

Sri Lanka's Presidential Elections: Initial Observations

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Summary

The forthcoming presidential elections in Sri Lanka would see a plethora of key issues discussed during the campaign; the foremost being national security and economic development.

Introduction

Sri Lanka is gradually approaching its next presidential election with incumbent President Maithripala Sirisena's term scheduled to end by 9 January 2020. In May 2019, National Election Commission (NEC) revealed that the presidential election will be held between 9 November 2019 and 9 December 2019¹, as the presidential polls need to be held one month prior to the expiry of the office of the current President as per the constitution. So far, no official date has been announced and neither has the Commission called for nomination. However, during a media briefing on 9 September 2019, the Chairman of the NEC Mahinda Deshapriya revealed that, as per the power bestowed upon his commission by the constitution, he has the power to call for a Presidential Election from 10 September onwards². This election is significant for the country given that more executive power would be vested upon the Prime Minister instead of the President as per the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.³

Candidates

Being a multi-party democracy, the Sri Lankan voters have a choice to select their President from a plethora of candidates. As of now, it has been revealed that 18 candidates⁴ - 17 fielded by political parties, and one independent candidate who is a former parliamentarian - will be contesting the upcoming election.

¹ 'Presidential poll between Nov. 9 and Dec. 9: EC', *Daily Mirror* (20 May 2019), http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Presidential-poll-between-Nov--9-and-Dec--9:-EC/108-167497?fbclid=IwAR0IyTfMVuLgPWuL3i50YwZAp9LgubUJ9Wae7bEpEQIPctLcuu26EYLY9Xc. Accessed on 16 September 2019.

² 'NEC has authority to call for presidential election from tomorrow-NEC Chairman Mahinda Deshapriya', *News First* (9 September 2019), <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/09/09/nec-has-authority-to-call-for-presidential-election-from-tomorrow/>. Accessed on 15 September 2019.

³ 'PARLIAMENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA', Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution (15 May 2015).

⁴ '18 candidates to contest Presidential election – Chairman of NEC', *News First* (9 September 2019), <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/09/09/18-candidates-to-contest-presidential-election-chairman-of-nec/>. Accessed on 16 September 2019.

The first to announce his candidacy was Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a former defence secretary and brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Ending months of speculation, the Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP) during its national summit revealed that Gotabaya will contest as its presidential candidate at the upcoming election. His candidacy has garnered mixed reactions from the public. While his supporters want a strong leader and are impressed with his proven track record as a former defense bureaucrat, his critics are wary of the civil cases against him in US courts, misusing government funds and whether his US citizenship has been formally renounced.

While Gotabaya's candidacy hardly comes as a surprise, the announcement of Anura Kumara Dissanayake's candidacy from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was unexpected as the JVP has not fielded its own presidential candidate for 20 years and has actively supported other candidates by forging alliances with the two main political parties: in 2005 with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and in 2010 and 2015 with United National Party (UNP). For the upcoming election in 2019, the JVP has joined hands with the National People's Movement (NPM)⁵, the same group of civil society activists from the common candidacy platform that triumphed over Rajapaksa in 2015. The NPM is an alliance of 28 organisations including the JVP and its trade unions, the People's Pioneer Artists and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, a JVP splinter group.

The United National Party (UNP), the party in power, has yet to field its presidential candidate. There is an ongoing power struggle between the current Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and Cabinet Ministers for Housing, Construction and Cultural Affairs Sajith Premadasa, who both want the party's nomination.⁶ A few months ago, Premadasa and his supporters announced his intent to contest and are campaigning to garner the public support to win the ticket to run from the UNP. There were multiple rallies around the country in support of Premadasa's candidacy organized by his party's supporters. He has publicly reiterated his willingness and ambition to contest at the upcoming polls saying that he would contest despite any obstacles⁷. In the meantime, Wickremesinghe has also expressed his interest to be the UNP candidate representing. Wickremesinghe was reported as saying he has every right to contest as the party leader, and if becomes the nominee, every UNP member will have to support him. There are also speculations that the UNP is considering the Speaker of Parliament Karu Jayasuriya as its presidential candidate. On 16 September 2019, it was reported that a group of Buddhist monks⁸ urged the UNP leadership to field Jayasuriya as the candidate to lead the UNP-led alliance. In a candid interview with a leading

⁵ Aanya Wipulasena, 'National People's Movement for a 'transformative leadership'', *Sunday Observer* (7 July 2019), <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2019/07/07/news-features/national-people's-movement-'transformative-leadership'>. Accessed on 16 September 2019.

⁶ 'UNP to decide between Ranil, Sajith, Karu', *Colombo Gazette* (27 July 2019), <https://colombogazette.com/2019/07/27/unp-to-decide-between-ranil-sajith-karu/>. Accessed on 16 September 2019.

⁷ 'I'll contest the presidential polls despite any obstacles: Sajith', *Daily Mirror* (16 September 2019), http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Ill-contest-the-presidential-polls-despite-any-obstacles-Sajith/108-174539. Accessed on 17 September 2019.

