

## The Rajapakse 'Coup' and Upcoming Parliamentary Election in Sri Lanka

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### Summary

The 8 January election was a decisive anti-Rajapakse vote in spite of Rajapakse's claim to the contrary. Notwithstanding that, as Sri Lanka prepares for parliamentary elections in August, two fundamental issues are at stake: democratisation of the political system, which regressed during Rajapakse's rule, and national reconciliation. Rajapakse's victory in the forthcoming elections would not only be a reversal of the January 8 mandate but his divisive politics based on Sinhala chauvinism will not be conducive for national reconciliation - a prerequisite for long term peace and stability of the country. A UNP victory is predicted given the dissension within the SLFP and voter uncertainty about a Rajapakse return. Unlike the Presidential election, local politics and local issues would influence the voters. People have not forgotten the Rajapakse decade, which epitomised corruption with his family directly controlling Rs. 1.2 billion of the Rs. 1.7 billion national budget. His development model has few takers in the rural south. It has not generated the employment that they were looking for as many of the projects have become economically unviable. People are aware of the massive corruption in which both the Rajapakse family and his close allies were involved. Given his past policies, the SLFP is also unlikely to get the votes of the minorities.

No other news attracted so much limelight and generated as strong a reaction as the nomination of Mahinda Rajapakse as the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate to the Kurungella seat for the forthcoming Parliamentary election. The Sri Lankan media as well as the 49 political, social and other civil society organisations that had supported Maithripala Sirisena in the game-changing January 8, 2015 Presidential election were shocked to hear that Rajapakse's nomination was actually endorsed by the President himself. Although Sirisena subsequently stated that he "will not breach the trust and faith of nearly 6.3 million people who voted for me", it is not clear how he will be able to keep their faith if the SLFP were to gain a majority in the upcoming Parliamentary election and Rajapakse emerge as the Prime Minister. Indeed, Rajapakse has been addressing election rallies as if he were an official Prime Ministerial candidate. Protesting the decision to nominate Rajapakse and to ensure that the SLFP does not gain a majority, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and even some senior members of the SLFP have joined the United National Party (UNP)-led United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) coalition to contest the August 17 Parliamentary election on a common platform.

Sensing the deep-seated disillusionment among a cross section of the political spectrum and the electorate, Sirisena, in a statement to the media on 14 July, clarified many of the misgivings that Rajapakse's nomination had generated. Perhaps, this was one of the more significant statements that Sirisena has made since January. His silence until then had earned him the tags of 'villain' and 'traitor'. In the statement, Sirisena referred to the tremendous pressure under which he has been working since assuming power. For one, the transition of the SLFP party leadership from Rajapakse was not a voluntary affair.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, Rajapakse began to work to undermine Sirisena; in the President's own words, "he [Rajapakse] started pulling my leg after two weeks."<sup>2</sup> Sirisena also stated that, by taking over the Presidency of the SLFP and of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), he had prevented Rajapakse from derailing the reform process, mainly the dilution of the powers of the Executive Presidency, strengthening Parliament and establishing independent commissions. In this regard, he noted that the UNP, headed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, had the support of only 47 Members of Parliament (MPs) in a house of 225. And without the support of a majority of SLFP members, it would have been difficult to pilot the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment bill, which reduced the tenures of both the President and Parliament to five years, re-introduced the two-term limit that a person

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<sup>1</sup> When the SLFP met to elect Sirisena as the new chairman, Mahinda Rajapakse held a parallel Central Committee meeting of the party.

<sup>2</sup> "Transcript: Read Full Text Of President Maithripala Sirisena's Speech On Current Political Situation," *Colombo Telegraph*, 15 July 2015, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/transcript-read-full-text-of-president-maithripala-sirisenas-speech-on-current-political-situation/>

can serve as President, altered the President's power to dissolve Parliament from after just one year to four years, reduced the power of the Executive Presidency and transferred some of these powers to Parliament<sup>3</sup> and, most significantly, established a Constitutional Council to appoint independent commissions.<sup>4</sup> With Rajapakse at the helm of the SLFP, this would not have been possible. Sirisena also categorically said that his opposition to Rajapakse has not changed. He assured that he would remain neutral in the Parliamentary election and work to carry out the mandate of 8 January irrespective of which party wins the election.<sup>5</sup>

