

Mahinda Rajapaksa: An Influential Figure in Sri Lanka Politics

Chulanee Attanayake and Roshni Kapur

Summary

Former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has continued to remain in public spotlight despite losing the presidential polls in January 2015. In fact, he rose in popularity so much so that, eight months later, he won a record number of votes in the Local Government Elections and entered parliament from Kurunegala district in North Western Province. In October 2018, he made a leadership comeback when he accepted President Maithripala Sirisena's offer to become the new Prime Minister. While the move thrilled his supporters, the political turmoil that erupted in Sri Lanka has questioned Rajapaksa's intent and the need for him to accept the offer. Against this backdrop, this paper analyses Rajapaksa's background, defeat in the 2015 elections and return to political prominence.

Political Rise

Mahinda Rajapaksa began his political career in 1970 as the youngest parliamentarian of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), representing the Beliatta electorate in the Hambantota district. He lost his seat in the 1977 parliamentary elections to a landslide victory by the United National Party (UNP) but was re-elected to Parliament in 1989. Since then, he has gradually risen in prominence within the party and the country. From 1994 to 2001, he held a number of ministerial portfolios in President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government, including being the Minister of Labour, Minister of Fisheries, and Minister of Ports and Shipping. Following the victory of the UNP government in the 2001 general elections, he was elected the Leader of the Opposition. In April [2004](#), he became the 13th Prime Minister of Sri Lanka following his party's victory at the general elections. He won the Presidential elections against former Prime Minister and Opposition Leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, in November 2005 and served as the 6th President of Sri Lanka until January 2015.

Rajapaksa hails from an [affluent political family](#) from southern Sri Lanka which is associated with Sinhalese nationalist parties. He identified himself with labour rights and championed human rights and political activism.

As a political leader, he underlined anti-terrorism, national security and sovereignty as his key priorities. He promised a hardline approach against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in his 2005 Presidential election campaign which swept him to victory. His landslide [victory](#) in the 2010 Presidential elections confirmed his growing legitimacy following the defeat of the LTTE through a military campaign in May 2009. His administration was credited with bringing an end to the highly protracted and intractable civil war. However, his rapid development drive, following the end of the conflict, was viewed with mixed sentiments. Some appreciated the infrastructure-oriented development as a way forward to

make Sri Lanka a hub in the Indian Ocean. Yet, others criticised his administration for taking large loans from China and leading the country into a debt trap.

However, since the United States and other Western countries criticised Rajapaksa for continuing with the military offensive against the LTTE and refused to provide economic aid to him, he edged closer to Beijing which was a willing lender. Internationally, Rajapaksa was criticised by the Western powers for dismissing calls for a ceasefire with the LTTE and later accusing him of undermining the rule of law, democracy and civil liberties, both during and after the civil war.

The Defeat and the Comeback

The years after 2010 demonstrated a decline in Rajapaksa's popularity due to various reasons. These included giving greater power centralisation to the executive branch, as brought about by the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which removed the two-term presidential limit. Allegations of nepotism, corruption and coercive practices voted an over-confident Rajapaksa out of power in the 2015 [Presidential elections](#). His opponent, Maithripala Sirisena, not only managed to secure votes from the minority communities, but also from the Sinhalese [heartland](#), Rajapaksa's main constituency.

The defeat, however, did not stop Rajapaksa from remaining in the limelight. The masses continued visiting him at his home in Medamulana in the Hambantota district and people pursued him everywhere he went which encouraged him to contest the general elections in August 2015. And the [landslide victory](#) of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), a newly formed political party, in the 2018 local government polls marked the return of Rajapaksa. The victory was as much due to his popularity as to [the failure](#) of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe unity government.

New Appointment and Impact

In a context where his winning the next elections was almost certain, Rajapaksa's decision to make a comeback in a rather [disputed manner is a mystery](#). However, the impact it could make on his political future cannot be taken lightly. His ardent supporters celebrated his appointment on the streets. Yet, part of the blame that is aimed at the President for his decision to appoint a new Prime Minister was also directed at Rajapaksa. His recent [defection](#) from the SLFP to the SLPP could perhaps be a move to keep his vote base intact and counter public pressure against his new political alliance with the President. Given the current political chaos in the country, in which Rajapaksa is a key figure, it now appears that he would need some image restoration in order to win the next general elections on his own.

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Dr Chulanee Attanayake is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at chulanee@nus.edu.sg. Ms Roshni Kapur is a Research Assistant at ISAS. She can be contacted at roshni@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.