

# 1982 all over again March 2010

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## **The potent similarities between the election of Mahinda Rajapakse now and J R Jayewardene nearly three decades ago.**

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 incum-bent 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 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 progressives, 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 been undermined drastically by the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and Emergency Regulations, which provided impunity for state crimes. None of these grievances was addressed after the end of the war, making it clear that this was an essential part of President Rajapakse's rule.

The sense of desperation generated by this situation was expressed by one Sinhalese citizen who referred to the Rajapakse brothers as "monsters", and another who said, "When you're in a frying pan you have to jump, even if you risk landing in the fire!" to explain why she was voting for Fonseka. The eloquent reply by another, one Anura Gunasekara, as published on the Transcurrents website on 8 February, commenting on Rajapakse's allegation that those who voted against him "betrayed the country", is worth quoting at length:

*Now I, along with 4.17 million other citizens, am being compelled to accept that a personal choice in the exercise of the franchise is an act of treachery against my country. As a citizen I need to consider this statement seriously and with trepidation; to me it seems to carry with it an ominous echo of approaching fascism, a suppression of civil liberties and a denial of a citizen's fundamental right ... I decided to take a risk with the unknown and unlovable Fonseka, in the hope that a change would bring about ...order in to what is fast becoming a lawless society; that marauding parliamentarians would at last be as equally subject to legal restriction, as any Citizen Perera; that public and private corruption would be minimized or curtailed to an extent that it is no longer a suppurating sore on the body public; that journalists who voice a dissenting point of view could ply*

*their trade without incurring the risk of armed attack, abduction and even loss of life; that unaligned news broadcasters could function without fear of being shut down for disseminating unpalatable truths; that the unconscionable expenditure of public funds on the aggrandizement of the politically powerful could be halted; that the minorities of this country who have suffered loss of life, livelihood, shelter, education and the opportunity of participation in mainstream national activity, would at last be given equal opportunities along with the majority. I sincerely believe that some, if not all of these issues, would have been in the minds of many of those who voted for Fonseka.*

The election revealed the illusory character of the orchestrated triumphalism and supposedly monolithic Sinhalese support for Rajapakse that had been propagated after the end of the war. It also exposed a much deeper fissure in Sri Lankan society than the so-called ethnic divide: one between those who benefit from or can live with a totalitarian state, and those committed to democracy. Given that many of the latter, both Sinhalese and minorities, felt that Fonseka was not a credible candidate and therefore did not vote at all, we can conclude that they are in fact the majority.

### **Rajapakse or Jayewardene?**

Soon after the election, Fonseka was dragged out of an opposition meeting by military police and threatened with a court martial and possible death sentence. The charges against him were vague and kept changing. The most frequently voiced was that he was planning a military coup, although anyone with common sense might ask why he would leave the military and contest an election if he was planning a military coup. Hundreds of his supporters, both within the military and civilians, were victimised. Demonstrators calling for Fonseka's release were physically assaulted by government thugs, and the police sided with the attackers. Fonseka's lawyer was threatened with death.

At this point, the sense of déjà vu becomes overwhelming. Before the presidential election of 1982, J R Jayewardene clamped down on media freedom and used state resources in his campaign. As has taken place in recent weeks, trade unionists were victimised and assaulted. The PTA and Emergency Regulations undermined the rule of law, providing impunity for state crimes. After the election, popular opposition politician Vijaya Kumaratunga (husband of former president Chandrika Kumaratunga) was detained on cooked-up charges. A rigged referendum resulted in the cancellation of parliamentary elections. State-sponsored thugs assaulted demonstrators, and police arrested the victims. Opponents of the government and lawyers who appeared for them were tortured and killed. The destruction of democracy by Jayewardene, continued by his successor, Ranasinghe Premadasa, spawned a Sinhalese insurrection in which about 60,000 people were killed. Will history repeat itself?

This time around, a referendum is not likely, but violent suppression of the opposition is underway to ensure that President Rajapakse's coalition gets a two-thirds majority in the parliamentary elections. The arrest and threatened court martial of Fonseka is part of this strategy. Meanwhile, the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission has approached Chinese military-intelligence specialists to help with blocking news websites and the Google search engine, indicating a further clamping-down on freedom of expression and the right to information. If this repression continues to escalate, another bloodbath could well follow. But the president's opponents are aware of the danger. People have understood that if the foremost war hero can be dragged off and tried in a kangaroo court, no one is safe. This is why leading Buddhist clergy, among others, have come out demanding Fonseka's release, or at least a fair trial in a civilian court.

There is an incipient anti-fascist movement in Sri Lanka's civil society today, but it lacks cohesion and a principled leadership. Wickremesinghe is tainted by having been part of the Jayawardene and Premadasa regimes while they were committing atrocities against both Tamils and Sinhalese. The

UNP cannot take the moral high ground unless Wickremesinghe is replaced, but no one knows who would be able to replace him. In addition, the left-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) needs to make a critique of its own past totalitarianism and anti-Tamil bias; while the TNA, which has already distanced itself from the LTTE demand for Tamil Eelam, needs to condemn the LTTE's authoritarianism, its killings of Sinhalese and Muslim civilians and ethnic cleansing of northern Muslims. Above all, genuine leftists need to take an independent and principled stand against the fascist transformation of the state that is underway, with all forms of dissent, including trade-union struggles, progressively being eliminated, and dissidents threatened with death. Today, they need to work to provide a moral compass, pointing towards democracy and social justice.

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