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Sri Lanka's Local Polls: Gains for Mahindra Rajapaksa's New Party

The results of the local government elections in Sri Lanka have brought former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, back to the political arena. The results were seen as a setback for the country's first post-war government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe whose parties contested the elections independently. The elections were the first since the coalition government was formed in 2015. Public support for the alliance has declined due to its lacklustre performance on its reform agenda in the last three years. This paper explores the reasons for Rajapaksa's victory and analyse the implications of the government's defeat in the local polls on the country's future.

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Introduction

Sri Lanka's local elections on 10 February 2018 witnessed the newly-formed party Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) of former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, achieving a landslide victory. On the other hand, the results were a major disappointment for the current government

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of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, whose parties decided to contest the election on their own. Both fared poorly at the polls.

The polls were designed to address local issues in Sri Lanka. These included road building, garbage disposal improvement and street light installation, among other municipal issues. However, the polls became a platform to address national issues and the government's performance over the last three years.² The elections saw 8,486 seats, across 341 local authorities (276 divisional councils, 24 municipal councils and 41 urban councils), being contested by over 56,000 candidates.³

The SLPP won 44.69 per cent of the votes, the United National Party (UNP) of Wickremesinghe 32.61 per cent, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) 8.90 per cent, the People's Liberation Front 6.26 per cent, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Sirisena 4.48 per cent and Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi 3.06 per cent.⁴ While the UNP performed better in Colombo, Nuwaraeliya, Mannar, Ampara and Badulla, the SLPP did well in Gampaha, Kalutara, Kandy, Matale and Hambantota. None of the main political parties, however, performed well in the North and North-East districts such as Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu.⁵

The elections were the first time that a mixed electoral system was implemented whereby 60 per cent of the members were elected using first-past-the-post voting and the remaining 40 per cent through proportional representation. The elections also paved the way for greater female representation, with a quarter of all seats on local councils reserved for women. The 17,000 women who contested during the polls may encourage more women to come forward and discuss their issues.⁶

² Mashal, Mujib, "Election Losses Test Sri Lanka's Leader, and the Country's Direction", *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/11/world/asia/sri-lanka-elections.html>. Accessed on 14 February 2018.

³ "Elections in Sri Lanka: 2018 local Government Elections", *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*, 5 February 2018. <http://ifes.org/faqs/elections-sri-lanka-2018-local-government-elections>. Accessed on 14 February 2018.

⁴ "All Island Results – Cumulative", Local Authority Elections- 2018. <http://lelections2018.dailymirror.lk/>. Accessed on 14 February 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sala, Iliaria Maria, Lahiri, Tripti, "Sri Lanka's new electoral quota is seeing thousands of women run for office", *Quartz*, 12 February 2018. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

Winners and Losers

The local polls were deemed a multi-cornered fight among the SLFP, the UNP and the SLPP. However, the SLPP, home for members of the UPFA loyal to Rajapaksa, performed exceptionally well. There are several reasons for its strong performance.

First, the party successfully attacked the government on its “broken promises”.⁷ During his election campaign, Rajapaksa argued that the ruling coalition had lost its mandate to run the country and a change in governance was imperative. “People have given a clear message: This government has no mandate...and no moral right to continue. The government should listen to what the people are saying”, said Rajapaksa.⁸

Second, public support from the Sinhala community for Rajapaksa has remained strong,⁹ in spite of his authoritarian rule and allegations of corruption. He was credited for ending the deeply protracted and intractable civil war that plagued the country for 26 years.¹⁰ Many villagers were ambushed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during the war. Their loyalty to the former president remains intact. Historically, Rajapaksa has received strong support from south, west and central Sri Lanka. For obvious reasons, he has received little support from the Tamil majority regions such as Vanni, Jaffna, Batticaloa, Nuwara Eliya and Trincomalee.¹¹

The UNP’s victory in the Colombo Municipal Council was its saving grace. Its candidate, Rosy Senanayake, was elected as the first female mayor of the capital, Colombo.¹² She is not a new face in politics and civil society. She was the Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations (UN) Population Fund in 1998 and Sri Lanka’s High Commissioner to Malaysia from 2001 to 2004. Although Sri Lanka was a pioneer in having both a female president and prime minister,

⁷ Riza, M, “Sri Lanka ruling alliance suffers defeat in local polls”, *Al Jazeera*, 11 February 2018. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/sri-lanka-ruling-coalition-suffers-local-polls-180211094940172.html>. Accessed on 14 February 2018.

