

Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: The Prospect of a Sajith Premadasa Victory

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Summary

Sajith Premadasa is the presidential nominee for the United National Party (UNP), which is part of the National Democratic Front coalition. The UNP, despite major electoral defeats for years, has managed to survive as the biggest party in Sri Lanka's political arena. Its poor performance under the Yahapalana (good governance) government, coupled with political infighting, though, has disenchanted many UNP supporters. Against this backdrop, Premadasa faces a difficult task in persuading voters that the UNP deserves a second chance in the upcoming election.

Introduction

The centre-right United National Party (UNP) has nominated Sajith Premadasa as its candidate for the forthcoming presidential election. Premadasa, the incumbent Housing Minister and only son of former president Ranasinghe Premadasa, was announced the party's presidential nominee after weeks of tension and uncertainty. There was a persisting power struggle between him and outgoing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The Working Committee finally made the decision following discussions between the Premadasa and Wickremesinghe camps.¹ The power struggle within the UNP was an embarrassing situation for the party that has only helped cede ground to the main political opponent, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP).

The UNP, under the Yahapalana government, has performed poorly in the last four-and-half years. The National Unity Government, formed by the UNP and sections of Sri Lanka Freedom Party after ousting Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2015,² assured the public that it would tackle corruption and high inflation, promote post-war reconciliation, restore democracy, hold the accused accountable and move the foreign policy to a middle-path. However, most of the electoral promises remained unfulfilled.³ Moreover, the administrative, ideological and personality differences between President Maithripala Sirisena and Wickremesinghe came into play. Wickremesinghe's pro-Western and economic liberalisation policies clashed with Sirisena's protectionism and Sinhalese nationalism,

¹ 'Contender unveiled', Daily FT (27 September 2019), http://www.ft.lk/ft_view__editorial/Contender-unveiled/58-686507. Accessed on 12 November 2019.

² D P Satish, 'As Presidential Battle in Sri Lanka Hots Up, Key Contenders Eye Tamil Votes. Could There be an Upset?', *News18* (14 October 2019), <https://www.news18.com/news/world/as-presidential-battle-in-sri-lanka-hots-up-key-contenders-eye-tamil-votes-could-there-be-an-upset-2345571.html>. Accessed on 12 November 2019.

³ 'Fulfil Promises Made To Ensure Good Governance: Friday Forum Tells Maithri And Ranil', *Colombo Telegraph* (8 July 2019), <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/fulfil-promises-made-to-ensure-good-governance-friday-forum-tells-maithri-and-ranil/>. Accessed on 12 November 2019.

throwing the country into instability.⁴ It resulted in the political crisis in October 2018 when Sirisena unlawfully dismissed Wickremesinghe.

The UNP, along with the support of smaller parties, has now formed the National Democratic Front to contest the elections under the swan symbol. Some of these parties include the Tamil Progress Alliance, Tamil National Alliance, Ceylon Makkal Congress and All Ceylon Makkal Congress. Till date, the UNP's campaign has been incoherent and idealistic. There is criticism that the UNP manifesto is rather ambitious and the party has not properly gone through the sufficiency of funds, feasibility and implementation process. There have also been conflicting statements by its members. The party has a difficult task ahead in convincing disillusioned voters that it deserves a second chance.

Background of the Party and the Candidate

The UNP was founded by Don Stephen Senanyake in 1947 by merging three parties into one. From the beginning, the party represented the interests of the business community and the landed gentry. At the same time, it was prudent in adopting populist measures to gain acceptance in the lower and middle classes.⁵ The party has undergone significant changes in its fortunes since the 1970s. It was the dominant party in 1977 and held on to power for 17 years. It secured a four-fifths majority in the parliament that enabled it carry out comprehensive changes in the political and economic arena. Under J R Jayewardene's leadership, the UNP liberalised the economy, moved away from the state-led socialist policies of the SLFP government and towards an open export-oriented economy. However, the UNP's economic policies turned increasingly unpopular and dampened public confidence. Many of these policies were implemented due to lobbying of local and international business groups and rather than in the interests of the public. It led to the eventual victory of the People's Alliance, led by the SLFP, in 1994. The UNP was then ousted and remained in opposition for close to two decades (except for a short period of 2001-2004).⁶

Following the UNP's defeat, the party started a process of political reforms to restore public confidence under the leadership of Wickremesinghe. The new party leaders decided to maintain a low profile in the public eye while mapping out new policies on key issues. In 2015, the UNP returned to power when it supported a segment of the SLFP and its candidate, Sirisena. The unexpected breakaway of Sirisena, along with a group of members of parliament (MPs), was an unexpected twist of events that changed the country's dynamics. The general elections, held later in 2015, consolidated the UNP's victory and gave it a parliamentary majority to form a national government, along with sections of the SLFP.

