

Sri Lanka's top general emerges as possible presidential candidate

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With the prospect of a presidential election early next year, Sri Lanka's Chief of Defence Staff, General Sarath Fonseka, is emerging as the likely common candidate of the opposition parties to challenge President Mahinda Rajapakse. The backing for Fonseka underscores the degree to which the entire political establishment in Colombo depends on the military.

President Rajapakse has been exploiting the army's defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May to whip up an atmosphere of triumphalism and communalism in order to deflect attention from the country's worsening economic crisis, the continuing deterioration of living standards and the government's gross abuse of democratic rights. About 250,000 Tamil civilians are still being held illegally in squalid military-run detention centres as virtual prisoners of war.

Clearly concerned about mounting popular discontent, Rajapakse has hinted that he is considering holding the presidential election, which is not due until November 2011, early next year. It is possible that he may even call the presidential poll before general parliamentary elections due to be held before next March. The government has already tested the waters with a series of provincial council elections since May.

The main opposition parties—the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have no fundamental disagreements with the government. Both parties backed the communal war against the LTTE, support the incarceration of Tamil civilians, regularly vote for the continuation of draconian emergency regulations and, for all their populist criticisms of the government's "waste and corruption", agree with its regressive economic policies.

Far from opposing the government's policies, the UNP and JVP hope that they can outdo Rajapakse by promoting the country's top general as the "war hero" responsible for defeating the LTTE. At the same time, it would allow the UNP and JVP to come together to support a common candidate without having to form an electoral alliance.

The JVP has publicly declared that it would back Fonseka as a common candidate. After persistent media rumours of private talks between the general and UNP leaders, the *Sunday Times* reported yesterday that the newly-formed United National Front (UNF) reached a consensus last week to support Fonseka. The

UNF is an alliance led by the UNP, with nine smaller parties.

Whether or not Fonseka becomes the opposition candidate, there are clear signs that he has fallen out with Rajapakse. In one of his first actions as president, Rajapakse appointed Fonseka as army commander in December 2005 after forcing his predecessor to resign. The installation of a general known for his ruthless military methods was part of Rajapakse's preparations to break the 2002 ceasefire with the LTTE and plunge the country back to war in mid-2006.

Fonseka was part of the close-knit cabal surrounding President Rajapakse that prosecuted the war, trampled on democratic rights and was directly responsible for numerous war crimes. In the final months of the war, Fonseka directed operations that included the indiscriminate bombardment of civilians trapped in a so-called "no fire zone" in the remaining pocket of LTTE-held territory. According to UN estimates, at least 7,000 civilians were killed in the period from January to May.

During the course of the 26-year civil war, the Sri Lankan military has vastly expanded and every aspect of society has been increasingly militarised. Defence expenditure rose from 1.5 percent of GDP in 1978 to 4.5 percent in 2008. The strength of the armed forces is about 300,000, making it one of the largest, per capita, in the world.

Reflecting the military's growing role in politics, Fonseka repeatedly made statements to the media. Bluntly stating the Sinhala supremacism that imbues the entire Colombo establishment, he told the Canadian-based *National Post* last year: "I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese." Other communities "can live in this country with us," he added. "But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things."

The reasons for Fonseka falling out with Rajapakse are not yet clear. He has not declared himself a possible presidential candidate or spoken publicly about his disagreements. Reflecting broader disgruntlement in the officer corps, the general undoubtedly resents the grandstanding by the president and his brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the defence secretary, as the architects of the LTTE's defeat.

At the army's 60th anniversary last month, Fonseka declared: "It was not just due to luck that the Sri Lanka army wiped out

the LTTE, ending a 30-year-old war, surprising the international community. The army had to make lots of sacrifices and service to achieve this... My overall plans and supervision and the dedication of the officers and soldiers were the most significant reason.”

President Rajapakse, acutely aware of the political danger posed by Fonseka, has been attempting to sideline the general. Fonseka was appointed Chief of Defence Staff in June and the powers over the post were extended by a special parliamentary act. However, the promotion also removed the general from any direct connection with the powerful army.

In the state-owned media, Fonseka has been effectively removed from the pantheon of those responsible for the military victory. Labour Minister Mervyn Silva recently told a public meeting that only the president and the defence secretary “deserved credit for the military victory, and that only these two names which would go down in history”. As signs of disagreement emerged, the defence ministry issued a press order last month prohibiting articles about serving military commanders and threatening prosecution.

Another indication of the differences emerged last week when Fonseka visited the US to renew his immigration green card. The US Department of Homeland Security asked Fonseka to attend a voluntary interview, reportedly to question him over war crimes. The US State Department had issued a report just two weeks previously, cataloguing a long list of military attacks on civilian targets, including hospitals, in the final months of the war.

The news prompted a furious response from the Sri Lankan government, which pulled out all stops to block the Homeland Security interview. Foreign Minister Rohita Bogallagama contacted the US ambassador in Colombo to urge the US to desist from any attempt to interview the general. He told a press conference that any information acquired by Fonseka in the course of his official duties was “privileged” and could not be shared with third parties. Finally, the government urged the US to return Fonseka to Sri Lanka on urgent matters. He returned on Thursday.

According to a lengthy report in yesterday’s *Sunday Times*, the main target of the interview was not to be Fonseka, but the president’s brother. Apparently the US had already written to Gotabhaya Rajapakse, along with another brother Basil and Justice Minister Milanda Moragida, asking them if they as US citizens had been involved in policy matters that constituted human rights violations. All three hold dual US-Sri Lankan citizenship.

Clearly the government was deeply concerned that Fonseka would provide evidence of its crimes. The newspaper reported that in a recent discussion with government parliamentarians, Fonseka had referred to what he described as “very highly sensitive” issues related to the final stages of the war, known to only a handful in the top echelons of the defence establishment. Fonseka would, however, only provide such information to the

US if he could be guaranteed immunity himself.

The US decision to target Gotabhaya Rajapakse, rather than Fonseka, points to its underlying motivations. These have nothing to do with concern about war crimes and human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, but rather are aimed at pressuring the Rajapakse government over its growing economic and political ties with US rivals, particularly China. By undermining the Rajapakse brothers, Washington possibly hopes to install a government more amenable to its interests. The UNP in particular is noted for its close alignment with the US in the past.

Within Sri Lanka, both the UNP and JVP have indicated that they will campaign in the election for the abolition of the powerful executive presidency. Currently the president has sweeping constitutional powers. Rajapakse, who is also defence minister and finance minister, can issue presidential decrees and, under emergency regulations, abrogate basic democratic rights.

The campaign against the executive presidency is not about defending the democratic rights of working people. Sections of the Colombo political establishment have become concerned that Rajapakse’s increasingly autocratic methods of rule will provoke a popular backlash, particularly under conditions of deepening economic and social crisis.

During the war, Rajapakse repeatedly demanded that working people sacrifice for the military effort. Since the end of the war, the global recession has hit the economy, which was already burdened by huge defence spending. The government is now implementing harsh austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund. Already a series of struggles have erupted since the end of the war, particularly over pay and conditions, which have been seriously eroded by soaring inflation over the past three years.

All the pre-election manoeuvring points to intense behind-the-scenes preparations by the Colombo ruling elite for a confrontation with the working class. The very same establishment layers that have been critical of Rajapakse’s cabal would not hesitate to employ the police-state apparatus built up during a quarter century of war to suppress any social eruption. That would certainly be the case if Fonseka were at the helm as the country’s president.



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