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Issue Brief

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS (2015) IN SRI LANKA: Explaining UNP's success and the Challenges Ahead

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Summary

The results of the Parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka held on August 17, 2015 did not come as much of a surprise. Following countrywide fervour in support of the movement for good governance since the Presidential elections held in January 2015 and the positive steps taken by the National Unity Government during the last seven months, it was almost certain that the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) coalition led by the United National Party (UNP) would outperform the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the elections. Some analysts even hoped that the UNFGG would be able to score a comfortable majority. However, despite the ongoing investigations into alleged corruption charges against several members of the former UPFA Government, and the prevalence of a sense of despondency about its performance, the alliance (virtually) led by Mahinda Rajapaksa did perform much better than expected.

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The Results

Out of the 196 seats for which direct elections were held, the UNFGG led by the UNP secured 93 seats compared to 83 seats by UPFA. Among the others, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) gained 14 seats, the Peoples Liberation Front or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) four, and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) one each. As far as total votes secured by the various parties is concerned, the UNP secured 5,098,916 votes, while the UPFA got 4,732,664, followed by JVP with 544,154 and TNA with 515,963 votes.

Including the seats allocated (out of a total of 29) on proportional basis of the votes polled, the UNFGG secured a total of 106 (93+13) seats with 45.66 per cent of the votes. The UPFA came a close second with 95 (83+12) seats (42.38 per cent). TNA retained its appeal in the Tamil majority areas by bagging 16 seats (14+2). Only the JVP fared rather badly to secure only 6 seats (4+2) despite the fact that its vote tally was more than that of the TNA in both gross and percentage terms.

The final results show that though the UNP improved its performance compared to the previous parliamentary elections in 2010 it fell short of securing a majority in the 225-member parliament. For its part, the UPFA continued to enjoy the support of a large section of the people, especially in the Sinhala majority areas in the south, although its position did decline significantly compared to the previous parliamentary elections. In 2010, the UPFA had secured 144 seats (with 60.33 per cent of votes polled) compared to 60 seats (and 29.34 per cent of votes polled) by the UNP-led coalition.

During the January presidential election, the common opposition front (in which UNP-led front was a major constituent) had secured 51.28 per cent of votes polled compared to the UPFA's 47.58 per cent. The UPFA's share dwindled further in the parliamentary elections to 42.38 per cent. Rajapaksa's supporters would have hoped to retain the 5.8 million votes he had secured as presidential candidate from the Sinhalese-Buddhist voters during the January 2015 election, but in the August parliamentary elections the UPFA could only poll 4.73 million votes — less by more than a million votes.

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Parliamentary Elections Results					
Party	2015		2010		
	Votes secured	(%)	No. of Seats won*	Votes secured (%)	No. of Seats won*
UNFGG/UNF	5,098,916 (45.66%)		106 (93+13)	2,357,057 (29.34%)	60 (51+9)
UPFA	4,732,664 (42.38%)		95 (83+12)	4,846,388 (60.33%)	144 (127+17)
TNA	515,963 (4.62%)		16 (14+2)	233,190 (2.90%)	14 (13+1)
JVP/Democratic National Alliance**	544,154 (4.87%)		6 (4+2)	441,251 (5.49%)	7 (5+2)
EPDP	33,481 (0.30%)		1	-	-
SLMC	44,193 (0.40%)		1	-	-
* Includes both district and national seats.					
** In 2010 JVP was a coalition partner of the Democratic National Alliance					
Source: Department of Elections, Government of Sri Lanka					

Explaining the UNFGG Victory

The most obvious reason for the UNFGG's success has been the support it received from some of the former partners of the UPFA who had defected to the UNP-led coalition prior to the Presidential election in January 2015 and extended support to the common opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena, the former general secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Minister of Health in the Rajapaksa cabinet. The sincerity of the Sirisena government in implementing political reforms and initiating action against corruption added to the popularity of the National Unity Government and much of this goodwill flowed into the UNFGG in the August parliamentary election.

