

OPINION

General Fonseka and the challenges to Sri Lankan democracy

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PRESIDENT Rajapakse's crack-down on political opponents, including the arrest of the defeated opposition presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka, is not as unexpected or as surprising as many commentators are suggesting.

The Rajapakse regime's behaviour has indeed confounded many international observers. After all President Rajapakse secured a convincing electoral victory against Sarath Fonseka in the recent presidential polls. The President also enjoys enormous popularity amongst the majority Sinhalese for leading the military victory against the LTTE and is widely regarded amongst them as a latter day Duttugemunu, the fabled slayer of Tamils from Sinhala mythology.

However, Rajapakse's recent conduct is only surprising if it is interpreted as an attempt to shore up his position within the Sinhala polity. It is not: Rajapakse is understandably confident of his popularity and authenticity amongst the mainstream Sinhala polity.

The arrest and detention of the defeated opposition candidate makes much more sense as an act of international diplomacy. In pursuing potentially criminal charges against Fonseka, Colombo is sending a resolute and unequivocal response to growing international demands for serious political reform in Sri Lanka.

In the months since the end of the war in May 2009 the international community has been increasingly insistent that Colombo facilitates a credible and internationally supported investigation and prosecution of Sri Lanka's war crimes and that it works with Tamil political representatives to find a meaningful solution to the Tamil question.

Although entirely reasonable within a liberal framework, to President Rajapakse and his Sinhala supporters, such demands fundamentally challenge the ethno nationalist vision of a Sinhala first nation state that has driven Sri Lankan political dynamics since independence.

Despite his previous close association with the Rajapakse regime, Fonseka's campaign for the presidential post was closely associated with both these issues. He stood as a common candidate for a coalition of parties that included the main Tamil party, the Tamil National Alliance. Fonseka also pointedly raised the war crimes issue and possible war crimes trials both during the campaign and after.

Although widely supported by western nations, Fonseka's positions on these issues put him entirely at odds with the dominant

Sinhala first ethos of southern politics. A meaningful solution to the Tamil national question would inevitably have to confront and dismantle Sinhala domination of the state and its resources while a credible investigation and prosecution of Sri Lanka's war crimes would unsettle deeply held notions that the Sinhala state's violence against Tamils is both a necessary and legitimate part of the Sinhala Buddhist order.

Fonseka's platform critically threatened presumptions that have been the bedrock of southern politics. It was common knowledge in the south that the TNA supported Fonseka in return for the pledge that if successful he would engage in a serious process of political reform.

Incidentally, Fonseka was in a meeting with a Tamil and Muslim politician when Sri Lankan military police stormed into his office and dragged him away to incarceration in the Naval Compound.

Fonseka's association with the war crimes issue also raised hostility in the south. Early on in the campaign in an unguarded interview with Sri Lanka's Sunday Leader, Fonseka admitted that the Defence Secretary Gothabaya Rajapakse had sanctioned the murder of unarmed LTTE political officials. Although the UNP, the main opposition Sinhala party, quickly sought to disown these comments, Fonseka went on to reiterate his allegations against the Sinhala military. In a press conference just hours before his arrest Fonseka declared his willingness to cooperate as a witness in an investigation of Sri Lanka's war crimes.

By arresting and possibly court-martialing Fonseka, Colombo is trying to block all attempts to reform Sri Lanka through peaceful regime change. It seems likely that the forthcoming parliamentary polls will only confirm President Rajapakse's status as the champion defender of Sinhala Buddhist order and further confound Sri Lanka's deepening ethnic polarization.

Fonseka's short lived and disastrously unsuccessful political career lays bare the tenacity of Sinhala Buddhist sentiment within the Sinhala polity. Far from being a moderate or a liberal, Fonseka was chosen as the common opposition candidate precisely because of his apparently unquestioned Sinhala chauvinist credentials.

