

# Sri Lanka's Challenges After Leadership Change

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The surprise victory of Maithripala Sirisena, former Health Minister in Rajapaksa's government and one of the senior leaders of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), over the incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa in the Sri Lanka Presidential election on January 08 2015, heralds a new era in the Sri Lankan political landscape. President Sirisena has started enforcing the 100-day Action Plan as promised in the common opposition front election manifesto.<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Wickremesinghe in his maiden address to the Parliament on January 18, 2015, explained the specific actions that would be taken under the Action Plan to bring "radical pieces of legislation".<sup>2</sup> These included:

- A Bill to transfer the executive powers of the President to Parliament through the Cabinet of Ministers.
- Enact the 19th Amendment to the Constitution repealing the provisions of the 18th Amendment and to establish independent commissions.
- A Bill on the national drug policy, National Auditing Act and Right to Information Act.

## Internal Challenges

However, to successfully go through this process to improve governance and accountability, President Sirisena has to firm up his support within the SLFP which was fissured at the time of the elections. In a strategic move, the SLFP elected him as the Chairman after Rajapaksa quit the post after his defeat. Despite electing Sirisena as Chairman, the SLFP Central Committee decided to

function as an opposition party in the Parliament along with the remnants of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition. The SLFP Parliamentary Party announced that the party would cooperate with the government and support progressive and constructive programmes. However, Rajapaksa loyalists who dominate the voter base in the southern Sinhala belt still retain the potential to cramp Sirisena's leadership.

To implement the Action Plan with a unity of purpose, Sirisena has to depend upon his present mentor, former President Mrs Chandrika Bandaranaike and Bandaranaike loyalists to manage the party, and continue to enjoy the continued support of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and the United National Party (UNP) he leads. This is not going to be an easy task as the present Parliament will be dissolved in the next 100 days and a general election conducted in April 2015 to elect an empowered Parliament. The SLFP may encourage President Sirisena to become the Prime Minister as the President in the new set-up would have lost much of his powers. This could pit Sirisena and the SLFP against the UNP which has been energised after the defeat of Rajapaksa. It could also result in the traditional competitive scramble between the two main parties to form their own winning coalitions to grab power in the reformed set-up.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe is leading a National Unity Government mostly dominated by the UNP with a sprinkling of former UPFA coalition partners who were disenchanted with Rajapaksa's oligarchic rule. These include the Sinhala right wing Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) parties and the two Muslim parties – the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC). The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) had supported them though it is not part of the government. They have huge expectations from Sirisena to fulfill at least part of their own party-specific agendas some of which are conflicting with the objectives of other parties.

The JHU was piqued with Rajapaksa for not attending to its concerns over increasing cronyism, drug menace and corruption. Hence, it quit the UPFA and decided to support Sirisena.<sup>3</sup> Rather belatedly, other UPFA partners like the SLMC and the ACMC also bowed to the wishes of the Muslim minority supporters after Rajapaksa failed to curb the virulent anti-Muslim campaign by Sinhala fringe elements like the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS).<sup>4</sup> The TNA announced its support to Sirisena after much internal debate with a lot of expectation sans promises. As TNA President Sampanthan said that it decided to repose faith in Sirisena rather than “expect what has not happened in the past 10 years to happen hereafter.”<sup>5</sup>

President Sirisena's success in the election was largely due to the massive minority vote. It enabled Sirisena to win by a margin of 3.7 percent of the 121 million votes polled in the election.<sup>6</sup> The UNP's ambition might be stoked by its success in ensuring the defeat of Rajapaksa as the SLFP has been weakened by internal differences; its UPFA partners are also said to be unhappy with the SLFP for neglecting them. It has been dismayed by Sirisena's brand of family favours, as when he appointed his brother Kumarasinghe Sirisena as the chief of telecom, ignoring Wickremesinghe's advice against it.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, UNP members are unhappy to see Sirisena surrounded by many tainted SLFP leaders who may escape corruption charges.

**Election of President Sirisena heralds a new era in Sri Lankan politics.**

Thus, the chances of the present ruling coalition collapsing will remain a distinct possibility till the general election is through or the clear contours of a ruling affiliation emerge. If Sirisena fails to get the best deal for the SLFP, Rajapaksa could stage a political comeback.

