

Opposition calls for withdrawal of referendum

VIRTUALLY all of Sri Lanka's opposition parties are formally rejecting the call by President Kumaratunga to change the constitution by urging a no vote at her proposed referendum, the Island newspaper reported Saturday. This is as a second resort if the joint opposition's call for the withdrawal of the referendum fails.

The opposition parties are apprehensive that a positive mandate for the referendum, being of a very general nature, could be used to make drastic overhaul of the Constitution after converting the present Parliament into a Constituent Assembly. In such an assembly, any new Constitution can be adopted with an ordinary majority, whereas in Parliament, it will require the support of two-third members of the House.

The concern stems from the open-ended nature of the question being posed. The proposed referendum gives Sri Lankans what is effectively Hobson's choice. Kumaratunga will ask the people to answer yes or no thus "is a Constitution as a matter of national importance and necessity needed

for the country?"

Early last week, a press release by the Commissioner of Elections Dayananda Dissanayake said thirty-three of Sri Lanka's forty six recognized political parties have intimated to the Department of Elections, whether they are for or against the referendum scheduled to be held on August 21. "Political parties that have not intimated their stand to the Department of Elections will be treated as neutral parties," the press release added.

The decision to ask the public support for the pot symbol on the ballot paper according to most political parties is a tactical move to thwart government efforts to subvert democracy. "There are serious doubts as to how the government will interpret a positive mandate. So we are calling for the people to vote in the negative," Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauff Hakeem said.

The main opposition United National Party (UNP) media spokesman Dr Karunasena Kodituwakku too said that his party would be supporting the pot sym-

bol. The JVP however took the position that while the party had informed the Election Commissioner that it would support the pot symbol, it had not determined what it would tell the people.

"We informed the Elections Commissioner as a formality for the allocation of time over radio and television. But this may change in the coming weeks depending on the situation," Propaganda Secretary Wimal Weerawansa told The Island Friday. "Our first priority is still to get the government to withdraw the referendum and we will continue with this campaign," he asserted.

The sole All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) MP Vinayagamoorthy said that his party too would call for a rejection of the government's call for constitutional change as it would not be possible to prevent the referendum.

"It does not seem that we can prevent the referendum. We will call for the people to vote for the pot symbol," he said. He will proceed to Jaffna on August 3 and hold

meeting till the 15 to call for support for his party's position.

Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) Vice President V Anandasangari said that his party had neither decided nor informed the Elections Commissioner of its decision on the referendum. "This is a very serious matter. We will make a decision at our Central Committee meeting on August 4. We

don't want to say anything one way or another. But we will definitely tell the people that the government is trying to cheat them and let them decide," he said.

The far right Sihala Urumaya's position is that it will support the pot symbol to stop the dismantling of the unitary status of the constitution.

Meanwhile there was a joint Opposition meeting

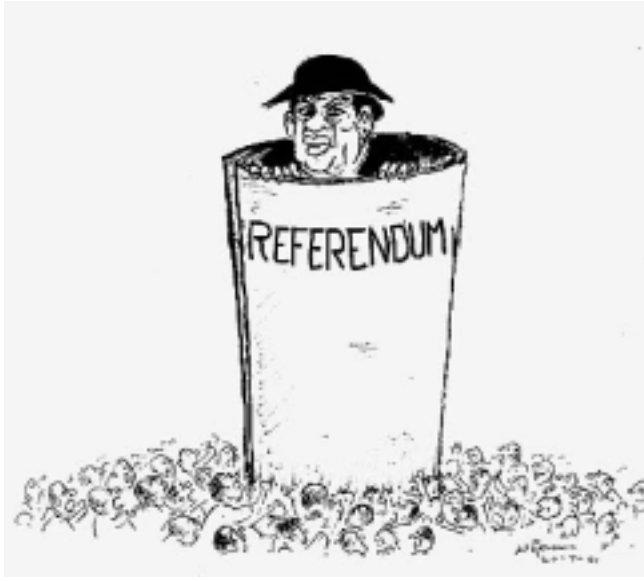
Friday with all the parties including the JVP that had not attended the previous meeting in attendance. A common position had been taken that thrust of all party meetings would be for "the withdrawal of the referendum forthwith".

The JVP had raised the possibility of a boycott of the referendum. However, the dangers of such a move had been pointed out, with

the possibility of ballot rigging.

