

# ISAS Insights

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Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore  
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
#08-06 (Block B)  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505  
[www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)  
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



## Sri Lanka's Transformational Election

S D Muni<sup>1</sup>

Maithripala Sirisena's unexpected victory against his former boss and the incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka's presidential election held on 8 January 2015 signifies a major political transformation in the country. The margin of victory, at 3.7 percentage points (51.3% votes for Sirisena against 47.6% for Rajapaksa) may not be considered huge, but it was comfortable and decisive.

### The Electoral Dynamics

The significance of the victory lies in the fact that the outgoing president Rajapaksa had carefully planned his electoral turf in a bid to secure an unprecedented third term. First he amended the Constitution to remove the two-term constraint on the presidency. Then, he advanced the election by two years to try and ensure that there would be no credible challenger before his gradually eroding popularity became a liability in 2016 when the election was due in the normal course. And finally, he consulted all his astrologers to find the most suitable date for winning the contest. During the election campaign, he liberally used state resources to offer sops to the Sinhala-majority constituency, tried to frighten the

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Sukh Deo Muni is Professor Emeritus at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses in New Delhi (India). He is a former Ambassador and Special Envoy of the Government of India. He can be contacted at [sdmuni@gmail.com](mailto:sdmuni@gmail.com). Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS.

minorities by unleashing extremist groups like *Bodu Bala Sena*, and scared the ordinary Sinhala voters that if he lost, the Tamil extremist/terrorist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, would re-emerge and that the international community would infringe on Sri Lanka's sovereignty and independence. He was trying to capitalise on his victory over terrorism, twice. The election saw considerable violence (nearly 250 major incidents according to the independent group monitoring election violence), and the disruption of opposition rallies and campaign. Even the former President Chandrika Kumaratunga had to report to the police the attack on her vehicle while she was campaigning for Sirisena. Rajapaksa tried—as has been alleged by the elected president's chief spokesman Rajitha Senaratne—to deploy armed forces at the counting centres to stall counting as he realised that the vote was going against him.<sup>2</sup> But this did not work as the army and police chiefs refused to interfere in the democratic process on behalf of a losing president. This has been denied by the Rajapaksa camp but the new administration promises to investigate the matter.<sup>3</sup>

The secret of Sirisena's unexpected victory lies in the rainbow coalition, the "New Democratic Front", of diverse and often-conflicting forces craftily put together by the former President Chandrika and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, to back him. It must also be kept in mind that Sri Lanka's bureaucracy and security forces remained politically neutral and delivered a free and fair election, as certified by various observers from the international community. In President Sirisena's victory, a critical role was played by the minorities, particularly the Tamils and Muslims. Together they cast about one million votes against Rajapaksa, giving his opponent a lead of more than 700,000 votes. This wiped out Sirisena's deficit of nearly 250,000 votes in the Sinhala areas, giving him a clear national victory. The Tamils and Muslims voted for Sirisena despite the fact that he had made no promises to them either on devolution or even on removing the army from the Northern Province. There was no doubt in any one's mind that the Tamils and Muslims voted against Rajapaksa than in favour of Sirisena. The Chief Minister of the Northern Province, C V Wigneswaran had publicly lamented that not only he had no powers to appoint even a peon, but his telephones were also being tapped under the instructions of Colombo when Rajapaksa was at the helm.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the support of liberal political

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<sup>2</sup> BBC News Asia, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30763699>. Accessed on 11 January 2015.

<sup>3</sup> *The Statesman*, (Sunday), January 11, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> "Why he wants Rajapaksa Out", *The Indian Express*, January 08, 2015.

leaders like Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickremesinghe for Sirisena, and Sirisena's emphasis on democratising the Sri Lankan polity proved reassuring for the minorities.

