

Top Sri Lankan general touted as presidential candidate

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The emergence of Sarath Fonseka, Sri Lanka's former Army Commander and Chief of Defence Staff, as a likely presidential candidate has highlighted the intense political crisis surrounding both government and opposition parties following the end of the country's protracted civil war in May.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has sought to continue victory celebrations indefinitely in a bid to boost the government amid a deteriorating economy and growing social discontent over rising prices and levels of unemployment. In the midst of this triumphalism, Rajapakse has won a series of provincial council elections by large margins and boasted that his coalition will win a landslide in general elections due by next April.

It was widely believed that Rajapakse would announce an early presidential poll—not due until 2011—at the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) conference last Sunday before the economy deteriorated even further. That, however, did not take place. Neither parliamentary nor presidential elections were announced, and it is not clear when a decision will be made. Rajapakse, who had counted on coasting back into office, now faces a probable challenge by General Fonseka, undermining the only plank in the government's campaign—boasting of victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The likely choice of Fonseka as the opposition's "common presidential candidate" also highlights the deep crisis of the opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and an alliance led by the United National Party (UNP). The victories of Rajapakse in the provincial polls were in large measures the result of a lack of any real opposition. Both the UNP and JVP backed Rajapakse's communal war, the military's war crimes and the subsequent incarceration of 250,000 Tamil civilians and other abuses of democratic rights. While denouncing the government's waste and corruption, both parties agree with its pro-market orientation and restructuring measures.

Both the UNP and JVP have now publicly supported Fonseka as a common presidential candidate. Their decision underlines the lack of confidence in either party that their own leaders could defeat Rajapakse. Moreover, there continue to be sharp differences between the UNP, the longstanding right-wing opposition party, and the JVP, a party based on Sinhala populism and extremism that formed in the 1960s as a guerrilla movement among disaffected Sinhala rural youth. In the 2005 presidential elections, the JVP backed Rajapakse against

UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, accusing the latter of betraying the country by signing a ceasefire with the LTTE in 2002 and entering peace talks.

Rumours that the opposition parties would back Fonseka have been circulating in the media for weeks. Fonseka was part of the politico-military cabal surrounding Rajapakse that plunged the island back to war in mid-2006 in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. As the top army general, Fonseka ruthlessly prosecuted a war of attrition, using the military's overwhelming air and artillery superiority to indiscriminately bombard LTTE-held territory. The UN estimates that at least 7,000 Tamil civilians were killed in the final months of the war from January to May.

Animosity between Fonseka and Rajapakse began to emerge in the wake of the LTTE's defeat, undoubtedly fuelled in part by deep going resentment in the officer corps that President Rajapakse and his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, were claiming credit for the victory that the military had achieved. Fonseka tendered his resignation on November 13, and it was almost immediately accepted. While he has yet to announce his plans, he pointedly told a press conference on Monday that he would continue to serve the country "at the highest capacity that I can."

Regardless of the immediate calculations of the UNP, the JVP and Fonseka himself, the entry of the country's top general onto political centre stage marks a clear turn by sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite to a military strongman to marshal the forces of the state apparatus in the face of mounting economic and political crises.

More than two decades of war, economic turmoil and deepening social inequality have led to widespread popular disaffection, disgust and opposition with all the major parties. Rajapakse relies on an unstable patchwork alliance held together by giving virtually every government parliamentarian a ministry or advisory post. The opposition parties are no less riven by divisions and tensions. The JVP, which functioned in the 1990s as a useful political safety valve, quickly became discredited on joining an SLFP coalition in 2004. Earlier this year, the party split, with many of its parliamentarians joining the government.

As the country has lurched from one political crisis to the next, exasperated media commentators have on more than one occasion called for a strongman to put an end to the parliamentary bickering and save the country by imposing the tough measures required and

riding roughshod over any opposition. It is no accident that the call for a Bonapartist figure has been answered at this time amid the deepest global economic crisis since the 1930s.

The opposition parties are attempting to dress up Fonseka, who along with Rajapakse was directly responsible for war crimes, the operation of death squads and other abuses, in new “democratic” clothes. Last weekend’s *Sunday Times* published a lengthy commentary on Fonseka’s resignation letter, which was reportedly drafted on November 6 in secret discussions with UNP leader Wickremesinghe and other opposition leaders, and subsequent revisions made by Fonseka himself.

