

Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna a Key Contender

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Summary

The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) has nominated Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former Defense Secretary, as its presidential candidate. Despite Gotabaya's recent introduction to mainstream politics and the SLPP being a relatively new party, they have emerged as key contenders who could resonate with voters. Amidst this backdrop, this paper analyses the factors that make Gotabaya a frontrunner despite his controversies.

Introduction

The nomination of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former Defense Secretary and brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, as the presidential candidate of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), did not come as a surprise. His candidacy was being discussed in the media and policy circles for months. His campaign started soon after the Easter Bombing attacks. His campaign highlighted national security and economic development as key platforms. By the time his main opponent, Sajith Premadasa of the United National Party (UNP), began his campaign, Gotabaya had already gained a one-and-a-half month head-start in campaigning.

The SLPP and Gotabaya have gathered the support of multiple minority political parties, demonstrating that, this time, their campaign is not as polarised as it was in the last election 2015. Moreover, three main Tamil parties – Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC),¹ Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP),² and Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal³ – are now supporting the SLPP. After multiple discussions and negotiations, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), under the leadership of President Maithripala Sirisena, also signed a memorandum of understanding with the SLPP. The support from the CWC and the SLFP will boost Gotabaya's campaign.

Gotabaya and the SLPP

In November 2016, the Joint Opposition (JO), a group of members of parliament and political parties, led by Mahinda Rajapaksa, unveiled a new political party – the SLPP.⁴ It was a relaunch

¹ The CWC has traditionally represented Sri Lankan Tamils who work in the country's tea estates. It may have aligned with the SLPP following its promise to increase the daily wages of plantation workers to Rs1,000 (S\$7.50). They signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in October 2019. See <http://www.ft.lk/news/SLPP-and-CWC-ink-MoU-to-back-GR/56-687922>. Accessed on 10 November 2019.

² Led by Douglas Devananda, the EPDP was a militant group like the LTTE. As the LTTE rose to prominence, the EPDP and similar groups were suppressed. The EPDP entered mainstream politics soon after and has supported different governments.

³ Formed and headed by Vinayagamurthi Muralitharan (alias Karuna Amman) a former LTTE leader.

⁴ Led by Mahinda Rajapaksa, the JO is a political alliance formed by the Rajapaksa-supported faction of the SLFP. It consists of a SLFP-Rajapaksa faction and other major quasi left-wing parties. Madhura Seneviratne, "Joint Opposition Party received a new name as 'Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna'", *SBS Sinhalese*, 2 November

of a minor political party previously known as the Sri Lanka National Front, later called Our Sri Lanka Freedom Front.⁵ The SLPP first contested during the 2018 Local Government Polls and won a landslide victory with 44.65 per cent of the votes and 231 out of 315 local government bodies.⁶ It outperformed Prime Minister Ranil Wickeremsinghe's UNP and Sirisena's SLFP. It also overtook the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, traditionally accepted as the third force in the country.

The victory of the SLPP reflected the people's frustration with the UNP-SLFP unity government's failure to deliver what it promised. Former strongman Mahinda Rajapaksa's association with the SLPP also contributed to its victory.⁷ His support also gave the JO the validation and confidence it needed to break away from the SLFP. Hence, it was clear that the SLPP would field its own candidate in the upcoming Presidential elections.

When the time came for the party to select its candidate, it was apparent Gotabaya would be nominated. On his part, Mahinda Rajapaksa cannot contest as a presidential candidate, due to the two-term limit set out in the constitution's 19th amendment. His son, Namal Rajapaksa, held to be a future candidate, has not reached the constitutionally required age to contest.⁸ Gotabaya's position was strengthened by groups of intellectuals and professionals not directly linked with any political party but rather with civil society platforms like Viyathmaga,⁹ Eliya¹⁰ and Ekathuwa,¹¹ which, for years, have been lobbying for Gotabaya's candidacy.

