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Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2010: The Choice before Pluralist Democrats¹

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Abstract

The Sri Lankan presidential election will take place in January 2010. Seeking a fresh mandate prior to the expiration of his first term in 2011, President Mahinda Rajapakse's main challenger will be his former Chief of Defence Staff, General Sarath Fonseka, who played a key role in the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. This paper compares the two candidates and concludes that, between President Rajapakse and General Fonseka, continuity is better than change; within the government, change is imperative; and between the government and the opposition, change may be better than continuity.

Introduction

Five days after we won the war, at a meeting of the (president's) Security Council, he said he'd stop recruiting new people in the army because it's too strong and too big, that Sri Lanka would become like Myanmar. Such statements demoralised me. I thought they were disgusting."

General Sarath Fonseka³

There are many interpretations of what came between Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse and General Sarath Fonseka. Some able commentators have speculated that it was dynastic rule. While there is indeed such a dismal prospect (as during the Sirimavo Bandaranaike years from 1970 to 1977), it is unlikely that this was the issue. The central issue was the balance of power between the civilian and military wings as represented by President Rajapakse and General Fonseka. During the war, there was a shift in that balance, which General Fonseka sought to prolong, make permanent or take to the next level in the post-war period. In peacetime, on the other hand, President Rajapakse pushed back to reassert civilian control and the supremacy of the elected Executive. The critical issue was whether

¹ This piece first appeared in *The Island* (Colombo) on 7 December 2009 – see <http://www.island.lk/2009/12/07/features.html>.

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³ Interview with *Outlook India Magazine* on the question of why he fell out with Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse; Satarupa Bhattacharjya, "He Said The Army's Too Strong, Sri Lanka Will Become Like Myanmar", *Outlook India Magazine*, 14 December 2009.

General Fonseka would exert veto power over decision-making as the military did for decades in Pakistan before the restoration of democracy. The army would dominate the armed services and the former army commander turned Chief of Defence Staff would determine the processes within the army and the military as a whole, while setting the parameters of national policy under the rubric of national security. The issues of a vastly expanded post-war military, the fate of the internally displaced persons and the 13th Amendment/Devolution were cases in point, and the faint contours of a “national security state” became discernible.

The President who ended the war

In the post-Cold War period, patriotic populists, President Ranasinghe Premadasa (1978-89) and President Rajapakse, were probably the most progressive alternatives possible. This stand derives support from ex-Cuban president Fidel Castro’s statements of 1986-87, foreseeing the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the global socialist system, that, “in the present historical period, revolutionary socialism is not on the agenda; what is on the agenda is the defence of national independence and the sovereignty of the state”.

Politically and historically, President Rajapakse has been far less disappointing than President Premadasa, – the reason being my failure to convince the latter to apply his drive and efficiency to the task of defeating Velupillai Prabhakaran [the slain leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)] and thereby securing the pre-requisites for the sustainability of his amazing social and development programmes. As a political scientist, I do not take my stand on the basis of personal disappointments but on an objective historical assessment.

Four Sri Lankan presidents – J. R. Jayewardene, Premadasa, Digiri Bada Wijetunga and Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga – failed to win the war. President Rajapakse did. By what logic or morality can Sri Lankans fail to reward him with a second term? By what logic or ethics can the Sri Lankan voter, who gave a second term to a president who failed to win the war and abandoned efforts to do so, turf out, after one term, a president who won the war, or if one prefers, on whose watch the war was won?

The Sri Lankans should not make the same mistake as the Tamil people did. Out of profound dissatisfaction, they abandoned and turned their backs on their civilian lawyer-politician leaders and opted for a warrior-warlord as their “national leader”. This led them to the brink of destruction as a community. Do the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims collectively wish to make the same disastrous choice or its equivalent? Sri Lanka needed a tough, ruthless, driven, army commander to beat an enemy as ruthless as the Tigers but do the Sri Lankans need him to lead us and rule them?

