

Sri Lankan election sets stage for deep political crisis

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Sri Lanka's presidential election, which culminates with today's national vote, has been marred by violence and bitter charges and counter-charges from the two principal candidates—the incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse and his rival, the former army chief Sarath Fonseka.

Both candidates appear to be preparing to proclaim victory and/or charge ballot-rigging, resulting in a contested election result and a political-constitutional crisis.

Moreover, there are indications that even as voters line up to cast their ballots, the candidates and their key aides are conducting their own secret poll of the country's bloated military-security apparatus to determine where the officer corps' sympathies would lie and what it would do in the event of a contested election result.

President Rajapakse, speaking at his final election meeting at Piliyandala on Saturday, declared: "I will be the president on January 26, 27 and 28 onwards too. We will not allow these conspirators (opposition candidate Fonseka and his supporters) to divide the country."

Rajapakse has repeatedly accused Fonseka—who until just recently was his top military commander in the war against the country's Tamil minority—of betraying the country by accepting the support of the Tamil National Alliance, a political party that was aligned with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) until its military defeat last year.

Fonseka claimed at a Saturday evening press conference that he had won the postal vote (the results of which will be released only as part of the post-election ballot-counting process). He declared himself confident of victory and signalled that he was in discussions with the military top brass about its attitude toward Rajapakse.

Addressing the media, Fonseka said, "A journalist asked me what I would do if a military coup is carried out on the 27th to prevent my victory. ... I am confident that the Army would not engage in any illegal move. The senior officers in the Army have connections with us. If such a thing is attempted it would boomerang on the initiators. The Army would go against them."

Fonseka told the same press conference that the government has ordered some army commanders in the Northern Province to come to Colombo. The unstated suggestion was that they are viewed to be Fonseka loyalists and that Rajapakse and the ruling clique wanted them out of the way so as to facilitate ballot rigging.

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama issued his own charges, accusing the Fonseka camp of mobilising some 600–800 army deserters under a former army major to support his campaign. Asked by an AFP correspondent, about the possibility the government's bourgeois opponents might not accept a Rajapakse victory claiming it was the result of electoral fraud, Bogollagama dismissed the possibility of a serious crisis, saying "Sri Lankan people do not have time for street protests."

The government has defied the Election Commissioner, instigated a wave of election-related violence and in recent days taken steps to strengthen its control of the national broadcasting network with a clear view to dictating how the election results and in protests over their validity are reported.

The Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its election candidate Wije Dias have explained that Rajapakse called the presidential elections two years ahead of schedule in order to strengthen his hand for what he has himself termed an "economic war." This economic war includes implementing stringent conditions ordered by the IMF when it provided \$US2.6 billion loan in July last year to stave off a balance of payment crisis triggered by the cost of the war and a precipitous decline in exports due to the world economic crisis.

However significant sections of Sri Lanka's ruling elite do not have confidence in Rajapakse's ability to impose this agenda and have rallied round the candidacy of General Fonseka, believing that he is a better candidate to act as strongman against the working class. He is backed by the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) as well as by much of big business.

This faction is also concerned by the extent to which Rajapakse has distanced Colombo from the US and India and developed close relations with China. These layers also resent the degree to which the president has concentrated political power in a small clique based on his family and the officer corps.

While Fonseka claims to represent a democratic alternative to Rajapakse—whose tenure in office has been marked by war and mounting repression and political violence—he is like Rajapakse responsible for war crimes and an uncompromising Sinhala chauvinist. He favours the retention of the entire police state apparatus that has been built up, beginning with the massive armed forces, during the 26-year war.

In the final days of the campaign Fonseka received a major boost

when Chandrika Kumaratunga, Rajapakse's predecessor as president and head of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SFLP) endorsed his presidential bid. "I took the decision," said Kumaratunga, "to end four years of silence as I am deeply concerned about the violence, intimidation and corruption." But exactly the same words could have been used to describe her own government.

At his final rally Rajapakse, accused his rival of having the backing of "international conspirators". He did not elaborate, but on several occasions he has attacked the opposition for being too close to the US and European Union.

For his part, Fonseka told his final campaign press conference he would appeal to the "international community," that is the major powers, if any election fraud takes place.

Washington has served notice that it is determined to counteract the burgeoning ties between Colombo and Beijing and would undoubtedly seize on any election crisis to push for a change of course.

Absent an independent intervention of the working class in opposition to both right-wing bourgeois camps, the military and foreign powers could end up playing the decisive role in determining the outcome of a contested election outcome.

Ominously, the question of the political loyalties of the military and its officer corps is already a subject of active discussion in the Sri Lankan press.

The *Sunday Leader*, an opposition newspaper, published a column last weekend by D.B.S. Jeyaraj revealing that both former and active military personnel are actively supporting Fonseka's campaign, with serving officers taking leave to promote the retired general's bid.

"In the north and east"—the majority Tamil areas that are under military occupation—"there is a visible a new development. Military officers serving in those regions are telling civilian acquaintances to vote wisely by voting for a 'Change.' Ordinary soldiers are more direct. They are telling members of the public in Tamil to vote for 'Fonseka Mahathaya' or 'General Aiya'."

D.B.S. Jeyaraj claimed an intelligence assessment found "roughly 75 percent to 80 percent of the rank and file are extremely loyal to the erstwhile army commander. As far as the officers are concerned around 40 percent belong to the Fonseka fraternity. A large number of these are in the captain to colonel ranks.

"The Fonseka phenomenon has had a tremendous impact on the army. Deep divisions are emerging. There is both a vertical and horizontal split.

Determined to win by any method, Rajapakse has openly flouted the country's election laws. Election Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake announced at a party representative committee meeting on January 19 that he would quit the job immediately following the election, thereby indicating his displeasure and frustration at the government's refusal to heed his directives.

Dissanayake had repeatedly protested about the state media's election coverage. On January 12, he ordered his designated monitor of state electronic and print media to withdraw, i.e., he abandoned all efforts to control the state media's coverage of the campaign because of anonymous threats. Clearly the state media

would not have defied the Election Commission's directives unless it had been ordered to do so by the government.

In the run-up to the presidential vote, the government has taken a number of steps that suggest it is trying to tighten its control over the media.

On Saturday, government authorities at the national television network, Rupavahini, announced holidays for its employees for today and tomorrow. Only selected employees will be allowed to come to work. Army officers came to the TV station yesterday and checked its operations, a move employees suspect could be in preparation for the army taking control of the TV facility if the government so orders.

Government supporters have also been the instigators of most of the more than 950 reported incidents of election violence. These include beatings, murders, and the destruction of campaign materials and election offices. Four of the five persons killed during the campaign were Fonseka supporters.

Observers have noted that glaring gaps in the voter registration process and the horrific conditions of displacement and military occupation that prevail in the North could facilitate electoral manipulation and fraud.

According to the election commissioner's department, one million poll cards had not been delivered by the deadline of January 23. About 300,000 cards had not been distributed, just in the northern districts of Vavuniya, Mullaithivu, Kilinochchi, Mannar and Jaffna. Although a polling card is not essential for voting, undelivered cards can be easily be used to stuff ballot boxes.

About one million people do not have national identity cards (NIC) or other forms of identity cards which are obligatory for voting. A spokesman for People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), an election monitoring group, said, "At the end of the day it could be easily said that at least a million voters, if not more, would be put in the cold despite efforts by authorities to issue temporary NICs in a rush before elections".

The election is setting the stage for a bitter struggle for power in ruling circles and a deepening onslaught on the social position of the working class.



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