Positive track record of the National Unity Government

After the Presidential elections, the UNP played a constructive role in the National Unity Government (NUG) with the support of Sirisena loyalists within the SLFP and actively participated in the implementation of the 100 days' reform programme (from January to April 2015) pledged by Sirisena during his presidential election campaign. The main agenda of the united front was to end the rule of one family, end the executive presidency, reverse unjustified amendments introduced into the constitution by Rajapaksa, and offer good governance.

In this regard, the NUG had set for itself 25 significant targets including amendment of the standing orders, reduction of power of the executive presidency,

introduction of a Code of Conduct, increment of the salary for state sector employees, introducing Ethical Code of Conduct, appointment of Special Commissions to investigate allegations of massive corruption, a Bill to implement the National Drugs policy, preparation of new elections laws, amendments to change the system of elections, passing the National Audit Bill, passing the Right to Information Act, appointments to and establishing Independent Commissions, etc. The NUG tried its best to achieve these objectives within 100 days. In the process, the president did overshoot the time he had granted himself, and Parliament continued to function till June 26 to implement the reforms promised by the unity government. But its sincerity was not in doubt as the popular verdict in the parliamentary elections has demonstrated.

With the full cooperation of President Sirisena, the National Unity Government brought about positive reforms, such as the adoption of the 19th amendment, which significantly reduced the power of the executive President and re-introduced the independent commissions and a national Drug policy bill. Parliament also passed an Interim Budget with amendments to the 2015 Budget, which increased salaries and reduced direct and indirect taxes on necessary goods and services. Investigation into several corruption charges including against the former members of the UPFA Government and the Rajapaksa family as well as into pending cases of disappearance and murder were also initiated. And the former Chief Justice of Sri Lanka who was illegally impeached during the Rajapaksa presidency was reinstated.

But the NUG could not bring about crucial reforms like the right to information act and electoral reforms. Nor could it achieve all the targets it had set for itself during the initial 100 days (from January to April 2015). However, both President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe demonstrated that there was no dearth of political will to rectify the wrongs committed by the previous government in political, economic and foreign affairs.

Thus, the new government investigated the allegation that its predecessor gave away contracts to Chinese companies for important projects without following due procedures. Allegedly, the country was burdened with a huge debt due to the previous government approving a vast array of Chinese funded infrastructure projects. To investigate all these allegations, the NUG suspended some ongoing Chinese projects. It was also noted that due to the previous government's undue leniency towards China the economy was badly affected and relations soured with economically and strategically important countries like the USA, EU members and India. Consequently, the NUG made special efforts to improve relations with India, USA and EU countries. At the same time it assured China about its wish to continue maintaining friendly relations. Thus, despite belonging to different political parties and ideologies, the members of the NUG and the President remained united in dealing with all these issues during the 100 days.

Due to the good performance of the NUG, the UNFGG made inroads into SLFP-dominated Sinhala majority areas in the Parliamentary elections. Even in the North and East, where the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) won 16 out of 22 seats, the seats won by the UPFA in 2010 went to the UNP this time round. It was quite clear,

therefore, that people across the country preferred Ranil Wickremesinghe to Mahinda Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister.

Tamils won over

It should also be underlined here that in the Presidential elections Sirisena was able to win mainly because the Tamils voted against Rajapaksa. In the Sinhala areas Rajapaksa had secured a majority. After coming to power, the new government took positive initiatives to address some of the concerns of the Tamils. These included the appointment of a civilian governor in the North, announcement of the release to civilians of 1000 acres of land in the high security zones of the Northern Province, and release of one of the illegal detainees. For the first time after the end of war, an army officer was sentenced to death for murdering eight Tamil civilians, including four children. At the political level, the NUG expressed its commitment to seriously take up the issue of political reconciliation. In this regard, in an unprecedented move, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera engaged with the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in London.