### Scripting the Comeback: The Rajapakse Coup

Parliament, dominated by supporters of the old regime, has made the task of political reform challenging since Sirisena's assumption of the presidency. The SLFP has remained a divided house, with Rajapakse's supporters dominating the Central Committee with their strong presence. Soon after his defeat in the Presidential election, Rajapakse planned his comeback agenda with the support of those MPs from the SLFP who had benefitted immensely during his regime. His supporters were encouraged to paralyse the party from within. Accordingly, they offered their support for the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment only after being promised that the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment – to increase the number of seats in Parliament to 255, introduce two types of voting systems (first past the post system and proportional

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<sup>3</sup> For a draft of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, see <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Exclusive-19th-Amendment-draft-.pdf>. Hearing a petition on the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, the Supreme Court ordered that Articles 42(3), 43(1), 43(3), 44(2), 44(3) and 44(5) would require a referendum as per Article 123 of the Constitution. As a result, these proposed articles were withdrawn from the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment. See, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/SC-SD-4-to-19-of-2015.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> The independent Commissions are: Election Commission, (b) Public Service Commission, (c) National Police Commission, (d) Audit Service Commission, (e) Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, (f) Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption, (g) Finance Commission, (h) Delimitation Commission, and (i) National Procurement Commission. Earlier, the President made appointments to important constitutional positions like the Bribery Commission, Election Commission, Chief of Police, Chief Justice of Supreme Court, etc. The 17<sup>th</sup> amendment had introduced Constitutional Commissions. Now, the President has to consult the Constitutional Commission. The Supreme Court also held that the requirement for the President to act on the 'advise' of the Prime Minister does not require a referendum. It further clarified that constituting a constitution commission does not require a referendum.

<sup>5</sup> "Transcript: Read Full Text Of President Maithripala Sirisena's Speech On Current Political SituationText of Sirisena's speech," *Colombo Telegraph*, 15 July 2015, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/transcript-read-full-text-of-president-maithripala-sirisenas-speech-on-current-political-situation/>.

representation) and establish the delimitation commission – would be introduced before Parliament was dissolved. Subsequently, they proposed many changes to the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment in order to delay the process for two reasons. First, delay would mean that the parliamentary election would be postponed to September 2015 by when the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) would have unveiled its report on Sri Lanka. The report was actually scheduled for discussion at the March 2015 UNHRC meeting, but was postponed after the newly elected government requested for time.<sup>6</sup> Any adverse remark in the report about Sri Lanka's conduct during the last phase of the war could be used to appeal to Sinhala voters to save the nation by voting for Rajapakse. Second, as was revealed by Sirisena in his statement to the media, Rajapakse supporters were planning to nominate the former president to Parliament on the national list. For that they were in the process of asking one of the MPs to vacate a seat. According to this plan, the SLFP, which had the majority in Parliament, would have passed a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe who was heading a minority government and replace him with Rajapakse. Sirisena foiled this design by dissolving Parliament.

Rajapakse has, however, been carefully scripting his comeback. In a show of strength, a series of rallies was organised between February and June in Nugegoda, Kandy, Ratnapura (with the theme "victory achieved at stake"), Kurunegala and Matara by Rajapakse supporters with a call to "bring back Mahinda". Sensing the resurgence of the old regime, many SLFP members, in spite of Sirisena's warning, attended these rallies. On 1 July, Rajapakse announced from his hometown Medamulana that he would contest the 17 August Parliamentary election as a Prime Ministerial candidate since "[p]eople's requests asking me to contest cannot be ignored."<sup>7</sup> And he further said that "[t]he current government, including the Prime Minister, is acting the way they did during the time they signed agreements with the LTTE terrorists... They have removed the Army from the North and are nurturing terrorists."<sup>8</sup> It is important to note here that Rajapakse's supporters<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> UN rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein said "the changing context in Sri Lanka, and the possibility that important new information may emerge which will strengthen the report." See, "UN postpones key Sri Lanka war crimes report," *Al Jazeera*, 17 February 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/02/postpones-key-sri-lanka-war-crimes-report-150217043554177.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "MR Enters the Fray," *Lanka Herald*, 1 July 2015, <http://lankaherald.com/2015/07/01/mr-enters-the-fray/>.

