

Sri Lanka: “Cohabitation”—Opportunity or Paralysis

Sri Lanka’s parliamentary election December 5 returned a solid majority for the United National Party (UNP) and its allies. The UNP’s Ranil Wickremasinghe has been sworn in as prime minister; Chandrika Kumaratunga, of the People’s Alliance (PA), still has four years remaining of her term as president. Political “cohabitation” will not come easily to either of these bitter political adversaries. If both mobilize their best instincts and political self-restraint, however, it could be an opportunity to develop a broad national approach to the country’s searing ethnic conflict.

Frenetic negotiations to save a troubled government: The wild political ride leading to this election started in July 2001. Kumaratunga had lost the support of the Tamil and Muslim parties. Threatened with a no-confidence motion and unable to dissolve parliament until a year had passed since the last election, she suspended parliament for 60 days and announced that the government would hold a referendum on the issue of whether the people wanted a new constitution. The next two months were spent in frenetic maneuvering. A group of government ministers tried to put together a government of national unity with elements of the opposition UNP. That failed because of both incompatible personal demands by would-be ministers and policy differences.

Kumaratunga then turned to the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist-nationalist group that had twice staged violent armed insurrections, but whose professedly nonmilitary successors had won 10 seats in parliament. The JVP exacted a high price for rescuing Kumaratunga’s parliamentary majority. It demanded that the referendum be cancelled, that the cabinet be cut by more than half to 20 ministers, and that independent commissions be set up to deal with five areas that had suffered from political manipulation: public service, the judiciary, the police, election procedures, and the media. These demands were widely applauded. Much more troublesome, however, were the JVP’s demands that the government drop any economic reform measures that involved austerity and refrain from making any serious offers to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to address the country’s longstanding ethnic issue.

The deal with the JVP enabled Kumaratunga to reconvene parliament on September 6, but it ultimately proved to be the government’s undoing. Within a month, the two key figures in the abortive negotiations for a national unity government,

Constitutional Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris, a former law professor widely regarded as the intellectual champion of the government, and S. B. Dissanayake, had walked out, taking four others with them. They rejected the restrictions the JVP deal had placed on the government’s economic and peace policies. More fundamentally, they were unwilling to be associated with a group that had imposed such terrible civil strife and violence on the country a decade ago. The government lost its majority. Rather than go through a no-confidence motion, Kumaratunga dissolved parliament and called an election.

A violent and controversial election: In late October, a group of Tamil parties that had hitherto opposed the LTTE suddenly announced a common election front, pushing for an end to the LTTE’s illegal status and the start of negotiations with the LTTE. The LTTE had made no secret of its desire to see Kumaratunga and the PA defeated, but the other parties to this announcement had been among the LTTE’s most frequent assassination targets. Their action was taken out of both desperation and fear. Kumaratunga, meanwhile, argued on the campaign trail that the UNP had made a deal with the LTTE, an accusation that seems to have backfired.

The election itself was one of the most violent in Sri Lanka’s history. The death toll reported by private monitoring organizations was more than 50. On election day, the son of one minister was arrested in conjunction with major irregularities, and widespread reports indicated that army checkpoints prevented Tamil voters coming from “uncleared areas”—those where the government’s control was weak and presumably LTTE sympathizers more numerous—from voting.

Decisive victory: The results were nonetheless decisive. The UNP received 109 seats; with its new allies in the Sri Lanka Muslim Conference, this gave it a majority, 114 of 225 seats in the parliament. The PA was reduced to 77 seats. The Tamil alliance won 15 seats, compared to their combined total of nine in the last election; the JVP came back with 16, well above their previous level of 10. Looking at the aggregate vote totals, the UNP outpolled the PA by more than 20 percent—4 million compared with 3.3 million votes. Moreover, the PA came in ahead of its rivals in only one of the country’s 22 electoral districts. Only Sri Lanka’s complicated electoral system, in which district-by-district proportional representation determines each party’s strength but individual

elections determine who gets elected, saved it from being marginalized.

