

NEWS

Promises made for votes but little faith in delivery



Both main contenders for the Presidency have been trying to entice voters with pledges that are not only contradictory, but they will most probably be incapable of delivering upon

WITH the Presidential elections less than a month away, campaigning by the two leading candidates, President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Gen. Sarath Fonseka (ret.) has gone into top gear with both making numerous promises to entice voters.

When Rajapakse announced his plan to hold the presidential election two years before his current term expires, he was hoping to capitalise on defeating the LTTE for his re-election. With the opposition not being able to counter Rajapaksa's claiming of credit for the war victory, a landslide win for him was a forgone conclusion.

Unfortunately for Rajapaksa, the emergence of the Fonseka, his former military chief, as the rallying point for most of the opposition parties has made the election a tough fight for Rajapaksa.

Rajapaksa and his Fonseka, who as the army commander also claims credit for defeating the LTTE, have been at loggerheads since the end of the conflict.

Late last year, accusing the government of sidelining him and falsely suspecting him of trying to stage a coup, Fonseka quit his military post and threw his lot into the presidential election.

As hard-line Sinhala nationalists both Fonseka and Rajapaksa claim credit for defeating the LTTE in May and appeal largely to their own ethnic group.

True to their Sinhala nationalist leanings Fonseka and Rajapaksa chose cities holy to the

Sinhalese majority to kick off their campaigns with religious blessings and rallies. Whilst Fonseka kicked off his campaign in the hill city of Kandy, home to a sacred relic of Buddha, Rajapaksa kicked off his campaign in Anuradhapura, a seat of ancient Sinhala kings.

Whilst Rajapaksa is standing on an openly Sinhala nationalist platform, focusing on the Sinhala votes, Fonseka has cobbled together an anti-Mahinda coalition comprising of opposition parties who have come together despite having little commonality in their policies.

Rajapaksa, as commander-in-chief of security forces and Fonseka as overall commander of security forces are accused of crimes against humanity for the brutal way in which they conducted the war in which tens of thousands Tamils were massacred.

Chris Patten chairman of International Crisis Group and former of Hong Kong writing in the International Herald Tribune wrote: "[P]ut yourself in a Tamil's shoes, and decide whom to vote for in the presidential election: Choose either the head of the government that ordered the attacks against you and your family, or the head of the army that carried it all out."

For Tamils, this presidential election is no different to the previous ones - an exercise for the Sinhala nation to choose their leader. Tamils do not expect either candidate to take any

meaningful steps to address their legitimate political aspirations.

Interestingly neither does the international community, based on Patten's comments.

"What counts more than campaign promises, though, is what the winner actually does in office, and based on past performance, it is hard to imagine either candidate making the necessary constitutional reforms to end the marginalization of Tamils and other minorities - the roots of the decades-long conflict. Left unaddressed, Tamil humiliation and frustration could well lead to militancy again," wrote Patten.

"While Sri Lankan voters face a difficult decision, for the international community, the choice is clear. Whoever wins, the outside world should use all its tools to convince the government to deal properly with those underlying issues to avoid a resurgence of mass violence. In the interest of lasting peace and stability, donor governments and international institutions - India, Japan, Western donors, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank - should use their assistance to support reforms designed to protect democratic rights, tie aid to proper resettlement of the dis-

placed, and a consultative planning process for the reconstruction of the war-ravaged, overly militarized north. U.N. agencies and nongovernment organizations should have full access to monitor the programs to ensure international money is spent properly and people receiving aid are not denied their fundamental freedoms." Patten added

"In short, this means not giving Colombo any money for reconstruction and development until we know how it will be spent. And if we see funds not being used as promised, it means not being afraid to cut them off." Patten concluded.

Unfortunately, Rajapaksa's manifesto had no evidence of a real effort by the Sri Lankan President to address the Tamil national question.

In his 14-point programme manifesto titled 'A brighter future' Rajapaksa promises "a unitary state, not to be divided" indicating no meaningful power devolution and no changes to the existing constitution.

According to the manifesto, Rajapakse will put Sri Lanka in a prominent position in Asia and the world and focus on developing the country in the next decade

which he declared as the "Development Decade" of Sri Lanka.

Speaking at the launch of the manifesto, President Rajapaksa conceded that having to spend most of the four years of his first term in fighting terrorism, and also the many international forces that sought to obstruct the efforts to defeat the most ruthless organisation in the world, he had barely six months left to address other important issues, according to Hindu newspaper published in India.

He promised that his next term would be wholly devoted to addressing these issues that would take the country to development and progress, giving priority to the battle against corruption with the same determination with which he had fought the underworld and terrorism, the newspaper further reported.

Rajapaksa is trying to portray himself the leader who stood against international pressure to protect the nation whilst portraying the opposition parties as trying to give into terrorism by forming alliance with the Tamil National Alliance.

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UN rejects request to observe elections

THE United Nations has turned down a request from Sri Lanka to send observers to monitor the country's presidential election later this month because of lack of time, a UN spokesman said.

Incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa is standing against 21 challengers in the January 26 vote.

UN spokesman Martin Nesirky said Sri Lanka's election commissioner and government had asked the world body to consider observing the election. "In light of the limited lead time available" and because U.N. election observation requires a mandate from

the General Assembly or Security Council, "the U.N. informed the commissioner and the government of Sri Lanka that it could not provide observers," Nesirky said.

The UN has not sent observers to monitor an election in any country for at least 10 years, Nesirky said, although it has provided technical assistance for votes in several nations, most recently Afghanistan.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited Sri Lanka days after the end of the war against the Tigers, in a move critics said could be seen as endorsing the government's military victory.

Tamils have no appetite for polls

ACCORDING to elections officials, only 1 in 9 persons classed as internally displaced had heeded the call to register to vote in the January 26 presidential elections by the deadline.

Although 200,000 IDPs were on the 2008 electoral register, only 22,000 submitted applications to vote in the upcoming election prompting election officials in the north to hold a special meeting with the Elections Commissioner, according to Sunday Times newspaper in Sri Lanka.

According to the newspaper, election monitoring groups are blaming the Commissioner and political parties for not taking

effective steps to encourage IDPs to vote and have demanded to extend the deadline to give those who missed the opportunity to apply. Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE) spokesman Keerthi Tennekoon said there had been little or no voter education for more than three decades in some parts of the north and people did not know the importance of voting, reported the Sunday Times.

He further said the main opposition parties the UNF and the JVP had not conducted campaigns in Jaffna or Wanni districts, especially among the IDPs.

"We have received reports

that certain parties were not allowed to visit the camps". Mr. Tennekoon was quoted as saying.

A Tamil political analyst commenting on the IDPs' lack of interest in the upcoming election said the poor voter registration is a clear indication that Tamils have no appetite for an election at a time when they are struggling to piece together their lives shattered by a genocidal war and forced internment.

An election would be the last thing in mind for the IDPs who live in fear under military and armed paramilitary occupation with human rights abuses accepted as part of life, he further added.