

# Police attack opposition protest in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents  
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Sri Lankan police and pro-government thugs attacked protestors demonstrating in central Colombo yesterday against the arrest of retired General Sarath Fonseka, the defeated opposition presidential candidate. The police also dispersed opposition rallies in the southern cities of Matara and Galle and in eastern Ampara.

Military police arrested Fonseka on Monday night, formally on the orders of Army Commander Lieutenant General Jagath Jayasuriya, on the basis of vague allegations that Fonseka conspired to assassinate President Mahinda Rajapakse and overthrow the government. The arrest is part of broader moves to crack down on all opposition in the country. Yesterday's violent attack on protestors is a further message that the government will tolerate no resistance.

Opposition parties, including the United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), had announced the protest at Hultsdorf, near the Colombo judicial complex. About 150 thugs were mobilised there by government politicians even before protestors arrived, and clearly intended to attack the demonstration. They were armed with iron bars, empty bottles and clubs. Hundreds of police were also deployed, including the anti-riot squad and water cannon.

Police had applied to a magistrate in the morning to issue an order banning the protest, but the magistrate refused—another sign of deep divisions in ruling circles. Police made no attempt to disperse the pro-government mob, which shouted provocative slogans demanding further arrests and denouncing the demonstrators as supporters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

As the protestors gathered, the armed thugs started to

attack. The police did not intervene to keep the groups apart, but used the provocation as a pretext to attack the opposition demonstrators with tear gas and water cannon. The police only backed off when around 5,000 protestors gathered, and the thugs retreated. Nine opposition demonstrators were treated at the national hospital.

While the protest proceeded, Fonseka's wife, Anoma Fonseka, filed a fundamental rights petition challenging his arrest. The petition declared that the arrest violated the general's constitution rights, including the freedom from arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention. It named the Army Commander, the Defence Secretary and Attorney-General as respondents. The case is due to be heard on Friday.

General Fonseka has been detained at the navy headquarters in Colombo. Yesterday evening, his wife Anoma and his lawyer Wijedasa Rajapakse were permitted to see him, after the International Committee of the Red Cross and some foreign embassies intervened.

President Rajapakse and the Defence Secretary, his brother Gotabhaya, have yet to make any statement on Fonseka's arrest. The allegations against him are so vague and contradictory that they could apply to any form of anti-government opposition. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told the media on Tuesday that, while Fonseka was serving as the country's top general, he had "many dealings with the other political party leaders who have been working against the government. This amounts to treason to some extent..."

Rambukwella admitted that no charges had been framed. Instead, evidence would be "gathered and

verified” to frame charges. Similarly, Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe, the military spokesman said: “We cannot say exactly what the charges are.” The charges would be determined “with the available evidence” by the Attorney-General’s department.

Rambukwella indicated that more arrests had already been made and others would soon follow. “There are many others, military and civilian, who were involved with Fonseka, who were also arrested. Some others are yet to be arrested. The CID [Criminal Investigation Division] and police are investigating.” By Rambukwella’s logic, the leaders of all the opposition parties “conspired” with Fonseka and are liable to arrest.

Inspector General of Police Mahinda Balasuriya yesterday issued an extraordinary gazette notification under emergency regulations to authorise the establishment of detention centres for arrested military personnel. The facilities will be set up at the Technical College Army camp at Nelumkulama in Vavuniya, the navy headquarters in Colombo, the naval dockyard in Trincomalee and the army camp at Saliyapura in Anuradhapura.

In this tense atmosphere, the government yesterday announced the dissolution of parliament two months before schedule. The timing, immediately after Fonseka’s arrest, is clearly designed to intimidate opponents and throw the opposition parties into disarray. The government is seeking a two-thirds majority in parliament to push through still unspecified “constitutional changes”. This can only mean a further step toward dictatorial rule.

The government’s crackdown is not aimed simply against the opposition parties but the working class and youth. Having inflicted military defeat on the LTTE, Rajapakse is preparing an “economic war” on the working people to impose the burdens of the country’s 26-year civil war and meet the terms of its \$2.6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund.

Already discussion is underway on implementing the IMF’s austerity measures. In London yesterday, the country’s Central Bank governor, Nivard Cabraal,

described the IMF’s target of reducing the budget deficit to 5 percent of GDP by next year as “challenging.” Independent economists estimate that the budget deficit rose last year to between 9 and 11 percent. Cutting the deficit in half by 2011 means drastic attacks on living conditions and social services in the next budget, which will now be presented after the parliamentary elections.

The opposition parties, including the UNP and the JVP, share the government’s economic agenda. They are themselves trenchant defenders and enforcers of the interests of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. Their differences with Rajapakse are purely tactical, bound up with divisions over how best to impose the IMF’s dictates, and where to line up in the intensifying rivalry in the region between the major powers, especially the US and China.

For now, the opposition parties are seeking to shore up their own flagging support by posing as defenders of democratic rights. They reflect fears in sections of the ruling elite that the blatant crackdown on the official opposition could fuel popular disaffection. In the presidential election they backed Fonseka, who was jointly responsible with Rajapakse for the communal war against the LTTE and all the military’s war crimes.

Yesterday’s violence against opposition protestors, and the regime’s threats of further arrests are a warning of even greater attacks on democratic rights as the Sri Lankan business and political establishment turns to dictatorial forms of rule to impose the full burden of its deep economic crisis on the working class.



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