

NEWS

Sarath Fonseka: frying pan or fire?



With speculation that Fonseka will run against Rajapaksa for President, the future for Tamils is bleak

Kumar David
Sunday Island

THIS piece is written on the assumption that Sarath Fonseka (SF) will stand for the presidency and be supported by a Joint Opposition (JO) of the UNF, the JVP and possibly minority parties. However, Rajapakse keeps dithering about an election because he will have to quit promptly in the unlikely event that he loses; hanging on for the remainder of the first term, whatever the constitutional position, will see the streets ablaze. Will he take the chance? Also by putting back the election Rajapakse makes the JO and SF stew and squabble for a year or two. So read on with these several caveats in mind.

SF's endorsement by the JO is also problematic. He has altered several points in the Addendum to the first version of the resignation letter agreed with the UNF and leaked to the press. The alterations are all retrogressive, reactionary and militaristic; unwelcome by democrats and unacceptable to Tamils. Therefore liberal-democrats, minorities and the left should confer on Fonseka the same suspicion they accord Rajapakse.

The Tamils cannot hold it against Sarath Fonseka that he fought a war against them and won. It is a soldier's job to fight, and there will be casualties, and it is his job to win if he can; no one can shrink from facing that fact. The point is; did he fight clean? Is he responsible, or partly responsible for alleged war crimes and contravention of human rights? These are grave charges about which he will have to reassure the Tamils if he wants any of their votes. I don't think he can build

this confidence; surely MR and SF are liable in equal measure for the alleged crimes – not to mention GR. Nevertheless let us see what they have to say about each other as the campaign heats up. Don't be surprised if you see one in the Presidential Palace and the other in The Hague; charges of treachery are already flung around like confetti.

As I wrote last week universal justice and humanitarian obligations in war are now vigorously enforced; the old days when governments could get away with war crimes are fading. Israel is in the UN dock literally, and the mighty USA is in the dock of global public opinion. Little wonder then that the world is breathing down on Sri Lanka and for sure the actors in the election will have a lot to say about each other's conduct in those fateful days of 2009; chronicles of white vans and motorbikes will leak like a plumber's nightmare.

Hobswamy's choice

Initially, I will approach the choice between MR and SF from a Tamil perspective, not because I am one (let alone 24 carat or 18 carat, not even 14 carats worth), but because the swing vote of the minorities is important. I think the hardcore Sinhala chauvinists will stick with MR; ideologically and politically he is their man and SF can't break that. Those who suggest that he can split the most racist-reactionary sections of the Sinhala-Buddhist electorate will be proved wrong. Rather, SF will have to play to the middle ground, the progressive Sinhala vote, ethnic and religious minorities, the JVP vote, and folks fed up with corruption and abuse of democracy. But, he does not seem to understand this as evidenced by the aforementioned changes to

the Addendum.

Points 14 to 16 of the original Addendum are good. Fourteen chides the government for ill-treating the IDP's but in the new version the demand that IDPs be allowed to go live with relatives has been removed and some security related clap-trap inserted; a despicable alteration. The original point-15 blamed MR for failing to reach out to the Tamils and achieve a credible solution to the national question; the emphasis is now adjusted to say more troops and security are needed, again militaristic jingoism instead of a political approach. Point 16, in its original form, was near verbatim from the Platform for Freedom agenda, it has been entirely deleted; obviously, democracy is not one of Fonseka's strong points!

If SF had the inclination and character to move in a progressive direction he may have made himself persuasive to the Sinhala middle ground and minorities. If for example he dumped the anti-conversion bill it would have brought the Christian vote flooding into his ballot box. Won't he lose the extremist S-B vote you may ask? Nope, he was never going to get it, as I said two paragraphs ago.

It is Hobson's choice for the Tamils. Vote this way, that way, boycott, enlist a Tamil candidate, what to do? It's a miserable choice, but a decision is obligatory. In the event of a strong Tamil candidate like Sampanthan appearing, then the second-preference is the key. If Sampanthan does not contest and proclaims neutrality, it is a tacit endorsement of MR, because to contest is to draw a large number of additional Tamils to the booth and their second-preference vote into the spotlight. Tamils who will puke rather than vote for SF may however be able to bring them-

selves to do a number two on him. The TNA's decision will tell us what kind of horse dealing has been going on in the background.