2016, <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/join-opposition-party-received-a-new-name-as-sri-lanka-podujana-peramuna>. Accessed on 9 November 2019.

- ⁵ "Call to the Rajapaksa Team", 19 February 2018, *The Island*, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=180200. See: "Political Party Symbol Changed", *Daily News*, 5 February 2016, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2016/02/05/political/political-party-symbol-changed>; Also see, "Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna - New Political Party of the Joint Opposition?", *Asia Tribune*, 6 November 2016, <http://www.asiantribune.com/node/89676>. Accessed on 10 November 2019.
- ⁶ "Call to the Rajapaksa Team", 19 February 2018, *The Island*, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=180200. Accessed on 8 November 2019.
- ⁷ Mahinda Rajapaksa was not an official party member when the Local Government Polls were held. However, he spoke at the launch of the Joint People's front election campaign and made a call to vote for 'Pohottuwa'. See: "Mahinda Throws SLFP into Crisis by 'Vote Pohottuwa' Call", *Colombo Telegraph*, 2 January 2018, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/mahinda-throws-slfp-into-crisis-by-vote-pohottuwa-call/>. Accessed on 8 November 2019.
- ⁸ "Will Gota reach his unreachable star as lights grow dimmer hour by hour?", *The Sunday Times*, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/190804/columns/will-gota-reach-his-unreachable-star-as-lights-grow-dimmer-hour-by-hour-361432.html>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.
- ⁹ Viyathmaga identifies itself as a network of "Academics, Professionals and Entrepreneurs who love the country and wish to contribute actively towards the development of a prosperous Sri Lanka where all citizens can live in peace and harmony." It is not a political organization but a civil society movement. For more information, see: <https://nalakagodahewa.org/>; and Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/viyathmagaPBF/>. Accessed on 9 November 2019.
- ¹⁰ Eliya is another civil society organisation that spearheaded Gotabaya's candidature. Launched in September 2017, it held seminars questioning issues of political and economic importance. While Viyathmaga was restricted only to professionals, Eliya was a mass organization. For more information, see: "'Eliya' to be Gota's pitch for the Presidency?", *The Island*, 9 September 2019, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=171434; and "'Eliya' campaign attracts top academic GR defends his role as Defense Secretary, pays glowing tribute to intelligence services", *The Island*, 4 March 2019, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=200391. Accessed on 11 November 2019.
- ¹¹ Ekathuwa identifies itself as 'a network of committed and principled youth activists who would constructively and positively engage in national, social and economic matters concerning the youth'. According to its

Gotabaya is not a politician. He is a career military officer who has been involved in battles with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He has been awarded gallantry awards by former presidents in recognition of his services to the country.¹² His limited exposure to Sri Lankan politics came during his tenure as the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of Urban Development and Planning between 2005 and 2015. Despite his brief political involvement, his service in the military and ministerial portfolios have earned him a reputation as a confident reliable leader who can deliver on the two most sorted requisites—national security and economic development.

The SLPP's election manifesto, 'The Ten Principles of Inclusive Governance', was launched on 25 October 2019 at the Nelum Pokuna Mahinda Rajapaksa Theatre. This manifesto, which consists of chapters about security, economic, social and political issues, is being promoted after years of consultation with various groups, including public individuals, trade unions and specialists from multiple sectors.¹³

What Makes Gotabaya the Front Runner?

Gotabaya and the SLPP are confident about being the front runner. This was shown when they formed an alliance with the SLFP, the parent party of the SLPP and one of Sri Lanka's oldest parties, on their own terms. It was noted in the media that Sirisena first negotiated with the SLPP as the common candidate and was later to be made the prime ministerial candidate. The SLPP ignored this request and nominated Gotabaya and Mahinda Rajapaksa for the respective roles. The SLFP tried to convince the SLPP to change its political symbol, the 'lotus bud', a trademark of Mahinda Rajapaksa and the party. However, SLPP managed to get the SLFP's support without agreeing to these demands. They are also counting on three other factors: an anti-incumbency vote, Gotabaya's perceived ability to deliver and the Mahinda Rajapaksa brand.

