

Sri Lankan government purges the military

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse carried out a major shake-up of the army last week, sacking a number of top-ranking officers. A defence ministry statement claimed that some senior officers were “sent into compulsory retirement” because they were considered a “threat to national security,” but gave no details.

Rajapakse carried out the purge after winning a second term in the presidential election held on January 26. He is clearly aiming at establishing his full control of the army, using the pretext that his main rival, former army commander General Sarath Fonseka, was planning a coup. The “retirements” are part of a broader crackdown on opposition as bitter infighting between rival camps of the ruling elite continues.

According to yesterday’s *Sunday Times*, 14 officers—five majors general, five brigadiers, a colonel, a lieutenant colonel and two captains—have been sent on compulsory leave. The newspaper reported that Army Commander Lieutenant General Jagath Jayasuriya summoned the officers personally and forced them to retire under threat of losing their pensions. The government has also transferred several top defence officials.

This unprecedented action was carried out under the Army Officers Regulations 1992, which allows the president, who is also the commander-in-chief, to ask an officer to “retire or resign” for “misconduct or in any circumstances that in the opinion of the president requires such action”. The regulations have been used only once in the past—in 1999 to punish officers held responsible for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) overrunning a number of military camps.

Lakshman Hullugalle, director of the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS), issued a statement noting that the government had received information “with regard to the active participation in political work prior to and during the recently concluded presidential elections by a handful of armed forces officers”. It decided to “terminate their services by awarding compulsory retirement irrespective of their ranks”.

“Active participation in political work” has only one meaning. Whether true or not, it signifies support for Fonseka and his election campaign. In the course of the election, Rajapakse openly used the resources of the state apparatus—including the police and military—for his campaign. All the “retired” army officers were regarded as close to Fonseka, who had 40 years of military service and was army commander when Rajapakse restarted the war against the LTTE in 2006.

In the course of the 26-year war that ended in the LTTE’s defeat last May, the Sri Lankan military became one of the largest, per capita, in the world, consuming a large share of government resources. The officer caste also became increasingly politicised and determined to defend its own vested interests.

As the country’s top general, Fonseka was part of Rajapakse’s ruling cabal and a member of the National Security Council that took all the major decisions on the war. After the LTTE’s defeat, however, he was pushed into the largely ceremonial post of Chief of Defence Staff and increasingly sidelined. He resigned from the military in November to contest the election as the common candidate of the opposition parties. In his resignation letter, he expressed the resentment of sections of the officer corps who felt that their role in winning the war had been insufficiently rewarded.

The bitter acrimony between the government and opposition camps continued after the election. In extraordinary scenes, the government dispatched hundreds of heavily armed troops on January 27 to surround the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel, where Fonseka and opposition leaders were staying. A military spokesman claimed that the soldiers were sent to arrest “army deserters” who had been assisting Fonseka.

The government later accused Fonseka of planning a coup to assassinate Rajapakse and his top officials, oust the government and take power. To date, no evidence of a coup attempt has been made public. Fonseka and opposition leaders insist that they gathered at the hotel for security after hearing that the government was planning to physically harm them.

The government has instigated an investigation by the police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) under the control of the country’s police chief. The CID is notorious for carrying out political witch-hunts and cooking up stories to frame detainees. So far, 37 people, including several retired generals and other military personnel, have been detained for questioning.

Among the arrested is Brigadier Duminda Keppetiwala who is accused of killing *Sunday Leader* editor, Lasantha Wickrematunge, in January 2009. That assassination sparked local and international outrage. Wickrematunge’s murder in broad daylight a few hundred metres from a high security zone was almost certainly carried out by one of the pro-government death squads that have killed hundreds of people over the past four years.

The decision to suddenly pin the murder on a Fonseka supporter is utterly cynical. As recently as the killing’s anniversary last month, the CID claimed to have no credible leads. Both Rajapakse and Fonseka are responsible for these death squads, which operated with the tacit, if not direct, support of the security forces. Keppetiwala is one of the very few ever detained over any of these crimes.

The CID has detained others over the “coup attempt,” including the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel’s security manager Ranjit Dayaratne, a former army major. Three

journalists closely associated with Fonseka when he was army commander are also in custody. To keep the “coup” story alive and to justify the continuing investigation, the CID claims to have extracted evidence from those arrested.

The purge has not been limited to the army. The *Sunday Times* reported yesterday that 209 police officers, including 18 deputy inspector generals, superintendents and headquarters inspectors, have been transferred. No reasons have been made public, but the newspaper declared that they were considered “disloyal” to the government.

In his statement on the military “retirements”, MCNS spokesman Hullugalle declared that the government intended to “end the involvement in political activities by officers”. In reality, supporters of Fonseka are being removed and replaced by officers considered loyal to the Rajapakse regime. Last Friday the government also announced an upcoming pay rise in a further bid to quell discontent, particularly in the lower ranks where support for Fonseka is, if anything, stronger than in the top hierarchy.

While the government is currently targeting Fonseka, his supporters and the opposition parties, the main purpose in purging the police and military is to prepare for a confrontation with the working class. In conditions of worsening economic and social crisis, Rajapakse is committed to carrying out the International Monetary Fund’s austerity measures, including deep cuts to public spending and the restructuring and privatisation of state-owned enterprises. The autocratic methods being used against the Fonseka faction will be applied with far greater ruthlessness against protests and opposition by working people.



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