

Sri Lanka's retired army chief

General intentions

The war's winners fall out

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WHEN Sarath Fonseka sought permission this month to retire as chief of Sri Lanka's defence staff from December 1st, President Mahinda Rajapaksa replied through his secretary that the general, who had led his government's victory against the Tamil Tigers, could consider himself retired with immediate effect. So General Fonseka had to vacate his office in less than two days. He was told his large security detail would be slashed. He must quit his official residence. The impromptu farewell ceremony for him was so hastily arranged, apparently, that the commanders of the army, navy and air force could not attend.

His retirement, more than a month before the end of his term, fuelled rampant speculation that General Fonseka would stand against Mr Rajapaksa at the presidential election he wants to call next year, nearly two years early, to capitalise on the government's defeat of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in May.

General Fonseka played no small part in that rout. But with a new opposition alliance, led by former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), hinting strongly that he would be their presidential candidate, the gloves are coming off almost as quickly as billboards of Mr Rajapaksa are springing up around the country. In an interview with a Tamil newspaper, Mr Wickremesinghe confirmed that his coalition has agreed to nominate General Fonseka. He urged a Marxist party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), once seen as a proxy for the Tigers, to support him.

The JVP, however, is already wooing General Fonseka to contest as its own candidate. The third force in Sri Lankan politics, the JVP, which was trounced by Mr Rajapaksa's party at recent provincial and local government polls, wants to back a winning horse. The TNA has not commented on General Fonseka. But the Tigers hated the army commander with such a vengeance that they once deployed a female suicide-bomber to assassinate him. (She exploded on target but he survived to return to work just three months later.)

It is the general's steely grit that Mr Rajapaksa seems to fear. The president has always counted on populist appeal to garner votes and knows that General Fonseka, who is considered a national hero, could significantly eat into his base among the Sinhala-Buddhist majority. Mr Rajapaksa's anxiety is beginning to show. Two days after he accepted General Fonseka's retirement, his Sri Lanka Freedom Party held its annual convention in a sports stadium hired for the occasion. The venue was brimming with members who had been promised "an important announcement" about elections. The event was broadcast live on television. But Mr Rajapaksa failed to name the day.

General Fonseka is yet to reveal which party he will join or, indeed, whether he will contest at all. This week he said that he would make his decision public next week. But just two days before he had told journalists that he would reveal his plans in 48 hours. Sri Lanka's first four-star general, it seems, is in a dither.

Many analysts feel that if he does decide to contest the election, General Fonseka will pose a formidable challenge to Mr Rajapaksa. Sanjana Hattotuwa, of the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a Colombo think-tank, says he will present himself as the architect of the victory over the Tigers and as a war hero. No other challenger could hope to boast as much.

P.S.

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