Since 1988, the presidential election has witnessed a strong tendency amongst voters to vote against the incumbent government. Currently, there is mounting criticism against the UNP-led government, popularly known as the Yahapalana government, because of its promise to deliver on good governance. However, it has been criticised for its failure to do so and to prevent bribery and corruption, and for its poor performance in economic development. Moreover, officers and politicians from the ruling party were involved in a bond-scam

website, it was first begun by a group of eight members in 2015 where they initiated discussions with Gotabaya Rajapaksa. In 2017, they transformed it into an organization with wider outreach. For more information, see their website <http://ekathuva.lk/our-story/>; and Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/ekathuva/>. Accessed on 6 November 2019.

¹² T B Singalaxana, "Opinion: Politics, Thoppigala and rhetoric", 30 September 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070930224545/http://www.dailymirror.lk/2007/07/19/opinion/2.asp>. Accessed on 9 November 2019.

¹³ Among others, the manifesto stated it would increase economic growth to 6.5%, introduce major tax cuts, maintain the budget deficit under five percent, increase per capita income to US\$6,500 and reduce interest rates to single digits. The party also promised to restore national security, eradicate corruption and strengthen the rule of law. On the foreign policy level, the SLPP promises friendly and non-aligned foreign policy with strengthened bilateral relations with India and other neighbouring countries, big powers and emerging economies. For more information see: "Gotabaya Presents to you a Reconstructed Country with a Future: Vistas of Prosperity and Splendor", *Election Manifesto*, <https://gota.lk/sri-lanka-podujana-peramuna-manifesto-english.pdf>

involving the Central Bank in 2015, which approximately cost the country US\$11 million (S\$14.99 million). The people's dissatisfaction was clearly reflected in the Local Government Polls in 2018, where Wickremesinghe's UNP only won 34 out of 315 local government bodies, while Sirisena's SLFP and its coalitions only won nine. The SLPP's landslide victory was referred to as "clear-cut evidence of the verdict by the people" of their dissatisfaction and a "call to the Rajapaksa team" to make a comeback.¹⁴ The numerous public sector protests that have taken place in recent months further demonstrate the level of public disapproval of the Yahapalana government.

The government has also been heavily criticised in the wake of the devastating Easter Sunday terrorist attack earlier this year. Preliminary investigations revealed that government authorities failed to act upon multiple warnings received from foreign intelligence agencies.¹⁵ More broadly, the bombings revealed the disturbing realities of a failed security apparatus and made national security one of the key issues in the upcoming election. Amidst this backdrop, Gotabaya, credited with working closely with his brother to bring the highly intractable civil war with the LTTE to an end in 2009, has emerged as the presidential race front runner. It is worth noting that the arrests of two Democratic Action Party members for their alleged connections to the defunct LTTE have strengthened Gotabaya's presidential campaign.

Gotabaya's track record as Urban Development Secretary is also an asset. His urban development projects such as the beautification of Colombo, and revitalisation of public centers and parks, were well received by the public. During his tenure, Colombo was ranked as the fastest developing city in the world.¹⁶

Gotabaya's relationship with Mahinda Rajapaksa, one of Sri Lanka's most influential and popular leaders, further helps his chances.¹⁷ Though he was ousted from power in 2015, Mahinda Rajapaksa retains an unwavering vote base of about 40 per cent. As noted above, Rajapaksa's legacy was important in the SLPP's victory in the 2018 local government election.