<sup>8</sup> "I Am Coming: Mahinda Declares," *Ceylon Today*, 2 July 2015, <https://www.ceylontoday.lk/51-97150-news-detail-i-am-coming-mahinda-declares.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Dullas Alahapperuma, Salinda Dissanayake, Prasanna Ranatunga, Bandula Gunawardene, Keheliya Rambukwella, Nishantha Muthuhettigama, Kumara Welgama and Wimal Weerwansa.

from the UPFA<sup>10</sup> were present during this announcement.

After Sirisena made it clear that Rajapakse does not have a place in reinstating good governance (*Yahapalanaya*), the latter's supporters, popularly known as Abhayaramaya cabal,<sup>11</sup> rallied around their leader. One of them announced "If all the party seniors agree that Rajapaksa must be appointed, then the President has to agree to it as well."<sup>12</sup> In an interview to an Indian website, Rajapakse said, "I will be contesting the parliamentary election with a view to forming the next government",<sup>13</sup> thus removing any doubts about his intentions. According to Article 42(4) of the Constitution, "The President shall appoint as Prime Minister the Member of Parliament, who, in the President's opinion, is most likely to command the confidence of Parliament." The repercussions of Rajapakse's comeback bid can be assessed from the words of Ven. Sobitha Thero who played a pivotal role in the 8 January election: "You are fighting to try and protect your party. But remember this... the rest of us will have to battle to save our lives."<sup>14</sup>

The UPFA has appointed Rajapaksa as the Chief of Elections Operations Committee (EOC) of the SLFP-led coalition against the wishes of Sirisena. To prevent the UPFA from undermining his leadership, Sirisena has obtained a court order to prevent the Central Committee of the party from meeting without his approval and has appointed four new electorate organisers from the party. With the battle lines drawn between Sirisena and Rajapakse, one could witness a division within the SLFP and a split in its vote bank.

Here, it is important to note that that Rajapakse, who removed all constitutional hurdles to become President for the third time, is unlikely to remain satisfied with being a mere MP. Becoming Prime Minister would be an insurance against a number of corruption and bribery charges against him and his family that are currently being investigated. Although

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<sup>10</sup> Constituent parties of the UPFA are: Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Sri Lanka Mahajana Pakshaya, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, All Ceylon Muslim Congress, Ceylon Workers' Congress, Communist Party of Sri Lanka, Desha Vimukthi Janatha Pakshaya, Eelam People's Democratic Party, Eelavar Democratic Front, Lanka Sama Samaja Party, Liberal Party of Sri Lanka, Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, National Freedom Front, Sinhala Mahasammatha Bhoomiputra Pakshaya, Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal, Up-Country People's Front, Sri-TELO (Pararajasingham Uthayarasa alias Uthayan Faction). Some of these constituent parties did not support Mahinda Rajapakse's candidacy, for example, the SLMC and Up Country People's Front.

<sup>11</sup> The group used to meet in Abhayaramaya temple in Narahenpita in Colombo.

<sup>12</sup> "Susil Rebuts Maithri," *Ceylon Today*, 16 July 2015, <https://www.ceylontoday.lk/51-98419-news-detail-susil-rebuts-maithri.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Rajapakse's Interview to Nitin Gokhale, "Sri Lanka Will Never Pose a Threat to India," *Rediff.com*, 4 July 2015, <http://www.rediff.com/news/interview/exclusive-sri-lanka-will-never-pose-a-threat-to-india/20150704.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Darisha Bastians, "Revolution Betrayed?," *Financial Times*, 10 July 2015, [ft.lk/article/443711/Revolution—betrayed?#sthash.Q36j8qDQ.dpuf](http://ft.lk/article/443711/Revolution—betrayed?#sthash.Q36j8qDQ.dpuf).

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have chosen not to press corruption charges against Rajapakse since January,<sup>15</sup> some of these could be opened up if the UNP-led coalition were to come back to power.

