

Violence Isn't Slowing in Sri Lanka

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Repression and fear continue in the wake of President Rajapaksa's snap election win

Despite promises by the Sri Lankan government to ease curbs on civil rights and a new era of reconciliation following its defeat of the Tamil Tigers, human rights and press freedom organizations say little has changed. Repression and state-sponsored violence are continuing in the wake of a convincing victory by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in a snap election on Jan. 26 and if anything, anything, threats and intimidation appear to have accelerated, the rights organizations say.

Rajapaksa's electoral success was built on the government's crushing defeat of the Tamil Tiger rebels in May 2009, ending a 26-year insurgency by the island's minority Tamil population. The opposition, led by the former Army chief, Sarath Fonseka, has charged that Rajapaksa's landslide victory, by 57.9 percent against 40.1 percent, was characterized by illegal imprisonment and intimidation of opposition figures. In return Rajapaksa accused Fonseka, a former ally, of seeking to organize a coup, and ordered the arrest of some of Fonseka's army colleagues.

Fonseka, who called Rajapakse a "tin-pot dictator" and told the media he would scrap the executive presidency within six months, hold parliamentary elections and adopt a new constitution that would "uphold democracy, social justice and media freedoms," had been endorsed by several opposition parties, principally the United National Party and Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna. He rejected the results of the election, which has been called suspicious, and said it would challenge them in court.

In the wake of the election, poll monitors and human rights groups including the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission cited counting irregularities, as well as blatant misuse of state resources by the Rajapakse government and intimidation of political opponents.

"Very clearly, the question as to whether Sri Lanka is any longer capable of conducting a free and fair election has been raised in this election," the collective groups said in a statement. "It is not only the electoral process that is under challenge. The very process of receiving, preserving and counting the ballot at the commissioner's office itself is an issue that has been prominently raised."

Although the government insisted that the election was free and fair, the United States Department of State has asked for an investigation into the vote fraud charges.

Human Right Watch said some 11,000 people remain in indefinite detention in the wake of the civil war, which was notable for savage cruelty on both sides that left 80,000 officially dead and probably lots more and impoverished the island's 21.3 million people. An estimated 400,000 ethnic Tamils have fled the island, according to the CIA Factbook. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of desperate boat people have attempted to sail to Australia. (See A Boatload of Money, October 22, 2009) As many as 30,000 people simply disappeared and presumably were killed at the hands of the government, rights workers say.

The Asia Human Rights Commission, in its 2009 report, said that in the wake of the defeat of the Tamil rebels, "what exists in Sri Lanka today is a situation of abysmal lawlessness, resulting in the

zero status of citizens. The word 'abysmal' is here used in its ordinary meaning to mean limitless, bottomless, immeasurably bad and wretched to the point of despair. Lawlessness of this sort differs from simple illegality or disregard for law, which to differing degrees can happen anywhere."

Journalists have been a major target and violence is nothing new (See Death of a Journalist, Jan. 13, 2009). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, the country ranked eighth in the world for journalist deaths in 2009, with 18 reporters killed in connection with their jobs and another six for reasons that are not clear. Amnesty International Tuesday issued a statement saying that "journalists have disappeared, been arrested or threatened with death and opposition supporters harassed since the Jan. 26 election. Victory against the Tamil Tigers followed by an historic election should have ended political repression in Sri Lanka, but instead we have seen a serious clampdown on freedom of expression," said Madhu Malhotra, Amnesty's Asia-Pacific deputy director.

Some 56 journalists reported they face serious threats, including some working for state-run media institutions, according to Amnesty International. The organization called on the government to cease its crackdown on journalists, political activists and human rights defenders. Reporters Without Borders appealed to Rajapaksa to put a stop to arrests and intimidation of journalists working for privately-owned and foreign media.

"This wave of post-election violence could cast a lasting stain on the start of President Rajapaksa's second term and bodes ill for the political climate during the coming years," said Reporters Without Borders.

The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence reported more than 85 post-election incidents, including two murders and several assaults, Amnesty International's Malhotra said: "Victory against the Tamil Tigers followed by a historic election should have ended political repression in Sri Lanka but instead we have seen a serious clampdown on freedom of expression. Threats, beatings and arrests mean that Sri Lankan human rights activists live in fear of the consequences of expressing their political opinions."

On Jan. 29, Amnesty International said, "police officers from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) raided the office of newspaper Lanka Irida and arrested chief editor Chandana Sirimalwatte, who remains in detention." Lanka Irida had openly campaigned for Fonseka during the elections. The office was raided again the following day.

The government suffered a rare loss Tuesday when the country's Supreme Court ruled that Rajapaksa's new six-year term in office won't begin until Nov. 19. The reason for the decision, which runs against practice in most countries covered either now or previously by Commonwealth law, wasn't given.

At the end of the war, according to Amnesty International, more than a quarter million Tamils were placed into government-run camps to be screened for rebel ties as their home villages were cleared of mines. Some 100,000 civilians still live in those camps. Those with suspected Tiger ties are held in separate facilities the government calls "rehabilitation centers."

The group also said it was concerned because a lack of information about the fate of detainees raised the possibility that some may have been tortured or mistreated or may have "disappeared."

P.S.

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