If we were to adopt a different analogy, the end of the Tamil nationalist cause commenced with Colonel Karuna Amman’s breakaway and the challenge to his leader. Colonel Karuna has proven his point about being the match-winning commander for the Tigers – they lost the only war in which he did not fight and, indeed, fought on the other side. Is General Fonseka the equivalent of Karuna? Karuna was good for Sri Lanka as a whole but that was because he went up against Prabhakaran, who was not a democratically-elected nationalist leader. What would the effect on the national interest of a Karuna rebellion be, on the Sri Lankan side? Do Sri Lankans wish to reward it with electoral success?

Significance of General Fonseka in war victory

General Fonseka claims that the military victory was his, while he acknowledges the “support” extended by President Rajapakse. History, however, rightly credits Abraham Lincoln over Ulysses S. and William T. Sherman, Vladimir Lenin over Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin over Georgy Zhukov, Winston Churchill over Bernard Montgomery, Franklin D. Roosevelt over George S. Patton and Douglas MacArthur, Mao Zedong over Zhu De and Lin Biao, and Ho Chi Minh over Vo Nguyen Giap. This is because the role of overall political leadership and the necessary political will is the single most vital element in the conduct of war.

General Fonseka was a vitally indispensable factor in the victory. There may not – or probably would not – have been one without him. However, there *definitely* would not have been a victory without President Rajapakse. If Sri Lanka had only General Fonseka as army commander and no Rajapakse as President – which would have meant no Gotabhaya Rajapakse as Defence Secretary – Sri Lanka may have had a very large *Jayasikuru* (Victory Assured)⁴ writ. Having fought under President Kumaratunga, who permitted Mangala Samaraweera’s *Sudu Nelum* movement⁵ and the *Saama Thavalama*⁶ to roam the countryside spreading anti-war propaganda precisely at the same time that the army was struggling to recruit men for the ongoing war that had been imposed by Prabhakaran, General Fonseka should perhaps be more aware than most of the vital role played by political will and commitment to victory at the top. In other words, this would be at the level of the Executive and Commander in Chief – the Rajapakse presidency. While General Fonseka was the driving force of the ground war and the prime motivator of the soldiery, this was a combined arms war in which tactical airpower was more important and effective than ever before, and the navy crippled the logistics of the Tigers. Bernhard Montgomery defeated Erwin Rommel’s German troops by targeting his petroleum supplies, reducing the efficacy of his splendid tank force. If the Tigers had been able to bring down on the Sri Lankan infantrymen the kind of ordinance they were able to during Operation *Jayasikuru*, the war would still be on. This does not mean that Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda and Air Marshal Roshan Goonetilleke were more important than General Fonseka, but it does mean that the victory was a superb collective effort, and that the *collectivity* of effort, overcoming inter-service rivalry and indeed intra-army rivalry was made possible by President Rajapakse through “General Manager” Gotabhaya, who also secured the necessary external inputs, both material and intangible-qualitative.

It is extremely amusing that some who have never looked violent death in the face say or heavily hint that General Fonseka, who has shed blood copiously for the Sri Lankan cause, carries enemy lead in his body, and was the thrust of the main force – the army – of the historic victory against the Tamil Tigers, is a traitor. What gives them the moral right and authority to do so? Who has the right to determine who is and is not a traitor, and by what criteria? Furthermore, what is the relevance of this terminology anyway? The war is over and

⁴ The Sri Lankan military launched Operation *Jayasikuru* in 1997. It was aimed at clearing out a land route to the government-held Jaffna peninsula through territory held by the LTTE by linking Vavuniya and Kilinochchi. However, the operation failed to even accomplish half of its objectives. By mid-May 1998, the operation completely stalled and it was called off in 1999.

