

# Sri Lankan government widens witch-hunt against opposition

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Having won a second term in last week's election, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse is widening a witch-hunt against political opponents, journalists and critics.

The *Sunday Times* reported yesterday that the arrest of opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka was "imminent" on the basis of allegations of a plot to assassinate the president and seize power in a military coup. Fonseka was the country's top general until last December, when he resigned to contest the presidency as the common candidate of the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

According to the newspaper, a top-level police investigation has been underway for days, focussing on the activities of Fonseka, his staff and opposition leaders at the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel on the evening of election day—January 26. The military surrounded the hotel with hundreds of heavily-armed troops and police and checked anyone entering or leaving.

The investigation is headed by Sri Lanka's police chief Mahinda Balasuriya, regarded as a Rajapakse loyalist, and State Intelligence Service Director Keerthi Gajanayake. Just before the election, Gajanayake was installed as head of the police Criminal Investigations Department (CID) and the former CID head, Nandana Munasinghe, was transferred out of Colombo to the northwestern town of Mannar.

The *Sunday Times* reported that CID detectives had questioned the manager and security staff at the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel as well as retired army personnel who were there at the time. The detectives claimed that weapons were stored in some rooms. Neither the government, the state-owned media nor the police has provided any evidence of a coup attempt. The newspaper reported that the opposition parties were deeply concerned that the government would try to hold onto power if it lost the election and jointly moved to the hotel for security.

On Friday, the government dispatched police commandos and CID detectives to search Fonseka's office in Colombo. Police arrested 15 retired army personnel, seized computers and

documents, and sealed the office. So far more than 20 retired army personnel working for Fonseka during the election campaign have been detained.

The *Sunday Times* said the Department of Immigration and Emigration had been instructed to prevent Fonseka, his son-in-law Danuna Tillekeratne and several other people from leaving the country. Security had been boosted at Bandaranaike International Airport. Last week, a government spokesman denied plans to arrest Fonseka or prevent him from leaving, but those denials were not repeated yesterday.

Fonseka held a press conference on Saturday and reiterated claims that there was a move to assassinate him. He pointed to the fact that his security detail, provided by the security forces, has been reduced from 90 soldiers to three police constables and one inspector. He criticised the lack of democratic rights, saying: "You can't go to the police or the courts. You can be arrested at any time. There's no media freedom. Everyone is under pressure and cannot carry out their rightful duties."

Fonseka warned that if he were killed he would expose the government's "secrets". He told the media that he had written an affidavit that would be made public on his death. The Rajapakse regime has every reason to fear that Fonseka could expose its secrets. As the country's top general, he was part of Rajapakse's cabal and ruthlessly prosecuted the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) until its defeat last May. He was thus privy to all the government's war crimes and abuses of democratic rights, for which he shares responsibility.

An element of the government's determination to silence Fonseka could well be to ensure that details of the military's slaughter of thousands of civilians and the operation of pro-government death squads do not come to light. More fundamental issues are at stake, however. The intense infighting between Rajapakse and Fonseka following the election is a symptom of wider factional warfare in the country's ruling elites as the island confronts a deepening economic and social crisis. These bitter differences have been

caught up in the broader rivalry of the major powers—particularly the US and China—for influence in the region, including Colombo. (See: “Behind Sri Lanka’s political infighting: US-China rivalry”).

The deep political divisions are affecting not only political parties and the media, but permeate the state apparatus and the security forces. Despite his sizeable margin of victory, Rajapakse fears his position is far from secure. A shake-up of the military hierarchy has already begun, with the installation of Rajapakse loyalists into key positions. Fonseka told the media that 13 army personnel, including three majors-general, two brigadiers and four colonels who were his supporters, had been sacked.

Fonseka added that Brigadier Duminda Keppetiwala had been arrested on charges that he was connected to the murder of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunga in January last year. Keppetiwala, the current commandant of the Army Training School in Amparam, served as Fonseka’s military assistant when he was army chief. Wickrematunga, a critic of the Rajapakse government, was killed in broad daylight as he drove to work.

Major-General Daya Ratnayake, who served as commissioner general (rehabilitation) under the Ministry of Defence, has been appointed the new chief of staff—the second most important position in the military after the army commander. He replaces Major-General Mendaka Samarasinghe who has been pushed into an administrative post as director general (joint plans).

State television Rupavahini reported last night that several staff members were under investigation in connection with Fonseka’s “coup attempt”. The report added that eight employees of the state-owned Lake House newspapers had been indicted and several others were being investigated. Earlier, all employees were forced to take compulsory leave for two days—election day and the day after—to ensure unchallenged government control of all coverage.

During the election campaign, Rajapakse shamelessly exploited the state-owned media as his propaganda vehicle. The latest investigations are aimed at bringing these TV, radio and newspaper outlets under total government control. The flavour of the coverage is given by a comment in yesterday’s *Sunday Observer*—the Lake House English language Sunday newspaper—entitled “Traitor eats humble pie as fantasy comes to an end”. Making no pretense at objectivity, the article accused Fonseka of bringing the security forces into disrepute, disgracing the country and preparing “an all-out attack to capture power”, imprison Rajapakse and behead his brothers.

Not only can the state-owned media publish such reports with

legal impunity, but anyone who challenges them is also treated as a traitor. A crackdown on the non-government media is continuing. On Saturday, police detained Chandana Sirimalwatta, the editor of the pro-JVP *Lanka* newspaper, reportedly to investigate his involvement in the “coup” attempt. The CID sealed the offices and printing press of the newspaper.

Amid international criticism, the government yesterday reversed its decision to expel Karin Wenger, the South Asia correspondent for Swiss radio DRS, saying it had been acting on false information. Wenger said she believed she was being expelled for asking “inconvenient questions”. According to the British-based *Times*, Wenger had asked why troops had been deployed around Fonseka’s hotel and why the president’s brother and adviser, Basil Rajapakse, had visited the election commissioner shortly before the poll results were announced. Officials denied the visit, but Wenger insisted she had seen him leave the commissioner’s office at that time.

Rajapakse is also trying to consolidate the position of the ruling coalition in parliament. Presidential spokesman Lucien Rajakarunanayake announced on Saturday that Rajapakse was preparing to dissolve parliament on February 5 before leaving on a state visit to Russia. General elections are not due until April, but the government obviously wants to cash in on the disarray in the opposition’s ranks.

The government is clearly concerned about growing unpopularity as it implements the austerity measures demanded by the IMF. Rajapakse called the presidential elections two years early for the same reason. Now he is seeking to mount a legal case to ensure that his presidency includes the remaining two years of his first term as well as all his six-year second term—eight years in all. The move is just one more indication of the consolidation of a police-state regime directed above all against the working class. If he had won, General Fonseka, whose economic and political agenda is virtually identical to Rajapakse’s, would have acted in a similar fashion.



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