## Old Politics, Old Agenda

Rajapakse has outlined three issues that he would focus upon during his campaign – “putting the economy back on track, dismantling the Police State apparatus, and restoring democracy and dealing with *threats to our sovereignty and national security* that have arisen since January this year” [emphasis added].<sup>16</sup> At the same time, he is attempting to mobilise the electorate on three issues. The first of these is the exploitation of the Sinhalese fear of a possible re-emergence of the LTTE due to various decisions and measures taken by the current government.<sup>17</sup> This will help emphasise how he, the saviour of the nation who

<sup>15</sup> The JVP filed bribery and misuse of power cases against Rajapakse and his family and cronies on 15 January. See, *Adararana.lk*, 27 July 2015, <http://www.adararana.lk/news/29405/jvp-files-corruption-charges-against-rajapaksas>. Rajapakse supporters protested in Parliament as well as in front of the Bribery Commission against the Ex-President being summoned before the commission. They organised a signature campaign and requested the Speaker, Chamal Rajapakse, who is Mahinda Rajapakse's brother, to intervene. As a result the speaker summoned the Director General of the Bribery Commission and asked her to meet the Ex-President in his residence for further investigation into bribery charges. Some Rajapakse supporters also threatened that if corruption charges were pressed against him they will not support the political reforms that the government intended to carry out. “Sri Lanka’s ex-president faces anti-graft probe,” *Daily Mail*, 20 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3046702/Sri-Lankas-ex-president-faces-anti-graft-probe.html>. Further, Ranil Wickremesinghe did not allow Gotabaya Rajapakse to be arrested. See, “Exclusive: Attorney General’s Recommendations On Gota Arrest: Full Text,” *Colombo Telegraph*, 27 April 2015, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/exclusive-attorney-generals-recommendations-on-gota-arrest-full-text/>.

<sup>16</sup> Rajapakse’s Interview to Nitin Gokhale, “Sri Lanka Will Never Pose a Threat to India,” *Rediff.com*, 4 July 2015, <http://www.rediff.com/news/interview/exclusive-sri-lanka-will-never-pose-a-threat-to-india/20150704.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> The reference is to the Government’s decision to return to the Tamils 1000 acres land that was under the military’s occupation, allowing Tamils to sing the national anthem in Tamil, closing down of the military check point in Omanthai for the people travelling to the north and celebrating the victory day in a low-key manner. In this context, Rajapakse would cite the genocide resolution passed by the Northern Provincial council on 10 February soon after the new regime took over power in Colombo (“Full Text: NPC’s Resolution On Genocide Of Sri Lankan Tamil,” 11 February 2015, *Colombo Telegraph*, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/full-text-npcs-resolution-on-genocide-of-sri-lankan-tamil/>) and a recent proposal by Minister for Rehabilitation, D.M. Swaminathan, to provide compensation to families whose members were killed during the last phase of war, as indicators of the government compensating terrorists (Udaya P. Gammanpila, “Appeasement of tigers,” *Ceylon Today*, 20 June 2015, <https://www.ceylontoday.lk/76-96101-news-detail-appeasement-of-tigers.html>). Already, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera’s meeting with the GTF in London has drawn criticism from Sinhala nationalists as an appeasement of the diaspora and their foreign patrons. TNA National list MP Sumanthiran and former Norwegian Peace Envoy Erik Solheim were also present at the London meeting. For details of the meeting, see Sulochana Ramiah Mohan, “GTF London Meet: Solheim shared his experience,” *Ceylon Today*, 16 June 2015, <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/51-95708-news-detail-gtf-london-meet-solheim-shared-his-experience.html>.



brought thirty years of war to an end, is unlike Wickremesinghe who had concluded a peace-deal in 2002 with the terrorists to satisfy foreign countries. Rajapakse emphasised this in the 15 July Anuradhapura election rally: "I never betrayed the motherland like other politicians, I never struck secret pacts." To consolidate the Sinhala vote bank, which provided him 48.2 percent of votes, mostly from the South,<sup>18</sup> the fear of LTTE re-emergence would be of great value. Second, saving the country's sovereignty would be a familiar issue in Rajapakse's campaign. Soon after his defeat he had said "what happened to me was not a defeat since it was the result of a conspiracy" and accused the Americans, Norwegians, Europeans and Indians of having worked against him.<sup>19</sup> He is likely to cite the UN investigation as an intrusion on Sri Lanka's sovereignty and contend that he is the only leader who would not allow the international community to humiliate the war heroes for defeating terrorism by putting them on trial for war crimes. This would make him a champion of the country's sovereignty against an international conspiracy. The third issue that he is likely to base his campaign upon is the Rajapakse model of 'development', which emphasised upon the building of railways and roads, mega ports, airports etc. to make Sri Lanka the 'emerging wonder in Asia'.<sup>20</sup> However, this development model, which emphasises upon economic development to address political grievances, has been rejected by the Tamils.

