

ANOTHER PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, WITH LITTLE SPACE FOR CHANGE

As the year 2009 comes to end, Sri Lanka's politics is showing signs of new contradictions and conflicts. These will unfold with greater intensity during the forthcoming presidential election campaign in which the two main contestants are President Mahinda Rajapakse and his former army chief.

The year 2009 is politically significant for Sri Lanka primarily because of the conclusion of the island's protracted civil war. The war ended in May, with a convincing military victory for the Sri Lankan state and a total defeat for the LTTE. This is an outcome that surprised many within and outside Sri Lanka. However, the government's military success seems to contain within it seeds of discontent between the political and military leaderships. General Sarath Fonseka, who led the ground war against the LTTE and was a key architect of the military solution approach to the ethnic conflict, has quit the military service to enter politics. His goal is to become the commander-in-chief, from being the chief of the Defense Staff. His political ambitions are also being facilitated by the opposition led by the United National Party. The opposition, which has been searching for a winning strategy against President Rajapakse, has found in General Fonseka a winning candidate. The fact that the ex-military chief has no background whatsoever in politics, in democracy, or in governance does not seem to bother the opposition, which seems to be desperately in need of a viable presidential candidate.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's post-civil war politics has not so far produced any major outcome in the form of addressing issues relating to the ethnic conflict that produced the Tamil separatist insurgency to begin with. After the military defeat of the LTTE in mid-May, the Rajapakse administration spent several weeks celebrating the victory. Then, after massive international pressure, the government began to think about a program for resettling over 250,000 Tamil civilians who surrendered during the last phase of the war. Herded into military-run camps in Vavuniya, the welfare of these civilians became a massive humanitarian challenge. However, the government's initial approach appeared to be one guided by security concerns. Local and international media began to call these camps in Vavuniya internment camps. Some even called them concentration camps. It took a huge global effort to convince the government that resettlement of the Tamil civilians should be a policy priority. It appeared that the government only after it realized that the threat of international took credible steps to improve the welfare of Tamil civilians in the camps isolation was a real possibility. As the presidential election is approaching, and in response to electoral imperatives, more progress in the resettlement process is taking place.

General Sarath Fonseka's exit from his official position of the chief of the Defense Staff also signifies the

weakening of the war-time coalition which President Rajapakse built to prosecute the war against the LTTE. That was a broad coalition which brought together parties of the ruling UPFA coalition, military, bureaucracy, foreign service, judiciary, JVP, media, Sinhalese nationalist intelligentsia, leading Buddhist monks, sections of

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the Catholic religious hierarchy, anti-LTTE Tamil groups and sections of the Sinhalese diaspora. This was a very broad coalition. It has now cracked from within. General Fonseka and the JVP have now left this coalition, co-headed by President Rajapakse and his brothers. In the heat of the presidential election campaign, these cracks are likely to further deepen and widen. It is too early to say how the continuing contradictions within the Sinhalese political establishment will affect the outcome of the presidential election, which will be held in mid-January.

Meanwhile, it appears that the question of a political solution to the ethnic conflict is no longer in the political agenda of either the ruling party or the opposition. The presidential election campaign is not likely to put forward a political solution as a major theme. In any case, the present regime has successfully marginalized the relevance of devolution to the political debate in post-LTTE Sri Lanka. President Rajapakse secured international support, particularly the support of the US and Indian governments, on the tacit understanding that once the LTTE was militarily defeated, he would move in the direction of implementing a devolution framework. He showed to the world, and the Tamils, the Tissa Vitharana Committee, which was entrusted with the task of formulating constitutional proposals for a political solution, as evidence of an ongoing process of political reform. However, the Vitharana Committee has proved itself to be a veil of deception, used by President Rajapakse to dilute international criticism. Given the fact that the nationalist coalition over which he presided had no commitment to minority rights within a liberal-pluralist framework, President Rajapakse could do very little in the direction of a fair and just political settlement. Besides, powerful forces within the ruling coalition saw the military victory over the LTTE as restoration of the Sinhalese unitary state project. It was patently unrealistic to expect that the war coalition which President Rajapakse put together to fight the LTTE would be a vehicle for a political settlement. During the forthcoming election campaign, the ruling party will try to woo minority votes with promises of a political

solution. However, there are no signs of President Rajapakse reconstituting his coalition in a manner that will enable him to implement meaningful political reforms that will include devolution.

Will the UNP-led opposition alliance, with General Sarath Fonseka as its presidential candidate, be a better alternative? Well, the indications are that it will not. The UNP and its allies are putting forward General Fonseka in a dubious strategy to make him a nominal head of state a few months after the election. The plan appears to be for Ranil Wickremesinghe, UNP leader, to become the caretaker Prime Minister soon after the election victory. Then, parliament will either be dissolved for fresh elections, or a recomposition of the balance of power in parliament will be affected in favour of the new president and the new prime minister. This will follow, as the UNP's plan goes, a constitutional amendment abolishing the presidential system. The entire plan will depend on the willingness of General Fonseka, once elected president, to give up his all powerful position just to become a nominal head of state. The UNP and the JVP might find it extremely difficult to convince the majority of the electorate of the viability of this extremely risky political strategy.

Issues that need to be brought to the centre of Sri Lanka's political agenda at present are democracy, demilitarization, devolution, human rights, governance free of corruption, and normalization of the political process. Resettlement of displaced civilians in the Northern and Eastern provinces, normalization of the life of Tamil civilians, withdrawal of the Emergency and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, release of political prisoners, and expediting of trials against those held without trial are immediate issues linked to the larger agenda of democracy, demilitarization and devolution. But the two main political coalitions that are being formed at present for the coming presidential election are not likely to take up any of these issues with any degree of commitment. Sri Lanka will have another presidential election and a very slow process of normalization. ■