Intra-SLFP divisions

Ever since Sirisena decided to contest as the common opposition candidate against Rajapaksa on November 21, 2014, the SLFP has been confronted with an internal crisis. There was an unresolved leadership issue within the party as Sirisena and Rajapaksa were engaged in a "power struggle" for control of the party, which worked "against UPFA's electoral fortunes".¹ Even as Sirisena's popularity grew because of his perceived sincerity and willingness to back his words with concrete action, and he was elected President of the party in January 2015, Rajapaksa tried his best to retain his hold over the party and held several rallies to demonstrate his continuing popularity especially in the Sinhala majority areas. Rajapaksa also tried to derail the reform programmes initiated by Sirisena and when parliamentary elections were announced exerted pressure on Sirisena to declare him the prime ministerial candidate of the UPFA. The personal antagonism between the two was in full display when Sirisena wrote and published a letter criticising Rajapaksa's actions and indicating that Rajapaksa would not be appointed as Prime Minister even if the UPFA were to win a majority of the seats.² Sirisena also sacked the secretaries of the SLFP and the UPFA, known for their loyalty to Rajapaksa, two days before the election. This battle for control within the SLFP obviously contributed to the UNFVG's success.

¹ Jayadeva Uyangoda, "A Vote for Continuing Change," *The Hindu*, August 20, 2015, at <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/sri-lanka-parliamentary-election-results-a-vote-for-continuing-change/article7554867.ece>

² For the full text of the letter written on August 13 and made public on August 17, see "Letter by President Maithripala Sirisena to Mahinda Rajapaksa," *Groundviews*, August 17, 2015, at <http://groundviews.org/2015/08/17/letter-by-president-maithripala-sirisena-to-mahinda-rajapaksa/>.

SLFP—down not out

While it is true that the UNFGG did put up a good show in the elections because of these factors detailed above, it is too early to write the obituary of the SLFP as a party. The fact remains that an overwhelming proportion of the electorate (42.38 per cent) voted for the UPFA led by the SLFP. The SLFP, as a political party, retains its appeal among the Sinhala people. Popular approval of Sirisena's leadership as the head of the national unity government and his continued assertion of loyalty to the SLFP also play a role in sustaining the party's support base. Further, speculation whether the UPFA could have defeated the UNFGG if Rajapaksa had not led the former's campaign is pointless. Because, although discredited, Rajapaksa did manage to make a dent in the ultra-nationalist Sinhala constituency. Given all this, the continuing appeal of the SLFP needs to be critically analysed.

The SLFP's electoral performance must not be measured solely in terms of either Rajapaksa's lasting appeal or his failed image. Sirisena's leadership is also a crucial factor in this regard. True, Sirisena joined hands with the UNF to defeat Rajapaksa, but he did not leave the SLFP. In fact, after becoming President, Sirisena took over the responsibility of leading the SLFP as its president as well. In the last six months, the measures initiated by Sirisena in his capacity as the country's president to rectify the mistakes of Rajapaksa has also gone down well with the people at large and probably helped retain cadres in the face of a political crisis that the party faced after Rajapaksa's defeat. And as President of the SLFP, Sirisena took all necessary measures to save the party from splitting under pressure from Rajapaksa loyalists. Sirisena's continuation in the party and his loyalists' support to the movement for good governance kept the reputation of the SLFP intact.

By making several tactical moves Sirisena also conveyed the message to the voters that the SLFP did not condone the actions of Rajapaksa. In the letter referred to earlier, Sirisena stated that more than SLFP members, some smaller parties within the UPFA coalition were keen to appoint Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister and that Rajapaksa should not have heeded their advice. Sirisena also made it clear in the letter that he had decided to allow Rajapaksa to contest, only to save the party from a split.

It should be noted here that while Sirisena's opposition to Rajapaksa and the conflict within the party was one of the main reasons for the defeat of the UPFA in the parliamentary elections, Sirisena also managed to save the reputation of the SLFP to a certain extent by steering popular reforms as an SLFP leader. Any decision by Sirisena to either expel Rajapaksa or allow the SLFP to split would have been more disastrous for the party by paving the way for an even more spectacular win by the UNFGG.

As far as SLFP's post-election status is concerned, the party's voters have nothing to lose given that the Central committee of the party led by Sirisena has decided to extend conditional support to the UNFGG for forming the National Unity Government. The UNP and SLFP signed a Memorandum of Understanding soon after Wickremesinghe took oath on August 21, according to which the SLFP will

join the government for two years and during this period there will be no crossovers between the two parties. SLFP is also negotiating for influential ministerial posts in the new government.

