

Sri Lanka: Report details Rajapakse's abuse of public resources in presidential election

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A report published on December 31 by Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) detailed how public resources and security personnel are being used on a massive scale to boost President Mahinda Rajapakse's re-election campaign.

The report notes that "abuse of public resources at elections seems to be a continuing activity in every election in Sri Lanka," but "the trend seems even more ominous at the current presidential election".

The details provided in the report underscore the determination of Rajapakse and his cronies to deploy the property, staff and funds of every possible government department and public agency, as well as police and military resources, to secure a win in the January 26 election.

TISL states that it has already received more than 80 complaints about various abuses of public property and election laws from the public and its investigators. TISL is the Sri Lankan chapter of Transparency International, a Western-backed anti-corruption agency.

TISL's details include misuse of state-owned funds and properties, air force helicopters, and the government's media outlets, and direct political involvement by senior government officials. In each instance, the activities openly violate specific regulations and guidelines issued by the Elections Commissioner.

By calling presidential elections nearly two years early, Rajapakse expected to stifle the discontent among ordinary people over declining living conditions by exploiting the military's victory against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, the emergence of General Sarath Fonseka, the former army chief, as the common opposition candidate, has led to a bitter contest.

The campaign for Rajapakse is running TV advertisements every few minutes, and pasting hundreds of thousands of four-colour posters, huge photographs of Rajapakse and hoardings throughout cities and busy commercial centres. As the TISL report indicates, this involves spending many millions of rupees.

The report reveals that an Air Force helicopter was provided to carry several cabinet ministers and members of parliament to a public meeting in Kandy on December 24. This was in direct violation of election regulations issued on December 8 prohibiting the use of government vehicles and aircraft for the benefit of an election candidate.

TISL also documents Rajapakse's efforts to cultivate support by entertaining people from various sectors at his official residences, "Temple Trees" in Colombo and the President's House in Kandy. Among his guests during December were public sector employees, police officers, education officials, lawyers, artists, dairy farmers and children of welfare beneficiaries.

"At these events, most of the participants were transported to the venue at State expense and were provided with food and in some instances, even with liquor," the report states. Rajapakse defended these events as "normal cultural practice" but according to the report: "These gatherings are a violation of the essence of the public notice issued by the Election Commissioner on 08.12.2009 preventing the use of public property for the purpose of promoting a candidate during the election".

Despite the TISL's report, such gatherings are continuing almost every day, and are publicised on government television channels.

By inviting police officers, Rajapakse is seeking to cement support among them. In the past, the ruling

parties have used police for election violence against opponents, ballot stuffing and other violations of election regulations.

The report cites directions given by the police superintendent in charge of Hambantota Division, which covers Rajapakse's hometown. Officers in charge (OICs) of police stations were told that "no one should be permitted to remove, destroy or deface any cut-outs (large photographs) of HE (His Excellency) the President and that OICs will be held answerable for any incidents in this connection". This instruction violates guidelines issued by the election commissioner to the Inspector General of Police, demanding the dismantling and removal of illegal cut-outs, banners and posters.

According to the report, far from being removed, fresh hoardings and displays are being installed by public institutions, including the State Trading Corporation, Presidential Secretariat and Southern Development Authority. Other government agencies are sponsoring newspaper advertisements promoting Rajapakse.

Moreover, a state-owned Ports Authority property is being used to print propaganda material for Rajapakse, with the resulting posters "seen in Colombo city and other parts of the country". In fact, the Ports Authority is a rich source for the president's campaign—providing manpower, vehicles, public meeting stages and buildings. Central Transport Board buses are also being used to transport people free of charge to meetings where Rajapakse speaks.

TISL provides details of a radio and TV advertising campaign run by Tharunyata Hetak, a youth organisation sponsored by state-owned institutions, including the Bank of Ceylon and the National Lotteries Board. Key officials include Rajapakse's two sons. Between December 1 and December 21 alone, a total of 3,554 TV spots were broadcast, at an estimated cost of more than 84 million rupees (\$US75,000). Another 5.8 million rupees was spent on radio ads. These amounts do not include the production costs.

Key officials of public media organisations, including the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, continue to hold posts in the president's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). TISL states that the continuation of these individuals in office "is a blatant violation of regulations issued by the Commissioner of Election on

17th December 2009 for the Electronic and Print Media".

Other abuses include 71 security officers attached to the Ports Authority being released for election work; airport employees given leave to attend an anti-Fonseka protest rally; and several diplomats being returned to Sri Lanka to participate in the election campaign.

Some of the individuals and agencies identified in the report have denied the allegations. However, when the *Daily Mirror* contacted the Ports Authority, its officials refused to answer any questions. A state-owned ITN television channel director refused to comment when asked about the conflict of interest involved in being an SLFP electoral organiser.

There is also ample evidence that the regime is employing violence and intimidation. The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) reported on January 1 that it had received 103 complaints since November 23. Of these, 44 were major incidents and 29 were against the SLFP-led United Peoples Freedom Front. There were five complaints against the United National Party (UNP) and three against the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Both the UNP and the JVP support Fonseka.

Separately, the Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) reported 115 election violence complaints up to January 5. They included 32 assaults, 6 shootings, 35 cases of property damage and 10 abuses of state resources. Most complaints were against the ruling coalition.

None of the acrimonious and bloody rivalry relates to major political differences between Rajapakse and Fonseka—because no such differences exist. Instead, the abuses underscore the sharp factional divisions within the ruling elite and the increasing reliance of the entire political establishment on repression and intimidation.

After years of communal war, the flagrant abuses are another measure of the advanced decay of democracy in Sri Lanka, and a warning about the thuggish and lawless methods that will be used by the winner to impose drastic austerity measures on working people.

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