

Sri Lankan SEP condemns opposition candidate's arrest

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) unequivocally condemns the arrest of defeated opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka. His detention by military police on Monday night is a fundamental attack on democratic rights that foreshadows the consolidation of a police-state regime under President Mahinda Rajapakse.

No charges have been laid against Fonseka, who resigned from the military last November to contest the January 26 presidential election. The various accusations levelled by government spokesmen are riddled with contradictions—that he divulged state secrets, conspired to overthrow the government, and planned to assassinate Rajapakse and his close advisers, including the president's brothers.

No evidence has been provided to substantiate any of these allegations. According to the government, all the charges relate to Fonseka's activities as a serving officer—that is, before he stepped down three months ago. Why has the government taken so long to act? The obvious answer is that it began concocting the charges when Fonseka became the opposition's candidate and is now using them to meet its immediate needs: to remove Fonseka from the political scene and intimidate its opponents.

Just 24 hours after Fonseka's arrest, Rajapakse prorogued parliament and called general elections for April 8. The poll will be held under a pall of intimidation and repression directed against any political opposition to the government. If Fonseka can be dragged away by military police on unspecified charges of "overthrowing the government" then anyone who challenges the Rajapakse regime can confront similar measures, or worse.

The government has declared that its aim is to win a two-thirds parliamentary majority to enable it to change the constitution. As executive president, Rajapakse already wields far-reaching powers that have been extended under the country's continuing state of emergency. During his first

term, he reduced parliament to a rubber stamp and ruled through a politico-military cabal that flouted the country's courts and legal system. Now Rajapakse wants to acquire the power to change the constitution to formalise his dictatorial methods of rule.

The response of the media to Fonseka's arrest demonstrates that there is no constituency within Sri Lankan ruling circles for the defence of democratic rights. The right-wing *Island* declared that the detention came as "no surprise". Its editorial acknowledged that "the unfolding drama" was "not without the trappings of a witch-hunt" but blamed the opposition parties and "hoped that the government and the army will operate within the confines of the law".

The *Daily Mirror*, which at times exhibits liberal pretensions, was no less cynical. Its editorial ignored the issue of democratic rights and lectured the government on its political blunder. By arresting Fonseka, it opined, Rajapakse had turned the general from "a zero into a hero". Neither newspaper condemned the arrest or called on the government to end its persecution of opposition politicians.

The media reaction in Colombo is in line with the muted international response. The brazen arrest of the main opposition candidate just two weeks after Sri Lanka's presidential election was referred to as "unusual" by the US State Department. The comment stands in marked contrast to the massive campaign mounted by the US and its allies last year, branding the Iranian presidential elections as rigged and denouncing the regime's repression of its opponents. In both cases—Iran and Sri Lanka—the response, or lack of it, is determined by the interests of US imperialism, not concern for democratic rights.

The SEP demands the immediate and unconditional release of Fonseka. In doing so, however, we warn the working class to place no faith in Fonseka or the opposition

parties that are supporting him. Until the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May, Fonseka was part of Rajapakse's cabal and ruthlessly waged the war that the president had restarted in 2006. Both men are responsible for war crimes and the gross abuse of democratic rights, including the operation of pro-government death squads.

Likewise, the main bourgeois opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have a long history of anti-democratic abuses. Their ability to posture as “democrats” depends on the support of the ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), both of which have uncritically joined the opposition movement to free Fonseka.

The actions of these opportunists confirm the SEP's recent warnings (see: “Sri Lankan SEP replies to the United Socialist Party”). A political fissure has opened up in the ruling class, posing dangers to its rule if the working class begins to fight for its own class interests. Far from mobilising workers and youth independently, however, the NSSP and USP are deliberately creating dangerous illusions in Fonseka and the right-wing opposition parties to block such a development.

The significance of the USP's and NSSP's actions is underscored by the deep crisis facing the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. The political warfare in ruling circles is a product of the extreme social tensions being generated by the country's worsening economic situation. Rajapakse's preparations for dictatorial forms of rule are not primarily directed against Fonseka and the opposition parties, but against the working class. Sri Lanka exhibits in a particularly acute form the debt crisis that is currently erupting around the world. Having mortgaged the country to pay for his war, Rajapakse is now compelled to slash public spending and launch a frontal assault on the living standards of working people.

For all the bitterness of the conflict between the Rajapakse and Fonseka factions, their differences are of a purely tactical nature—how to take on the working class and where to line up in the intensifying rivalry between major powers, especially between the US and China. Confronted by a concerted movement of workers in defence of their rights, the two camps would rapidly bury their differences and not hesitate in using the most extreme methods to defend the profit system and crush the opposition.

The working class confronts serious dangers. Workers cannot defend their class interests if they are politically shackled to one or other faction of the bourgeoisie, but must strike out on an independent road using the methods of class struggle. The SEP calls for the immediate formation of independent action committees in workplaces and working class areas as a first step in defending the democratic rights and living standards of the masses.

The fight for democratic rights is inexorably bound up with the struggle against capitalism—a social order that is rooted in the economic exploitation of the overwhelming majority by the wealthy few. In opposition to all factions of the ruling class, the working class must fight for a workers' and farmers' government to implement a program of socialist policies that would refashion society from top to bottom to meet the social needs of working people.

The necessary precondition for such a political struggle is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism, which have been exploited for decades to divide Sinhala from Tamil workers, and workers in Sri Lanka from their class brothers and sisters in South Asia and internationally. There is no solution to the problems facing working people within the narrow confines of this island. The fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam is indissolubly linked to the broader struggle for socialism throughout the region and around the globe.

The SEP calls on workers and young people to give urgent consideration to these political issues, contact the party and actively take part in its campaigns.



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