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<sup>18</sup> Rajapakse got a majority of votes in Hambantota, Moneragala, Matara, Ratnapura, Galle, Anuradhapura, Kurunegala, Kalutara, Kegalle and Matale, ranging between 63.02 and 51.41 per cent. In all these districts the voter turnout was high.

<sup>19</sup> "Rajapaksa: RAW not government conspired against me," *The Hindu*, 13 March 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/rajapaksa-raw-not-government-conspired-against-me/article6987460.ece>. He also said Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) was a Western-backed conspiracy to alienate minority Muslims and defeat his government. "BBS Is A Western Conspiracy: Mahinda Rajapaksa," 24 April 2015, <http://asianmirror.lk/news/item/8381-bbs-is-a-western-conspiracy-mahinda-rajapaksa>. Also, see "'Gnanasara ruined me' – ex-president," <http://lankanewsweb.net/news/10456-gnanasara-ruined-me-ex-president>.

<sup>20</sup> Mahinda Chintana of 2005 reads, "The objective of our next massive leap forward is to transform Sri Lanka into a strategically important economic centre of the world. My determination therefore, is to transform Sri Lanka to be the Pearl of the Asian Silk Route once again, in modern terms. Using our strategic geographical location effectively, I will develop our motherland as a Naval, Aviation, Commercial, Energy and Knowledge Hub, serving as a key link between the East and the West". See, <http://www.treasury.gov.lk/publications/mahindaChintanaVision-2010full-eng.pdf>. This is mentioned in Mahinda Chintana of 2010, p. 99. Also see pp.109-110 for details of infrastructure projects.

## China and the Politics of Development

Rajapakse's defeat in the January 2015 election was perceived as a loss for China,<sup>21</sup> which had invested \$5 billion in the last five years and was instrumental in operationalising the Rajapakse model of economic development.<sup>22</sup> The new UNP government made a fresh assessment of Chinese projects and highlighted their massive cost<sup>23</sup> as well as financial irregularities. In an interview to *CNN Money*, Ravi Karunanayake, the current Finance Minister, said, "[t]he Chinese companies used the opportunity of a corrupt regime to crowd out other companies coming in... There was no even playing field. It was basically anybody who achieved their objective, to get money in their pockets".<sup>24</sup> As a result of these concerns, the Colombo port city project was stalled.<sup>25</sup> In addition, concerns have been expressed about loan repayments,<sup>26</sup> a sentiment captured by Sirisena in the run-up

<sup>21</sup> Debashish Roy Chowdhury, "Passive investor to partner in crime: How China lost the plot in Sri Lanka," *South China Morning Post*, 29 March 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/business/china-business/article/1750377/passive-investor-partner-crime-how-china-lost-plot-sri-lanka>; Bruce Einhorn, "Sri Lanka's President Loses an Election—and China Loses an Ally," *Bloomberg*, 9 January 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2015-01-09/sri-lankas-president-loses-an-election-and-china-loses-an-ally>; Miles Yu, "China stung by Sri Lanka's election," *Washington Times*, 22 January 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/22/inside-china-stung-by-an-election/?page=all>.

<sup>22</sup> Smruti S Pattanaik, "Chinese Investment in Sri Lanka," *East Asia Forum*, 5 June 2015, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/06/05/controversy-over-chinese-investment-in-sri-lanka/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Steven, "Did China profit from corrupt Sri Lanka deals?," *CNN Money*, 2 April 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/04/02/news/sri-lanka-china-corruption/>.

<sup>25</sup> China, which is still awaiting a green signal to build the Colombo port city, has warned that suspension of the project would mean that the GoSL have to pay Rs. 40 billion as compensation. See, Sulochana Ramiah Mohan, "If China's Colombo Port City project terminates... Government compelled to pay Rs 40B damages," *Ceylon Today*, <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/51-90366-news-detail-if-chinas-colombo-port-city-project-terminates-government-compelled-to-pay-rs-40b-damages.html>. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Beijing expects Colombo to "preserve Chinese companies confidence to invest in Sri Lanka in the overall interests of China-Sri Lanka friendliness and the fundamental interests of Sri Lanka's national development." China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference," 5 March 2015, <http://lk.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1243039.htm>. The Colombo-Katunayake Expressway, which was found to be the most expensive highway ever built in terms of cost per kilometre, with the government spending Rs. 1.8 billion per km on the 26 km expressway linking Colombo to the Bandaranaike International Airport.

