

A Political Crisis in Sri Lanka

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Summary

In an unexpected turn of events, President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, and appointed former President and his political foe Mahinda Rajapaksa as the new premier of Sri Lanka. This paper explores the causes that led to this unlikely alliance and the breakup of the coalition government.

Political Ironies

On 26 October 2018, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena withdrew his United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) from the coalition government with the United National Party (UNP), [sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe](#) and replaced him with former President-turned Member of Parliament Mahinda Rajapaksa.

One of the many ironies of this episode is that Sirisena was a senior Cabinet member, including Minister of Health, in Rajapaksa's government during the latter's two terms as President from 2005 to 2014. He later joined hands with the UNP in November 2014 to contest and win the Presidential election as the common candidate against Rajapaksa, his long-term political partner. Sirisena explained that he had defected to the UNP and joined his long-term political rival Wickramasinghe to save the country from being steered towards a dictatorship and [to prevent blatant abuse of power](#).

A Mismatched Marriage

The Wickramasinghe-Sirisena alliance was viewed as a mismatch due to their political history. While Wickramasinghe represented centre-right political ideologies and liberal economic policies, Sirisena was a centre-left, people-centred nationalist. At the time of coming together, their primary objective was to defeat the strongman Rajapaksa.

However, shortly after coming into power, the Sirisena-Wickramasinghe coalition showed signs of political and ideological divisions. Initially, both were focused on pursuing their own agendas – Sirisena on consolidating his leadership in the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Wickramasinghe on strengthening his power in the UNP. As a result, the unity government failed to deliver what was promised – to uphold democratic values and to bring the alleged corrupt officials before the law – while the economy dipped to the displeasure of the public. As the UNP was implicated in the Central Bank bond scam, [Wickramasinghe continued to defend the perpetrators](#), worsening the coalition government's image as a bastion of good governance.

The Writing was on the Wall

This marked the beginning of the end of the coalition as Sirisena appointed a Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the Central Bank bond scam, which found a direct or indirect involvement of the UNP Members of Parliament, and when bringing those perpetrators before the law became the primary slogan of his party's election campaign in February 2018.

Further, the two parties blamed each other for the coalition's loss in the Local Government Elections in February 2018, as rumours of the President searching for a new Prime Minister and [the end of the coalition](#) emerged. In late February 2018, the President disbanded the Prime Minister-led Economic Management Committee, indicating an internal conflict in the government. Sirisena's silence over the no-confidence motion raised in Parliament against Wickramasinghe by Rajapaksa's supporters in April 2018 fuelled speculations of the rift.

As [Sirisena himself noted](#) on 29 October 2018, different political and personal stances have caused the failure of the unity government. Inadequate internal communication was evident on many occasions when they were found to be on opposing spectrums on matters of importance. There were times when Wickramasinghe's statements were publicly contradicted by the President, or when decisions taken by UNP ministers were reversed by the President claiming his lack of awareness. Sirisena's appointment of a committee of inquiry to look into the free trade agreement signed with Singapore is one of the best examples.

As Sirisena himself stated, it is the revelation of a plot to assassinate him, and his suspicion of the intervention of UNP Members of Parliament to spread fake news of him accusing the Indian Research and Analysis Wing's involvement in the assassination plot that triggered his immediate action of replacing the Prime Minister.

The Deal

Previously, the UNP had been losing elections when Wickramasinghe directly contested Rajapaksa. In a bid to have an alternative representative, Wickramasinghe struck a deal with Sirisena in 2014 that is widely believed to entail the executive presidency eventually being replaced by a parliamentary system, which will see the former becoming the Head of State, especially since the former made [this promise the cornerstone of his presidential campaign](#). However, Sirisena did not do exactly that. In April 2015, the Sri Lankan parliament passed the 19th amendment to its constitution which diluted the powers of the presidency, [namely, restricting a President to two five-year terms](#) – reversing Rajapaksa's removal of the term limitations of a President and increasing each term to six years. Nevertheless, the 19th amendment did not eradicate the executive presidency and only slightly diluted the powers of the President, which meant that Sirisena did not fulfil his campaign pledge or his supposed deal with Wickramasinghe. Moreover, in January 2018, Sirisena surprised the nation when he inquired from the Supreme Court about the impediments of extending his term until 2021.

It is likely that Sirisena may have struck a similar deal with Rajapaksa for his candidacy for the Presidency in 2020 since the Local Government Elections proved that he had lost his election base. Thus, he could be seeking re-election using Rajapaksa's vote base.

It is unclear why Rajapaksa agreed to accept the invitation to be the Prime Minister through a rather questionable procedure as he was likely to win in the 2019 elections even without Sirisena's support. Constitutionally, Rajapaksa cannot run for a third term in a Presidential Election. There have been differing views within the Rajapaksa camp if his brother Gotabaya should run for the Presidency instead although, [in a recent interview](#), Rajapaksa hinted that his son, Namal, could also be a contender. However, the 19th amendment had ensured that the constitution refrained both from contesting in the next presidential elections – Gotabaya as he is a dual citizen of the United States and Sri Lanka, and Namal as he does not meet the minimum age requirement of 35 years. Thus, it is likely that Rajapaksa is attempting to be in a position of power until his son meets the age requirement. Yet, whether he will go to the extent of jeopardising his political credibility to pave the way for his son is a puzzle yet to be answered.

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