The executive presidency

SF is on record that he will retain the executive presidency as he needs authority to root out corruption and abuse. A website quotes him as saying, 'that's the way I did it in the army and that's the way I am going to do it nationally'; this is nearly verbatim. He is more than half wrong; firstly, an administration with an executive president or Westminster style prime minister can be corrupt or clean, depending on the people at the top. Secondly, countries are not armies, as SF will learn if he becomes president; and a corollary the general seems to have missed, presidents who try to run a country like an army are known by another epithet, Dictator! Thirdly, it will take a good two years to get a new constitution written and adopted and the transitional arrangements implemented. That's executive-time enough to get the basics of corruption fighting done.

SF's tone is too full of himself and too self-aggrandizing. He will have to climb down and learn flexibility and people skills, neither of which the kaki uniform is adept at inculcating. Forcing capitulation on the executive presidency issue to secure Joint Opposition endorsement would be a good start in teaching him to be pliable and political. The UNF and JVP should tell SF to go to hell if he does not climb down on this issue.

The West, China and India

The Rajapakse government has drifted away from the West and into Sino-Iranian waters not because of any ideological preference, this government is ideologically chintanaless, but rather because these friends are anodyne on human rights issues. Western governments, under pressure of domestic public opinion, the Tamil diaspora and the global human rights lobby, have made themselves pesky gadflies, now even beckoning from the corridors of The Hague.

The anti-Western tilt opens a window which SF can use if his foreign policy is sufficiently sophisticated.

A critique can be made of the Rajapakse government for unbalancing our traditional post-independence relationship with the West and its educational, cultural and intellectual openings. It can be argued that this has already cost us GSP+, and could damage direct private investment and harm our economy in many ways. Ever since 1956 Lanka has been adroitly non-aligned, developing

economic and regional ties with new friends while protecting its strong historical links with the capitalist West. Now is first time this balance has gone way out of kilter, the United States even contemplating war crimes charges against some political leaders. The point is not the charges per se, but the breakdown of established relationships.

The Sri Lankan voter is no fool; he/she will take the benefits of a balance in foreign linkages into account when marking the ballot. Hence SF can play the 'rebalance and restore our traditional non-aligned foreign policy' card, if he knows how to.

The great unknown in this game is Delhi, which will of course be very pleased by a tilt back from a Beijing-Teheran-Islamabad love affair towards the West; towards America to be precise. The unknown is whether India will risk discarding the known devil for the unknown, or think it safer to stay the course with MR having invested so much political capital in propping up the regime in its deadly duel with the Tigers. My prophetic nose feels a twitch of premonition about which way India will tilt, but it's too early to share it with you.

Why either MR or the UPFA must go

The choice between MR and SF is like Scylla and Charybdis; between the UPFA and the JO, like the devil and the deep blue sea. Are there good reasons for abandoning sea monsters and ghouls in exchange whirlpools and the ocean depths? The answer is that the merit lies not in the entities themselves but in the need to thwart a second term; to have MR as president and the UPFA in parliamentary majority, jointly, for another six years, will be a calamity. These people have had a monopoly of too much power for too long and this is one root cause of corruption, abuse of power and the peril to democratic rights. Recall that for 17 years the UNP misruled while holding both branches of state, and then the SLFP-PA has done so for another 15, except the short Chandrika-Ranil interlude.

The interlude, notwithstanding the shortcoming of internal squabbling in power sharing governments, was clearly the best for the public. It was also the best for the minorities. I have no doubt that the Oslo Accord during the interlude was the closest we came, since the Dudley-Chelva Pact, to settling the national question; and the 2003 ceasefire ushered in the most hassle-free period for the Tamil people for so long as it lasted. I have no patience with those who say the ceasefire was a sell out to the LTTE – plain war mongers and chauvinists!