⁸ Yohan Perera, 'Several monks urge PM to field Karu for presidency', *Daily Mirror*, http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Several-monks-urge-PM-to-field-Karu-for-presidency/108-174538. Accessed on 16 September 2019.

daily paper, Jayasuriya, for the first time, expressed his willingness to accept the candidacy “on an abolition platform [of the Executive Presidency]”⁹ if his nomination is supported by all the progressive forces including the fractions of the UNP.

While initially there was news that President Maithripala Sirisena harboured ambitions of seeking a second term in office he has not yet announced his candidacy. There are rumours that his party is intending to form an alliance with the SLPP, yet, the process seems to be posing challenges. They are clashing on the terms and conditions at which the two parties will join hands. On-going disagreements have been reported on the party symbol through which their alliance would contest, and of certain SLFP members extending their support publicly even before the alliance has been formally confirmed.

Apart from the above, sections of the Sri Lankan community have been looking for alternative political groups that are critical of established political parties and have extended their interest in fielding their own candidates with the hope of changing the existing legislature, judiciary and the executive along with the main parties. Nagananda Kodithuwakku, Attorney-at-law and public interest litigation activist; Gamini Wijesinghe, the former Auditor-General and Dr. Ajantha Perera, a scientist and environmentalist, top the list. Perera’s candidacy from the Socialist Party of Sri Lanka has drawn public attention given the fact that it is after 20 years that a woman is contesting the presidential polls. Even though a female President ruled the country for a decade between 1994 and 2004, after 1999, in which then President Chandrika Bandaraikema Kumaratunga contested for her second term, no party has fielded a female candidate.

Key Issues

The forthcoming presidential election in Sri Lanka would see a plethora of key issues raised during the campaign; the foremost being national security and economic development. For several decades during the civil war, Sri Lankans’ have prioritised national security over other issues. Since the end of the war in 2009, this was shifted to economic development. However, by the time of the election in 2015, public sentiment was more drawn towards good governance, in which they demanded the leaders to end widespread corruption and uphold democracy while ensuring stable and long-term economic development for the country. However, the governance of the UNP-SLFP unity government for the past four years and the recent Easter Sunday terror attacks has brought national security back to the forefront. There are a number of other key issues which would be of utmost interest to the voters in deciding their next president.

⁹ ‘Next President Should be the last : Karu Jayasuriya’, *Daily Mirror* (17 September 2019), <http://www.dailymirror.lk/hard-talk/Next-President-Should-be-the-last-Karu-Jayasuriya/334-174618>. Accessed on 16 September 2019.

National Security

The Easter Sunday bombings that killed over 250 people and injured many more; and the reported failure of the incumbent government to prevent or minimise the attacks, despite having prior warnings from foreign intelligence services, has compelled the public to prioritise national security policy from the upcoming leader. After a decade void of any terror incident, the Easter bombings have re-traumatised the generation who lived under the fear of war, and have traumatised the younger generation for whom this is new. Amid rising Islamic insurgency, there are greater calls for the state to rebuild its intelligence and military capabilities. The police raids after the bombings revealed that extremism is a much deeper problem that cannot be solved overnight.

This has given the main opposition, especially the SLPP, a vantage point. Being the former Defense Secretary who served in a war-winning government, Gotabaya is credited with employing an effective military strategy to defeat the Tamil Tigers and bringing the highly intractable and protracted conflict to an end. His proven record has struck a chord with many who want a stronger security apparatus and hence seem to be confident in his ability to ensure national security.

Economy, Development and Deliverability

The inability of the current government to deliver promised economic development and the slow economic growth during its tenure has made the public emphasise on economic performance as a key priority. Even though the unity government promised steadfast growth, economic stability and increased foreign direct investment, the past four years has seen slow economic growth. The economy has declined rather than reach its potential¹⁰, worse than during the war period. Between 1983 and 1998, the GDP growth was approximately 4.6 per cent yearly and exports increased nearly three-fold in real terms. Although market reforms began in 1977, it continued to develop as the war unfolded. Throughout the war, successive governments not only carried out market reforms but also promoted an export-driven economy in order to reduce dependence on the tea industry and develop the garment sector.¹¹

After the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government came into power in 2015, economic growth stagnated at 5 per cent from the previous year. From 2016 onwards it started to decline. In 2016, economic growth was at 4.5 per cent and in 2017, it declined to 3.1 per cent. The 2018 political crisis dampened the economy, the outflow of foreign capital and tourism opportunities. As a result, its economic growth of 3.2 per cent in 2018 was the lowest in 17

¹⁰ 'Four years of a National Government: Political change and economic disappointment', *The Sunday Times* (13 January 2019), <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/190113/columns/four-years-of-a-national-government-political-change-and-economic-disappointment-330060.html>. Accessed on 12 August 2019.