**Minority Vote**

The heartening feature of this election was the massive turnout of Tamil voters. After a long time, they voted to make a difference in national politics. In doing so, they rejected the call to boycott the election from separatist lobbies both at home and abroad and among the diaspora. The TNA's support to Sirisena's victory is an affirmation of the popular will among the Tamils. The winning minority support is going to be crucial for both Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. Conscious of this, the unity government has taken a few visible actions to meet some of the long standing demands of the TNA that were ignored by Rajapaksa. Soon after assuming office, the new government replaced the Governor of the Northern Province, retired Gen Chandrasiri with HMGS Palihakkara, a respected former Foreign Secretary and diplomat. Colombo has also transferred the Chief Secretary considered by the TNA as a Trojan horse of Rajapaksa to neutralise the effectiveness of TNA rule in the Northern Province. The government is also speeding up the work of the commission of inquiry into missing persons. It has also proposed the return of all private lands occupied by the military to the owners. As a signal of its trust in the Tamils, the President is appointing a Tamil as Chief Justice of Sri Lanka.

**Chinese influence in Sri Lanka can be detrimental to Indian interests.**

While Prime Minister Wickremesinghe is confident of implementing the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, it would be difficult for him to meet the TNA demand for including police and land powers being given to the provincial government. While Sirisena and the SLFP and the JHU are not for it, even the UNP is reluctant to do so, for fear of the Sinhala backlash in the general election.

This is perhaps the reason for Wickremesinghe to call the TNA to join the Cabinet to smoothen the process of political reconciliation. If the TNA responds positively, perhaps there are hopes of working out a compromise formula to meet the Tamil demands while carrying the support of the majority Sinhala.

**External Challenges**

The Sirisena government also faces tricky external challenges: managing the competing relationship of India and China, and Sri Lanka's accountability for the alleged human rights excesses issue at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Rajapaksa had used these issues to whip up national pride, triggering xenophobia for his own political gain. The new government has to be careful in handling them to allay any apprehensions of its intentions. The government is approaching the UNHRC to find a face saving solution. It has taken visible actions like lifting restrictions on media freedom and on foreigners visiting the Northern Province to strengthen its efforts at Geneva.

India's expectations from Sri Lanka after the Eelam War were four-fold: maintain their close strategic security bonds, trigger the reconciliation process starting with the Tamil leaders by implementing the 13th Amendment in full; correct the tilt in favour of China to provide a level platform for Indian trade and investment; and resolve the Tamil Nadu fishermen's issue amicably while respecting Sri Lankan sovereignty.

There was little progress on these issues particularly after the Chinese started bank-rolling some of the Rajapaksa's grandiose infrastructure projects like the Hambantota port project, Matara airport project and express highways, adopting opaque processes. Favourable trade concessions were extended to Chinese businesses while a hike in indirect tax made trade with India less profitable. China signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Sri Lanka last year which could further worsen the situation.

The Indian coalition government could not act freely due to pressure from its Tamil Nadu partner's strident anti-Rajapaksa stand. As Tamil Nadu has ceased to be a pressure point in conditioning New Delhi's Sri Lanka policy, it will be able to reciprocate the Sirisena government's desire to improve its relations with India to achieve some positive results. China had used India's political impasse with Sri Lanka to further its strategic interests. This culminated in Rajapaksa signing a strategic security agreement with China in 2013. This was articulated further when Sri Lanka and China entered into a defence cooperation and maritime security agreement during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Sri Lanka in September 2014.<sup>8</sup> Sri Lanka also pledged support for the 21st century Maritime Silk Route on the occasion.

As a result, China has gained legitimate access to Sri Lankan port facilities for visiting People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships on Indian Ocean missions for replenishment. Recently, when India expressed concern over the visit of PLAN submarines to the Colombo port, Sri Lanka assured that it would never allow any action that would jeopardise India's security. In spite of this, the Chinese could test it in the coming months after suitably revising their regional strategy. The Sri Lanka government is now reviewing some of the mega projects executed by China with loans at high rates of interest which had benefitted the Rajapaksa family due to the opaque allotment process.