As head of the armed forces he merrily slaughtered tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in the Sri Lankan crusade to militarily annihilate the threat of Tamil nationalism. He has also spoken candidly in support of the Sinhala first vision of the Sri Lanka.

Despite these qualifications,



Fonseka's arrest is less about local politics and more about sending a message to the international

President Rajapakse's campaign successfully seized on Fonseka's alliance with the TNA to charge that the retired army general was now working with 'pro LTTE forces' to sell out the Sinhalese people and 'divide the country'.

Fonseka's performances in the Sinhala districts was dismal and demonstrates that anyone, even the man who slaughtered tens of thousands of Tamils, will be branded a traitor for even appearing to compromise with Tamil representatives.

Sinhala democracy it appears has no space for Tamil identity.

This is also not merely a problem associated with the Rajapakse government. Remember the UNP led pro western regime of J. R Jeywardene. In 1977, soon after taking power on a massive wave of Sinhala electoral support Jeywardene stood by and condoned the anti Tamil pogrom that convulsed the island. This was followed by further bouts of Sinhala violence culminating in the vile massacres of 1983.

It must also be remembered that it was explicitly UNP parliamentarians who in June 1981 ordered the arson of the Jaffna public library and watched from their hotel balconies as the Tamils' prized collection of literature went up in flames.

The UNP government that came to power in the December 2001 elections and participated in the Norwegian mediated peace process of 2002 - 2006 came to power primarily on the back of Tamil and Muslim votes. Most forget - or ignore - the fact that President Kumaratunga's exhausted and discredited SLFP still won the majority of the Sinhala

votes on a platform of no surrender to the Tamils.

Although the peace process ushered in a period of relative stability, especially for the exhausted population of Vanni, there was no progress on core issues such as resettling IDP's and dismantling the much loathed high security zones.

When the LTTE proposed mechanisms such as the ISGA and PTOMS that were intended to serve a merely administrative purpose they were hurriedly quashed by Presidential or High Court decree.

Even if a UNP regime were to come to power at this stage it would continue to operate within the boundaries of Sinhala ethnocracy. Any Colombo government that attempted to reach out to the Tamils would contend with the possibility of massive popular unrest, defections by disgruntled Sinhala parliamentarians, the possibility of politically fatal reprimands from the Sangha and of course executive or judicial prohibitions. There is also now the bloated and heavily militarised Sinhala security infrastructure that is completely wedded to the Sinhala first world view.

These deep ethnic fissures that run through Sri Lanka's democracy have for decades been hidden beneath the long running civil war.

For the past thirty years Sri Lanka has been able to use the rhetoric of fighting 'terrorism' to conceal the Sinhala polity's deep seated antipathy to acknowledging the political rights and status of the Tamil people as well as its willingness to condone and sanction massive and retaliatory vio-

lence against Tamil civilians.

The international community's has also played a role in this concealment. While the war with the LTTE raged Sri Lanka was generally regarded in the west as a good little liberal democracy that was struggling against a 'ruthless terrorist' organisation but still tenaciously holding onto at least some of its democratic and liberal traditions.

Of course the Tamils were always structurally excluded from the liberal democratic space. As the recent presidential poll demonstrates, electoral competition between the Sinhalese always turns on the promotion of the Sinhala first vision; those who electorally court the Tamils forsake the support of the Sinhalese.

At the last presidential elections the UNP paid a heavy electoral price in the Sinhala districts for backing Fonseka's platform. It is likely that in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, the UNP will return to the safe womb of Sinhala ethnocracy. It has already ditched its former Tamil and Muslim alliance partners in preparation.

Sri Lanka's apparent liberal norms have also never extended to the Tamils. Tamils can be arbitrarily murdered, abducted, ethnically cleansed from whole districts, have their assets expropriated and stripped and their cultural landmarks vandalised or destroyed without any recourse to fundamental rights, due process or other legal redress.

While sections of the international community acknowledged these failures most international

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