

## EDITORIAL AND OPINION

## TAMIL GUARDIAN

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**Liberal Gamble****The reality underlying Sri Lanka's elections.**

Two weeks before Sri Lanka's Presidential elections, the gap between the two main contenders has, to the surprise of many, narrowed. While it is now no longer certain who the winner will be, the intensifying struggle between the incumbent, Mahinda Rajapakse, and his challenger, former Army chief Sarath Fonseka, typifies all that is wrong with Sri Lanka. In short, who wins - and how the subsequent Parliamentary polls unfold - is less important to Sri Lanka's future than how the international community engages with the Sinhala ethnocracy.

To begin with, amid the excitement of Fonseka's increasingly powerful challenge, what is largely forgotten is why he is a credible candidate in the first place: it is because both Rajapakse and Fonseka are self-confessed Sinhala chauvinists who share a vision of the island as a Sinhala-Buddhist bastion in which the Tamil-speaking minorities may exist provided they know their subordinate place. This is a view so widely shared as to be commonsensical amongst the Sinhalese and has been consistently reflected since independence in southern voting patterns and changes in state policy.

This is also why Fonseka has, with no difficulty, become the common candidate of the main Sinhala opposition. The market-friendly UNP (United National Party) and Marxist JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Perumana), the second and third largest Sinhala parties after Rajapakse's ruling SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party), are bitterly opposed, both in terms of policy and history: it was a UNP regime which slaughtered sixty thousand Sinhala youth as it crushed the JVP's armed insurrection in the late eighties. What unites them now is a recognition that only an ultra-nationalist can win Sinhala votes in numbers sufficient to worry, let alone defeat, Rajapakse.

It has ever been thus. There are other Sinhala candidates with long political histories. Wickremabahu Karunaratne of the New Left Front (NLF) is one. But his platform of accommodation and equity between Sinhalese and Tamils has strikingly little standing amongst the former. No genuine liberal voice has any hope. That much has been clear since 1956.

Nonetheless, as Rajapakse's government and supporters are protesting ever more loudly, the West-led international community would rather there was a regime change in Colombo. Fonseka's challenge advances this cause. But were he and/or the UNP to assume power this year, an equitable and lasting ethnic peace

on the island will, in the absence of close, robust and sustained international engagement, be no closer.

The main Tamil coalition, the TNA (Tamil National Alliance), last week hesitantly expressed its preference for Fonseka. This has undoubtedly been a difficult decision for the party. Rajapakse and Fonseka jointly oversaw the cold-blooded slaughter by artillery, airstrikes and starvation, of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians. They conducted a murderous campaign of assassination, 'disappearance', torture and rape against Tamil civil society - journalists, aid workers, political activists and several TNA parliamentarians and activists. Inevitably, the TNA's decision to back one chauvinist and war criminal over another has discomfited, if not outraged, many Tamils and others.

The TNA leadership's decision is not devoid of reason when situated in the deepening internationalization of Sri Lanka's ethnic crisis. They have rightly set out what they first expect from any new regime in Colombo: the urgent alleviation of the acute and multi-faceted humanitarian crisis that is gripping the Tamils and their homeland. They have also reiterated their commitment to the fundamentals of Tamil political aspirations. Yet, they have also made it clear that they expect nothing from Fonseka or the Sinhala polity more generally. Thus it may yet prove a Faustian pact.

In and of itself, as we and other Tamil voices argued when they were announced, the outcome of this year's polls will, in and of themselves, change nothing: the structural persecution and suffering of the Tamils will simply continue unabated. Rather, it is in the international community's commitment to an equitable solution that the TNA has placed its trust. Amid the long-standing international support for the Sinhala-dominated state, this has been dismissed by skeptics as naïve and is thus undoubtedly a conscious gamble.

For those who saw Sri Lanka's problems as the Liberation Tigers and the Tamil demand for Eelam, the present appears a radical change from the past. For those who see it as one of deeply entrenched Sinhala majoritarianism (by which we mean not only the prevailing attitudes amongst the Sinhalese, but a principle embedded in state machinery and policy decisions) the present is clear a continuation of the past. In other words, the course of Sinhala majoritarianism - and Tamil resistance to it - will not change from within. Sri Lanka's future will turn almost entirely on what happens from without.

**Sri Lanka's choice, and the world's responsibility****Chirs Patten**

International Herald Tribune

PITY the poor Sri Lankan voter. As presidential elections loom on Jan. 26, the public is faced with a choice between two candidates who openly accuse each other of war crimes.

The current exchange of charges and counter-charges between retired Gen. Sarath Fonseka and President Mahinda Rajapaksa must be particularly confusing to those Sri Lankans who consider both to be war heroes rather than war criminals. Many from the ethnic Sinhalese majority feel that, regardless of the human costs in the last months of the long-running civil war that ended last year, both leaders deserve credit for finally finishing off the terrorist Tamil Tiger rebels.

With the Sinhalese nationalist vote thus split, the two candidates are focusing their energies on winning the votes of the country's minority ethnic Tamils - which is surely one of the stranger political ironies of early 2010. After all, both General Fonseka and Mr. Rajapaksa executed the 30-year conflict to its bloody conclusion at the expense of huge numbers of Tamil civilian casualties.

By early May, when the war was ending, the United Nations estimated that some 7,000 civilians had died and more than 10,000 had been wounded in 2009 as the army's noose was being drawn tight around the remaining rebels and hundreds of thousands of noncombatants, who could not escape government shelling. The final two weeks likely saw thousands more civilians killed, at the hands of both the army and the rebels.

After the war, the Tamils' plight continued. The government interned more than a quarter million displaced Tamils, some for more than six months, in violation of both Sri Lankan and international humanitarian law. Conditions in the camps were appalling, access by international agencies was severely restricted, and independent journalists could not even visit. Barbed wire and military guards insured people could not leave or tell their stories to anyone.

By the end of 2009, most of the displaced had been moved, and the nearly 100,000 remaining in military-run camps were enjoying some freedom of movement - important steps brought about mostly as a result of international pressure and the authorities' desire to win Tamil votes. However, a large portion of the more than 150,000 people recently sent out of the camps have not

actually returned to their homes nor been resettled. They've been sent to and remain in "transit centers" in their home districts.

Now, put 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.

On Jan. 4, the Tamil National Alliance, the most important Tamil political party, made its choice and endorsed General Fonseka after he pledged a 10-point program of reconciliation, demilitarization and "normalization" of the largely Tamil north. There is some hope his plan might be a sign that top leaders realize that, after decades of brutal ethnic conflict, peace will only be consolidated when Sinhalese-dominated political parties make strong moves toward a more inclusive and democratic state.

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.

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 displaced, 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.

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