<sup>26</sup> The government, according to another news report, spends Rs. 250 million monthly for repayment of loan taken for Chinese built Mahinda Rajapakse International airport and another Rs. 250 million for its maintenance. See, Dharama C Abeyaratne, "Sri Lanka to pay Rs 250 m monthly for loan obtained," *Daily News*, 16 May 2015, [www.dailynews.lk/?q=local/sri-lanka-pay-rs-250-m-monthly-loan-obtained#sthash.vW1PPNML.dpuf](http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=local/sri-lanka-pay-rs-250-m-monthly-loan-obtained#sthash.vW1PPNML.dpuf). Similarly, Minister of Port and Shipping reported that the loss from the Hambantota port was Rs. 678 million in 2012 and it was maintained from the profit made by the Colombo port. See, "Loss incurred by Hambantota Harbour in 2012 is 678 million rupees," 10 April 2015, *ITN News Network*, <http://www.itnnews.lk/?p=63870>.



to the January presidential election thus: “Sri Lanka is a country with excessive state debt and a dangerous ratio with regard to loan payment and state revenue”.<sup>27</sup>

Rajapakse wants to cash in on government inquiries into the China-financed projects by portraying them as aimed at appeasing the West and India, which are opposed to China. To emphasise the benefits of the economic partnership with China, he has evoked the memories of how China stood by Sri Lanka during the war and later voted against the West-sponsored UNHRC resolution to protect Sri Lanka’s sovereignty and continues to “resolutely oppose any move by any country to interfere in Sri Lanka’s internal affairs”.<sup>28</sup> Thus, in his first public appearance in the Anuradhapura election rally after his nomination, Rajapakse noted that ‘development’ has suffered during the last six months – an indirect reference to the stalling of Chinese projects.<sup>29</sup>

According to a media report, the Chinese Embassy in Colombo is also engaged in a public relations exercise to counter the negative publicity that Chinese projects have received in Sri Lanka. It has sent mobile text messages to businessmen and journalists, highlighting how Chinese projects have generated employment opportunities and resulted in transfer of technology.<sup>30</sup> The Chinese have also started a campaign in favour of the port city and have hired a Sri Lankan advertising agency. Now one can find stickers on three wheelers that read “We support Colombo port city project”. It appears that China is expecting that

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<sup>27</sup> “Full Text Of Maithripala Sirisena’s Election Manifesto”, *Asian Mirror*, 19 December 2014, <http://www.asianmirror.lk/news/item/5782-full-text-of-maithripala-sirisena-s-election-manifesto>.

<sup>28</sup> Xi Jinping, “Let us Become Partners in Pursuit of our Dreams,” *Daily News*, 16 September 2015, <http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=local/exclusive-xi-jinping-president-people-s-republic-china-daily-news-readers-let-us-become>.

<sup>29</sup> In an interview to *South China Morning Post*, Rajapakse said, “But I would urge China not to take it personally. It’s me they are after. They are only using China to get me. China should not feel hurt and stop helping Sri Lanka.” Debashish Roy Chowdhury, “Sri Lanka should thank China, not attack it, ex-president Rajapaksa says”, *South China Morning Post*, 12 March 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1735379/sri-lanka-should-thank-china-not-attack-it-ex-president-rajapaksa-says>.

<sup>30</sup> “Chinese Embassy Washed Mud off Rajapakse!,” *Lankanewsweb*, 9 July 2015, <http://lankanewsweb.net/news/11215-chinese-embassy-washes-mud-off-rajapaksa>. According to Chen Chuan, Spokesman for China Chamber of Commerce in Sri Lanka, “Chinese-funded projects created 100,000 job opportunities in Sri Lanka in the past five years; 90% of workers in Chinese-funded projects are Sri Lankans.” Cited in “Suspension of Chinese projects; Loss is for Lanka,” *The Independent*, 4 July 2015, <http://www.theindependent.lk/index.php/news/item/1287-suspension-of-chinese-projects-loss-is-for-lanka>.

a Rajapakse victory will help it turn the tide with respect to its economic engagement in Sri Lanka where it has indeed acquired a large stake during the Rajapakse years.<sup>31</sup>

### **Sovereignty Debate and the India Factor**

India has reservations about Chinese intentions since Beijing pursues a balance India strategy in South Asia. Taking cognizance of Indian reservations with regard to Sri Lanka's support for the Maritime Silk Route, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said (during Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera's visit to China) that "China is open to a triangular cooperative relationship" involving India and Sri Lanka. For his part, Rajapakse has also realised the importance of addressing India's suspicions about his close relations with China. He reflected this during his interview with Nitin Gokhale by stating that he would serve as a bridge between India and China. India, however, well knows that Rajapakse is not a man who keeps his promises.