¹¹ Rajesh Venugopal, 'Sri Lanka: Military Fiscalism and the Politics of Market Reform at a Time of Civil War' in Aparna Sundar and Nandini Sundar, *Civil Wars in South Asia*, (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2014).

years.¹² Although the constitutional crisis was eventually resolved through a judicial intervention and the economy has picked up marginally by 3.6 per cent¹³ in 2019, Sri Lanka was the second worst performing economy in South Asia. Its smaller neighbours Nepal and Bhutan outperformed it at 6.2 per cent and 5.7 per cent respectively.¹⁴

The Easter bombings were another setback for the economy that widened the current account deficits, plunged investor confidence and made international borrowings harder. In contrast, Rajapaksa's presidential stint was characterised with high economic growth of 7-8 per cent, development and multiple infrastructure projects.¹⁵ Public dismay regarding economic performance was seen through numerous strikes carried out by the working community for the past four years. People's voting against the ruling party and electing the Mahinda Rajapaksa-led SLPP during the local government election was a sign of community frustration and disappointment in the incumbent government. Current strikes and protests held by the Government Administration Service; the Sri Lanka Health Service; the non-academic staff of universities and many other similar public demonstrations are a reminder of broken and unfulfilled promises.

Communal Relations

Although Sri Lanka is arguably no longer a tinder box of sectarian and ethnic violence, communal tensions have risen in the last few years. There has been a string of anti-Muslim riots in various parts of the country, some of which erupted due to minor disagreements between different ethnic groups. The Easter Sunday attacks that were orchestrated by a local Islamist group National Thowheeth Jamath added fuel to the fire. Hate speech proliferated on social media and Muslim-owned houses and shops were attacked following the bombings.

The current government has been criticised for being bystanders and not practicing due diligence to stop the riots. The mob attacks in Kandy in 2018 went on for four days despite the imposition of a curfew and social media ban.¹⁶

Corruption

Tackling corruption and bribery is another key issue that has persisted from the previous election. The current government was elected on its promise to usher electoral and political reforms including lowering corruption levels and removing alleged financial inconsistencies.

¹² 'Sri Lanka's Growth to Recover Gradually But Continued Commitment to Reforms Remains Essential — ADB', Asian Development Bank (4 April 2019), <https://www.adb.org/news/sri-lankas-growth-recover-gradually-continued-commitment-reforms-remains-essential-adb>. Accessed on 13 August 2019.

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ 'Sri Lanka: Economy', Asian Development Bank, <https://www.adb.org/countries/sri-lanka/economy>. Accessed on 13 August 2019.

¹⁵ 'Profile: Mahinda Rajapaksa', *BBC* (18 August 2015), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24918281>. Accessed on 13 August 2019.

¹⁶ 'Sri Lanka to probe anti-Muslim riots, lift curfew', *New Straits Times*, 10 March 2018, <https://www.nst.com.my/world/2018/03/343625/sri-lanka-probe-anti-muslim-riots-lift-curfew>. Accessed on 12 August 2019.

However, corruption continues to be embedded in every level of the state's administration. Sri Lanka was ranked 89 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index.¹⁷ The GAN Business Anti-Corruption Portal echoed similar ratings and expressed concern on the relatively high corruption levels including red tape, bureaucracy, nepotism, cronyism and bribery.¹⁸ Although the government is beginning to implement new laws to set up courts to handle the backlog of cases, the implementation is hindered by a lack of technical expertise and resources.

One of the most scathing corruption cases was the bond scam in which the auction of government bonds was scaled up ten-fold to meet government borrowing needs. However, corruption has hit both the government and the opposition. It would be unwise to cast all the blame of corruption solely on the current government. Some members of the Rajapaksa family, including Gotabaya, are facing police probes and court cases for alleged financial misappropriation.¹⁹

Conclusion

Being a multi-party democracy, having multiple candidates at a Presidential poll is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. However, the leading candidates have always been from the UNP and SLFP. Yet, at this election, the SLPP has emerged as a new third force. Given the public disappointment with regard to mainstream political parties, different sections of the Sri Lankan community are also looking at alternative political parties and individuals to represent the country. As the competition is expected to increase, getting over 50 per cent of votes for the winning candidate may be a challenge. As the election campaign is yet to begin, and the candidates are yet to officially put out their manifestos it is too early to decide who has the most practical and innovative solution and policies to make Sri Lanka's future bright.

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¹⁷ 'Sri Lanka' Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/country/LKA>. Accessed on 13 August 2019.

¹⁸ 'Sri Lanka Corruption Report', Business Anti-Corruption Portal- GAN Integrity, <https://www.ganintegrity.com/portal/country-profiles/sri-lanka/>. Accessed on 13 August 2019.

¹⁹ Shihar Aneez, Ranga Sirilal, 'Sri Lanka parliament backs special courts for bribery, corruption cases', Reuters (10 May 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-corruption-court/sri-lanka-parliament-backs-special-courts-for-bribery-corruption-cases-idUSKBN1IA2QE>. Accessed on 13 August 2019.