

## OPINION

# J.R. Jayawardene, Mahinda Rajapaksa and the presidential elections of 1982 and 2010

**Himal South Asia**  
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OVER the past year, events have moved quickly in Sri Lanka. At the end of the war, less than ten months ago, the Sinhalese people appeared united and triumphant. Army Commander Sarath Fonseka often appeared alongside President Mahinda Rajapakse and his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya. Yet today, Fonseka, after losing in the recent presidential poll, is in custody after a humiliating arrest by military police; his election posters have been ripped off the walls; and anti-Rajapakse demonstrations have been attacked by government thugs. What happened?

Prior to Fonseka becoming a presidential candidate, Rajapakse could have expected to win the election with a 70 to 80 percent majority. Observers who argue that Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP), could have polled close to five million votes, as he did in the 2005 presidential election, ignore the seismic shift in the situation since then. In 2005, Wickremesinghe was the one responsible for a 'peace dividend' under the Ceasefire Agreement signed in 2002, from which all communities had benefited. In 2010, in contrast, he was the one seen to have been ready to cede a large part of the country to the Tamil Tigers, while Rajapakse had led the nation to victory over the hated LTTE, after it broke the ceasefire. A grateful populace was thus expected to vote overwhelmingly for the incumbent president.

Gratitude to Rajapakse for winning the war was indeed the main reason why Sinhalese voters turned out for him. There was universal and understandable relief that there would be no more bomb blasts in buses, trains, shops and markets; no more young men being sent to the frontlines to die in their thousands or come back disabled. There were also negative perceptions of Fonseka. His opponent was a seasoned politician, while Fonseka was a novice who he lacked the charisma that might have compensated for this deficit. An atrocious speaker, his abusive language put off many Sinhalese, while traditionalists found it unseemly that he should stand against his former boss. The ragtag coalition backing him, including parties which had earlier been sworn enemies, did not help. Tamils, meanwhile, knew him as a Sinhala chauvinist

who shared responsibility for the carnage at the end of the war.

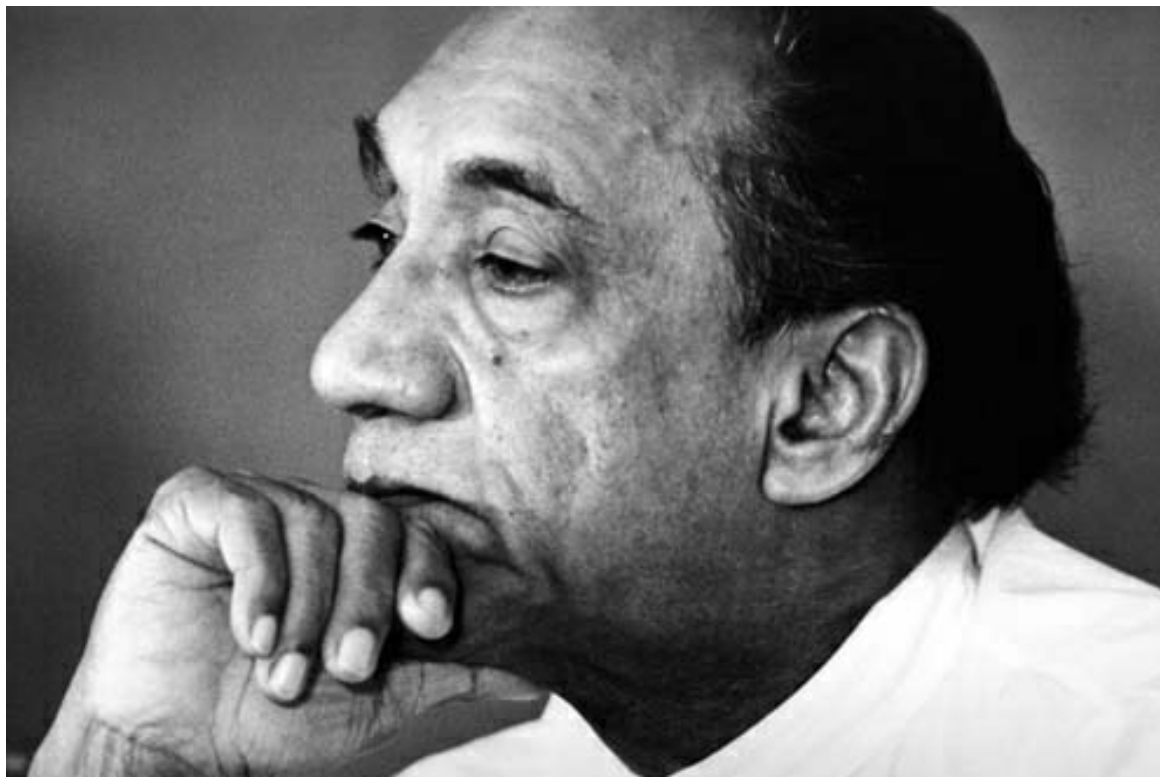
Given these circumstances, it is amazing that as many as 4.2 million votes were cast for Fonseka, and indeed, it is likely that the count would have been much more had the election been free and fair. In a petition filed on 15 February, Fonseka detailed scores of instances of violence against his supporters during campaigning (including murder), massive use of state resources and state employees to campaign for Rajapakse, denying Fonseka advertisements and airtime, buying off voters using state resources, falsely accusing Fonseka of a pact with the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) to divide the country should he come to power, and falsely stating that he was ineligible to hold office. All these would have reduced the number voting for Fonseka, not to mention the propaganda comparing him to Adolf Hitler and Idi Amin, which frightened some Sinhalese.

