

The danger of Bonapartist rule in Sri Lanka

Wije Dias

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The candidacy of General Sarath Fonseka in the January 26 presidential elections in Sri Lanka is a sharp warning to the working class of the advanced preparations for police-state rule on the island. Amid a deepening economic crisis, powerful sections of the ruling elite are backing Fonseka, the common candidate of the main opposition parties, as the means of imposing new economic burdens on working people.

Before he resigned last month, Fonseka was Sri Lanka's top general. Under President Mahinda Rajapakse, he waged a brutal war of attrition against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated in May. In the final months of the conflict, an estimated 7,000 Tamil civilians were killed by the military's indiscriminate bombardment of LTTE-held territory. After the LTTE's collapse, the army herded more than 250,000 civilians—men, women and children—into “welfare camps” where they were illegally detained until December 1.

Following the end of the war, Fonseka, who had been closely involved in the ruling politico-military cabal, fell out with Rajapakse, not over their joint war crimes, but over who should take the credit. Rajapakse provoked deep resentment in the officer caste by thrusting himself forward as the architect of the victory in order to bolster his fragile ruling coalition and win a series of provincial council elections. Fonseka became the mouthpiece for this bitterness, particularly after he was shunted out of his post as army chief into the largely symbolic post of Chief of Defence Staff. His secret negotiations with opposition parties became public last month. When Rajapakse announced early presidential elections, Fonseka was put forward as their common candidate.

Fonseka is not a member of any political party. While he undoubtedly has reached election agreements with the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), he will not be bound by their policies or party discipline if elected. This situation is unprecedented in post-independence politics in Sri Lanka and underscores the profound degeneration of parliamentary politics. After decades of civil war and pro-market restructuring, the two main bourgeois parties—the UNP and Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—are widely distrusted and despised. The Sinhala chauvinist JVP, after acting as a political safety valve for public frustration and alienation, rapidly lost support after joining a SLFP coalition in 2004. Last year it suffered a debilitating split.

The norms of parliamentary rule have already been stretched to

the limit. Rajapakse presides over an unwieldy coalition of 17 parties, all of which have posts in what is one of the world's largest ministries. As a result, he has increasingly sidelined cabinet and parliament and operated through a cabal comprising his brothers, close political cronies, trusted bureaucrats and generals. His extensive powers as executive president have been further enhanced by the ongoing state of emergency that allows arrest without trial, censorship and the suppression of industrial action. His regime has flouted the constitution on several occasions and ignored the rulings of the country's High Court.

In launching his campaign, Fonseka branded Rajapakse a “tin-pot dictator” and embraced the call by the UNP and JVP to abolish the executive presidency. No credence can be placed in this promise or the attempts by the opposition parties to dress up the general in democratic clothes. Political leaders have routinely pledged to abolish the executive presidency while in opposition, only to shelve the promise on taking office. Rajapakse's immediate predecessor Chandrika Kumaratunga promised to end the executive presidency before taking office in 1994, only to use its sweeping powers to arbitrarily dismiss an elected UNP government in 2004.

Unlike previous Sri Lankan presidents, however, Fonseka has no political party or any substantial following of his own. If elected, he will be compelled to use his presidential powers to the full as he attempts to balance between competing political forces. His main constituency is not the opposition parties that are backing him and certainly not the voters. He is a mouthpiece above all for the state apparatus, particularly the officer corps of the country's huge military, and for sections of the ruling elite who have become increasingly frustrated that their economic agenda has been blocked. Fonseka is emerging as a classic Bonapartist figure—a strongman, who appears to rise above the political fray, claims to impose policies for the good of the nation, and who is a stepping-stone to a naked military-police dictatorship.

