parties may work out a temporary compromise, the disagreements underscore the highly unstable character of the new UPFA government. Kumaratunga and the SLFP turned to an electoral alliance with the Sinhala chauvinist JVP as a means of offsetting their own loss of support. Like the UNF, which took office in 2001, the SLFP was responsible for drastic economic measures that seriously eroded living standards during its previous term of office from 1994 to 2001. The JVP was able to capitalise on the alienation from both major parties to significantly boost its vote on April 2 and more than double its seats from 16 to 39.

The collapse of support for the major parties was also highlighted by the JVP's standing in the preference lists. Under the Sri Lankan electoral system, a voter not only chooses a party slate but also indicates a preference for three of its candidates. Once the seats within an electoral district are allocated proportionately to each of the parties, the preferences determine which candidates are elected.

In a result that shocked the SLFP, the JVP topped the preferences in most of the 14 election districts that the UPFA won. In Colombo and Kurunegala, JVP candidates took the first three slots, relegating the SLFP to fourth position. JVP propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa received the highest UPFA preference vote in any of the districts and was second only to the former prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe. In Anuradhapura, the SLFP district leader H. B. Semasinghe failed to win a seat.

Two fundamental issues can only compound the tensions in the UPFA coalition and within the JVP itself—economic policy and peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Prime Minister Rajapakse has already indicated that the UPFA will not be able to keep its economic promises, which include the creation of 30,000 jobs in three months and a 70 percent salary increase for government employees. He told the *Sunday Leader*: “We are going to commence negotiations with all the relevant trade unions. We will explain to them the real situation and how difficult it is to deliver everything that we promised overnight.”

The JVP is also being called upon to play a role. An editorial in the *Island* on April 12 encouraged the JVP to use its trade union influence to stop strikes and protests. “The JVP has the potential of eliminating labor unrest,” the newspaper enthused. “If they do really back the private sector and let them run as good businesses without political interference, they could make the economy tick and build investor confidence.”

However, if the JVP satisfies the demands of big business, as it pledged to do in the course of the election campaign, it will rapidly alienate its base of support among the rural and urban poor, and open up rifts in its own ranks.

As far as the peace talks are concerned, the UPFA has promised to abide by the current ceasefire and to restart negotiations with the LTTE. However, prior to the election, the JVP stridently denounced the peace process and the UNF for “betraying the country” in talks with the LTTE. Along with the military, the JVP and other chauvinist groups pressured Kumaratunga to move against the government, which was finally dismissed on February 7.

Aware that big business and the major powers do not want a return to war, Prime Minister Rajapakse is seeking to enlist the support of the Indian government to pressure the LTTE to the negotiating table on Colombo’s terms. But there is no agreement between the SLFP and JVP over the basis of negotiations. The JVP is hostile to granting any significant concessions to the LTTE and opposes the SLFP’s plan for a limited devolution of powers to the wartorn North and East of the island.

Notwithstanding the *Island* editorial, there is a degree of nervousness in ruling circles about the entry of the JVP into government for the first time. Few take the JVP’s “socialist” and “Marxist” phrase-mongering seriously. But there are concerns that the JVP may be susceptible to pressure from its base among the rural poor and therefore become an unreliable and erratic alliance partner.

While Kumaratunga cannot avoid relying on the JVP at present, she is seeking other means for shoring up her government. Under the guise of abolishing the country’s autocratic and unpopular executive presidency, she is proposing to change the existing proportional electoral laws, which favour minor parties. Kumaratunga has already served two terms as president and is thus ineligible to serve a third. By reverting to a parliamentary system, she is counting on making herself prime minister with extensive powers.

It is not at all clear, however, that the government will be able to make the necessary constitutional changes. With just 105 seats, the UPFA lacks a majority in the 225-seat parliament. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Most minor parties, which would be wiped out if there were a return to the previous first-past-the-post system, oppose any change.

In the immediate aftermath of the elections, Kumaratunga sought the support of a number of smaller parties, but has only increased the UPFA’s numbers by one—from the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP). She is now reliant on the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala extremist party that fielded Buddhist monks in the elections. The JHU indicated last weekend that its nine MPs would not join the UPFA, but they would support the government from outside.

One of the reasons that Kumaratunga installed Rajapakse as prime minister was to woo the JHU. Unlike Lakshman Kadirgamar who is a Tamil, Rajapakse has close connections to the Buddhist hierarchy.

In an extraordinary move, the president also enlisted the military top brass to win JHU backing. The head of the Sri Lankan navy, Vice Admiral Daya Sandagiri, called on the JHU monks to urge their support for the UPFA. Sandagiri’s partisan involvement in the post-election political manoeuvring is one more indication of the openly political role being played by the country’s top military leaders.

The government’s reliance on the JHU further compounds the difficulty in opening talks with the LTTE. The JHU, like the organisations that formed it just prior to the elections—the Sinhala Urumaya (SU) and the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya (JSS), is opposed to the ceasefire and any talks with the LTTE. Last year the SU and JSS criticised not only the UNF, but Kumaratunga as well for being too conciliatory and engaged in a series of provocations aimed at triggering a confrontation with the LTTE.

Significantly, one of Kumaratunga’s first steps after the elections was to meet with the defeated prime minister, Wickremesinghe. The two leaders had been involved in bitter conflict for months after the president arbitrarily seized control of three key ministries last November. Yet the two-hour meeting on April 7 was officially described as “cordial” and included discussion on the sensitive issue of the “peace process.” There is no doubt in the present uncertain situation that Kumaratunga is considering all options, including a grand coalition with the UNF, which sections of the ruling class have been advocating for years.

The inability of Kumaratunga to establish a parliamentary majority and form a stable government is symptomatic of the deepgoing divisions that wrack the entire political establishment in Colombo. The new administration confronts exactly the same intractable contradictions as the outgoing UNF. In this volatile situation, Kumaratunga, with the backing of the military and state apparatus, is increasingly turning to anti-democratic methods of rule.



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