

Sri Lankan government calls early presidential poll

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26 November 2009

After more than a week of hesitation, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse on Monday called for fresh presidential elections nearly two years early. It is a desperate bid to strengthen his hand amid a deepening economic and political crisis.

Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency in November 2005 and the next election was not due until November 2011. Under the constitution, the president can call an early poll only after completing four years in office. The election will be held on January 26. General parliamentary elections are due by April but have yet to be announced.

Rajapakse called the election early hoping to take advantage of the army's defeat in May of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the island's long running civil war. By trumpeting the military victory, he calculated that he could deflect growing discontent over the worsening economy, rising prices, job losses and cutbacks to social services. The government has already held provincial council elections to test the waters.

However, Rajapakse's calculations were thrown into disarray by the likely emergence of General Sarath Fonseka, former army commander and Chief of Defence Staff, as the common presidential candidate of the main opposition parties—United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Fonseka, who was part of Rajapakse's ruling cabal, resigned his post last week and indicated his intention to run amid bitter recriminations about who won the war.

The willingness of the UNP and JVP to back Fonseka, rather than stand candidates of their own, is the clearest sign that neither party has any fundamental differences with the government. Both supported Rajapakse's communal war, the subsequent detention of 250,000 Tamil civilians and the government's pro-market economic approach. The UNP and JVP lost badly in provincial elections precisely because they offered no alternative to the ruling United Peoples Freedom alliance (UPFA).

By latching onto Fonseka, the UNP and JVP are seeking to beat Rajapakse at his own game—promoting the general as the real war hero as opposed to the president. The Sinhala extremist JVP has endorsed Fonseka already, with an electoral bloc headed by the right-wing UNP expected to follow suit quickly. Without a

common candidate like Fonseka, it is unlikely that the two rival parties could have pursued a joint campaign.

Fonseka is not simply an opposition figurehead. Rather his candidacy represents the direct intrusion of the military top brass into political life. As army head, Fonseka ruthlessly prosecuted the war against the LTTE and, together with the Rajapakse government, is responsible for war crimes against Tamil civilians. He became increasingly disenchanted with Rajapakse after the end of the war, reflecting discontent in the military hierarchy at being shunted into the background.

The prospect of Fonseka becoming the opposition candidate posed a dilemma for Rajapakse. The longer he left the election, the worse the country's economic position and his chances of being re-elected. However, proceeding with an early election risked being undercut by Fonseka on the government's only election plank—defeating the LTTE. Rajapakse initially indicated he would announce the poll on November 15 but delayed the decision, before finally going ahead after intense behind-the-scenes discussions.

Rajapakse kicked off his election campaign on Tuesday at a meeting of the 30 parties comprising the UPFA coalition. According to the state-controlled *Daily News*, Rajapakse told party leaders: "The people earlier gave us a mandate to unify the country. Today we seek their mandate to strengthen the program of rebuilding the country that has been liberated."

Every word is a lie. Rajapakse did not campaign in the November 2005 election to unify the country through war. He claimed to be a man of peace who would negotiate with the LTTE even as he was outlining demands that spelled an end to the 2002 ceasefire. He promised to improve living standards, increase wages, create a million jobs for youth and improve education and health. All these pledges were sacrificed to his huge military budgets.

Rajapakse plunged the country back to war in July 2006, partly to take advantage of a divided and weakened LTTE, and partly to stoke communal tensions and divide the working class amid rising social unrest. Over the subsequent three years, the government used the pretext of the war on "LTTE terrorism" to suppress

struggles and protests by workers, students and farmers. Far from “liberating” Tamil civilians, he incarcerated them behind barbed wire in so-called welfare villages run by the military.

The end of the war only intensified the government’s crisis. Having mortgaged the country to pay for the war, Rajapakse was confronted with a global economic recession that made it impossible to borrow on the international money markets and hit Sri Lanka’s exports hard. The government was compelled to obtain a \$2.6 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan in June to stave off a chronic balance of payments crisis.

Rajapakse has announced another series of election promises designed to placate and buy off voters, including a 750 rupee (\$US6.55) increase in the monthly cost of living allowance for government employees and a 375 rupee monthly allowance for pensioners. Public sector workers, who have been demanding far larger increases to compensate for high inflation, are furious. He has also promised 17,000 jobs for graduates by January although there are already 25,000 unemployed graduates.

Even these limited promises will not be met. The government has obscured the real state of its finances by putting off the annual budget—due in November—until after the election. As soon as the poll is over, the election pledges will rapidly vanish as the IMF insists that the benchmarks for its loan are met. The IMF has demanded that the budget deficit be slashed to 5 percent of GDP by 2011—the estimates for this year are between 9 and 11 percent.

At the same time, to deflect attention from its abysmal record on democratic rights, the government has announced it will grant “freedom of movement” for detained Tamil civilians next month and close the detention camps by January 31. Over the past six months, the government and the military have been building army camps and police stations throughout former LTTE-held areas in the North and East. Tamils “released” from the detention camps will return to a permanent military occupation without any assistance in rebuilding their shattered lives.

In order to boost General Fonseka, the UNP and JVP are both attempting to provide him with democratic credentials. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe told the media that his party’s backing for Fonseka was subject to 10 conditions, including abolition of the executive presidency, formation of a caretaker government to hold fair general elections and resettlement of Tamil detainees.

In an open letter to soldiers last week, Fonseka hailed them for winning the war and expressed his regret at his inability to improve their conditions. Indicating his intention to run for president, he declared: “I will dedicate myself to secure the weakening democracy, human rights, media freedom, social justice and secure communal harmony and also will be with you as a shadow for the well-being of the future.”

Fonseka’s posturing as a democrat is absurd. He helped to devise the detention of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians,

repeatedly branded the media as traitors and was in charge of the military as it collaborated with pro-government death squads in hundreds of killings and disappearances. As for the UNP’s supposed opposition to the powerful executive presidency, opposition politicians habitually call for its abolition, only to renege on winning the post.

Senior UNP leader Lakshman Kiriella told reporters on Tuesday the UNP would officially announce the name of a “common candidate” on November 27. The *Sunday Times* reported closed-door meetings between Fonseka and UNP and JVP leaders last week to try to resolve continuing differences. The JVP, which has publicly supported Fonseka as a common candidate, held further discussions with him on Monday evening.

Fonseka is projecting himself as the “strong leader” needed to deal with the country’s worsening problems. Addressing a conference of Certified Professional Managers on Tuesday, he declared that his motto was “can do”. “If you become a government leader, what should you do to solve the nation’s problems? Can you solve those problems? Can you fortify the national security? Can you establish a police force without political interference? Can everyone who is qualified enter university?” he asked, without offering any solutions or policies.

Fonseka is being backed by sections of the ruling elite that are concerned about the ability of the Rajapakse regime to ram through the necessary austerity measures. The *Sunday Times* economic columnist last weekend raised the necessity of addressing the mounting budget deficit. “The need for fiscal consolidation is well recognised. Yet governments have not had the political will, courage and determination to follow prudent fiscal policies to ensure that the problem does not reach the outlandish proportions it has reached,” he complained.

The implication was that the next government must slash public sector jobs, pay and essential services, and deal with the popular opposition such measures will inevitably provoke. Layers of the ruling class view the Rajapakse regime as weak and divided. They are lining up behind Fonseka as the “strongman” needed to wield the police-state apparatus against the working class.



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