In his incisive analysis of the regimes in Germany that preceded the Nazis in the 1930s, Leon Trotsky explained that Bonapartism emerged only under definite conditions. “As soon as the struggle of two social strata—the haves and the have-nots, the exploiter and the exploited—reaches its highest tension, the conditions are given for the domination of bureaucracy, police, soldiery. The government becomes ‘independent’ of society. Let us once again recall: if two forks are stuck symmetrically into a cork, the latter can stand even on the head of a pin. This is precisely the schema of

Bonapartism,” Trotsky wrote. By its very nature, such a system of rule is unstable and temporary.

In Sri Lanka today, class conflict has yet to take an open, political form, primarily as a result of the treachery of the old leaderships of the working class. Like the major bourgeois parties, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and Communist Party of Sri Lanka have profoundly degenerated, functioning as little more than loyal factions of the SLFP and the Rajapakse government. Limited strikes and protests have taken place but have been quickly betrayed by the leaderships of the trade unions.

As the political establishment is well aware, however, the island’s worsening economic crisis is producing a state of extreme social tension. Rajapakse achieved his military victory at enormous economic and human cost. Defence spending during Rajapakse’s four years of rule was 629 billion rupees (\$US5.5 billion) or more than 25 percent of total government revenue. The island’s accumulated debt this year is estimated to be 4,023 billion rupees or more than 90 percent of GDP.

Rajapakse’s ability to pay for his war depended on cheap international credit, which dried up following the global financial crisis. The international recession also hit Sri Lankan exports, creating an acute foreign exchange crisis that forced the government to obtain a \$US2.6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Among the stringent conditions attached, the IMF is demanding a drastic reduction of the budget deficit from 9 percent to 7 percent of GDP this year, followed by another 2 percentage point cut next year.

Rajapakse has delayed the inevitable deep cuts to public sector jobs, wages and essential services by postponing the 2010 budget, which was due last month, until after the elections. At the same time, he is maintaining a freeze on public sector pay and recently used his emergency powers for the first time to issue an essential services order illegalising industrial action on the docks and in the state-owned electricity, water and petroleum boards. All the trade unions immediately caved in and shut down their campaigns.

Sections of business are demanding savage cutbacks to public spending. At a panel discussion last week, Ceylon Chamber of Commerce chairman Anura Ekanayake bitterly complained that “the cost of production is so high primarily due to the inefficiency of the public sector” and called for an end to “this nonsense of subsidies and incentives”. Such steps will inevitably produce a rebellion among working people who are already frustrated and angry that the end of the war has only led to a further worsening of living standards.

The ruling elites in Colombo are preparing for a showdown after the elections. While some layers continue to back Rajapakse, others are backing Fonseka as the strongman who can wield the state apparatus against the working class and, when needed, simply ignore political parties and parliament. His proven track record as a ruthless military commander, who has the backing of the security

apparatus, contrasts with Rajapakse’s reliance on a fragile parliamentary coalition. For all his pretences of defending democracy, Fonseka used his election announcement to emphasise his intention to wipe out corruption, clean up the underworld and establish “discipline” in society.

All the major political parties are lining up on one side or another in the Rajapakse-Fonseka contest. While the ex-radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party nominally oppose Fonseka, their support for the UNP as the “democratic alternative” to Rajapakse has only assisted this right-wing bourgeois party to present the general in the same way.

The great danger confronting the working class is that it is completely unprepared politically. Contempt and hostility toward the present political parties and candidates as well as the trade unions does not automatically translate into a political program and leadership to combat the emergence of police-state rule. The Socialist Equality Party will stand in the upcoming election to educate and mobilise workers and youth around a socialist alternative in opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie.

The emergence of Fonseka has far broader implications for the working class of South Asia and internationally. All the political and economic processes contributing to the developing crisis in Sri Lanka are underway to a lesser or greater extent around the world, including in the advanced industrialised nations. Worsening economic conditions, deepening social polarisation, popular alienation from existing political parties, the decay of parliamentary politics and the increasing use of police-state methods are not the sole prerogative of so-called developing countries. As in the past, events on this small island are a warning to the working class of what is building up internationally.



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