⁸ Mallawarachi, Bharatha, “Sri Lanka’s former strongman calls for snap elections”, *ABC News*, 12 February 2018. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sri-lanka-strongmans-party-makes-strong-showing-polls-53011636>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

⁹ Kirinde, Chandani, Christopher, Chrisanthi, “Connecting people through news”, *Sunday Times (Sri Lanka)*, 14 January 2018. <https://www.pressreader.com/sri-lanka/sunday-times-sri-lanka/20180114/281848644006119>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

¹⁰ “Coconuts and jolts”, *Politics in Sri Lanka*, *Economist*, 20 January 2018.

¹¹ Kumar, Satish, “India’s National Security: Annual Review 2010”, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2003), p 186.

¹² Riza, M, “Sri Lanka ruling alliance suffers defeat in local polls”, *Al Jazeera*, 11 February 2018. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/sri-lanka-ruling-coalition-suffers-local-polls-180211094940172.html>. Accessed on 14 February 2018.

female political representation has been strikingly low – less than two per cent of local office seats and under six per cent seats at the parliamentary level are occupied by women. More than just being a UNP victory, Senanayake’s election showed that cultural and societal barriers were breaking down and women could take up leadership roles independently of family connections in the current political landscape.

While the SLPP was able to present itself as a credible proposition at the local elections, the UNP and the SLFP failed miserably for a multitude of reasons.

First, the fractured alliance had been bogged down by political bickering for months before the polls. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe were at loggerheads with each other over several issues. The differences between the coalition partners became more obvious as the local polls drew nearer. While the president had openly said that the UNP was more corrupt than the previous administration, the UNP blamed Sirisena of backstabbing it. Sirisena’s and Wickremesinghe’s decision to contest the elections separately certainly further undermined the unity of the coalition.

Second, the government was accused of failing to achieve anything substantial in the last three years of its rule. Many Sri Lankans had hoped that the government’s reform agenda would tackle corruption, inflation and post-war reconciliation. Core consumer prices grew to 4.3 per cent in December 2017 and the core inflation rate was 6.89 per cent, on average, from 2004 to 2017.¹³ Corruption remains a concern in both in the public and private sectors in Sri Lanka. The country was ranked 95 out of 176 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2016 by Transparency International (India was ranked 79).¹⁴ The state has also not been able to prove any allegations of corruption against the previous administration.

In 2015, the government agreed to a UN resolution to launch a truth and reconciliation commission, start an office of missing persons, give reparations to war survivors and create a special court to prosecute the alleged perpetrators within an 18-month deadline. The deadline

¹³ “Sri Lanka Core Inflation Rate”, Trading Economics, 2004-2018. <https://tradingeconomics.com/sri-lanka/core-inflation-rate>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

¹⁴ “Sri Lanka”, Corruption Perceptions Index 2016, Transparency International. <https://www.transparency.org/country/LKA>. Accessed on 17 February 2018.

is long over and little has been achieved in these areas.¹⁵ The government has also still not revoked the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) that allows suspects to be detained without the right to a legal recourse.¹⁶

Third, the government has not provided sufficient assistance to the agricultural community which was adversely hit by a severe drought in 2017. The drought, followed by heavy rainfalls, caused food shortages and crop failures. Many families were forced to purchase food from markets where food prices have surged over the years.¹⁷ This rural community felt that the government did not take concrete steps to tackle rising food insecurity, inflation and cost of living.¹⁸

Implications for the Country

Immediately after the local elections, Rajapaksa leveraged his victory by calling for snap parliamentary elections.¹⁹ In essence, the president can bring the elections forward if two-thirds of parliament supports his decision.²⁰ While Rajapaksa will not be able to participate in the presidential elections since he is constitutionally barred from seeking another term, his brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a former defense secretary, may launch a presidential bid.

There is also the possibility of more members from the SLFP defecting and joining Rajapaksa's new party, given the latter's stellar performance at the recent polls.²¹ This would further weaken

¹⁵ Muddell, Kelli, "Divided by years of conflict, Sri Lankans have yet to see the promise of justice fulfilled", *ICTJ*, 24 July 2017, <https://www.ictj.org/news/sri-lanka-justice-not-fulfilled>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

¹⁶ "Sri Lanka: Repeal Draconian Security Law". *Human Rights Watch*, 29 January 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/29/sri-lanka-repeal-draconian-security-law>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

¹⁷ "Sri Lanka's food production hit by extreme drought followed by floods", Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 22 June 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/sri-lanka-vote-law-sees-women-standing-180210113319765.html>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

¹⁸ Kirinde, Chandani, Christopher, Chrisanthi, "Connecting people through news", *Sunday Times (Sri Lanka)*, 14 January 2018. <https://www.pressreader.com/sri-lanka/sunday-times-sri-lanka/20180114/281848644006119>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

¹⁹ AP, "parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka after party backed by him sweeps local polls", *Firstpost*, 12 February 2018. <http://www.firstpost.com/world/mahinda-rajapaksa-seeks-snap-parliamentary-elections-in-sri-lanka-after-party-backed-by-him-sweeps-local-polls-4347155.html>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

²⁰ Aneez, Shihar, Sirilal, Ranga, "Sri Lanka PM plans reshuffle in wake of local election drubbing", *Reuters*, 17 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics/sri-lanka-pm-plans-reshuffle-in-wake-of-local-election-drubbing-idUSKCN1G025Y>. Accessed on 19 February 2018.