⁴ S D Muni, 'Sri Lanka's Crisis: Conflicts of Class and Power' ISAS Insights, No. 523 (26 November 2018), p 3, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ISAS-Insights-No.-523-Sri-Lankas-Crisis.pdf>. Accessed on 12 November 2019.

⁵ 'History', United National Party, <https://www.apiunp.com/history/>. Accessed on 13 November 2019.

⁶ Amita Shastri, 'United National Party: From Dominance to Opposition', in Amita Shastri & Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Political Parties in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), p 101

The fluctuations in the UNP's political power have been accompanied by economic and political changes. The party introduced several macroeconomic policies, including market, constitutional and electoral reforms. When the party was defeated in 1994, it lost its ideological orientation of being an icon of free-market capitalism. It was only the 2015 surprise victory that provided a boost to UNP's fortunes. It is surprising that the UNP has managed to survive as a major party despite continuous electoral losses, ineffective leadership and erosion of its ideological orientation.

Premadasa is currently the Minister of Housing, Construction and Cultural Affairs and MP for the Hambantota Electoral District. Unlike most of the politicians in Sri Lanka, who change parties frequently, Premadasa has shown his undivided loyalty to the UNP. He has challenged Wickremesinghe to become the party leader for many years and as a concession was given the position of a deputy leader.⁷ Although he is well connected and comes from an influential family, Premadasa has branded himself as a populist leader with a proven track record.

Strengths and Challenges

The nomination of Premadasa brings a set of strengths as well as challenges for the UNP. First, Wickremesinghe has lost his legitimacy as an effective leader, especially after the government's failure to prevent the Easter Sunday attacks. He has constantly tried to deflect blame, saying that he was unaware of the prior intelligence warnings. Wickremesinghe's rising unpopularity has been a boost for Premadasa's election campaign, where the latter has presented himself as a new contender who would introduce fresh policies and reforms.

Second, Premadasa has given the party a nationalistic orientation by portraying himself as a devout Sinhalese Buddhist, a departure from Wickremesinghe's pro-West and liberal stance.⁸ Premadasa is continuing on the same path as his father Ranasinghe by appealing to the conservative Sinhalese community, who usually vote for the SLFP (now the SLPP). During a major election rally, he said that he has the 'patriotism and the Buddhist qualities of Ranasinghe Premadasa' and will give 'priority to Buddhism'.⁹ This could appeal to some Sinhalese voters.

Third, Premadasa has initiated many grassroots projects on housing development, poverty reduction and youth movement. His family legacy of being Ranasinghe's heir is likely to be an asset. Ranasinghe earned a reputation of being a populist and people-oriented leader with humble, working class beginnings. During his presidency, he initiated the Million Houses Programme to provide houses for the homeless, *Gam Udawa* (Village Awakening Movement), which developed neglected rural areas, and *Jana Saviya* (People's Strength) for

⁷ Krishan Francis, 'Sri Lanka's governing party picks Premadasa as candidate', *Yahoo! News* (26 September 2019), <https://news.yahoo.com/premadasa-named-ruling-coalitions-presidential-122355705.html>. Accessed on 13 November 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "'I will protect your rights more than my own life" – Sajith Premadasa', *YouTube* (10 November 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hvw-fqlqvHk>. Accessed on 13 November 2019.

poverty eradication.¹⁰ Premadasa has also promised to revive some of his late father's populist programmes such as the *Jana Saviya* scheme that will distribute more funds to low-income families.¹¹ Restoring former populist policies could partially contribute to Premadasa's election campaign. While human development issues such as poverty reduction, education, healthcare are not key issues this elections, they could still appeal to the rural community.

Fourth, the coalition with Tamil and Muslim parties would help to bring some minority votes. The Global Tamil Forum (GTF)¹² has urged Tamils to exercise their vote at the forthcoming election. In contrast, many Tamils accuse Gotabaya for political violence and repression during his tenure as the Defence Secretary. There are also civil cases against him in United States courts, including ordering the murder of a newspaper editor, Lasantha Wickrematunge, and the torture of a Tamil detainee, Roy Samathanam.

There are also a number of challenges for the party. First, Premadasa has assumed the leadership of the incumbent government that has not fulfilled most of its promises. He is surrounded by the same group of politicians who have lost their credibility due to their failed policies. Amid the UNP's failed governance, Premadasa has remained largely passive and unreceptive. He has played along and chose not to rock the boat.

Second, the UNP started its election campaign one and a half months after the SLPP launched its campaign. Moreover, the UNP's campaign has been largely unorganised and dispersed. Some of the ad hoc opinion polls state that he trails by the same margins as he started the election campaign.¹³ Although the UNP has taken the initiative to launch new apps, presumably to reach out to younger voters, most of them do not work. In contrast, Gotabaya's election campaign has been much more articulate and coherent, with better functioning apps.