⁵ The *Sudu Nelum* movement was the propaganda arm of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

⁶ This *Saama Thavalama* (Peace Caravan) was an island-wide publicity campaign launched in August 1997 as part of the programme to raise awareness among all communities about the Sri Lankan government’s peace and constitutions reform proposals.

won, thanks far more to General Fonseka than to any of those people, so what is the relevance of traitors and patriots except in the historic sense of who was and was not pro-Tiger when the war was on? It is doubtful that this rhetoric of an international conspiracy and General Fonseka as a traitor is going to cut much ice with the Sri Lankan voter who is a pretty sophisticated political animal. Conspiracies are secret and what is happening is out there in the open, in the Western and Sri Lankan media. There is a crisis in Sri Lanka's external relations with a very important part of the world, including the world's only superpower, led by one of the world's most popular personalities. Any conspiracy is located within this crisis and is a by-product of it.

The two presidential candidates

Anyone who hopes for the top-most slot in any enterprise, be it in the corporate or state sector, must either have some experience in that broad area *or* possess academic training and qualifications in that subject, or have a combination (for example, United States President Barack Obama – academic and intellectual, community organiser, writer and Senator). A soldier with 40 years experience, General Fonseka is seeking the top spot in the country with no experience in politics or civilian life. Dwight Eisenhower was the United States' President in 1953; not 1945, and in the intervening years, he was President of Columbia University, one of the Ivy League universities in the United States and one of the best in the world. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono came from within the Indonesian military which had governed Indonesia since 1965 until 2000. General Colin Powell was once regarded as a possible American presidential candidate but that was after he was Secretary of State. General David Petraeus of the United States army is seen as a possible United States presidential candidate next time around, but he is known as a warrior-scholar, a student of History with a PhD from Princeton (and a protégé of the renowned progressive scholar of international law and international relations, Richard Falk). General Fonseka does not qualify on either count, though it may be added that, with a term in Parliament as a Member of Parliament or as a Cabinet Minister, he may qualify for serious consideration as a presidential candidate.

It was his 40 years in the army that turned General Fonseka into what he is: a warrior capable of providing inspiring leadership to his men to win the war. It is precisely those 40 years that disqualify him from holding the top-most civilian job in the land – a job that requires consultation, compromise and consensus – three qualities that are necessarily absent in the army, and which General Fonseka was never renowned for during his military career. President Rajapakse has exactly the same number of years of experience in civilian politics that General Fonseka has in military life. That makes him at the moment – a time where General Fonseka has not yet accumulated any civilian experience – the better man for the presidency. He is not the visionary that Sri Lankans need to take the country united into the 21st century, but as a *populist*, he is preferable to *an authoritarian persona*.

None of this means that the country does not need change, accelerated and socially responsive economic progress, or an enlightened charter for multi-ethnicity and a vastly improved style of governance. Someone should just look at the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development report figures for Sri Lanka over the past few years, including the Gini Coefficient. President Rajapakse's rule does indeed need reining in, but the answer does not reside in General Fonseka as president; it does not lie in the presidential election at all. It resides in the doctrines of "balance of power", "containment" and, more concretely, "checks and balances". The parliamentary election is to be held shortly after the presidential election. The two must not be confused with each other. Sri Lankans get an

opportunity to throw the non-performers out at the parliamentary election by either (i) electing the United National Party [UNP] (which is unlikely if the party leadership remains unchanged); (ii) reducing the strength of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led coalition and having a strong UNP opposition or (iii) simply throwing out, by means of preference votes, existing incompetent ministers and sitting members of parliament.

Conclusion

Between President Rajapakse and General Fonseka, continuity is better than change; within the government change is imperative; and between the government and the opposition, change may be better than continuity. Observing the vital distinction between the two elections, presidential and parliamentary, enables Sri Lanka's citizens to get the best deal available. Fortunately, for democracy, the issues that really divided General Fonseka and President Rajapakse (by the former's own admission) are now out in the open, not hidden within the state structure where they could have exploded in extra-constitutional violence. Now, it is the people *of all communities*, who, by their free choice at the ballot box, will determine the trajectory of the country.

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