

Sri Lankan army head provokes diplomatic furore

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A diplomatic row with India provoked last week by the remarks of Sri Lankan army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka is a striking demonstration of the political muscle wielded by the military in Colombo. Having plunged the island back to war in mid-2006, President Mahinda Rajapakse is reliant on the army, which, as a result, has assumed a prominent role in government and political life generally.

In the course of a lengthy interview in the state-run *Sunday Observer* on December 7, General Fonseka lashed out at politicians in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and their demands that New Delhi pressure the Sri Lankan government for a ceasefire with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). "If the LTTE is wiped out, those political jokers [in Tamil Nadu] like Nedumaran, Vaiko and whoever who is sympathising with the LTTE will most probably lose their income from the LTTE," he declared.

Asked if the Indian government would be influenced by protests in Tamil Nadu, Fonseka commented: "I am confident that the Indian government is not interested in a ceasefire in Sri Lanka and they listed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. They have already accepted [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran as a criminal and given him the death sentence... [Indian] Prime Minister Singh has enough problems after the Mumbai terrorist attack. They are against the LTTE and nothing in favour of the LTTE would happen."

Predictably Fonseka's remarks provoked a political storm in India, sparking demonstrations in Tamil Nadu that threatened to reignite the protest movement that flared in October. President Rajapakse sent his brother Basil to New Delhi on October 26 to placate the Indian government while extracting an assurance that it would do nothing to oppose the communal war in Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in turn had managed to ensure that Tamil Nadu parties

did not pull out of his ruling coalition.

Since Rajapakse renewed the war, the Indian government has been engaged in a delicate balancing act. Not wanting to encourage separatism in India or allow regional rivals Pakistan and China gain an upper hand in Colombo, it has quietly backed the Sri Lankan government both politically and militarily. At the same time, Singh cannot simply ignore sentiment in Tamil Nadu, where there are strong ties with the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. The posturing of Tamil Nadu politicians reflects popular anger at the Sri Lankan military's indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population in the North and East of the island.

Fonseka's comments were not accidental. He gave the interview just days after New Delhi, at the insistence of the Tamil Nadu state government, agreed to send Indian Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee to Sri Lanka to discuss possibilities for a ceasefire. While it was highly unlikely that New Delhi would press too hard, speculation was Mukherjee would, at least formally, raise the issue. By deliberately provoking a diplomatic row, Fonseka made clear that the military would not tolerate any such discussion. Mukherjee postponed his visit.

What happened subsequently in Colombo is instructive. The Indian government told its High Commissioner in Colombo to lodge a formal protest over Fonseka's remarks. In an unusual step, Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse—another of the president's brothers—replied on Fonseka's behalf, saying the comments would not be repeated. The government sacked the editor of the *Sunday Observer* for publishing the interview.

As for the general, he has not been touched. Fonseka has not retracted his remarks nor has he been in any way reprimanded or disciplined despite his overt interference in foreign policy and sensitive relations with India. No one in the government, the opposition or the media challenged

Fonseka's blatant transgression of the norms of parliamentary democracy—a sign not only of their support for the reactionary war, but their prostration before the military.

Far from criticising Fonseka's actions, President Rajapakse went on to heap praise on the general. At a military ceremony on December 12, he lauded Fonseka as "on a par with the best commanders in the world". "The army that is fighting under Fonseka's leadership has won the hearts of the people," he added. Fonseka, who was also on the podium at the Sinha Regiment headquarters in Ambepussa, presented the president with a commemorative plaque.

Far from "winning the hearts of the people," the government's renewal of the war has intensified the island's economic and social crisis and is deeply unpopular. Resting on a shaky parliamentary coalition, Rajapakse has increasingly concentrated power in his own hands. As he has done so, the president has relied on the war and the military as a means of intimidating and silencing any opposition in the name of "national security".

It is not surprising therefore that Fonseka is a prominent figure in the Rajapakse's ruling clique. Rajapakse's brother Gotabhaya and Fonseka were schoolmates at the prestigious Ananda College and served together as officers in the Sinha Regiment. President Rajapakse originally appointed Fonseka to the post of army commander and recently extended his service for another year beyond the compulsory retirement age.

The Sri Lankan government is confronting a worsening economic and social crisis as a result of the global recession. Despite Rajapakse's constant whipping up of patriotic fervour, opposition to the war and its harsh economic burdens will inevitably emerge. Under conditions of political turmoil where the opposition parties are already widely discredited and therefore unable to function as a safety valve, the ruling elites may well turn to the army and a figure like Fonseka as "a saviour of the nation" and the fortunes of capitalist rule.

In that light, an interview with Fonseka on the official government news website on December 11 under the headline, "Lt. General Sarath Fonseka—Man of the Moment," takes on an added significance.

Asked if a different situation with a different approach to the war would lead to military reversals, Fonseka declared: "If the people elect a weak leader, one who underestimates our ability and overestimates the strength and capabilities of

the enemy, we will lose territory and the problem will get worse. Such a person can be a leader but is definitely not a patriot."

Fonseka continued: "I think, like in other countries, national security should not change, even if governments change. The President has to be a patriot. We have to live with pride and honour and this need has to be recognised by whoever is in power." He concluded with a thinly disguised threat: "Presidents and politicians, they come and go. But citizens remain. They need security."

The interviewer did not ask Fonseka what he would do if people elected an unpatriotic leader, but the answer is already evident from the logic of his comments. In the name of "security" for the citizens, the army would be compelled to consider overriding the choice of the people and imposing its own form of rule. As for a political movement that emerged against the war, Fonseka obviously would not hesitate in using the most extreme measures.

In the "liberated" East of the country, the government has already imposed a de facto military occupation headed by the leader of an armed militia notorious for abductions and murder. The same is planned for the North, where intense fighting is continuing. To meet the demands of war, military manpower has been boosted. According to Fonseka, the security forces have approval to increase their numbers further from 130,000 to 200,000. Per capita, Sri Lanka already has one of the largest militaries in the world, with one in 25 of all males between the ages of 18 and 49 in one of the security forces.

Rajapakse has made the "war against terrorism" the overriding government policy and transformed the island into a huge military camp. Under these circumstances, the army commander feels he can act with impunity and set foreign policy. If the government fails to measure up on "national security," then, in the words of Fonseka, presidents and politicians, will come and go.



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