Controversies

Gotabaya is, however, not free from controversies and his position as a front runner has given rise to concerns. Gotabaya's ideological positioning as a communal, anti-liberal and nationalistic leader has stoked fears that his presidency may engender ethnic divisions, polarisation and social division. His presence as the chief guest at the inauguration of a leadership academy organised by the Bodu Bala Sena, a Buddhist extremist group, in 2013,

¹⁴ "Call to the Rajapaksa Team", 19 February 2018, *The Island*, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=180200. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

¹⁵ See Chulanee Attanayake, Nazneen Mohsin and Roshni Kapur, 'Easter Attacks in Sri Lanka', *ISAS Brief*, 26 April 2019, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ISAS-Briefs-No.-655.pdf>. Accessed 10 November 2019; and Mustafa Izzuddin and Chulanee Attanayake, 'Lessons from the Sri Lankan Easter Sunday Tragedy', *ISAS Insight*, 29 May 2019, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/isas-insight-lessons-from-sl-easter-sunday-tragedy.pdf>. Accessed 10 November 2019.

¹⁶ 'Colombo ranked world's fastest growing city', *Daily Mirror*, 4 June 2015, http://www.dailymirror.lk/75051/colombo-ranked-world-s-fastest-growing-city?source=post_page-----27fd4fabddbfbf. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

¹⁷ Chulanee Attanayake and Roshni Kapur, "Mahinda Rajapaksa: An Influential Figure in Sri Lanka Politics", *ISAS Briefs*, 21 November 2018, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/621-mahinda-rajapaksa-an-influential-figure-in-sri-lanka-politics/>. Accessed on 10 November 2019.

has led to criticism that he has been unable to distance himself from the hardline Sinhala-Buddhist base.

While some herald his candidacy as the ‘timely return of a strongman’,¹⁸ others fear he will usher in a style of undemocratic leadership.¹⁹ Many Tamils accuse Gotabaya of war crimes, including extra-judicial killings, kidnappings and abductions. Gotabaya’s supporters vehemently reject these allegations.

A slew of domestic and international court cases against Gotabaya were filed to stop him from running for political office. One filed in September 2019 challenged the validity of his Sri Lankan citizenship. However, this case was dismissed by the Appeal Court. There is an ongoing court case in the United States accusing Gotabaya of ordering the murder of a newspaper editor, Lasantha Wickrematunge, and the torture of a Tamil detainee, Roy Samathanam. Paradoxically, these cases have helped to increase support among Gotabaya’s base by contending that human rights activists and other petitioners are undermining those who emancipated the country from the civil war.

Conclusion

Despite being a multi-party democracy, Sri Lanka is still dominated by a two-party system. In this election, the SLPP has seemingly replaced the SLFP as the main contender. This development marks a turning point for Sri Lanka’s political candidates. The SLPP’s popularity is a result of multiple factors, including Gotabaya’s own popularity as a doer, the poor performance of the incumbent government and Sirisena’s unpopularity, which led to the downfall of the SLFP.

Hence, the anti-incumbency factor, coupled with Gotabaya’s previous ministerial track record, gives him the advantage in the upcoming election. His association with the intellectual and civil society groups also promises a new political culture under his government. However, he remains a controversial candidate. While his supporters are confident he will rebuild the security apparatus and improve the economy, his critics fear his presidency will be marked by the erosion of civil liberties, corruption, authoritarianism and nepotism.

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¹⁸ Marwaan Macan-Markar, “Sri Lankan strongman eyes presidency in upcoming elections”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 23 August 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Sri-Lankan-strongman-eyes-presidency-in-upcoming-elections>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

¹⁹ See: Jayadeva Uyangoda, “Residential Election 2019: In Simple Terms, The Choice Is Between Dictatorship and Democracy”, *Sri Lanka Brief* 19 October 2019, <https://srilankabrief.org/2019/10/presidential-election-2019-in-simple-terms-the-choice-is-between-dictatorship-and-democracy-jayadeva-uyangoda/>; Also see Taylor Dibbert, “In Sri Lanka’s election, bumps ahead”, *The Interpreter: Lowy Institute*, 01 October 2019, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/the-interpreter/sri-lanka-election-bumps-ahead>. Accessed on 10 November 2019.