

## Voice of Shakthi Thursday 17 August 2000

There was a time when President Chandrika Kumaranatunge was considered a leader who was genuinely committed to a peaceful settlement to the ethnic crisis in [Sri Lanka](#). But her attempt at forcing through her peace package in Parliament last week has starkly illustrated the fact that either through sheer naivety or bad political judgement, she has lost much of her credibility.

The package, the President says, failed because of the campaign carried out by certain sections of the Buddhist clergy. Because of this protest action, she is left with no alternative but to carry on the military effort, she says. For this purpose, she wants the Maha Sangha's help in [recruiting](#) at least 20,000 more soldiers. If, in the meantime, anyone is capable of suggesting a better solution to the crisis, she is willing to resign her position, she also adds.

But how genuine is the President when she makes these statements? If she is genuinely committed to a genuine political solution and a democratic Sri Lanka, how come she managed to include these very interesting additions to her package?

Like, why was it necessary to include a six-year term for the Executive Presidency that she now holds, a position she promised very faithfully to abolish nearly a decade ago?

What is the need for doing away with the existing proportional representation system with an alternative which will surely wipe out whatever power small political [parties](#) currently have?

While talking of decentralising power on the one hand, isn't her proposal to increase the number of MPs a blatant attempt to concentrate power within the ruling clique?

Why is she so keen on pushing this package through without even discussing the concerns expressed by the minority Tamil parties who, surely, have the most to lose by these changes?

As Vasudeva Nanayakkara, one of the few politicians who has consistently called for a genuine devolution of powers to the minorities said, the President's package was a cyanide capsule covered with icing. In a powerful speech in Parliament last week, Vasu described the proposed changes as an attempt to impose a dictatorial junta on the country.

It was a view shared by many thinking Sri Lankans, judging by the marked lack of support the Government received and which forced it to postpone the vote.

Politics, they say, make strange bed-fellows. Isn't it ironic that the

very people she pandered to after the loss of [Elephant](#) Pass, the extremist nationalist groups, the very same people who carried out a campaign to sabotage her constitutional changes. There is no doubt that her duplicity in adopting a militaristic approach after Elephant Pass to please these extremist elements and her subsequent attempts at a political situation left her supporters in a quandry.

Then there was the laughable attempt at appointing Vice-Presidents from the two minority communities. Her statements that this move signified a genuine attempt at devolution raised howls of protest from the extremists. This forced Government Ministers to appear on state [television](#) to say this was only a token gesture to please the minorities, a statement which, no doubt, shattered her credibility even further in the eyes of the Tamil and Muslim population in the country. Did she seriously believe that such antics could bring about a genuine settlement to the crisis?

Thus the President finds herself caught in a trap of her own making. On the one hand, she is compelled to offer some solution to please the international community. At the same time, she tries to please the rabid elements in the majority community who are able to muster the xenophobic fears of those who are genuinely confused by her muddle-headed actions.

As she and the Government fights to maintain their power for yet another term of office, she has succeeded in at least one area. Their comical stances on the ethnic crisis will, in a perverse way, help them to conveniently forget the other issues which burden the ordinary Sri Lankan these days, such as the ever-increasing cost of living, the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots and the selling off of the country's resources.