Sirisena's image of an honest and straight-forward politician, identified with the legitimate causes and concerns of the majority Sinhala community helped him to dent the hardcore Sinhala constituency of Rajapaksa, unlike in the previous elections of 2005 and 2010. Sirisena was one of Rajapaksa's closest Ministers and has also been the General Secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the biggest component of his ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). He was not on the same wavelength as Rajapaksa over many of his repressive and undemocratic moves. Those Sinhalese who stood with Sirisena now did so to protest against what was widely seen as Rajapaksa's corrupt family autocracy. Three of his brothers held important positions in the government, with the family controlling more than 70% of the state resources. While the economy had done well under Rajapaksa, crony capitalism was promoted with most of the advantages going to the rich and socially well-entrenched corporate groups. Employment in the manufacturing sector had declined, forcing poor Sri Lankan women to migrate for jobs to West and Southeast Asian countries. Sirisena has promised to restore economic balance, improve law and order, close down unethical economic enterprises like gambling, and reduce powers of the executive presidency in favour of the parliament, judiciary and other constitutional bodies. Rajapaksa's 18<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment, enacted in September 2010, had seriously eroded the independence and credibility of democratic institutions in Sri Lanka. His ruthless political style of suppressing dissent, destroying opposition and monopolising power also alienated some of the erstwhile Sinhala hardliners like the radical Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) and the religious Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU – The Monks' Party).

## **The Domestic Challenge Ahead**

The rainbow coalition of forces that has delivered an impressive victory to Sirisena will also pose a challenge in the implementation of his agenda. In the domestic political context, there are three areas where the sagacity and political acumen of the new president and his supporters will be tested. One is the area of expanding and consolidating electoral support so as to ensure adequate backing in parliament for delivering on the electoral promises made. In his post-victory address to the Sri Lankan people from Kandy, he declared: "I will deliver the change I have promised". It is clear that the outgoing president still has a considerable

support base and he has given all possible indications that he will not give up his fight easily. The main battleground will be the control of SLFP to which Rajapaksa as well as Sirisena and Chandrika belong. There is a clear shift by the erstwhile SLFP and UPFA members belonging to the Rajapaksa camp towards the newly elected president. A majority of the SLFP Central Committee members have already done so. It appears that, in the coming days and weeks, this shift of loyalties will continue. But if that does not happen, then the new president may face difficulties in securing parliamentary approvals for his initiatives. The Sri Lankan Parliament has 225 members. While the Sirisena camp is claiming a clear majority following the pre- and post-election defections, some constitutional changes may need two-thirds support which will require special efforts. The new president may also dissolve the parliament and go in for fresh elections, but obtaining two-thirds majority will always depend upon forging alliances and mustering additional support. Sirisena is leading a unique coalition where the dominant groups are the UNP and the SLFP, hitherto traditional adversaries in Sri Lankan politics since 1956. The several ideological angularities and individual idiosyncrasies of the various leaders involved will have to be straightened and smoothed to obtain necessary political consensus.

The main plank of Sirisena's campaign was to dilute the executive presidency and restore the supremacy of the parliament. This is not for the first time that the transformation of executive presidency has been promised. Chandrika Kumaratunga also made this promise during her second term but the problems of sharing power with the-then UNP-led opposition came in the way. The ghosts of such power-sharing calculations may haunt again, assuming that Rajapaksa and his associates will remain politically active and assertive and that various other groups like the JVP, JHU, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) will also put forth their stakes for hard bargaining. It may however be possible for the new president to empower the judiciary and other political institutions to function independently in the best interests of the people of Sri Lanka—through executive orders. The new president may also open up space for the media and eliminate the atmosphere of fear and undue suspicion without much difficulty.

The Tamil question will remain a complex issue to be addressed. Sirisena did not promise anything to the Tamils during his campaign. This could have been a tactical move to ensure that whatever Sinhala support he could mobilise would not erode, and this calculation may not easily vanish. But he promised democratisation of the Sri Lankan polity, which if carried

out honestly, has considerable scope to keep the Tamil-minority happy. He is also acutely aware that the Tamils and Muslims have courageously scripted his victory and he cannot afford to be indifferent towards their principal concerns in the interest of his moves for democratic consolidation. The implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment (introduced in 1987 under Indian pressure) literally is not possible as some of its provisions like the merging of North and Eastern provinces seem incompatible with the developments in Sri Lanka in nearly three decades since that time. However, with the liberal national leaders like Ranil Wickremesinghe and Chandrika Kumaratunga, who belong to the Sinhala-majority, standing by the side of the new president, it should be natural for the Tamils and other minorities to expect that the Sirisena administration will try and reach out to them for greater understanding and accommodation. Sincere moves to devolve power to the Tamils, and to smoothen the hurt and humiliation felt by the Muslims, will go a long way in restoring ethnic harmony and peace in Sri Lanka.