According to the *Sunday Times*, an annexure to the resignation letter set out 16 reasons why Fonseka is politically opposed to Rajapakse. In point 13, prepared by the opposition parties, Fonseka declared that the plight of Tamil civilians detained in military-run internment camps was “of great concern to me”. The annexure criticised the lack of proper government planning and advocated that detainees with friends and relatives elsewhere should be allowed to live with them.

Point 15 criticised the government for having “no clear policy to win the hearts and minds of the Tamil people, which will surely ruin the victory attained, paving the way for yet another uprising in the future”. Point 16 bemoaned the fact that “the peace dividend the whole country expected at the conclusion of the war has yet to materialise. The economic hardships faced by the people have increased while waste and corruption have reached endemic proportions; media freedom and other democratic rights continue to be curtailed.”

These limited criticisms, designed to appeal to popular discontent, seek to obscure the fact that the opposition parties continue to back the arbitrary detention of a quarter of a million citizens in open breach of the country’s constitution and legal system, support the current state of emergency that grants the president wide anti-democratic powers and advocate economic policies that will only worsen the hardships facing working people.

Fonseka, however, was having none of it. His final resignation letter deleted point 16, underscoring his complete contempt for democratic rights. Fonseka is on the public record as denouncing even mild media critics of the military as “unpatriotic”. In the course of the war, a number of journalists were abducted or murdered by pro-government death squads that operated with the complicity of the security forces.

As for the detention camps, which were established under his leadership, Fonseka removed any reference to allowing detainees to leave and instead criticised the government for resettling them “in an ad hoc manner without proper infrastructure facilities”. Far from denouncing the internment policy, he repeated the official flimsy pretexts: it was needed to identify “infiltrated [LTTE] terrorists” and allow for de-mining to be completed.

Instead of a policy to “win the hearts and minds” of the island’s Tamil minority, Fonseka called for a strengthening of the permanent occupation of the former LTTE-held areas in the guise of “providing security”. His letter stated: “There is no clear policy to ensure the security of the Tamil people thereby leaving room to ruin the victory

attained, paving the way for yet another uprising in the future due to lack of security arrangements in the resettled areas.”

Central to Fonseka’s letter is the political defence of the military and his own role in defeating the LTTE. “It is with my vision, command and leadership this yeoman task [of winning of the war] was achieved,” he wrote. He was critical of alleged comments by Rajapakse that “strong public opinion is in the making to say that the country is in possession of too powerful army” that would lead the country to another Myanmar.

The letter also criticised Rajapakse for alerting India on October 15 about the danger of an imminent army coup. It is not clear whether Rajapakse alerted India. New Delhi has denied Fonseka’s claim. But there is no doubt that Rajapakse is nervous about possible challenges from the huge army that his government helped create.

Fonseka embodies the increasingly direct role that the military has played in political life. As part of Rajapakse’s presidential cabal, he helped decide government policy and made political pronouncements of his own. That Fonseka has abruptly resigned and is seeking the presidency is a sign that the powerful military apparatus is intent on maintaining its power and privileges after the end of the war.

Whatever Fonseka’s intentions, sections of the ruling elite are backing this general in civilian clothes for the country’s powerful executive presidency for their own purposes. For 26 years, the Colombo political establishment has exploited the war to sow communal divisions among working people and to suppress opposition to its regressive economic policies. It now confronts a profound economic crisis, which is only going to worsen and lead to widespread social unrest. Already there is a developing strike movement among significant sections of workers demanding pay rises despite the efforts of the trade unions to contain and sabotage it.

The depth of the crisis was underscored in letter by International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director Strauss Khan to Human Rights Watch on November 5, defending the IMF’s economic assistance to Sri Lanka. “The Sri Lankan economy is facing a serious crisis and, regardless of one’s opinion of the human rights situation in that country, the collapse of the economy cannot be considered a reasonable outcome,” he wrote. “Our role ... is to do everything possible to prevent a collapse, the effects of which would be catastrophic for the people, and especially for the poorest parts of the population.”

Facing this looming social explosion, the turn to Fonseka reflects above all fears in the ruling class that the Rajapakse regime is not capable of carrying out the ruthless measures required in a confrontation with the working class.



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