²¹ Aneez, Shihar, Sirilal, Ranga, "Sri Lanka's ex-leader seeks fresh elections after council vote boost", *Reuters*, 12 February 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics/sri-lankas-ex-leader-seeks-fresh-elections-after-council-vote-boost-idUSKBN1FW0ZA>. Accessed on 16 February 2018.

the party, which is already currently suffering a fractious relationship with its coalition partner, the UNP.

In spite of the government's poor performance, Wickremesinghe has said that it will continue its full term until 2020.²² However, he might reshuffle some of the ministries.²³ The government will need to take some drastic measures to regain public confidence. It could consider expediting action on the ongoing corruption investigations, reconciliation efforts and revoking the PTA. It will also need to bring down consumer prices and inflation, and work towards robust economic development.

The year 2020 will be crucial for all the key political parties. Judging from the local election results, the presidential elections would provide a serious test to the current government. It is likely that the UNP would present its own candidate since it has said that it would contest the elections independently of the SLFP. In this respect, Wickremesinghe could have his own presidential ambitions and could put his name in the hat for the 2020 elections. On his part, Sirisena still has the strong support of his party. During a press conference in April 2017, the SLFP stated that it would nominate Sirisena as its presidential candidate.²⁴ With the SLPP being a serious contender as well, Sirisena is likely to face a tough battle, regardless of who stands as a candidate, during the presidential elections.

The local election results may also see the possibility of China's involvement in the country's local infrastructure development. As evidenced during his presidency, Rajapaksa is closely linked to China. Chinese-funded investment poured into the country during his tenure. The Colombo Port City project was one of the key deals signed by Rajapaksa with China.²⁵ He also

²² "PM Holds Meeting At Temple Trees: Says He Will Continue With Maithri Until 2020: Dubs Results As Wake-Up Call", *Asian Mirror*, 11 February 2018. <http://www.asianmirror.lk/news/item/26867-pm-holds-meeting-at-temple-trees-says-he-will-continue-with-maithri-until-2020-dubs-results-as-wake-up-call>. Accessed on 15 February 2018.

²³ "Sri Lanka PM plans reshuffle in wake of local election drubbing", *Today*, 16 February 2018. <https://www.todayonline.com/world/sri-lanka-pm-plans-reshuffle-wake-local-election-drubbing>. Accessed on 17 February 2018.

²⁴ Gunatilleke, Nadira, "President Sirisena, SLFP's 2020 Presidential candidate: SB", *Daily News*, 6 April 2017. <http://dailynews.lk/2017/04/06/local/112681/president-sirisena-slp%E2%80%99s-2020-presidential-candidate-sb>. Accessed on 19 February 2018.

²⁵ Sala, Iliaria Maria, "Chinese investment aid to Sri Lanka has been a major success for China", *Quartz*, 26 January 2017. <https://qz.com/896219/chinese-investment-aid-to-sri-lanka-has-been-a-major-success-for-china/>. Accessed on 17 February 2018.

received financial assistance from China for wartime spending and, subsequently, for post-war reconstruction.²⁶

Conclusion

The results of the local elections have shown that Rajapaksa continues to remain a key player in the country's political landscape. He has succeeded creating his own brand of politics, one which has strong support in large pockets of the country. The local election results should also be seen as a wake-up call for the unity government. It has significant challenges and there are concerns if it would be able to address them in time for the national elections in 2020. It has failed to do so in the last three years. With the UNP intending to contest the national elections on its own, there is virtually no hope of a coalition front at the elections. The 2020 elections may see a multi-cornered fight among Gotabaya, Wickremesinghe and Sirisena. The disharmony in the UNP-SLFP camp, coupled with the impressive poll results for the SLPP, puts the Rajapaksa camp in a good position ahead of the national elections in 2020.

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²⁶ Gowen, Annie, "Can Sri Lanka's new government break free from China?", *Washington Post*, 16 August 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/can-sri-lankas-new-government-break-free-from-china/2015/08/15/d7bd9974-4044-11e5-b2c4-af4c6183b8b4_story.html?utm_term=.3f10e4b50701. Accessed on 17 February 2018.