

Sri Lankan election: General Fonseka's anti-working class agenda

Wije Dias

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has repeatedly warned that General Sarath Fonseka's emergence as a presidential candidate represents a shift by significant sections of the political establishment towards police-state rule amid the country's deepening economic and social crisis.

This warning is confirmed by Fonseka's election manifesto, which is a "common minimum program" agreed by the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Both opposition parties are backing the former army chief and falsely promoting him as a democratic alternative to incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Like other politicians around the world, Fonseka is aping US President Obama's campaign. Taking a leaf straight out of Obama's script, he has entitled his manifesto "Visvasaneeya Venesak" or "Believable Change". "I am different. I am change. I will bring believable change," he declared. Like Obama, Fonseka is appealing to the widespread hostility towards the incumbent regime while obscuring his actual agenda.

In reality there are no fundamental differences between the two candidates. Rajapakse plunged the island back to war in July 2006 and Fonseka, as the country's top general, ruthlessly prosecuted the offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both men are responsible for the thousands of civilians killed by the military's indiscriminate bombardments, the hundreds of thousands left homeless and the incarceration of 280,000 Tamil civilians after the LTTE's defeat last May.

Fonseka was a key participant in the politico-military cabal around Rajapakse that waged the war, trampled on democratic rights and imposed the burdens of the war on the working class. He now postures as a disgusted opponent of the regime, even criticising the "culture of disappearances and extra-judicial executions" that he and the military were, at the very least, complicit in. Fonseka fell out with Rajapakse after the president sidelined the military brass and claimed all the credit for the victory himself.

Fonseka's message of "believable change" is addressed to two very different audiences. First, he is trying to exploit the mass hostility, among Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working people alike,

toward the Rajapakse regime. He is fraudulently posing as a pious man, born to bring democracy, peace and prosperity. Such rhetoric is necessary because the entire political order, not just the government, is discredited in the eyes of working people.

Appealing to widespread popular sentiment, Fonseka laments: "The peace that the people expected at the end of the war has not materialised. Their hopes have been dashed. The economy has collapsed." He even sheds a few crocodile tears over the fact that some people that cannot even afford three meals a day. He emphasises that he is not a politician and part of the culture of corruption.

At the same time, Fonseka presents himself as the strongman that the ruling class needs. He complains: "Law and order has broken down." He proclaims: "With forty years experience in the army I am not a career politician. I am a leader who is not frightened to take decisions. I have delivered decisions on my promises". He pledges "a just and disciplined society".

These are ominous statements. In every period of acute turmoil, going back years, the Colombo establishment has habitually bemoaned the lack of leadership and castigated the sordid character of parliamentary politics. On such occasions, editorial writers have called for a hero on a white horse who can ride roughshod over parliamentary procedure and democratic rights and impose the agenda required by the ruling elites.

Now, amid the island's worsening economic and social crisis, powerful sections of the ruling class are turning to Fonseka—the general who is not beholden to any political party but who can wield the state apparatus against the working class. As he told business leaders last Wednesday "Sri Lanka at this juncture needs a leader, who is disciplined, committed, honest, forthright and not afraid to make tough decisions."

In his manifesto, Fonseka promises to make the country more "business friendly". He declares he will streamline and simplify the process of starting a business, making tax payments, obtaining construction permits, registering property, securing credit and carrying out cross-border trade. He also pledges to attract foreign investment by reintroducing "the one-stop-shop concept that was practiced by the BOI (Board of Investment) in the old days, to help

improve investor facilitation.”

However, Fonseka’s entire economic agenda is based on a fraud. Like the UNP and JVP, his manifesto repeatedly declares that the country’s economic woes are caused solely by the “unimaginable levels of corruption, bribery, nepotism and ego-boosting extravagance” of the Rajapakse regime. Sweep that away and there will be plenty of money to improve the living standards of everyone, Fonseka claims.

Anyone who believes this is a fool. The root cause of sharply declining living standards of ordinary working people is the capitalist system and, in Sri Lanka, the devastating 26-year civil war that it produced. What is on the agenda after the election is not a new era of peace and prosperity but a savage new onslaught on living standards. Rajapakse mortgaged the island to the hilt to pay for his war and had to borrow \$2.6 billion from the IMF to stave off a balance of payments crisis. The next president—whether it is Fonseka or Rajapakse—will have to immediately begin implementing the IMF’s austerity measures.

Fonseka may have been an army officer for years but he has quickly adapted to the role of Colombo politician. Like Rajapakse, the general is adept at making empty promises to everyone: financial security for families, jobs for young people, higher wages for workers, more welfare for the poor, higher prices and subsidies for farmers and the list goes on. As Fonseka knows, none of these promises can be kept.

The general even promises that he will initiate “national reconciliation” with the Tamil minority, which his army indiscriminately bombed, tortured and imprisoned. For the past 60 years, the Colombo political establishment relied on anti-Tamil communalism as its primary weapon to split the working class. Official discrimination led to civil war in 1983. If so far as any “reconciliation” takes place, it will be to involve sections of the Tamil elite in policing the Tamil masses whose democratic rights will continue to be trampled on.

The only promises that Fonseka will keep is to “modernise the armed forces”. If he does win the presidency, he will be compelled to rely on the military as a base of support and the instrument, together with the police, for suppressing political opposition.

That brings us to the greatest deception: Fonseka’s pledge to abolish the executive presidency, strengthen parliament and restore democratic rights. As his first steps, the general is promising to form a new all-party caretaker cabinet, amend (not abolish) the emergency regulations, dissolve parliament and call fresh elections.

If Fonseka does win the presidency, he will be a new autocrat, not a democrat. Far from abolishing the executive presidency, he will be compelled to wield its far-reaching powers to a greater extent than any previous president. Having no power base of his own, he will have to rely on his ability to issue edicts, dismiss

ministers and governments and mobilise the state apparatus under the country’s continuing state of emergency. That is the very reason sections of the ruling elite are backing him to impose their agenda.

One final point needs to be made. Fonseka is also signalling a significant shift in diplomacy. In his meeting with business leaders, he accused Rajapakse of destroying “the goodwill of the international community”. He also criticised his rival for “the foolhardy manner in which the GSP+ issue is being mishandled”. The GSP is a tax concession for Sri Lankan exports, including garments, which the European suspended, citing alleged human rights violation.

When Fonseka talks about the “international community”, he means the US and the EU, rather than China on which Rajapakse has relied for diplomatic support, military sales and financial aid. As a means of exerting political influence in Colombo, the US and the EU made limited criticisms of Rajapakse’s war crimes and abuses of democratic rights. Rajapakse responded by denouncing the “international conspiracy” against Sri Lanka and relying even more heavily on China. Fonseka is indicating—above all to Washington—that he intends to bring Sri Lanka more firmly backing into the US camp.

Neither Fonseka nor Rajapakse represent the interests of the working class. The SEP again warns that the next government will rapidly launch what Rajapakse has described as “an economic war” which will be directed against working people. The SEP and its candidate Wije Dias are campaigning in this election to educate workers and youth and to begin to mobilise them independently to defend their basic rights in the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist policies.



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