

Sri Lanka government's survival under threat

The survival of the Sri Lanka government is in question given the possibility that its annual budget may be defeated in parliament here Friday.

Following the defection of four MPs belonging to the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) on Dec 12, the government's strength in the house of 225 had come down to 114, just one more than the required number to get the budget passed.

With heavy horse trading, abductions, threats and counter threats being reported in the media, defections from one side to the other are not ruled out.

'It is going to be touch and go for both sides,' said a diplomatic observer, not wanting to be named.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa seems very confident of a win. He is on an extended foreign tour leaving domestic politics entirely to his lieutenants.

Furthermore, a defeat of the budget does not legally require the government led by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake to resign.

The constitution allows the government to present a revised budget. It has to resign only when the budget is defeated twice over.

Rajapaksa himself is safe as he is an executive president directly elected by the people. His term of office too is different from that of parliament.

However, Rajapaksa has to have a parliament of his own to get access to funds and make laws. Also, a defeat in a budget vote will lead to shrill calls for the resignation of the government, dissolution of parliament and fresh elections.

'The government will forfeit the moral right to continue if its budget is defeated,' said a Supreme Court lawyer.

As of now, the government is trying to get the support of its former ally, the 37 member Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which had voted against the budget at the second reading Nov 19.

Media reports said the JVP could 'reconsider' its stand after an influential Buddhist monk, Elle Gunawansa Thero, met JVP supremo Somawansa Amarasinghe Thursday and asked him not to topple the government when it was winning against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) terrorist group.

Indeed, the government is playing the nationalist card to the full. Media Minister Anura Priyadharshana Yapa Thursday said that opposing the budget was tantamount to indulging in a 'pro-LTTE manoeuvre'.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), a party representing Tamil workers with seven MPs, is sitting on the fence though, according to one of its top leaders, it has 'no grievances' against the government after tea estate labourers were given a wage hike.

Political observers say that the CWC will vote with the opposition if it is sure that the government is going to be defeated.

It is still not clear what stand the Muslims MPs will take after the SLMC had raised issues like the 'grabbing of Muslim lands' by the government, recent curbs on the use of loudspeakers by mosques, and plans to regulate animal slaughter.

'Muslim MPs from the Eastern province are under tremendous pressure from the community to quit the government,' a source said.

There are also rumblings within the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) over the extraordinary power enjoyed by Rajapaksa and his brothers Basil, Chamal and Gotabhaya, at the cost of the stalwarts of the party.

While the opposition is hoping there will be many defections from the SLFP, the party is luring opposition MPs with the offer of ministerial posts.

In fact, the Rajapaksa government's never ending bid for political security has led to the council of ministers growing exponentially from 77 in Nov 2005 to 108 in Nov 2007.

However, the prospect of getting ministerial posts is not the only reason why MPs want to be with the government.

The main reason is Rajapaksa's popularity among the rural masses based his strong 'nationalistic' actions vis-a-vis the LTTE and 'neo-colonialist' western countries.

The government's political managers are acutely aware of this and do not fail to dub any opposition to the regime as being at the behest of LTTE separatists or foreign 'imperialist' powers.

This puts parties like the nationalist JVP in deep dilemma. The UNP too has to battle with the image of being 'less nationalistic' than the SLFP.

Furthermore, any opposition bid to form an alternative government will have to rely on the 22-member pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA). This is unsavoury for all, but especially for the JVP.

The viability of the opposition combination is in serious question. This is expected to make many cast their lot with the government, say political analysts.

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