

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN SRI LANKA

A Strategic Assessment

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Sudha Ramachandran
Hamsini Hariharan
Shibani Mehta



The Takshashila Institution
Bengaluru, India

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Executive Summary

The victory of the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) in the local bodies' elections in Sri Lanka in February reflects public dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition's performance. It also indicates that Rajapaksa continues to draw the bulk of the votes of the island's Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists. The SLPP's recent performance has provided a shot in the arm to the Rajapaksa family's political ambitions. However, the ruling Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe coalition could possibly win the general elections due in 2020, especially if they win the support of the minorities (Tamils and Muslims). The challenge for the United National Party (UNP) will be to draw a chunk of Sinhalese support and to win the backing of parties representing the minorities. The need to secure the support of the minorities may propel the UNP to move forward on constitutional reform. Important factors to be taken into consideration include the roles that former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the island's minorities are likely to play in the coming months.

Introduction

This report begins with a short summary of the recent local body elections. It draws attention to violence targeting Muslims and the question of constitutional reform. These form the backdrop for an assessment of potential outcomes in the Sri Lankan general elections due in 2020. It then lays out a few factors that could impact the outcome and concludes with an outline of implications for India.

It has been three years since former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was defeated by his Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena in Sri Lanka's presidential elections. A motley coalition of parties that included a section of Chandrika Kumaratunga and Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) joined hands with Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) to back Sirisena. They ran a powerful campaign that drew attention to the Rajapaksa family's corruption and its murky dealings with China. The coalition promised to correct the Rajapaksa government's 'excessive tilt' towards China. The island's minorities, the Tamils and Muslims, extended strong support to Sirisena and played an important role in ousting Rajapaksa from power. Elections to parliament a few months later saw a UNP-led coalition forming the government.

Three years thereon, the coalition government's performance has been below par as differences between President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe have stood in the way. Public support for Rajapaksa has grown as evident from the strong showing of his new party, the SLPP, in recent local government elections. Promises made by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government to move away from Rajapaksa's pro-China policy seem to be all but forgotten. The Hambantota Port has been handed over to a Chinese company, while the controversial Colombo Port City project is going full steam ahead. Although the government reduced the powers of the executive presidency by passing the 19th Amendment, a new Constitution providing meaningful devolution of power acceptable to the Tamils remains elusive.¹ Besides, Muslims are being targeted by Sinhalese mobs.

None of these developments can be dismissed as internal issues or problems that concern Sri Lanka alone. Given Sri Lanka's geographic proximity to India—just 22 miles of shallow waters separate the northern coast of Sri Lanka from the southeast coast of India—the island's politics, conflicts, economic problems and foreign relations impact India. There are linguistic and ethnic commonalities between Tamils in Sri Lanka and India and the problems of Tamils there could have spill-over impact

on Tamil Nadu's politics. Colombo's ties with countries hostile to India could undermine India's security too.

Context

- **Local Bodies Elections:** The local government elections in Sri Lanka on 10 February 2018, saw Rajapaksa's SLPP ride to a landslide victory with 44.65% of the votes.² Wickremesinghe's UNP secured 32.63% of the votes and Sirisena's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) came a distant third with 8.94% of the votes. Voter dissatisfaction with the performance of the UPFA-UNP government played an important role in Rajapaksa's victory. Besides, the UNP and UPFA contested the election separately, dividing the anti-Rajapaksa vote. The result triggered churning in Sri Lanka's politics with a looming political instability in the coming months. For one, the strong performance of the SLPP in local elections prompted Rajapaksa to attempt to topple the government. He sought to put pressure on the government by calling for early elections.³ In addition, he moved a no-confidence motion against Wickremesinghe in parliament, which Wickremesinghe successfully defeated on April 4.⁴ Rajapaksa can be expected to keep up the pressure on the government which is likely to deepen the rift between the President and the Prime Minister.
- **Anti-Muslim Violence:** Close on the heels of an attack on a shelter for Rohingya Muslims last year, Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists went on a rampage against Muslims in the central highlands in Feb-March. When a police curfew failed to curb the violence, the government imposed a 10-day emergency across Sri Lanka.⁵ Sinhalese-Buddhist triumphalism has surged in the island since the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 and Muslims have emerged as the latest enemy of Sinhalese extremist groups with attacks on Muslims growing ever since. In the 2015 presidential elections, parties representing Muslims like the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) were part of the 'joint opposition' that backed Sirisena. In the parliamentary elections of August 2015, the main Muslim parties, the SLMC and the All Ceylon Muslim Congress were part of the UNP-led coalition.⁶ With whom will the Muslim parties align in 2020 amidst the surging Muslim anger?
- **Tamils and the Issue of Constitution Reform:** The ruling coalition had promised to bring in a new Constitution that would not only end Sri Lanka's

all-powerful executive Presidency but also usher in, among other reforms, a meaningful devolution of power that would enable a comprehensive political solution to the Tamil question. This promise remains unfulfilled.⁷

Potential Election Outcomes in the General Elections

This report examines four main potential outcomes of parliamentary elections and discusses a few factors that could influence the results.

