

NEWS

'Fool' Fonseka on trial, President dismisses pardon pleas

TamilNet

FORMER Army General and presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka, was produced before a secret court martial and charged with preparing to challenge President Rajapakse in the January presidential election, whilst in the army and violating regulations for purchasing military equipments during the war.

Engaging in politics whilst in uniform is illegal in Sri Lanka.

Fonseka has denied all charges against him and claims that "none of the accusations are true." President Rajapaksa, he says "is jealous of me as I got more votes than him although he rigged [the election] he knows that I can challenge him... but I will never give up."

Meanwhile, President Rajapakse ruled out any chance of a military pardon for Fonseka. In an interview with Singapore's Straits Times, he dismissed Gen. Fonseka as a "fool" and ruled out an early pardon for his rival.

"But if I pardon him what about army discipline? What about the court martials of other officers? What can I do? This is the British law. They gave it to India and us," Rajapaksa said.

"Fonseka himself put thousands of soldiers under court martial. At one time the figure was

8,500. I shouted at him and I had to release them." Rajapaksa added.

Questioned about the alleged coup plotted by Fonseka, Rajapakse said: "There was something going on. I cannot discuss all details as inquiries and legal proceedings are on."

Fonseka's court martial was conducted by a panel of 3 military officers, all of whom were previously subordinates of the former general. The hearing has been adjourned until April 6 as the officers themselves disputed the validity of the panel for both cases, arguing that they are not clear on whether it is legal for the panel to preside over both hearings.

The neutrality of the panel was also questioned as two of the three military judges had previously been disciplined by him. The third officer is a close relative of Gen. Fonseka's replacement as head of the Army, who also initiated the court martial.

Media was excluded and only given limited information.

"This is very bad. This is the first time in Sri Lanka's history that an army commander has been court-martialled," Mr Fonseka's wife, Anoma, told The Independent from Colombo.

"A year ago he was the most



Former allies Mahinda Rajapakse and Sarath Fonseka are now protagonists in a power struggle

popular army commander in the world and now [they say he is] just like a terrorist."

The spokesperson for Gen. Fonseka, Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has accused the tribunal of delaying tactics.

"The army judges did not wake up this morning and discover that they have been appointed to both courts," the spokesman said. "They knew it from the day they were appointed." Dissanayake said, adding this is a ploy to prevent Gen. Fonseka from contesting in the forthcoming general elections.

Gen. Fonseka was arrested in February, on dubious charges. Critics say that his statements over war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan forces is the real rea-

son behind his arrest, but the government has consistently denied this and has said that Gen. Fonseka was planning a coup and the arrest of President Rajapakse.

Since his arrest he has spoken of his fear of being assassinated. In a recent letter smuggled out and handed to British broadcaster Channel 4, Fonseka complained of being denied access to hot water and lack of air conditioning. The Sri Lankan Government in turn used the opportunity to accuse him of collaborating with the "voice of the Tigers", Channel 4.

Gen. Fonseka is leading the Democratic National Alliance, which includes various parties including the JVP, at the upcoming parliamentary elections. But with him under arrest it is unclear

how the party will be led. Currently his wife Anoma is presiding over party events and reports suggest that she will stand in for him at the general election.

President Rajapaksa has been accused of waging a personal vendetta against the former Army General, and has been urged by the international community to guarantee his safety.

Last month, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon expressed concern over events in a conversation with President Rajapaksa.

A UN statement said Ban "expressed his concern (to Rajapaksa) about recent developments in Sri Lanka", brought up Fonseka's arrest and "urged the government to respect the due process of law and guarantee (Fonseka's) personal safety."

I am above the law, says Rajapakse

SRI LANKA'S President Mahinda Rajapakse has claimed that constitutionally he is above the law.

Rajapakse made the claim whilst addressing an election rally in Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama's constituency in Kotte, according to media reports from Colombo.

"Republic Constitution of 1978 brought by the then J. R. Jayawardene government places me above the Law," the President said.

"Accordingly judiciary cannot take action against me," President

Rajapakse noted.

"The constitution empowers me to punish any soldier of the Sri Lanka Army who works against the country," the President stated, in obvious reference to the incarcerated former Army chief and Presidential Candidate Gen. Sarath Fonseka.

"The Foreign Ministry and Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama acted firmly and responded decisively during the final stage of the war against LTTE to avoid unnecessary foreign interference," he added.

Sri Lanka denies Akon visa for 'defaming Buddhism'

SRI LANKA has refused US rap star Akon a visa for a planned concert in April, following Sinhala protests that a music video of his was offensive to Buddhists. Stone throwing extremists on Monday March 22 protested outside a media network sponsoring the concert. Sri Lanka's decision comes after the powerful Buddhist clergy expressed its displeasure. In the music video, shot around a pool party with a number of swimsuit wearing women, the statue of Buddha is occasionally seen on the pool house's roof.

Akon has denied intent to cause offense and protested the violence against the TV station.

The statue only appears momentarily a few times in the background in the several minutes-long video for the song 'Sexy Bitch' (also released as 'Sexy Chick').

But Sri Lanka's clergy is decisively influential in Sinhala politics. "The government has taken into consideration the sensibilities of the Buddhists who have been offended by one of his videos which showed scantily clad wom-

en dancing in front of a Buddha statue," Sri Lanka's Director General of Information Anusha Pelpita told AFP.

Reuters quoted Pelpita as saying the main allegation against Akon was that he was "defaming Buddhism in his music videos."

Colombo decided to stop the Grammy Award-nominated star's concert planned for April 24 despite hopes from the official Tourism Promotion Bureau that his visit would attract more holidaymakers to the island, AFP reported.