

ISAS Brief

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Presidential Stakes and Sri Lanka's Future

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With the Sri Lankan presidential election set for 8 January 2015, pressure is building up against the incumbent, Mahinda Rajapaksa. In the 2010 presidential election, Rajapaksa, as the candidate of the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), won re-election, in a landslide, in the backdrop of the Sri Lankan military's conquest over the Tamil separatists. Rajapaksa called another presidential election, two years before schedule, hoping to further consolidate his position² With a divided opposition, this would probably have been a very easy win, had Maithripala Sirisena not resigned from the party to oppose him for the presidency. Sirisena was the general secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Rajapaksa's party, and Minister of Health. This led to a domino effect, with several ruling party luminaries defecting from the government. In a historic and important turn, the opposition United Nationalist Party (UNP), along with several SLFP loyalists, as well as former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, chose Sirisena as the common candidate to run against Rajapaksa. More recently, the Sri Lanka

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² This is after Sri Lankan Parliament approved, in September 2010, constitutional amendment allowing presidents to seek an unlimited number of terms.

Muslim Congress and the Buddhist nationalist party³ also quit the government to support the opposition. Sirisena is now backed by 40 political parties and groups.

It would be presumptuous to say that this may cost Rajapaksa his presidential post; however, UPFA felt the heat and boosted campaigning vigorously. Even the army was found to have used state money to post pro-Rajapaksa propaganda material to hundreds of thousands of soldiers and their families.⁴ Rajapaksa even roped in Bollywood stars like Salman Khan for his campaign; however resentment is apparent with several local artists, singers and others campaigning against the President.

Rajapaksa's Reign

Rajapaksa's core support-base is the rural, Buddhist and Sinhala constituency. During his current term, Sri Lanka has become the fastest-growing South Asian nation. His government had embarked on a number of infrastructure projects and built highways etc. Investment is also steadily rising given that the investment climate has improved after the defeat of the Tamil rebel group in May 2009. With exports rising, trade deficit has shrunk. Unemployment rate and inflation are low at 4% and 3.5% respectively.⁵

Though Rajapaksa is revered among the majority Sinhala population for the rapid building of post-war infrastructure, the Tamil minority still feels marginalised.⁶ Muslim minorities are reported to dislike the current government's inaction in the face of a series of attacks on them by Buddhist hardliners since 2012. With the victory over the Tamil Tigers well into the past, Rajapaksa's popularity is also fading. This has been mainly attributed to high cost of living, alleged abuse of power and nepotism. His family members occupy important government posts

³ Also known as the Jathika Hela Urumaya or the National Heritage Party.

⁴ Charles Haviland, "Is Rajapaksa facing defeat in Sri Lanka?" BBC. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30656219

⁵ Dushni Weerakoon, "The economics of Sri Lanka's mid-term elections" East Asia Forum. Available at: www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/01/04/the-economics-of-sri-lankas-mid-term-elections/

⁶ Irfan Husain, "Threat of violence in Sri Lankan election" Dawn. Available at: www.dawn.com/news/1152327

and are estimated to control half the country's annual budget. It is rumoured that he is grooming his eldest son, Namal (a current MP), to succeed him.⁷

The opposition's main reason to unite is to "re-establish democracy" and the "rule of law" in the country. Even the judiciary is no longer seen as independent after Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake was impeached in January 2013 and replaced by former Attorney General Mohan Peiris. The various parties that defected from the government have cited "mis-governance issue", "corruption", "human rights violations"; and some even feel they did not receive due respect for years of loyalty to Rajapaksa.

What Lies Ahead

Has this resentment reached the threshold where it might topple the President? The answer depends on the political appeal of the alternative candidate.

First of all, till now the opposition has made no mention of minority rights. Also, the Buddhist nationalist party is known to dispute the death of thousands of Tamil civilians in the civil war. This makes it hard for the ethnic minorities to choose between the "known devil and the unknown angel".⁸

Sirisena calls himself a farmer and speaks only Sinhalese; he expects to win over the Sinhala Buddhist majority that has voted for Rajapaksa so far and makes up 70% of the population. However, Rajapaksa is also trying to enhance his popularity by increasing gas and diesel subsidies, lowering electricity tariff and giving free seeds to farmers. The opposition's main rallying cry is of 'governance'; it hardly mentions economic reforms, while Sri Lanka's 8% GDP growth rate is one of Rajapaksa's strongest electoral assets. Sri Lanka's economy has mainly been growing due to infrastructure development financed primarily by overseas borrowings. This

⁷ "Profile: Mahinda Rajapaksa", BBC. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24918281

⁸ Meera Srinivasan, "Vote for 'known devil', Rajapaksa urges Tamils", *The Hindu*. Available at: www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/rajapaksa-to-tamils-known-devil-is-better-than-unknown-angel/article6748743.ece

is healthy in the short- to medium-term but the long term requires productivity-enhancing reforms⁹ which neither of the parties is focusing on.

The opposition says it would pursue a more balanced foreign policy and remove the over dependency on any one country (i.e. China). This may come as a relief to India but would hardly affect the common man's decision, 70% of the population being rural-based.

Apart from the gaps in the opposition's strategy, this election has been marred by escalating violence. The Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE) says the violence is almost always targeted at the opposition. International observers told reporters recently that they have already received complaints that the military had set up 400 roadblocks to discourage minority Tamils from voting freely in the former war zones.¹⁰

Rallies of both opposition and the ruling party have drawn huge crowds. The whole world is closely watching the results as it would affect Sri Lanka's bilateral relations. The *Economist* calls it the closest presidential contest in the history of Sri Lanka. International delegations from the Commonwealth and other regional forums are monitoring the election. The 2010 election saw the failure of a common opposition candidate to win against Rajapaksa. This time the opposition has united again to remove the "family dynasty". Observers feel it is quite likely that Rajapaksa may win, though marginally, given also that the Supreme Court has dismissed all legal concerns over his third term. However, if the opposition wins, Sri Lanka's economy and political stability would depend on the policies they adopt. These are unclear so far.

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⁹ Ibid. (4)

¹⁰ "Sri Lanka monitors fear voter intimidation before election", Daily Mail. Available at: www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2896128/Sri-Lanka-monitors-fear-voter-intimidation-election.html