Third, besides promising to make former army chief Sarath Fonseka his national security adviser presumably to challenge Gotabaya's strong national security standing, Premadasa has not openly stated who else will a part of his cabinet. He said that he would appoint a new prime minister, implying that Wickremesinghe will not hold the position. In contrast, Wickremesinghe has publicly said that he would continue to the prime minister post-elections. The clashing statements by Premadasa and Wickremesinghe demonstrate that the party is still undergoing internal issues and is unable to demonstrate a united front. If the UNP manages to win the elections, one cannot discount the probability of a power rivalry emerging between Premadasa and Wickremesinghe, like the one between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. Any internal rivalry would lead to serious implications on decision-making for the country.

¹⁰ 'Ranasinghe Premadasa', *Daily News* (1 May 2018), <https://www.dailynews.lk/comment/114796>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

¹¹ 'Revived Janasaviya scheme to supplement Samurdhi', *Daily News* (14 October 2019), <https://www.dailynews.lk/2019/10/14/political/199767/revived-janasaviya-scheme-supplement-samurdhi>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

¹² The GTF is one of the biggest Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora organisations.

¹³ 'Sajith Premadasa's subconscious prejudices – or probably he is being over cautious not to be accused of pandering to minorities – is preventing him from actively reaching out to ethnic minority voters.', *Daily Mirror* (11 November 2019), <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/66282>. Accessed on 13 November 2019.

Fourth, while the support of some Tamil and Muslim parties could help to garner minority votes, it could also create anxiety within the Sinhalese community. The TNA stated in its press release that the new government would need to address issues of an acceptable political solution, missing persons, resettlement, rehabilitation, release of lands and people in custody.¹⁴ Many of these points coincide with the 13-point demands that it formulated with the Tamil Students Union from Jaffna University. The TNA's demand for devolution of power into the Northern and Eastern provinces has been a sensitive issue for the core Sinhalese voters, who see it as a threat to the unitary state structure. Separately, there are allegations that some of the leaders of the Muslim parties have connections with the National Towheeth Jamaat, the terrorist group that orchestrated the deadly Easter Sunday attacks.¹⁵ The support of these Muslim parties could dissuade many Sinhalese voters from supporting the UNP.

Fifth, Premadasa has not taken a clear stand on the 13-point demands raised by the TNA, while Gotabaya has outrightly rejected these demands (except for the 13th amendment). Premadasa may hesitate to take a firm stance because it would accuse him for pandering to the Tamil minority community and jeopardise his relationship with the conservative Sinhalese community. The UNP may be assuming that minority voters would cast for them simply because they dislike Gotabaya. Many may end up abstaining in their vote despite the GTF's call to exercise their vote. The party's lack of efforts to actively reach out to minority groups is limiting its prospects to build the biggest possible alliance, similar to the one formed in 2015 that brought it to victory.

Conclusion

Premadasa is surely a stronger contender against Gotabaya than Wickremesinghe. However, there are several challenges surrounding his election campaign. He has assumed the leadership of a highly unpopular party due to its substandard performance. The UNP's electoral defeat at the 2018 local polls of 32.63 per cent was an indication of the waning public support for the party. Many are sceptical on whether the UNP would be able to implement the policies stated in its new manifesto.

Regardless of the election outcome, the UNP will need to seek new policy changes and revamp itself in order to survive as a major political party. Although Wickremesinghe had to cede to party pressure to allow Premadasa to stand as the party candidate, his authority and power over the party remains intact. He continues to be the party leader, its prime ministerial contender and would become the Leader of Opposition if the UNP loses the elections. Furthermore, many of the members of the Working Committee hold their loyalty to Wickremesinghe. The inconsistencies and lapses in the UNP's electoral campaign demonstrate that the party's current state of affairs is self-destructive in nature.

¹⁴ 'Presidential Election – 16th November 2019', TNA (6 November 2019), <http://tnapolitics.org/>. Accessed on 13 November 2019.

¹⁵ Sandun Jayawardana, 'Rishad, Army Chief clarify matters over phone calls', *The Sunday Times* (30 June 2019), <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/190630/news/rishad-army-chief-clarify-matters-over-phone-calls-355973.html>. Accessed on 13 November 2019.

The UNP's decision to nominate Premadasa, a young leader not associated with any faction, as its presidential candidate could be a strategy to unite the party divisions and give the impression that a change of candidate would organically change its unpopular and failed policies. It remains uncertain whether Premadasa's Sinhala-Buddhist campaign of a moral high ground would appeal to the core Sinhalese nationalist constituency. Many in the Southern hinterland are strong supporters of Rajapaksa and are nostalgic about the economic prosperity the country saw during his government. On a more positive note, for those who have reservations about Gotabaya and the controversies surrounding his campaign, there is an alternative in Premadasa.

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