Allegations of wrongdoing are not coming only from the opposition candidate's corner, either. The Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE), a civil-society group, has confirmed that many displaced people were deprived of their franchise, while many who had died or left the country remained on the voting lists; and that counting agents of opposition candidates were chased away from the counting centres while unauthorised persons were allowed to enter. The results, instead of first being announced at the counting centres as usual, were announced only after being centralised; demands by CaFFE that carbon copies of the results at each counting centre be submitted for inspection were refused, giving rise to suspicions of fraud.

Reports that describe Rajapakse's election victory as a 'landslide' or 'resounding' are thus far from the mark. Emphasising that the proportion of votes for Fonseka in minority-dominated areas was consistently higher than in Sinhala-dominated areas also fails to recognise that the overwhelming majority of votes for Fonseka were cast by Sinhalese, which denies Rajapakse's victory a 'national' character.

## Escalating authoritarianism

It is easy to understand why many Tamils refrained from voting, given the hell they had been put through in the final months of the war. It is less easy to explain why so many who did vote opted



**Mahinda Rajapaksa is following in JR Jayawardene's footsteps, with his crackdown on media outlets**

for Fonseka, the army commander, unless it is recognised that Rajapakse was held responsible for the unspeakable cruelty inflicted on the survivors after the war. For instance, the government excuse that the 280,000 civilians held in camps after the war ended were being screened to identify LTTE members was belied by the fact that the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross were not allowed to register the displaced or monitor the process of screening.

Neither domestic nor international pressure could make the government budge from its stand, until Fonseka entered the electoral fray. Thus, although the promises made in his electoral manifesto, and a signed letter to the TNA, were minimal, it was more than Tamils could expect from Rajapakse. Meanwhile, Fonseka's offer to give evidence in a war-crimes tribunal would have given comfort to the victims of those crimes.

Among Sinhalese progres-

sives, there had been growing anxiety about the systematic undermining of democracy under the Rajapakse regime. Two phenomena in particular were highlighted: the numerous abductions, assaults, arrests and killings of journalists; and the demise of the Constitutional Council, which had been set up during the previous administration to ensure that appointments to key posts and commissions would be free of political bias. The rule of law had

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