For India, which is now trying to put in place an Indian Ocean strategy with the successful visit of Prime Minister Modi to the Indian Ocean countries, any reversal of the January 8 mandate would re-create a space for China at India's cost. It is closely watching the evolving political situation in Sri Lanka.

In the past, India witnessed how Rajapakse played the China card by allowing the docking of two Chinese nuclear submarines in Colombo port despite India conveying its concerns. The Rajapakse government also repeatedly emphasised India's training to the LTTE during the 1980s while at the same time deliberately played down its diplomatic and intelligence support during the last days of the civil war. This went hand in hand with the lavish praise heaped on China and Pakistan. There are other not so positive experiences as well. Sri Lanka under Rajapakse deliberately delayed communicating the list of beneficiaries for the Indian Housing project. It threatened to take back the oil depot from Indian Oil Corporation after India voted against Sri Lanka at the UNHRC. It sponsored a protest by businessmen to derail the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement that India wanted to conclude. It had almost prepared to abolish the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in July 2013 when the Provincial Councils were encouraged to vote against that Amendment. In addition, India is also concerned about Rajapakse's divisive politics and denial of devolution to the Tamils, which will only keep the neighbourhood embroiled in instability and pose security implications for India.

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<sup>31</sup> Interviewing Rajapakse after his January defeat, Debashish Roy Chowdhury, correspondent for South China Morning Post, wrote, "If he can hold that smile for another six months, Beijing could yet have the last laugh." Debashish Roy Chowdhury, "Sri Lanka should thank China, not attack it, ex-president Rajapaksa says", *South China Morning Post*, 12 March 2015 <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1735379/sri-lanka-should-thank-china-not-attack-it-ex-president-rajapaksa-says>.

## Conclusion

The 8 January election was a decisive anti-Rajapakse vote in spite of Rajapakse's claim to the contrary. Notwithstanding that, as Sri Lanka prepares for parliamentary elections in August, two fundamental issues are at stake: democratisation of the political system, which regressed during Rajapakse's rule, and national reconciliation. Rajapakse's victory in the forthcoming elections would not only be a reversal of the January 8 mandate but his divisive politics based on Sinhala chauvinism will not be conducive for national reconciliation – a prerequisite for long term peace and stability of the country. A UNP victory is predicted given the dissension within the SLFP and voter uncertainty about a Rajapakse return. Unlike the Presidential election, local politics and local issues would influence the voters. People have not forgotten the Rajapakse decade, which epitomised corruption with his family directly controlling Rs. 1.2 billion of the Rs. 1.7 billion national budget. His development model has few takers in the rural south. It has not generated the employment that they were looking for as many of the projects have become economically unviable. People are aware of the massive corruption in which both the Rajapakse family and his close allies were involved. Given his past policies, the SLFP is also unlikely to get the votes of the minorities.

It appears that Sri Lanka's chances of reverting to the period of "Monarchy" – as Sirisena characterised the Rajapakse years – is slim. Sri Lanka's journey towards greater democratisation that began on 8 January will surely reach its destination with *Yahapalnaya* at its core. Moreover, Sirisena continues to enjoy substantial power under the Constitution. If the UPFA manages to get the majority and Rajapakse is nominated as Prime Minister, he can exercise his powers only in concurrence with the President. Sirisena's momentous speech exposing the anti-reform agenda of the UPFA and the intrigues of the senior leaders who conspired to undermine the mandate of 8 January would influence the voters to make a cautious choice. While a SLFP defeat will end Rajapakse's political career, it would pave the way for Sri Lanka to implement the aspirational politics that the 8 January mandate epitomised. For the people of Sri Lanka the choice is clear – between de-democratisation represented by Rajapakse and his supporters and democratisation represented by President Sirisena and his political allies.