

Sri Lankan government cracks down on opposition

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After winning Tuesday's election, President Mahinda Rajapakse has begun his second term with a widening crackdown on his political opponents. Despite winning by a substantial margin, Rajapakse's position remains weak amid continuing sharp divisions in ruling circles and widespread popular frustration and resentment over declining living standards.

On the island of Kayts off the northern Jaffna peninsula, the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) mobilised a gang of thugs on Thursday evening to intimidate people they believed had voted for opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka or Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate Wije Dias. Dozens of people were physically attacked. One supporter of the SEP has been hospitalised—his medical condition is unknown. The EPDP, which is notorious for its thuggery, is part of Rajapakse's ruling coalition. (More details will be published when available.)

The attacks in Kayts are part of a broader pattern. Yesterday evening, some 150 police commandos from the Special Task Force raided the election office of opposition candidate Fonseka in Central Colombo on the pretext of searching for army deserters and illegal weapons.

The operation, which extended over five hours, ended with the detention of 15 retired military personnel, including six officers, who were taken to the Criminal Investigation Department. Computer hard drives, mobile phones and some documents were confiscated.

Karu Jayasuriya, deputy leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP), told reporters that no weapons or explosives were found during the search. "We informed them that they [the detained men] are all officers and other rankers who have retired from service," he said.

On Thursday, Lakshman Hulugalle, the director general of the Media Centre for National Security, claimed that the security forces had uncovered a plot organised by Fonseka to mount a coup and assassinate members of the Rajapakse family, the president and his brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is the country's defence secretary.

Hulugalle declared that Fonseka had hired "70 rooms in two

prestigious hotels" and gathered "retired army officers and army deserters to assassinate the president and his family members". The spokesman offered no evidence to support his extravagant claims, but added that Fonseka would be arrested if his involvement in the plot could be proven.

On Tuesday evening, hundreds of heavily armed soldiers surrounded the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel where Fonseka and his supporters were staying. A tense standoff continued into Wednesday, with the government claiming that the troops were hunting for deserters. None were found. Fonseka accused Rajapakse of preparing to arrest him.

Following Hulugalle's statement, Fonseka flatly denied any plans for a coup. "This would then be a mess officers' coup. The government thinks that I'm as stupid to plan a coup so close to the president's office in a hotel," he told the media. The general reiterated his claim to have won the election, despite receiving 18 percent less votes than Rajapakse, and his plans to challenge the results.

"We have sent a letter to the elections commissioner and we have begun initiating court proceedings to contest the legitimacy of these results," Fonseka said. "During the early stages reliable sources told us that I had a 1.4 million lead to him. This amount has been transferred to the president."

Fonseka accused the government of undermining his personal security by removing his security detail. "They have left me with only four policemen and I have had to resort to employing unarmed civilians. There is a Supreme Court order that my security contingent of 70 should at no time be reduced, however this president does not respect the law of this country."

On Thursday, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse added another legal threat, telling the BBC that the government was considering legal action against Fonseka over accusations during the campaign that the defence secretary had ordered the killing of senior leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While Fonseka later retracted the accusation, saying he had been misquoted, the killings in the final days of the war last May were covered in the international press. Rajapakse scoffed at the retraction, declaring: "We will follow legal procedures. If he has

violated certain laws then we will take action.”

The government is particularly sensitive to accusations of war crimes. In the wake of the LTTE’s defeat, the US and its European allies sought to use the issue to put pressure on President Rajapakse and undermine China’s growing influence in Colombo. In fact, both Rajapakse and Fonseka, who was the country’s top general until he resigned in December to contest the election, are responsible for war crimes and the systematic abuse of basic democratic rights.

The government’s threats against Fonseka are part of a broader campaign that has also targetted the media. The international media watchdog, Reporters Without Borders, yesterday called on Rajapakse to put an end to the intimidation of journalists. “This wave of post-election violence could cast a lasting stain on the start of President Rajapakse’s second term and bodes ill for the political climate during the coming years,” the statement said.

Yesterday evening the editor of *Lanka*, Chandana Sirimalwatte, was arrested over an allegedly defamatory article published on January 26. The newspaper is linked to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which, along with the UNP, backed Fonseka for the presidency. On Thursday, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe accused Defence Secretary Rajapakse of threatening to kill him and to burn down the *Lanka* newspaper offices.

Other incidents included the sealing of the office of the *Lankaenews* web site by plain-clothes police on Thursday evening. The web site had been previously blocked by the state telecommunications company, Sri Lanka Telecom. Also on Thursday, Ravi Abewikrama, a reporter with the state radio broadcaster SLBC, was attacked by one of the station’s officials for criticising the biased election coverage in favour of Rajapakse imposed by the station head.

During a victory speech, Rajapakse declared: “From today onward, I am president of everyone, whether they voted for me or not.” In reality, Rajapakse will not hesitate to make full use of the state apparatus to suppress political opposition in the lead-up to parliamentary elections due by April. The moves against media critics are a sharp warning to the working class of what is in store as the government proceeds to implement the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In his election platform, Rajapakse boasted that he would double the country’s per capita GDP within six years. During the campaign, he appeared on platforms with large pictures of power stations, new ports and transport infrastructure. In reality, the country faces a worsening economic crisis, burdened with huge debts as a result of heavy military spending, and confronting shrinking markets for its exports.

The government was compelled to seek a \$US2.6 billion loan from the IMF last July to stave off an acute balance of payments crisis. The terms of the loan included a drastic reduction in the

budget deficit equivalent to 4 percent of GDP over the next two years, higher taxes and the restructuring of key state-owned corporations, including the Electricity Board and the Petroleum Corporation.

Rajapakse claims that “building of the economy” will be his top priority. What this means in practice is a savage assault on the social position of the working class and rural masses that will inevitably provoke opposition. Despite the defeat of the LTTE last May, Rajapakse has retained the state of emergency that grants the president sweeping powers to censor the media, ban industrial action and carry out arrests without trial.

Ominously, the general secretary of Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Maithripala Sirisena, declared on Thursday that the abolition of the country’s executive presidency was now a non-issue. In a bid to present himself as a democrat, Fonseka had promised to abolish the post. The executive president has the powers to assume cabinet posts, dismiss ministers and bring down governments.

Rajapakse, who holds both the defence and finance portfolios, exploited the executive presidency to marginalise parliament and the cabinet. He has wielded power through a cabal of top bureaucrats, including his brother Gotabhaya, generals and political allies. In the course of his four-year term, Rajapakse openly violated the constitution and High Court rulings, including the 17th Amendment that requires the establishment of a constitutional council to oversee senior government appointments. Fonseka was part of the presidential clique until he fell out with Rajapakse following the LTTE’s defeat.

Sirisena defended the executive presidency, declaring that it had helped to thwart “enemy” manipulation of parliament. His comments are a clear sign that Rajapakse will continue to ride roughshod over parliament, the legal system and the constitution as he presses ahead with what he describes as his “economic war” to rebuild the nation.



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