Sri Lanka: A reactionary alliance between the JVP and Fonseka

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The campaign for the April 8 parliamentary election in Sri Lanka has thrown up an odd political marriage of convenience—between the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the country's former top general Sarath Fonseka, who is currently in military custody on the basis of vague allegations that he planned a coup to oust President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The JVP, which is still falsely referred to by the media as "Marxist", was formed in the 1960s as guerrilla outfit based on Guevarism and Maoism. It fought the security forces in the 1970s and 1980s. Now part of the Colombo political establishment, the JVP bases itself squarely on reactionary communal politics. It supported Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in the LTTE's defeat last May.

In the January 26 presidential election, the JVP joined the right-wing United National Party (UNP) in supporting General Fonseka as the common opposition candidate. Fonseka, who led the military in the war against the LTTE, fell out with Rajapakse after the end of fighting and resigned last November to run for the presidency. Such is the bitterness of the factional feuding in Colombo ruling circles that the government arrested Fonseka and some of his supporters after the election.

Fonseka lost the election by a wide margin of 1.8 million votes, leaving the opposition parties in disarray. In the rural areas of the largely Sinhala south, Rajapakse won a landslide over Fonseka, mainly because the two men stood on virtually identical platforms. Both claimed to have won the war and promised a rosy economic future. Many Tamils in the North and East, who had borne the brunt of the military's murderous offensives and abuses of democratic rights, did not vote at all.

However, Fonseka did not give up his political ambitions after the election. He is challenging the election outcome in the Supreme Court and is running for a parliamentary seat in Colombo despite his continued detention. His intention was to stand at the head of a UNP-JVP electoral alliance, but the two opposition parties could not agree on a common platform and symbol.

As far as the UNP was concerned, Fonseka was demanding too high a political price. According to the *Sunday Times* on February 21, the general's wife Anoma Fonseka made clear to UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe that Fonseka "did not wish to be viewed as doing a 'contract job' for the UNP". He was in effect demanding to become the UNP's parliamentary leader, ensuring that he would become prime minister or opposition leader depending on the election outcome. Wickremesinghe rejected the proposal, offering Fonseka instead the job of deputy leader of the UNP-led United National Front, which the general turned down.

So the retired general now finds himself leader of the Democratic National Alliance (DNA) formed by the JVP as its electoral front to contest the election. Unlike the UNP, the JVP has had no qualms about giving Fonseka the top DNA position and the first position on its slate for the Colombo district. If Fonseka is elected, the JVP has guaranteed that he will head the DNA's parliamentary group.

For Fonseka, it is no doubt a strange arrangement. As a man of the military establishment, he would find himself more at home in the UNP or Rajapakse's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)—the country's two longstanding bourgeois parties. Instead, he is the main candidate of the JVP, which the army fought against when he was a junior officer. Fonseka is clearly using the JVP as a convenient stepping-stone for bigger plans. He has not joined the JVP and is not bound by the party's program and discipline.

What Fonseka and the JVP do have in common is a commitment to Sinhala supremacism. Unlike the UNP, the JVP does not advocate a "political solution" to the end of the war with the LTTE. A political solution is commonly understood to mean a concession to the Tamil elites in the form of a devolution of limited powers to the North and East on a provincial level. The JVP has opposed such proposals, claiming they would divide the island. Although he later distanced himself from the remarks, Fonseka bluntly expressed his own racialist attitudes when he told the Canadian-based *National*

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Post in 2008 that he strongly believed that "this country belongs to the Sinhalese".

The DNA's campaign for the parliamentary election is based on the fraudulent claim that it stands for "democracy". In an interview with the *Nation* on February 28, JVP general secretary Tilwin Silva said: "The priority will be given to democracy and human rights. Then issues like corruption, fraud and good governance will also be addressed."

In reality, Fonseka is just as responsible as Rajapakse for the military's war crimes, including the indiscriminate killing of thousands of civilians in the final months of the war, as well as its abuses of democratic rights. Hundreds of people have been arbitrarily detained without trial as "LTTE suspects" and hundreds more have been killed or "disappeared" by pro-government death squads operating in collusion with the security forces. The JVP has always opposed any attempt to investigate these crimes, saying it would tarnish the reputation of the "war heroes".

Fonseka is putting himself forward not as a democrat, but as an alternative autocrat to Rajapakse to impose the economic agenda of the corporate elite on working people. His differences with Rajapakse are tactical, including on how to orient the country in the deepening rivalry in the region among the major powers, particularly the US and China. Fonseka was critical of Rajapakse during the presidential election campaign for alienating the "international community"—that is, the Western powers—implicitly opposing Rajapakse's orientation to China.

Significantly a number of former army officers—allies of Fonseka—have been included on the DNA's election slates. Among them are retired Captain Sanjeeva Kandanaarachchi in the Colombo district, Major Kudaligama in the Kalutara district and Major Wimal Ratnayake for Kurunegala. Speaking to DNA candidates yesterday, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe enthusiastically embraced the former officers, saying: "We have an increasing number of 'war heroes' that fought for democracy".

The JVP's alliance with Fonseka is undoubtedly an act of political desperation. At the last parliamentary elections in 2004, the JVP was in an electoral bloc with the SLFP, then headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga. It was bitterly opposed to the UNP for engaging in peace talks with the LTTE and had pressed Kumaratunga to sack the UNP government.

The JVP won 39 seats on the joint ticket and for the first time entered a coalition government, accepting four ministerial posts. Previously the JVP had captured a sizeable protest vote by appealing to widespread disaffection with the two main parties. As part of Kumaratunga's cabinet, the JVP rapidly lost support as it helped implement the government's pro-market agenda. Using a disagreement over tsunami aid as an excuse, the JVP left the government a year later, but its political fortunes did not revive.

Fearful that its loss of support would be exposed, the JVP did not stand its own candidate in the November 2005 presidential election, but backed Rajapakse. After his narrow victory, the party remained in opposition yet voted for his military budgets, backed his renewed war and promised its support in the event of a no confidence motion. At the same time, the JVP used its influence among sections of workers to scuttle their demands for improved pay and conditions, on the basis that the priority was the war. Declining support led to bitter brawling in the JVP leadership over tactics, resulting in a significant portion of the party defecting in 2008 to form the National Freedom Front (NFF) and join the Rajapakse government.

The JVP has latched onto the "war hero" Fonseka as a political lifeline. In a series of provincial council elections last year, the party was decimated. Its seat count plunged from 12 to none in the Central Province, 6 to 1 in the North Western Province, 23 to 3 in the Western Province and 14 to 3 in the Southern Province. The collapse of support in the south is particularly noteworthy as it among disenchanted rural Sinhala youth in these areas that the JVP initially gained support in the 1960s.

Nothing progressive can come from the Fonseka-JVP alliance, which brings together a disenchanted layer of the country's officer caste with a Sinhala extremist party that is based on the most unstable and confused sections of the rural and urban petty bourgeoisie. Far from representing democracy, the DNA is offering its services to the ruling elites as the best means of enforcing a regressive pro-market agenda that will inevitably provoke opposition from working people.

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