Sri Lanka's ex-military chief announces presidential candidacy

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After weeks of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring with opposition parties, Sri Lanka's former top general Sarath Fonseka announced on Sunday that he would stand in the presidential poll slated for January 26. Fonseka's candidature marks the direct entry of the military into the political life of the island.

As army chief, General Fonseka oversaw the brutal war that led to the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May. Fonseka was a prominent figure of the ruling politico-military cabal surrounding President Mahinda Rajapakse that rode roughshod over basic democratic rights, flouted the constitution and ignored parliament.

At his press conference, however, the ex-general tried to portray himself as a defender of democracy, who was a victim of the president and was now challenging the "tin-pot dictator". This posturing is absurd. During the war, Fonseka backed Rajapakse to the hilt and played an increasingly aggressive political role, openly denouncing the media for undermining the war effort.

Bitter differences only began to emerge after the LTTE's defeat—not over the conduct of the criminal war, but over Rajapakse's determination to take all the credit for the victory. At his press conference, Fonseka claimed he had been effectively sidelined when he was promoted to the specially-created position of chief of defence staff (CDS), which had no operational power over the three armed services. He resigned on November 16 to run for office.

Fonseka's candidacy has compounded the political problems confronting Rajapakse, who called the presidential poll two years early in order to capitalise on the LTTE's military defeat. Since the end of the war, the ruling coalition has exploited the victory to deflect attention from the country's worsening social and economic crisis, and win a series of provincial council elections. The main opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—which both backed the war, provided no alternative.

Rajapakse, who calculated that he could win by posing a war hero, now faces the ex-general as opposition candidate. The decision of the UNP and JVP to back Fonseka, rather than fielding their own candidate, reflects their own political bankruptcy and falling support. Lacking any fundamental differences with the government, the rival opposition parties have decided to jointly support an alternative "war hero" to challenge Rajapakse.

The UNP has formed an electoral bloc with a number of smaller parties, including the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Tamil-based Democratic People's Front (DPF). These parties have taken on the difficult task of painting the ex-general as a defender of democratic rights and a friend to the country's Tamil and Muslim minorities. Fonseka bluntly expressed his own racialist attitudes when he told the Canadian-based *National Post* last year that he strongly believed that "this country belongs to the Sinhalese".

Fonseka held his Sunday press conference in the lavish ballroom of the Hilton condominium in central Colombo. He was clad in white cloth and banyan (a long-sleeved long top), the typical dress of a Sinhalese politician, to announce he was standing against Rajapakse as the "common candidate" of the opposition parties. He has yet to decide under which political party to file his nomination.

The fact that Fonseka is not a member of a political party, and therefore is not subject to its policies and discipline, has considerable significance. His real power base is the military's officer caste, whose resentments and frustrations he voices. In conditions of deepening economic and political turmoil, he is emerging as an autocratic military figure, who is being backed by sections of the ruling elite to exploit the powerful executive presidency to ram through austerity measures and suppress any opposition, with or without the support of parliament.

Fonseka certainly has the ruthlessness required. He bragged at the media conference that as army chief he had fulfilled his pledges to the letter. Fonseka had publicly declared that he would not "leave the job of fighting the LTTE" to his successor

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and would not allow LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran to make his "Hero's Day speech" this November. In the final days of the war, the army slaughtered the top LTTE leadership, including Prabhakaran. According to the UN, at least 7,000 Tamil civilians were killed by the military's indiscriminate bombardment of LTTE-held territory between January and May.

Fonseka condemned Rajapakse for protecting the "nepotistic interests of one family—a dynasty and a king" and acting as a "dictator". He joined the UNP and JVP in promising to abolish the executive presidency within six months and to "strengthen the parliament". No one should take the ex-general at his word. In order to posture as democrats, opposition politicians habitually call for the abolition of the executive presidency, only to break their promises as soon as they win office.

Rajapakse and his immediate predecessor Chandrika Kumaratunga, with the JVP's backing, both promised to end the executive presidency but exploited its powers to the full once in office. In addition to being president, Rajapakse holds the key posts of defence minister and finance minister. Under the ongoing state of emergency, he has sweeping powers to ban strikes, censor the media and detain individuals without charge.

For all his claims to oppose the present "dictator", Fonseka's main message was that he was the strong, capable man required to implement the tough "law and order" policies that Rajapakse was failing to impose. He ominously declared that he would wipe out corruption, clean up the underworld and establish "discipline" in society. As head of the military, he collaborated in Rajapakse's "war on the underworld" that has resulted in the ex-judicial killing of a number of alleged criminals by the police and security forces.

Asked by a WSWS reporter about his economic policies, Fonseka indicated his support for the UNP's pro-market policies, saying: "I believe that UNP's economic policy would bring the country towards prosperity." The right-wing UNP pioneered the opening up of Sri Lanka in 1978 as a cheap labour platform—the program, which as Fonseka stated, is now followed by all the major parties in Sri Lanka. During its last term in office between 2001 and 2004, the UNP sought to implement an extensive restructuring plan known as "Regaining Sri Lanka" to transform the island into a regional investment hub and made far-reaching inroads into public sector jobs, subsidies and welfare measures.

Amid the continuing global economic crisis, Sri Lanka is in a far worse position today. The Rajapakse government was compelled to turn to the IMF in June for a $US2.6 billion loan to avert a foreign exchange crisis. The IMF's stringent conditions included further privatisations and savage cutbacks to public spending under conditions of rising unemployment and falling living standards. Sections of big business no longer believe that the fragile Rajapakse government is capable of imposing the austerity measures required and are backing Fonseka as the strongman to carry them out.

Asked about his policy toward the Tamil minority, Fonseka also toed the UNP line, saying that he supported a "political solution" to the communal conflict that might go beyond the limited provisions for provincial autonomy contained in the constitution's Thirteenth Amendment. The UNP has called for a power-sharing deal between the island's Sinhala and Tamil elites to pave the way for their mutual exploitation and suppression of the working class. Such a deal is also backed by the US and European powers, which have been critical of Rajapakse, as a means of easing communal tensions that have the potential to trigger regional turmoil, particularly in southern India.

Asked about his communal comments to the Canadian-based *National Post* last year, Fonseka tried to distance himself by saying he was "misquoted". Having been instrumental in herding more than 250,000 Tamil civilians into detention centres following the LTTE's defeat, the ex-general also attempted to show some sympathy for the detainees. At the same time, he reaffirmed that he was against their release "without proper security". That is exactly what the Rajapakse government, which was anxious to end criticism of the camps prior to the election, is doing—allowing detainees to leave the internment centres to return to conditions of permanent military occupation, which Fonseka helped establish.

The contest between the former top general and the "dictator" is a sharp warning to working people of what is in store as soon as the election is over. In the course of a quarter century of civil war, the Sri Lanka military has vastly expanded into one of the largest, per capita, in the world with a powerful officer caste that has increasingly played a political role. Whereas Rajapakse rested heavily on the military, Fonseka directly represents the defence establishment. Whoever wins the January 26 election will have no qualms about using the police-state apparatus built up during the war to impose the anti-working class policies being demanded by big business and foreign investors.

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