

Sri Lankan election announced amid climate of fear and intimidation

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse dissolved parliament on Tuesday and called a general election for April 8, just one day after detaining his rival in the January 26 presidential election, General Sarath Fonseka. The timing was not accidental. The arrest has set the stage for an election in which the government will use every means at its disposal to intimidate and suppress political opposition.

The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has made clear that it intends to seek a two-thirds majority, enabling it to change the constitution. UPFA general secretary Susil Premajayantha told the media on Wednesday that the government was seeking a mandate to reduce the size of the cabinet and make significant constitutional reforms.

Currently the government rests on an unwieldy and unstable coalition of parties. The president has had to offer virtually every pro-government MP either a ministerial post or some other office as a bribe to ensure their continued loyalty. As the cabinet has swollen to one of the largest in the world, Rajapakse has used his sweeping executive powers to rule through a cabal of relatives, cronies and trusted advisers operating from the presidential office.

Rajapakse wants to use the election to boost the weight of his own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), reduce the influence of his allies in the ruling coalition and fashion a more manageable administration. Reducing the size of the cabinet will not, however, lead to a more open form of rule. Rather the government is seeking to consolidate its grip over parliament and all sections of the state apparatus as it prepares to impose the burdens of the country's deepening economic crisis onto working people.

Ominously, Premajayantha did not indicate what constitutional reforms are being proposed. Rajapakse already has extensive powers as executive president to appoint and sack ministers and to dismiss the government. He currently holds two key portfolios—defence and finance. Under the present state of emergency, which has continued despite the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May, he can ban industrial action, impose media censorship and authorise arrests without charge.

Rajapakse has increasingly treated the country's legal system and constitution with contempt. In December 2008, the president lashed out at the Supreme Court for ordering him to establish the Constitutional Council as required under the 17th amendment of the constitution. In a barely disguised threat of physical violence, he reminded the judges "about the time when the homes of the judicial officers were stoned and impeachment motions brought against three Supreme Court judges".

Under the constitution, the Constitutional Council is jointly appointed by the government and opposition and has broad responsibilities to establish commissions to oversee the police, electoral department, judiciary and other areas of public administration. Rajapakse resisted the implementation of these limited measures because they would cut across his own ability to install his cronies and direct the state apparatus.

Having stalled on the formation of the Constitutional Council for four years, Premajayantha indicated that the government is now planning to proceed. It is not difficult to identify the reason for the change of heart. If the UPFA succeeds in obtaining a two-thirds majority, it will be in a position to issue an ultimatum to the opposition parties—agree to the Constitutional Council we want, or

we will constitutionally change its structure or abolish it altogether.

Of course, the UPFA still has to get its two-thirds majority. But there is every sign that it will use the same methods as in the presidential election—the blatant use of state resources including the state-owned media for election campaigning, together with thuggery and violence against opposition parties. In the fortnight since the presidential poll, the government has detained Fonseka supporters, sacked military officers loyal to the former army commander, arrested the editor of a newspaper connected to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and blocked websites critical of the government.

On Monday, Fonseka was dragged out of his office and arrested by military police on vague allegations that he conspired with opposition parties to overthrow the government. If the country's former top general and presidential candidate can be detained in such a manner, then any political opponent can be dealt with similarly. If Fonseka was involved in a conspiracy with opposition leaders, then the implication is that they were also involved in “treasonous” activities.

An editorial in the state-owned *Daily News* yesterday issued what amounted to a threat against the pro-opposition media. “Perusing the media for the past several weeks one could find many instances of disinformation,” it declared. After criticising media “disinformation” about the fairness of the presidential election, the newspaper honed in on Fonseka's arrest.

While it was legitimate to disagree with the arrest, the editorial declared, “that does not permit anyone to conclude that the arrest was illegal as certain media and certain politicians claim. Any media or person who propagates that view is carrying out disinformation and misleading the public as to the powers of the Army.”

The newspaper then warned: “The danger of disinformation lies in that the enemies of the country could ... bring discredit to the country and even put it in embarrassing situations which could even compromise national security and state sovereignty”.

Within the framework of bourgeois democracy, citizens can challenge the legality of arrests and other government

actions through the courts where the issue is decided. In fact, Fonseka's arrest is due to be heard in the Supreme Court today. By declaring it impermissible to question the legality of his detention on national security grounds, the government is arrogating to itself the right to determine what is legal and what public criticism is permissible, and what is not.

As the Colombo media is well aware, such threats can have dire consequences. Over the past four years, opposition journalists have been murdered or “disappeared” by pro-government death squads operating in collusion with the security forces. If the Rajapakse regime were ever called to account, undoubtedly it would declare that such measures were needed in the interests of “national security”.

The editorial is another warning about the atmosphere of intimidation and repression that will prevail during the election and afterward. In the final analysis, the government's sweeping attacks on democratic rights are not directed primarily against Fonseka and the opposition parties, but against the working class. As soon as the election is over, the next Rajapakse government will launch a sweeping assault on living standards in line with the International Monetary Fund's austerity demands and use the full force of the state apparatus against any opposition.

During the protracted, 26-year war against the LTTE, successive Colombo governments built up a massive military-police apparatus that provides the framework for a police state. During his first term, Rajapakse exploited his extensive powers to the hilt to intimidate and suppress political opponents. Now as he prepares to embark on an economic war against working people, the president is seeking a two-thirds majority to provide a constitutional rubberstamp for his dictatorial regime.



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