

# Ex-army chief calls for regime change in Sri Lanka

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General Sarath Fonseka, former opposition presidential candidate and ex-army chief, pledged earlier this month to launch a campaign to bring down the Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. “I am definitely asking people to rise up” and “overthrow the government by democratic means,” he told the British-based *Daily Telegraph* on July 8.

Fonseka made an appeal to the Western powers for a regime change along the lines of the NATO intervention in Libya and the current efforts to oust the Syrian government. Slamming Rajapakse as a “dictator,” he declared: “[They should] derecognise the government and give protection to the people... if there is a dictator violating human rights and the democracy of the people, I think the world will have to take care of that.”

While he referred to “democratic means,” Fonseka did not rule out other methods. “You have seen how it took place in other countries and how those people were rescued from tyrannical regimes. I hope and pray it will not be like Libya,” he said.

Fonseka led the army in its ruthless communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and, along with Rajapakse and his government, was responsible for war crimes, including the killing of thousands of civilians. He fell out with Rajapakse after the LTTE’s defeat in May 2009, resigned from the

army and was backed by the major opposition parties as their joint presidential candidate in the 2010 election.

Fonseka lost the election and was then arrested along with a number of his supporters on the basis of unsubstantiated claims that he was plotting a coup. He was finally charged and convicted on trumped-up charges of corruption and carrying out political activities while in uniform. He was stripped of his rank, pensions and benefits, jailed and removed from the parliamentary seat that he won in the general election later in 2010.

The jailing of Fonseka was part of a broader assault on democratic rights by the Rajapakse government during and since the end of the war. Hundreds of people, including journalists and critics, have been killed or “disappeared” by pro-government death squads operating in collaboration with the security forces.

The US and its European allies, which backed the war against the LTTE and remained silent on the army’s war crimes until the last few months of fighting, have exploited the “human rights” issue to put pressure on the Rajapakse regime. Washington’s concern is not with democratic rights but Rajapakse’s developing ties with China.

In response to the “human rights” campaign, Rajapakse has in recent months sought to mend relations with Western powers. In May, in a bid to deflect international criticism, he granted a presidential pardon to Fonseka. The former army chief is free but, because of his conviction, cannot stand as a candidate in elections.

Fonseka's interview with the *Daily Telegraph* indicates that far from keeping a low profile, he is putting himself forward as the figurehead for a regime change operation and seeking the West's backing to do so. He is seeking to exploit the growing opposition among working people to the government's imposition of harsh austerity measures in line with the International Monetary Fund's demands. He pointed in particular to the killing of a fisherman in February when police opened fire on a protest against rising fuel prices.

Fonseka indicated his pro-Western stance during the 2010 election campaign, criticising Rajapakse for undermining the confidence of the "international community" in Sri Lanka.

Following Fonseka's release from jail, the US indicated a degree of support for him by inviting him to the US ambassador's residence in Colombo to attend this year's July 4 independence day celebration. On the day, US ambassador Patricia Butenis pointedly noted that the US "will remain engaged with Sri Lanka despite some differences of opinion on the political front."

At his stage, the Obama administration has indicated no overt support for ousting Rajapakse and continues to use the issue of human rights to pressure the government. In April, the US and its allies pushed a resolution through the UN Human Rights Council, against the opposition of Sri Lanka, calling the implementation of the limited recommendations of the Rajapakse government's own inquiry into the war.

Washington's actions are in line with a diplomatic offensive throughout Asia to undermine China's economic and strategic influence. The Obama administration is strengthening military alliances with countries like Japan, Australia and South Korea, building up military forces and partnerships across the region, and seeking to entice countries like Burma to loosen their ties with Beijing.

Fonseka represents sections of the Sri Lankan ruling class that have been marginalised by Rajapakse, who

has increasingly operated through a politico-military cabal that includes his brothers, military chiefs and top state bureaucrats. The ex-general is no democrat and is steeped in Sinhala chauvinism. While denouncing Rajapakse as "a dictator," Fonseka was a leading figure in the presidential cabal for years.

Fonseka can only posture as a defender of democratic rights with the complicity of the opposition parties—the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—which backed him as their common candidate in the 2010 election. The UNP, which was notorious in power for its abuse of democratic rights, relies on ex-left organisations, like the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), to provide it with democratic credentials.

The Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), a breakaway JVP group that postures as socialist, has also indicated a sympathetic attitude to the right-wing ex-general. The May 27 edition of its journal *Janarala* declared that "Fonseka will inevitably become the symbol of the opposition against the Rajapakse regime." It added that it awaited Fonseka's presentation of a program to lead the masses against the government.

Workers and young people should reject this fraud. As Fonseka made clear during his 2010 campaign, he will be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in imposing the austerity agenda demanded by international finance capital. Such a program cannot be implemented democratically. The ex-general would, like the present government, use the extensive police-state apparatus built up during the country's protracted civil war to crush any opposition.



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