Behind Sri Lanka's political infighting: US-China rivalry

Peter Symonds
29 January 2010

In the wake of Tuesday's presidential election in Sri Lanka, Colombo has become a hotbed of rumour and intrigue as the two factions of the ruling elite backing the winner, Mahinda Rajapakse, and the loser, General Sarath Fonseka, manoeuvre and position themselves for open political warfare. Far from putting an end to the campaign brawling, the election has set the stage for deepening instability.

The extraordinary events of the past three days have included: the surrounding of Fonseka's hotel by heavily-armed troops, government accusations that he was planning a coup, counter-accusations by Fonseka that the government was about to arrest or assassinate him, a demand that the election be annulled and threats of legal action from both sides.

What is behind this bitter rivalry? The two men have essentially the same domestic program. General Fonseka was part of President Rajapakse's inner cabal as it ruthlessly prosecuted the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in the LTTE's defeat last May. Fonseka now pledges to renew Sri Lankan democracy, but like Rajapakse, he is responsible for war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights. If he fears assassination, it is because he is intimately acquainted with the operations of the pro-government death squads that murdered hundreds of politicians, journalists and ordinary people over the past four years.

The economic agenda of the two men is identical. Both campaigned on the basis of fanciful promises that they knew could not be kept. Rajapakse pledged to turn the island into the "wonder of Asia" and to double per capita GDP within six years. Fonseka demagogically declared he could solve all the country's problems by eliminating "waste and corruption"—as if the impact of 26 years of civil war and the current global economic turmoil could be overcome simply by ending the corrupt practices of the Rajapakse brothers. In reality, Rajapakse and Fonseka are committed to imposing the full burden of the worsening economic crisis onto working people and using the police-state apparatus built up during the war to suppress any opposition.

The main reason for the political feuding is not to be found in Colombo. Since the LTTE's defeat, the country has been drawn into the vortex of great power rivalry. Sri Lanka's strategic position in South Asia and astride the key sea routes from the Middle East and Africa to North East Asia and across the Pacific has made it the focus of growing attention by the major powers. China, which is seeking to protect its maritime trade, used the war to bolster its position in Colombo—providing arms, aid and diplomatic backing in return for economic and strategic concessions—in particular, a major new southern port at Hambantota. India and Pakistan, along with the European powers, are also vying for position in Sri Lanka.

The major destabilising factor, however, has been the US, which is determined to counter China's growing influence in Asia and internationally, including Sri Lanka. Following the LTTE's defeat, the Obama administration, which had backed Rajapakse's war, cynically played the "human rights" card. Together with the Europeans, Washington sponsored a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council calling for a limited war crimes investigation as a means of pressuring the Rajapakse government. China, however, flexed its diplomatic muscle, blocked the US/European move and

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supported the Sri Lankan government's own resolution hailing its victory in the "war on terror".

By early December, the US had shifted tack. A major report entitled "Sri Lanka: Recharting US Strategy After the War", issued by the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, highlighted the danger to US strategic interests of China's growing influence in Colombo and bluntly declared that the US "cannot afford to 'lose' Sri Lanka". It advised "a new approach that increases US leverage vis-à-vis Sri Lanka" using economic, trade and security incentives. As for "human rights", while they remained important, the report stated, "US policy towards Sri Lanka cannot be dominated by a single agenda. It is not effective at delivering real reform, and it shortchanges US geostrategic interests in the region".

Rajapakse is acutely aware that he can ill-afford to alienate the US. In the course of the presidential election, he boasted that he had opposed the "international conspiracy" to save the LTTE and smear the army with war crimes charges. But his anti-Western posturing and defence of "little Sri Lanka" always had its limits. While pointing to Washington's war crimes in Afghanistan, he only did so to justify his own. He was always careful never to name names and now shows every sign of wanting improved ties with the "conspirators"—the US and the EU.

Fonseka's own relations with Washington are extremely murky. He arrived in the US in late October, purportedly to renew his Green Card and visit relatives, and was asked to attend a voluntary interview with the Department of Homeland Security, reportedly to answer questions over war crimes related to Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Colombo furiously opposed the interview, which eventually did not take place. While the nature of discussions between US officials and Fonseka is shrouded in secrecy, he announced his resignation from the army just days after returning to Colombo and actively campaigned against Rajapakse's anti-Western stance.

The nature of future relations between Washington and the Rajapakse regime is by no means clear. What is certain is that this great power rivalry, especially between the US and China, is adding an explosive new factor to the volatile and unstable mix of Sri Lankan politics. Whatever the immediate outcome, the factional warfare in the ruling elites will only compound the economic crisis facing the island, and therefore the determination of whoever comes out on top to launch a savage onslaught on the social position of the working class.

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