

Sri Lanka: Release of opposition supporters undermines “coup” claims

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A magistrate’s court last week unconditionally released 14 supporters of opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka who had been detained following the January 26 presidential election. The government and the state-owned media accused Fonseka, who was the country’s top general until November, of planning to overthrow President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The court ordered the release on February 17 after police were forced to admit that they had no evidence to make a case against any of the detainees. The decision undermines Rajapakse’s pretext for the continuing crackdown on opposition supporters and the government’s decision to arrest General Fonseka on February 8.

The 14 men, including 10 retired military officers, were arrested on January 29, when hundreds of police raided Fonseka’s election office. They were held and interrogated for 19 days by the police Criminal Investigation Department (CID), which is notorious for concocting stories to justify false arrests. In this case, Colombo Chief Magistrate Champa Janaki Rajaratne released the men after the CID informed him they could find no evidence of a criminal conspiracy against the government.

Fonseka is still being held by military police at the navy’s headquarters. He is yet to be charged. His lawyer, Wijedasa Rajapakse, has told the press that Fonseka has decided not to collaborate with the court martial. The dropping of charges against his close supporters and others allegedly involved in the “coup” attempt calls into question the case against Fonseka himself.

Other cases against opposition supporters have also run into obstacles.

* The editor of the *Lanka* paper Chandana Sirimalwatte was released on February 16 by the Gangodawila magistrate after the CID failed to press charges. He was originally detained on January 29 after the CID called him in to make a statement. A day before his release, his wife filed a Fundamental Rights violation petition in the Supreme Court.

Lanka is the newspaper of the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which together with the United National Party (UNP) backed Fonseka in the election. A day after Sirimalwatte was detained, the CID sealed the newspaper’s office without providing any justification. Two days later, the Gangodawila magistrate revoked the ban.

At a press conference after his release, Sirimalwatte said a CID officer told him that he had been lucky to survive and should have met the same fate as *Lanka-e-news* journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda. Eknaligoda went missing a few days before the presidential election and has not been seen since. Hundreds of people, including a number of journalists, have “disappeared” or been murdered over the past four years by pro-government death squads.

*On February 11, a Colombo magistrate criticised the police over their arrest of opposition protesters outside the central court complex the previous day. She pointed out that instead of detaining armed pro-government thugs who had attacked the demonstration, the police had arbitrarily arrested eight protestors for damaging public and private property and causing injury to

bystanders. The magistrate released the eight on bail and ordered the police to apprehend the thugs.

A few days later, an Anuradhapura magistrate similarly reprimanded police for arresting protestors who were agitating against Fonseka's arrest, but not detaining pro-government thugs who attacked them.

* On February 17, the CID arrested Ashoka Tillekeratne, the mother of Fonseka's son-in-law Danuna Tillekeratne, for being in possession of foreign currency to the tune of 75 million rupees [US\$655,000]. Police wanted her placed in remand so she could be interrogated over "terrorism connections" but the magistrate refused, saying the allegations involved an exchange control violation.

The armed forces, state bureaucracy, police and judiciary are all politicised in Sri Lanka. The fact that the police have failed to file charges against opposition supporters or have been rebuffed and even criticised by magistrates indicates anti-government sentiment in the state apparatus, rather than real concerns for democratic rights and the law.

Fonseka's arrest has also exposed divisions within the Sinhala-Buddhist hierarchy. In an unusual move, the chief prelates of three Buddhist sects issued a statement on February 13, calling for the general's immediate release. In a letter to the president, they wrote: "We wish to stress that we do not under any circumstance approve of the arrest of former army commander General Sarath Fonseka, who risked his life for the country's unity."

Fonseka was the general who ruthlessly prosecuted President Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both men are responsible for the war crimes and abuses of democratic rights carried out by the military. The Buddhist hierarchy, which enjoys a privileged position as a result of the country's communal constitution, fully backed Rajapakse and the war, but is clearly concerned at the bitter factional infighting within the ruling elite.

The chief priests of four Buddhist sects called a

special convention of monks on February 18 in central Kandy to discuss the political situation, but later cancelled the meeting, reportedly under pressure from the government. In a statement, the prelates said they had to "consider the safety of the monks and laymen"—a guarded reference to concerns that the convention might have been attacked by pro-government thugs.

The sharp political differences between the government and opposition camps are of a tactical, not a principled, character and have been accentuated by deepening rivalry between the major powers for influence in Colombo. The US and its allies are concerned that China in particular gained an advantage during Sri Lanka's civil war by providing the Rajapakse regime with arms, financial aid and political support.

Rajapakse has called general elections for April 8 and is intent on gaining the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed to change the constitution. The ruling coalition claims that it must make constitutional alterations to provide "stable government". But its real aim is to sanctify the government's autocratic methods of rule in preparation for a confrontation with working people over the far-reaching austerity measures it intends to impose.



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