

Sri Lankan government arrests opposition presidential candidate

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Sri Lankan military police last night detained General Sarath Fonseka, the common candidate of the main opposition parties in the country's January 26 presidential election. The arrest is a marked escalation in the government's crackdown on political opponents over the past fortnight and foreshadows widening intimidation and repression in the lead-up to parliamentary elections expected to be called this week.

Fonseka was meeting in his office with opposition leaders, Somawansa Amarasinghe of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Rauff Hakeem from the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and Mano Ganeshan of the Democratic Peoples Front. They were discussing a legal challenge to results of the presidential poll, which Fonseka lost by a wide margin, as well as strategies for the general election.

According to Ganeshan, dozens of military police officers entered the office and told Fonseka he was under arrest. The retired general demanded to know the charges and insisted that any arrest should be by civilian police. When he resisted, Fonseka and his secretary Senaka de Silva were dragged away. "They arrested him and carried him out like a dog," Ganeshan told the *New York Times*. The office was cordoned off by heavily-armed troops, who prevented the media from entering the building.

The arrest follows two weeks of sharpening political tensions after the government accused Fonseka, who was the country's top general until he resigned in November to contest the election, of planning a coup against President Mahinda Rajapakse. On election day, hundreds of soldiers surrounded Fonseka's hotel in a tense standoff. Police have already detained retired military officers and journalists over the coup allegations. The government has purged the top ranks of the army and police of Fonseka supporters.

The detention of Fonseka under military regulations means that he will be tried behind closed doors by a court-martial,

which can deliver the death penalty. The arrest steps up the Rajapakse regime's use of the military for political purposes. While Fonseka is accused of engaging in political activities as a serving officer, President Rajapakse has increasingly politicised the military since he restarted the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in mid-2006.

The exact charges against Fonseka have not been made public, but defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told the media: "When he was the army commander and chief of defence staff and member of the security council, he had direct contact with opposition political parties, which under the military law can amount to conspiracy. He's been plotting against the president while in the military... with the idea of overthrowing the government."

To date, the only evidence of any "conspiracy to overthrow the government" has been Fonseka's candidature in the presidential election. In other words, challenging the government at an election is tantamount to a coup attempt. If the government presses charges along those lines, the arrest is a major step toward illegitimising political opposition and undermining parliamentary rule. Over the past four years, Rajapakse has increasingly ruled through a presidential cabal and flouted constitutional and legal norms.

Charging Fonseka over his activities as a serving officer raises the obvious question as to why the government has waited months to act. Fonseka's meetings with opposition leaders were public knowledge before he resigned to become a presidential candidate. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the allegations are a convenient pretext to end Fonseka's political career, conduct a trial without public scrutiny and intimidate opposition parties.

The immediate trigger appears to have been Fonseka's comments, just hours before his arrest, threatening to testify about war crimes committed during the war that ended with the

LTTE's defeat last May. Fonseka told reporters in his office: "I am definitely going to reveal what I know, what I was told and what I heard [about war crimes]. Anyone who has committed war crimes should definitely be brought into courts... Those who reveal the truth are not traitors."

During the election campaign, Rajapakse and Fonseka traded accusations that each was involved in war crimes. In comments to the media, later retracted, Fonseka claimed that the president's brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who heads the defence ministry, ordered the military to kill top LTTE leaders rather than accept their surrender last May. The defence secretary responded by accusing Fonseka of divulging state secrets, and the pro-government media branded him a "traitor."

In reality, both men are responsible for the atrocities that took place. According to UN estimates, at least 7,000 civilians were killed between January and May 2009, mainly by indiscriminate bombing and shelling by the Sri Lankan military of the remaining pockets of LTTE-held territory. In addition, pro-government death squads, acting with the military's complicity, killed hundreds of people, including journalists and politicians. Following the LTTE's defeat, the army herded 280,000 Tamil men, women and children into squalid detention camps guarded by heavily armed soldiers.

Sri Lankan war crimes became a sensitive issue after the US and European powers called on the UN Human Rights Council last May to instigate an independent investigation. The Sri Lankan government blocked the resolution with the assistance of China, India and other allies, but President Rajapakse and other top officials are concerned that the demand could be resurrected. For the US and EU, which backed Rajapakse's criminal war, the issue was a convenient means for putting pressure on Colombo in an effort to sideline their rivals, particularly China.

Defence Secretary Rajapakse hinted last week that the government was preparing to move against Fonseka through military charges. He told the BBC: "He [Fonseka] has made certain mistakes. He was a member of the security council... He has divulged security information to the public. He accused me of giving wrong orders [during the war]." During that interview, the defence secretary insisted that he would not allow any war crime investigation.

Fonseka's offer to testify at an international war crimes investigation was an open offer to the US and the EU to use him as a tool to pressure the Sri Lankan government. In the course of the campaign, the general criticised Rajapakse for

alienating the "international community" and disadvantaging Sri Lankan businesses as a result of the EU's decision to end its preferential subsidies for the country's exports.

For now, the US and European powers appear to have spurned Fonseka. Washington's response to the election result, allegations of electoral fraud and the subsequent crackdown on the opposition has been muted. After Fonseka was arrested yesterday, the US State Department spokesman could only muster "concerns that any action be in accord with Sri Lankan law". In typical diplomatic understatement, he said the arrest was "an unusual action to take right on the heels of an election".

These comments are in line with the Obama administration's downplaying of the so-called human rights issue in Sri Lanka. A US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations report in December recommended "a broader and more robust approach to Sri Lanka" that was "not driven solely by short-term humanitarian concerns" in order to counter growing Chinese economic and political influence in Colombo. Such an approach could easily change if Washington senses an opportunity to exploit Fonseka to advance US interests in the island. The country's entanglement in rivalry between the major powers is a key factor intensifying the factional warfare in Colombo.

In the final analysis, the Sri Lankan government's crackdown is not primarily directed at Fonseka and the opposition parties but is in preparation for a confrontation with the working class as it implements the International Monetary Fund's austerity program. The arrest of Fonseka, who was until relatively recently a trusted ally, is a sharp warning of the measures that will be used against the opposition of working people seeking to defend their living standards.



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