

Sri Lankan official accuses US of supporting opposition candidate

Wije Dias
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In a lengthy interview to the Singapore-based *Straits Times* last Thursday, Sri Lanka's defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse accused the US and Norway of financing the defeated opposition candidate, General Sarath Fonseka, in the January 26 presidential election. President Mahinda Rajapakse, the defence secretary's brother, won a second term. Fonseka, who claimed the ballot was rigged, was arrested by military police last Monday for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government.

The defence secretary told the *Straits Times*: "We are 100 percent convinced that Western countries with vested interests were backing him [Fonseka]. Even the US, and countries like Norway, spent lots of money on his campaign." He continued: "I have proof of the Norwegian government paying journalists to write against the government. They have vested interests and used to support the Tamil Tigers in various ways. They also supported Fonseka to try to oust the president."

As in the rest of his interview, Rajapakse provided no evidence to support his claim or his allegations that Fonseka had been plotting a coup against his brother. The defence secretary is a top bureaucratic post made by appointment, not an elected position. Yet Rajapakse, as the president's brother and part of the inner ruling circle, wields far more power than any cabinet minister, including the foreign minister.

The US and Norway immediately denied any support for Fonseka during the election campaign. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama distanced the government from the comments, saying his ministry had "no intention of pursuing the allegations made by the defence secretary that United States and Norway supported the election campaign of the defeated presidential candidate Fonseka". The US State Department, however, summoned the Sri Lankan ambassador in Washington to lodge a strong protest over the defence secretary's interview and the arrest of General Fonseka.

Whether or not the US provided money for Fonseka's campaign, the diplomatic row highlights the degree to which Sri Lanka is being swept up in growing rivalry between the

major powers in South Asia and internationally. After plunging the island back to civil war in 2006, President Mahinda Rajapakse relied increasingly on China for arms, financial aid and political support. In return, Colombo has given Beijing economic concessions and allowed it to construct a major new port at Hambantota on the southern tip of the island.

Following the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May, the US and its European allies called at the UN Human Rights Council for a war crimes investigation. Sri Lanka blocked the resolution with China's assistance. Having backed Rajapakse's war, the US was trying cynically to use the issue of "human rights" to put pressure on Colombo and sideline China. Since then, Washington has redoubled its efforts. A US Senate Foreign Relations Committee report in December commented that the US could not afford to "lose" Sri Lanka to its rivals.

In his interview, Defence Secretary Rajapakse simply blurted out more openly what his brother had declared in the course of the election campaign. President Rajapakse not only claimed full credit for "victory" in his criminal war, but boasted that he had defeated "an international conspiracy" to tarnish Sri Lanka's reputation. Obviously concerned not to further sour relations, he did not name the US and the EU, but the message was clear.

Fonseka, on the other hand, criticised President Rajapakse for alienating the "international community", leading in particular to the EU's decision to end GSP+ trade preferences for Sri Lanka. Higher tariffs will impact on Sri Lankan exports to Europe, particularly in the substantial garment sector. Fonseka, who was the country's top general until he resigned last November, was backed by the opposition United National Party (UNP), which traditionally has oriented toward the US and Europe.

While the foreign minister did not publicly back Defence Secretary Rajapakse, the outspoken character of the *Straits Times* interview underscores the fact that the government feels that it can criticise the US and EU with relative impunity,

secure in the knowledge that it can rely on the backing of China and other powers.

Colombo recently received another boost when Russia offered to provide a \$US300 million line of credit to buy Russian arms. Asked whether the deal would strain relations with the West, Foreign Minister Bogollagama told the media: “Not at all. In fact, Russia is an Asian country. They are part of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue of which we are the chair currently. In that context we want to see Russia as part of our agenda, respecting our domestic compulsions.” Despite Bogallagama’s assurances, Washington is not going to passively watch as Sri Lanka consolidates ties with US rivals.

The bulk of the defence secretary’s interview was directed at trying to justify Fonseka’s arrest and his trial behind closed doors by court-martial. In comments that clearly prejudice any fair trial, Rajapakse told the *Straits Times* that Fonseka was planning a military takeover. “In his very last stages as army commander he began bringing people into Colombo and his regiment, positioning his senior regiment people all over. All these things were looking like a military coup... All that hastened our decision to move him to a higher appointment [Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)].”

Rajapakse did not provide any facts to justify these claims. Moreover, given that Fonseka was moved to the CDS post last June, why did it take the government more than seven months to act? The decision to detain Fonseka was not determined by what he did or didn’t do last May, but rather by the government’s determination to remove him from the political arena. One day after his arrest, the president prorogued parliament and called a general election, which will now take place in a climate of intimidation and fear. The security forces have already arrested a number of retired officers and others allegedly involved in the “coup attempt”.

Asked whether Fonseka could contest the general election, Rajapakse told the newspaper: “Now he can’t. The court martial will begin immediately after the assembling of the summary of evidence is done. I do not know how long it will take... The severity of the charges is very high. He can be put in jail for as long as five years.” In fact, if Fonseka is found guilty of treason—as Rajapakse claimed in the interview—he faces a far higher penalty, including a possible death sentence.

The defence secretary also accused Fonseka of being responsible for the murder of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunga who was killed in broad daylight in January 2009 while driving to work. “We have a clue whom he [Fonseka] has used,” Rajapakse said. “We are very convinced. In fact, I know for sure. He was definitely responsible for 5 or 6 cases (of disappearances) where media people were involved.

Now I am going after the people who did the executions.”

Whether true or not, Rajapakse’s accusations amount to nothing more than a falling out among members of a criminal gang. President Rajapakse restarted the war in July 2006, which was presided over by his brother, as the top defence bureaucrat, and Fonseka, as the army commander. All of them, along with the government as a whole, bear political responsibility for the Sri Lankan military’s war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights.

Hundreds of people, including journalists and politicians, have been murdered or “disappeared” over the past four years by pro-government death squads acting with the complicity of the security forces. In the final months of the war, the UN estimates that indiscriminate army shelling and bombing killed at least 7,000 Tamil civilians. Former UN spokesman in Colombo Gordon Weiss told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation last week that the figure was probably much higher—between 10,000 and 40,000.

Just hours before he was arrested, Fonseka told the media that he was willing to testify before any international tribunal investigating war crimes in Sri Lanka and would not protect anyone. The comments were a direct threat to the Rajapakse brothers. In the course of the election campaign, Fonseka accused the defence secretary of ordering the murder of LTTE leaders as they sought to surrender. While he later retracted the allegation, Fonseka was intimately involved in the presidential cabal that waged the war and undoubtedly knows details of the crimes committed. The defence secretary is using the notorious killing of the *Sunday Leader* editor as a means of hitting back.

To date no charges have been framed against Fonseka. His wife is challenging his arrest through a fundamental rights petition in the Supreme Court. The political character of Fonseka’s arbitrary detention, together with the broader crackdown on opposition parties and media, are a warning that President Rajapakse is rapidly consolidating a police-state regime. These measures are above all being prepared for a confrontation with the working class as the government imposes the harsh austerity measures being demanded by the International Monetary Fund and foreign investors.



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