Cohabitation: Kumaratunga moved quickly to appoint Wickremasinghe as prime minister, as the constitution requires. The appointment of the cabinet took a couple of days longer, as Kumaratunga tried to persuade her new prime minister to allow her to retain the two ministerial portfolios she had held throughout her presidency, finance and especially the defense ministry. Ultimately, she gave in, and Wickremasinghe appointed a cabinet of his own choosing. The basic pattern had been set during Sri Lanka's last bout with "cohabitation." When Kumaratunga won a parliamentary election in 1994, she appointed her own cabinet, though she did agree to let the UNP president retain the defense portfolio for the three months remaining in his term.

The new cabinet is large, in the Sri Lankan tradition, and includes some talented figures. Wickremasinghe himself has previously served as industries minister and as prime minister, and is deeply interested in moving the economy forward. The finance minister is K. N. Choksy, a successful corporate lawyer. Having a high-powered person in full-time charge of the finance ministry will allow more concentrated attention to the country's growing economic problems than was possible when the president held the portfolio. Tilak Marapane, who served as attorney general in the last UNP government has had a career in both public service and legal practice and is known for his analytical skill and focused approach to his work. He will be the first full-time defense minister in more than a decade. Professor G. L. Peiris has returned to the Constitutional Affairs Ministry, where he served for most of the PA government. He was the principal architect of the constitutional proposals Kumaratunga's government put forward in 1995; his departure from her government effectively brought it down.

Making this enforced cooperation work will be more difficult than the last time, however. In 1994, the UNP president was almost at the end of his term and had decided not to run again. He was content to play a figurehead role. Kumaratunga still has four years to go. She is an energetic woman with passionate views on most areas of policy, and a fighter's approach to politics. As president, she is still commander in chief of the armed forces. Her convictions on the country's ethnic problems and her economic policies differ mainly in nuance from those of the new prime minister, but their clashing personalities and political agendas will make it very difficult for them to work together.

The key issues: peace and prosperity: The new government has correctly singled out the ethnic conflict for its first attention. Its statements about the importance of negotiations with the LTTE have a strong resemblance to the views that Kumaratunga brought to her first government. The LTTE, for its part, has announced a one-month ceasefire starting December 24, "to give peace a chance." A major speech by LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran, with its references to the LTTE's "desire to live together" with Sri Lanka's Sinhalese population, suggests an increased interest in organizing some

kind of talks. However, the Prabhakaran speech continues to bill "self-determination" for the Tamil people "in their historic territories" as the touchstone of any acceptable settlement. In the Sri Lankan context, these have become code phrases for the LTTE's goal of a separate state. Moreover, the LTTE continues to argue that it cannot talk to the government unless the regulations making it an illegal organization are rescinded.

In short, there is still an enormous gap between the aspirations of the LTTE and the government's minimum requirements. The new government's apparent receptivity to some form of third party assistance is welcome. The election results mean that Sri Lanka's government will no longer be constrained by its 1995 constitutional proposals. Despite the creativity that went into them and the promise they initially showed, the LTTE never took those proposals as a basis for negotiations. Having the flexibility to present new ideas will be an advantage for government negotiators.

The economy needs to be the other priority. Sri Lanka's growth has been declining for several years. This year, a devastating attack on the country's only international airport shattered the tourism industry, restricted air links with Europe and East Asia, depressed foreign investment, and saddled exporters with huge insurance fees. On top of that, the recession in the United States and the West has savaged exports of garments, by far the country's largest earner of foreign exchange. The infrastructure needs are particularly acute, and private resources will be needed to deal with gaps in electric power and telecommunications.

The road ahead: The blood feud between the UNP and the PA stymied the last government's peace initiative. With the major parties now thrown together, they have an opportunity to draw up a general national consensus at least on the main lines of peacemaking policy. Coordination between political and military policies is especially important, because the president retains authority over the armed forces. A consensus is almost certainly out of reach, but a limited political nonaggression pact might work.

This will come naturally neither to the two leaders nor to their party colleagues. The first year will be critical: once that milestone is passed, the president will once again be able, if she wishes, to dissolve parliament and call for a fresh election. The situation calls for unusually strong self-restraint by both leaders. Sri Lanka has a more than 50-year-old tradition of democracy. Elected leaders from both major parties have at times bent the constitution to expand their own power. These times are not looked back on with much admiration. Both the current leaders have had to transfer power peacefully, and have enhanced their standing in the process. This experience may help them find the strength they need to steer through an uncomfortable period.

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