There are clear indications of Sirisena trying to distance himself from Rajapaksa's China tilt. Sirisena has chosen New Delhi to be the first overseas port of call after assuming office. With political uncertainties likely in the near future, Sirisena has a stake in building a personal rapport with the Indian leadership as New Delhi's support can be crucial when he faces the general election. Sri Lankan Minister of External Affairs Mangala Samaraweera visited New Delhi from January 17, 2014, within a week of joining the Cabinet and met his Indian counterpart Mrs Sushma Swaraj to hold detailed talks presumably in preparation for President Sirisena's visit. Samaraweera expounded the vision of the new government in Sri Lanka in his article published in *The Hindu* during his visit.<sup>9</sup>

In his media interaction in New Delhi, Samaraweera reiterated his government's stance to "demilitarise the Northern Province, order a domestic probe into the excesses reportedly committed during the last phase of the Eelam War in 2009, and take suitable steps to provide justice to the victims of the civil war."<sup>10</sup> Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has also responded positively to India's well known concerns on the Tamils, the fishermen's issue and the growing Chinese influence at the cost of India. Presumably this has been to inform the

Indian audience about the commitment of the new Sri Lankan government to improve relations with India. Samaraweera talked of Mrs Sushma Swaraj's visit to Colombo in February 2015 to attend the joint commission meeting. President Sirisena is likely to visit New Delhi after February 2015. One can look forward to improvement in bilateral relations after the visit. The relations could be further strengthened during Prime Minister Modi's likely visit to Sri Lanka in March 2015.

The UN investigation report on Sri Lanka will be presented at the UNHRC session scheduled to be held in March 2015. This will be a critical test for the Sirisena government's credibility. Conscious of this fact, the Sirisena government is probably trying to buy time while it orders a domestic investigation into the allegations with some international assistance as a compromise. India's help would become a crucial factor for Sri Lanka to find a face saving solution at Geneva.

There is also a lot of ambivalence in the attitudes of President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe on revisiting Sri Lanka's close relations with China to achieve a balance with India as a cash rich China has created strategic assets in infrastructure like ports and airfields as well as in trade and commerce. Chinese tourists are poised to overtake India in the number of tourists visiting Sri Lanka in the next few years. China's determination to make a success of the Maritime Silk Route holds a lot of promise for Sri Lanka which supports the initiative. In view of this, it will be difficult for Sri Lanka to ignore the imperative for maintaining close relations with China. Also, China cannot be easily pried away from its strategic toehold in India's close proximity; at best, probably it would be slowed down.

## **Conclusion**

The victory of Maithri Sirisena in the Presidential election has churned up Sri Lanka's political spectrum. The Action Plan now underway to restructure the political and constitutional structure of governance has the potential to revive political polemics within the SLFP which could affect Sirisena's national unity government with UNP participation. Then only, the Action Plan to rejuvenate governance can be successful. This is going to be a difficult process.

The massive minority vote defeated Rajapaksa although most Sinhalas seem to have preferred him. This augurs well for bringing the Tamil minority into the national mainstream politics. Their rejection of the separatist Tamil Diaspora elements' advice to boycott the election showed the waning of separatist influence among the population. However, their national political participation can be sustained only if the political process to meet their demands is started.

The new leadership is keen to repair the fractured relationship with India. However, it will have to manage cordial relations with China which has invested heavily in Sri Lanka in view of its strategic importance and to make a success of the Maritime Silk Route as well as retain its toehold in India's close proximity. The China factor will continue to weigh heavily in India's strategic calculus for the Indian Ocean region and its littorals in spite of building better relations with Sri Lanka.

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## Notes

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6. Sirisena polled 51.38 percent of the 121 million votes in his favour against Rajapaksa who attracted only 47.58 percent of the votes. Sirisena's victory was commendable if we consider that Rajapaksa's scraped through with a narrow 1.86 percent over his rival Ranil Wickremesinghe to become President for the first time in 2005. Data from Department of Elections, Colombo, [www.slections.gov.lk](http://www.slections.gov.lk)
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