

ISAS Brief

No. 153 – Date: 4 February 2010

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Sri Lanka Polls: Incumbency is Endorsed

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's electoral gamble has paid. His decision to go to polls two years before the end of his first term has won him a comfortable second term of six years.

Two things that carried him through this gamble were his political will and determination to eliminate the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) militarily and his control over the State apparatus as the Executive President. The war on LTTE was fought under his leadership against heavy odds, particularly international pressures on humanitarian issues. His campaign effectively drove home the point that despite his opponent and erstwhile Army Chief General Sarath Fonseka's claims for an equal share in the campaign against the LTTE, victory belonged to him alone. It was he who took the critical political decision to deal with the LTTE militarily and carried the decision to its ultimate conclusion. In democracies, it is the political leadership and not army generals or bureaucrats that are credited with critical initiatives. Both Sinhalese, as well as Tamil voters seem to have endorsed this point. In the Tamil-dominated Northern and Eastern parts of the country the anti-LTTE voters supported Rajapaksa for ending terrorism. Those sympathetic to the LTTE in these areas voted with the combined opposition candidate General Fonseka. The pro-LTTE political party, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) was a part of the combined opposition.

President Rajapaksa's incumbency gave him the critical control over official machinery. The State had numbed the critical media long back. Private Websites monitoring elections were blocked hours before the counting started. The Election Commissioner reportedly had to "withdraw the competent authority appointed to regulate the State media institutions due to the refusal of those bodies to implement his direction". He also abandoned his attempts to give directives to "police and other government authorities" as they ignored his directions in the "run-up to the presidential election". The first election held after the elimination of LTTE terrorism was not completely free from violence. Most of the violence was blamed on the official side. The pre-dawn series of blasts in Jaffna on the polling day definitely scared the pro-Fonseka Tamil voters to come out in full strength. Many of the Tamil IDPs of the anti-LTTE war were without their voting cards. The recorded voter turnout in the North was below 20 percent and in the East below 50 percent, both much lower than the national average of more than 70 percent polling.

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However, no large scale irregularities were reported in the voting watched by nearly 10,000 observers including international groups. Even without the alleged misuse of State machinery, President Rajapaksa would have perhaps carried the day. The combined opposition was such a mumbo-jumbo of discordant forces that it did not invoke any confidence among the voters. The liberal United National Party (UNP), joining hands with the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) and being supported by the TNA, known as the LTTE front-organisation did not have anything economically or politically in common except the hatred for the Rajapaksa regime. President Rajapaksa, through his crafty political moves seriously eroded the strength of the JVP and the UNP. The elections of the provincial councils held in 2009 clearly established his firm hold over the Sinhala political dynamics. Roping in Rajapaksa's former army chief was a clear indication of the leadership bankruptcy in the opposition.

As a candidate Gen Fonseka appeared to be moved more by his personal rivalry with the Rajapaksa brothers, rather than any credible economic or political programme. He was an enthusiastic party to the elimination of the LTTE and all humanitarian violations alleged in the process. His attitude towards the Tamil minority was also not much to speak of, as he is on record to have caricatured them as second class citizens. His campaign to usher in greater democracy and change the presidential system and render justice to the Tamils could not inspire many. He did not display any economic vision for Sri Lanka either. His sole emphasis on corruption, nepotism and family oligarchy of the Rajapaksa family, though valid issues, did not cut much ice with the voters. The support he eventually received was from the secure constituencies of the three main parties in his favour. Rajapaksa also succeeded in conveying the message that electing a US green card holder and western supported candidate like Fonseka would be an affront to Sri Lankan patriotism. On the polling day, everyone was surprised to know that Fonseka had not even registered as a legitimate voter. His hometown constituency of Ambalangoda decisively voted against him.

President Rajapaksa fought against the opposition's slogan of "change". It would therefore be illogical to expect any major change in Sri Lanka. The victory was sought to consolidate the Rajapaksa regime and that will now be done ruthlessly on the strength of popular endorsement. There may be international pressure for a political package to the Tamils. But the Rajapaksa regime had mastered the art of blunting adverse international pressures while fighting the LTTE. It would be unrealistic to expect anything more than cosmetic relief for Tamil grievances. But will this revive Tamil resistance in a different shape and size?

Executive Presidency will be consolidated at the cost of freedom and prosperity of common Sri Lankans. Economy will grow in the name of reconstruction and rehabilitation of the war torn North and the East to the advantage of entrenched interests. Relations with China and India will dominate Sri Lanka's foreign policy but mostly on the terms of the Rajapaksa regime's priorities.

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