

Sri Lankan army charges opposition candidate

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13 March 2010

After detaining General Sarath Fonseka for more than a month, the Sri Lankan army finally announced on Thursday that it was charging the defeated opposition presidential candidate and former army commander. He will be tried in closed military courts on March 16 and 17 on seven charges that fall into two categories—engaging in political activity while in active service and breaking the military’s procurement procedures.

The charges fall far short of the government’s unsubstantiated allegations that Fonseka had been planning a coup. The more lurid accounts claimed that Fonseka intended to imprison President Mahinda Rajapakse and murder his brothers. For weeks, while Fonseka was detained at naval headquarters, the state-owned media has been repeating these claims as part of a thinly-veiled campaign to blacken his name prior to parliamentary elections on April 8.

During Thursday’s press conference, military spokesman Major General Prasad Samarasinghe was asked whether the army had dropped the coup allegations. Samarasinghe tried to evade the issue by saying that the army had never levelled such charges against Fonseka. In fact, the military is on the record to the contrary. It would have been unable to justify Fonseka’s arrest and protracted detention on the basis of the relatively minor charges now being laid.

General Fonseka was army commander throughout President Rajapakse’s renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and only fell out with the president after the LTTE’s defeat last May. Having been pushed to one side by his elevation to Chief of Defence Staff, Fonseka resigned

last November to become the common candidate of the opposition parties in the January 26 presidential election.

Despite his landslide win, Rajapakse clearly felt threatened by Fonseka’s political challenge. In extraordinary scenes, the government sent hundreds of heavily armed army personnel and police to surround the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel in central Colombo where Fonseka and opposition leaders were staying on election night. Military spokesman, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara, told the media that 400 army deserters were there and could be engaged in “subversive activities”.

On January 28, Lakshman Hulugalle, the director general of the Media Centre for National Security, claimed that Fonseka had been plotting to assassinate President Rajapakse, his family members and top government officials. “They had hired 70 rooms in two prestigious hotels. They have hired retired army officers and army deserters to assassinate the President and his family members,” he said.

On January 29, hundreds of police commandos raided Fonseka’s election office in Colombo and arrested 14 people, including 7 retired army officers who were detained under the country’s emergency laws. Just over a week later, Fonseka was dragged away by military police on the night of February 8 while meeting with opposition politicians. He insists that the military has no jurisdiction over him and has refused to cooperate with its proceedings.

Over the past month, the government has continued its political vendetta against Fonseka. No evidence has

ever been released to demonstrate that Fonseka was planning a coup. In fact, even the timing of this alleged coup has changed. While Hulugalle claimed a plot was being hatched after the election, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse claimed in an interview with the Singapore-based *Straits Times* on February 11 that Fonseka was planning a military takeover last June.

“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 in June],” Gotabhaya Rajapakse told the newspaper. If that were true, the obvious question is: why did it take seven months for the government to act?

In fact, the government trumped up the coup allegations as part of its campaign to politically destroy Fonseka, discredit the opposition parties and consolidate its hold on power in the parliamentary elections. That conclusion is confirmed by the lack of evidence, the limited nature of the military’s charges now brought against Fonseka and the fact that most of his “co-conspirators” have now been released. Of around 50 Fonseka supporters arrested by police, the courts have freed at least 23 after police admitted they had no evidence to sustain any charges.

Fonseka’s wife has challenged the legality of her husband’s arrest by filing a fundamental rights petition in the Supreme Court. While the judges have allowed the petition to proceed, the hearing has been put off until April 26—that is, until after the parliamentary election. If he is found guilty next week, he may become ineligible to run as a candidate. Fonseka is currently standing as a candidate for the Democratic National Alliance (DNA) formed by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Military spokesman Samarasinghe told the media that President Rajapakse, who is also the commander-in-chief, appointed the two courts martial on the recommendation of army commander General Lieutenant General Jagath Jayasuriya. According to the army prosecutor, evidence has been recorded from 35

people, including 22 army personnel and 7 police officers. Fonseka’s lawyers plan to go to Appeal Courts on March 16 to request a ruling that the courts martial are illegal.

Army commander Jayasuriya is regarded as a Rajapakse loyalist. In the first week of February, he forced 14 high-ranking officers to go on “compulsory leave” in a major purge of Fonseka supporters. When Rajapakse and Fonseka were arguing during the presidential election campaign over who defeated the LTTE, Jayasuriya pointedly commented: “It was the same army that waged war against the LTTE for 30 years, but it was the political leadership that led security forces to achieve victory”.

Despite the bitterness of the rift between Rajapakse and Fonseka, their differences are tactical, centring on how best to impose the agenda of big business on working people and where to orient internationally in the sharpening major power rivalry. The entire Colombo political establishment backed the communal war waged by Rajapakse and Fonseka as well as the military’s war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights.

Rajapakse’s crackdown on Fonseka is not primarily directed against the opposition parties, but is in preparation for a looming confrontation with the working class. As soon as the parliamentary election is over, Rajapakse will have to bring down a budget, which he has delayed since November, to meet the IMF’s demands. In return for a \$2.6 billion loan, the IMF is insisting that Sri Lanka’s budget deficit be more than halved by the end of next year. Rajapakse’s harsh measures against Fonseka are a warning of the police state measures the government will use to suppress opposition from working people to this renewed onslaught on living standards.



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