1. UNP (with Sirisena) wins

A UNP victory is likely to be a continuation of the status quo. Although the UNP-UPFA government has lost much of its popularity and public goodwill, it could still return to power. This would require Sirisena and Wickremesinghe to set aside their differences and contest the election together. They would also need the support of minorities. To win such support, the government will need to deliver on constitutional reform and prevent anti-Muslim violence in the coming months. Securing the support of minorities would be necessary for the UNP as a significant proportion of the Sinhalese vote is likely to go to Rajapaksa. A victory of the UNP-Sirisena combine is possible. After all, it was their decision to contest local elections separately that divided their votes and resulted in Rajapaksa's victory. Had they contested the election together they could have secured over 41% of the vote.⁸ Thus, the ruling coalition could win the 2020 vote but it needs to hold together and win the votes of the minorities. Simply put, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have to bury the hatchet and work to deliver on promises to minorities to return to power.

2. UNP (without Sirisena) wins

Another possibility is that the UNP and Sirisena part ways on account of not being able to resolve their ongoing differences over economic issues, corruption, etc.⁹ This means the UNP is likely to contest the election on its own in which case, it would need the support of minorities to win.¹⁰ A UNP victory would be the outcome of a split in the SLFP's votes, as in this scenario, Sirisena and Rajapaksa are not likely to unite.

3. Rajapaksa (without Sirisena) comes to power

The third possibility is of the SLPP winning the largest number of seats. Campaigning on a plank of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and opposition to foreign investment, particularly the land acquisition issue, the SLPP could come to power even without a convergence of various factions of the SLPP.¹¹

4. Sirisena and Rajapaksa unite the SLFP

Pro-unification SLFP leaders are attempting to bring the Rajapaksa and Sirisena factions of the party together.¹² Should they succeed, it would result in Sirisena and Wickremesinghe parting ways. A united SFLP under Sirisena and Rajapaksa is likely to win the election.

Influential Factors

- **The Kumaratunga Factor**

In 2015, former President and SLFP leader Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga played a major role in negotiating the formation of a coalition between the UNP and an SLFP minus Rajapaksa to back the joint opposition's candidate, Sirisena. She could act to keep that coalition together and should she do so, the chances of the UNP and SLFP minus Rajapaksa returning to power is strong. She can play a useful role in getting the minorities on board as well.

- **Which Way will the Minorities Vote?**

The Sri Lankan Tamils have always voted for Tamil parties and this pattern is unlikely to change for the next general elections. The Illankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK) has strong support among the Tamil people as is evident from the local government election results; it won the majority of the local bodies in the Tamil-dominated north. The ITAK is more likely to contest the general election on its own and possibly seek a post-election arrangement to either join the government or support it from outside. Which Sinhalese formation it supports will depend on how the constitutional reform process goes in the coming months. Tamil anger and hurt over Rajapaksa government's defeat of the LTTE and Sinhalese-Buddhist triumphalism that followed continues to rankle the Tamils. Under the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, the situation of Tamils has improved to a moderate extent. Mass violence against the community hasn't happened. However, Tamil youth continue to

'disappear' and the community continues to feel that they have not got justice yet. Still Tamils while voting for Tamil parties are more likely to prefer a post-poll arrangement with the UNP.

- Muslims have traditionally voted as a bloc and in 2015 elections, chose to vote Rajapaksa out of power, particularly because of his family's ties with extremist groups like the Bodu Bala Sena.¹³ Muslim parties could go with the UNP but much depends on how robustly the present government acts to prevent violence targeting Muslims and to rein in the extremist groups. Alienation with the state is growing among Muslims, a worrying sign that points to possible radicalisation of its youth.

Issues to Watch

Sri Lankan politics continues to be in a state of flux as the no-confidence motion in March 2018 against Ranil Wickremesinghe failed. Despite Rajapaksa's loss in the no-confidence motion and the 2015 general elections, he remains a veritable contender. His electoral fortunes are on an upswing but to translate the upsurge in support for his party to a victory, he will need to build further on the support of his traditional supporters—the Sinhalese-Buddhists. In addition to winning over supporters from the SLFP and anti-Wickremesinghe UNPers, he may attempt to deepen the wedge between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. Besides, he is likely step up protests on issues such as land acquisition that are of concern to the masses. He is likely to oppose constitutional reforms that provide for meaningful devolution to the Tamils.

For India, the outcome of the general elections is important as it is keen to see the Sri Lankan government reach a political settlement with the Tamils. As things stand, a UNP government would perhaps be the most likely to deliver on this issue.

The Indian media has tended to discuss India's threat perceptions in terms of pro-China and pro-India parties. Such a classification is not useful as it does not reflect the reality on the ground. Especially in the Sri Lankan situation, all parties including the SLFP and the UNP, even the supposedly 'anti-India Rajapaksa', have had close relations with India. Consequently, India must reach out to all parties and build bonds that were broken during the 2015 presidential election.

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- ⁶ An important feature of Sri Lanka's highly ethnicised politics is that voting happens along ethnic lines. Thus, Sinhalese tend to vote for the Sinhalese dominated parties like the SLFP and the UNP, while Tamils vote for Tamil parties and the Muslims for Muslim parties. Parties representing the minorities have generally extended support to either the SLFP or the UNP in government or in opposition.
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