Aware of the differences within the party, Sirisena has also given the SLFP and other UPFA allies the option of sitting in the opposition if they wish to do so. As of now, UPFA coalition partners – Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), National Freedom Front (NFF) and Pivithuru Hela Urumaya (PHU) – and Rajapaksa loyalists within the SLFP have decided to sit in the opposition. As the parliament began its session on 1 September, 14 UPFA members including Rajapaksa himself were seen to be sitting in the opposition benches. This has been a masterstroke by Sirisena who has thus ensured that the SLFP does not split, with its members sitting in both the treasury and opposition benches, as the new national unity government begins its rule.

Other political parties

The main Tamil party, TNA, and the left-wing JVP have so far decided to sit in the opposition, but they would provide issue-based support to the new government. Smaller Tamil parties — Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) — have also extended support to the government. The TNA's continued success in Tamil areas and its willingness to work with the new government connotes the healthy continuation of a positive trend in Sri Lankan politics.

Challenges and Prospects

In the last seven months, Sri Lanka has seen some positive developments. There has been an overall improvement in governance. A conducive atmosphere has been created for exiled dissidents, journalists and activists. Incidents of communal clashes have declined. The conduct of free and fair parliamentary elections without any misuse of the state machinery is an additional feather in the cap of the national unity government. There has also been a marked improvement in the way the new government has conducted its foreign policy and repaired Sri Lanka's relationship with India and the West. There is political will now to stay put on the track and bring about a transparent and accountable system of governance. There is hope that the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe duo would lead the country in a positive direction.

This is not to deny that the next five years will be free of challenges. The real challenge for the government will be to satisfy both its own citizens and the international community on the issues of alleged war crimes during the last phase of the Eelam War and political reconciliation of the Tamils. After the formation of the NUG in January 2015, the international community had given a breathing space to the new government to improve the country's record on issues of governance, human rights and political reconciliation. The international community is likely to keep a close eye and continue to evaluate the country's performance in this regard.

On the issue of alleged war crimes, the Wickremesinghe government has clearly stated that it will not allow an international investigation as demanded by the Tamils. Instead, it will initiate a credible domestic investigation. Until now, there has been a lot of suspicion in the international community about the reliability of a domestic investigation. However, after the Parliamentary elections results, the USA has said that it would sponsor a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council in September 2015 supporting the government of Sri Lanka in its bid to conduct a domestic probe into the alleged war crimes. This is a major shift in the US approach and it can be assumed that Assistant Secretary Nisha Biswal made the announcement in this regard on August 25 after considering the views of the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil National Alliance. However, the Northern Provincial Council has its own suspicions about a domestic investigation and has passed a unanimous resolution to this effect. Following this, the TNA has said that it would accept a domestic investigation only if it has international participation.³ The new government thus has quite a job on its hand to convince the Tamils about its sincerity and commitment to address the issue of war crimes.

At the same time, it also has to contend with the opposition of some Sinhala chauvinist organisations to a US-backed domestic investigation. These latter have stated that "foreign elements are now trying to get their agenda put into action by using the Sri Lankan government." Media reports suggest that there would also be resistance from Rajapaksa loyalists to any action by the government against the former President, former Defence Secretary, and "all those soldiers who sacrificed their lives to protect the country from the LTTE."⁴ The new government, therefore, is likely to face a major challenge from the Sinhala nationalist constituency loyal to Rajapaksa while implementing its domestic and foreign policies as per the promises made to the people of Sri Lanka.

³ P. K. Balachandran, "US To Collaborate With Lanka In Drafting UNHCR Resolution On War Crimes," *The New Indian Express*, August 26, 2015, at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/world/US-To-Collaborate-With-Lanka-In-Drafting-UNHCR-Resolution-On-War-Crimes/2015/08/26/article2994734.ece>.

⁴ Nadira Gunatilleke, "PHU against domestic war crimes probe – Gammanpila," *Daily News*, August 26, 2015, at <http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=local/phu-against-domestic-war-crimes-probe-gammanpila>.

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