## **Foreign Policy Course Correction**

The exit of the Rajapaksa regime has not unduly disturbed the international community, with the possible exception of China. The Western world has been unhappy with Rajapaksa's refusal to look into the allegations of human right violations during the final phase of the military elimination of the LTTE in 2009. Prominent representatives of the international community like the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and the US Secretary of State were concerned about the holding of free and fair elections in Sri Lanka and had urged Colombo to ensure the credibility of the electoral process. The US and India have also been worried about the growing Chinese economic presence in Sri Lanka. Between 2005 and 2012, China gave Sri Lanka over US\$4bn for infrastructure projects. In September 2014, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit, Sri Lanka endorsed China's Maritime Silk Road proposal and accepted assistance worth US\$1.4bn for developing the "Colombo Port City". India took exception to the docking of a Chinese submarine at Colombo port. However, Sri Lanka ignored such concerns, and even after the visit by India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval to Colombo in November 2014 to caution Sri Lanka in this respect, another Chinese submarine was allowed to visit Colombo for rest and refuelling.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Times of India*, September 29, 2014; *The Hindu*, November 29, 2014; also see "Indian NSA warns against visit of Chinese submarine docking to Colombo", [Lankanewspapers.com www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2014/11/90940\\_space.html](http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2014/11/90940_space.html)... Accessed on 12 January 2015.

The new dispensation under Sirisena in Colombo is expected to be more accommodative towards the concerns of the international community. Both President Sirisena and the newly appointed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe are sensitive to human rights issues, though any possibility of the defeated president Rajapaksa being tried by the international community for “crimes against humanity” is ruled out. But the Report on “Lessons Learnt” presented to the Rajapaksa government in 2011 may be implemented more seriously. Soon after his swearing in as the President, Maithripala Sirisena outlined his foreign policy by saying “We will have a foreign policy that will mend our ties with the international community and all international organisations ... (to) ...derive maximum benefits for our people”.<sup>6</sup> There is now emphasis on non-alignment in foreign policy pronouncements. With regard to China, Sirisena during his campaign had expressed resentment that Sri Lanka was getting burdened by heavy debt and becoming a “colony” of foreign powers.<sup>7</sup> Ranil Wickremesinghe had opposed the “Colombo Port City” project, and in the course of his campaign, promised to stall the project if Sirisena won. President Sirisena has also declared that his first foreign visit will be to India. It would be unrealistic to expect the new government to curtail ties with China which has proved to be a generous source of economic support for Sri Lanka. The Chinese government has also moved quickly to reach out to the new government in Colombo. However, Sirisena’s government may be cautious in conceding projects and privileges to China that disturbed the sensitivities of its other neighbours and friends like India. Nor will this government flaunt the China card to the discomfort of India and the Western international community.

In the coming days and months, Sri Lanka will unfold transformational changes in its polity, economy, governance, ethnic relations and foreign policy. The process of pushing such changes may not be easy and smooth for the new government under President Maithripala Sirisena, as it has to retain and consolidate its assorted coalition and its diverse support-base. Both the Sri Lankans and their international supporters are keenly watching the process of change which the new president has confidently promised to deliver.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, January 10, 2014. Also see President Sirisena’s address to the nation from Kandy on January 11, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Barry, *The New York Times*, January 09, 2015; *India Today*, January 09, 2015, “China, friend of Rajapaksa, pledges to build ties with new Sri Lanka government”, <[indiatoday.intoday.in/story/maithripal-sirisena-mahinda-rajapaksa...](http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/maithripal-sirisena-mahinda-rajapaksa...)>. Accessed on 12 January 2015.