The call for foreign monitors too had been taken up at the meeting. UNP Deputy Leader Karu Jayasuriya who is coordinating efforts had informed that there was too little time to involve foreign monitoring. The parties have already raised the issue with the Election Commissioner, and are seeking the support of local monitors.

Sixteen parties in favour of the referendum proposals include the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA), Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the far right Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), Desa Vimukthi Jathika Peramuna, the paramilitary and Eelam Peoples Democratic Party, Liberal Party and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).



Kumaratunga's referendum is a way to protect her self from public opposition as the Island's cartoon reflects

Kumaratunga assures Sinhala far right over devolution

SRI LANKA'S President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga said Friday that the draft Constitution tabled in Parliament in August last year and later withdrawn amid vehement opposition from the Sinhala community will not be considered in preparing the new constitution.

The President told a group of special representatives of the Joint Trade Unions' Federation that the new constitution will be presented within a short period, after seeking opinions of the

the Mahasangha - high priests of the Buddhist clergy, the minorities, minor political parties and intellectuals.

Minister Mangala Samaraweera, addressing another meeting in Colombo this morning, said: "the new constitution will be presented to the people before November this year." The phantom of devolution is undermining Kumaratunga's support base, as the Sinhala far right and Buddhist clergy are suspicious of any change to the constitution that might

extend any powers to the Tamils.

The devolution proposals presented in Parliament last year were rejected outright by the Colombo-based Tamil groups, including the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) which had originally helped draft the constitutional proposals. The supremacy accorded to Buddhism in that earned the TULF the ire of the Tamils. Yet even those proposals had been considerably weakened to be meaningless by August 2000.



Ostriches and flopping rampages

INDEPENDENT newspapers criticized the Sri Lankan government and police on Friday, while the state-owned press justified the security forces' violent response to last week's opposition protests.

"The severe retaliatory measures deployed by the government indicated that opposition toward the new moves were a serious challenge to the government," said The Island. "The numbers that turned out did convey an upsurge of resentment against the prorogation and the call for a referen-

dum."

"It could well be that those in power are retaliating through fear," the paper said further. "Tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons and baton charges, despite the physical discomfiture caused, is a sign of recognition by those that matter of the cause that has brought the protesters on to the streets."

However, the state-run Daily News accused the protesters of inciting police retaliation, in a lead story on the "UNP protest rampage." It crowded about the "much vaunted protested (sic) cam-

paign in Colombo and suburbs turned out to be an utter flop, for the crowd that took part in the demonstrations was nowhere near the 1 million which the party boasted about," while fact the UNP got exactly the numbers it planned: an estimated hundred thousand. "It is this destructive militancy which engulfed the city in chaos and brought tears and groans among citizenry," the Daily News said loftily.

"The law enforcers couldn't stand idly by while all this took place. It was their duty to enforce the law

and that is exactly what they did. The alternative would have been social chaos. When sections of the crowds proved recalcitrant, the law enforcers were reluctantly compelled to use a minimum of force," the paper said.

The Island warned of further turmoil: "Whatever the spin doctors of Lake House and other state media institutions will put on, President Kumaratunga will only be Ostrich like, burying her head in the sand, if she cannot recognise the rising tide of anger against her two recent moves."



Journalists attacked by Presidential Guards

JOURNALISTS and opposition parliamentarians last Tuesday demonstrated in front of the Fort Railway station in downtown Colombo, urging the Sri Lankan government to act against "intimidation" from the Presidential Security Division (PSD).

Two years ago, journalists were covering a march on Kumaratunga's tightly guarded Temple Trees residence by the

opposition United National Party when police fired rubber bullets and tear gas and baton-charged them. Members of the PSD reportedly assaulted photographers, smashing equipment and confiscating cameras.

The protesters last Tuesday, numbering more than a hundred, said that despite repeated complaints to authorities, no action has been taken so far.

Several Sri Lankan journalists were beaten up by gunmen last Monday as they put up posters commemorating an alleged attack on reporters by government agents, media organisations said. None of the activists was seriously injured, the AFP reported. Gunmen dressed in camouflage, who were travelling in jeeps used by Sri Lankan security forces and police, roughed

up the journalists, confiscating their posters and damaging their three-wheeled taxis, the Photo Journalists Association of Sri Lanka said. The Photo Journalists Association and the Editors Guild said their latest poster campaign was aimed at attracting public attention to the plight of the victims and to show that no action had been taken against the perpetrators

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