

SRI LANKA ELECTION RESULTS

# A vote for continuing change

The Sri Lankan electorate has voted to reject polarisation and reinforce the process of democratisation

Jayadeva Uyangoda

There are two significant political consequences following Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections. First, the majority of voters have given a verdict in favour of completing the partial political change that began with the presidential election of January 8 this year. Secondly, and no less important, it has dashed the hopes of the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa to return to power as Prime Minister.

Parliament was dissolved on June 27 under some peculiar circumstances, although it could continue till April 2016. President Maithripala Sirisena and the coalition that backed him had promised during the election campaign to call fresh parliamentary elections after 100 days of assuming office. In any case, the new coalition was a minority government, with only about 65 members in the 225-member legislature. Regime stability required a parliamentary majority through fresh elections.

The final tally of seats obtained by the United National Party-led coalition, UNFGG (United National Front) does not however, constitute a majority — a minimum of 113 seats — in the new legislature. This was a scenario predicted by many analysts. Under the existing system of proportional representation and in the present balance of political forces in the country, no party or coalition could get a working majority unless there was a massive wave of support, as in 2010 when the Mahinda Rajapaksa-led United Peoples' Freedom Alliance coalition won the election with just two seats short of the two-thirds majority. That was under unusual circumstances of the Rajapaksa government having won the war against the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

## Political stability

In post-civil war Sri Lanka, electoral politics has reached a degree of normalcy that does not facilitate electoral waves, as evidenced by Tuesday's results. The UNP's coalition has managed the highest number of parliamentary seats, yet is short of a clear majority, followed by the Rajapaksa-led UPFA. The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK), the main Tamil party, has won 14 seats from the Northern and Eastern provinces, with one national list seat

coming into its final tally. However, the ITAK is not likely to join any coalition and may support the government from outside. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has five seats and is most likely to follow the ITAK's stance by staying neutral in the post-election coalition formation. This makes it necessary for President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to invite at least a dozen MPs from the opposition UPFA to join their government. The idea of a national government, which both Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe have been promoting for the past several months, will certainly provide the political cover for such crossovers in the run up to the finalisation of the new government and its cabinet.

The question that helps us to understand Sri Lanka's current trends in politics is not why the UNP-led coalition won the highest number of seats but why the Rajapaksa-led UPFA coalition failed to gain a majority. Two factors seem to have contributed to Mr. Rajapaksa's second defeat within just seven months. The first is a failure to learn political lessons from the January defeat and second is the erosion of Mr. Rajapaksa's personal electoral appeal.

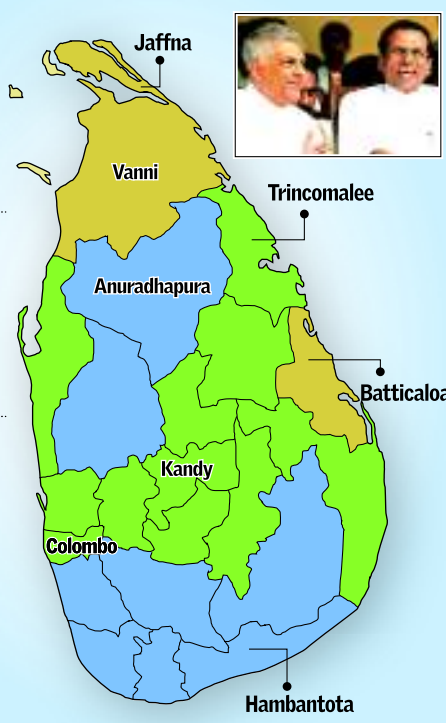
## Minority alienation

The Rajapaksa camp should have learnt one crucial lesson from the January defeat — the need to erase the trust deficit between the former President and the ethnic and religious minorities. When Mr. Rajapaksa lost the presidential bid in January, he still polled the highest number of total votes from the Sinhalese-majority districts, but he received virtually no support from the minority-dominant electorates. On the other hand, the victory of Mr. Sirisena, Mr. Rajapaksa's challenger, was facilitated by the ethnic and religious minority voters throughout the country and particularly from the Northern and Eastern provinces. Mr. Rajapaksa and his political managers do not seem to have acknowledged the crucial need to address the minority alienation. Their parliamentary electoral strategy was primarily based on the nationalist appeal to Sinhalese Buddhist voters, wrapped in the language of national security and patriotism. They also seem to have calculated that they could emerge as the party with the

| DISTRICT      | UNFGG      | UPFA      | JVP      | TNA       | Others   |
|---------------|------------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Colombo       | 11         | 7         | 1        |           |          |
| Gampaha       | 9          | 8         | 1        |           |          |
| Kalutara      | 4          | 5         | 1        |           |          |
| Kandy         | 7          | 5         |          |           |          |
| Matale        | 3          | 2         |          |           |          |
| Nuwara-eliya  | 5          | 3         |          |           |          |
| Galle         | 4          | 6         |          |           |          |
| Matara        | 3          | 5         |          |           |          |
| Hambantota    | 2          | 4         | 1        |           |          |
| Jaffna        | 1          |           |          | 5         | 1        |
| Vanni         | 1          | 1         |          | 4         |          |
| Batticaloa    | 1          |           |          | 3         | 1        |
| Ampara        | 4          | 2         |          | 1         |          |
| Trincomalee   | 2          | 1         | 0        | 1         |          |
| Kurunegala    | 7          | 8         |          |           |          |
| Puttalam      | 5          | 3         |          |           |          |
| Anuradhapura  | 4          | 5         |          |           |          |
| Polonnaruwa   | 3          | 2         |          |           |          |
| Badulla       | 5          | 3         |          |           |          |
| Monaragala    | 2          | 3         |          |           |          |
| Ratnapura     | 5          | 6         |          |           |          |
| Kegalle       | 5          | 4         |          |           |          |
| National List | 13         | 12        | 2        | 2         | 0        |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>106</b> | <b>95</b> | <b>6</b> | <b>16</b> | <b>2</b> |

## DISTRICT-WISE SEATS

- Final tally of seats obtained by the UNP-led coalition, UNFGG does not constitute a majority
- Under the present system, it is difficult for any one party to secure a working majority
- The UNP would have to rely on the TNA and other smaller parties



GRAPHIC: L.BALAMURUGAN

highest number of parliamentary seats on the strength of Sinhalese votes alone and then poach UNP members to secure parliamentary majority, as Mr. Rajapaksa had successfully done in the past. In fact, during the two final weeks of the election campaign, the Rajapaksa camp intensified its communal appeal to the Sinhalese electorate in subtle and not so subtle ways. The results of the election clearly indicate that in almost every electoral division with sizeable presence of ethnic and religious minority populations, the UPFA has fared even worse than it did in January.

The loss of Mr. Rajapaksa's personal appeal is also a factor that found no acknowledgment in the UPFA camp. He was immensely popular only among the Sinhalese voters and even that suffered a setback after his defeat in the January presidential election. Then, the investigations that the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration launched into allegations of corruption, abuse of power and even murder, although some of these investigations had a political agenda, had severely damaged his image as a political hero.

## A majority of Sri Lanka's voters have given a verdict in favour of completing the partial political change that began with the presidential elections

What emerged during the election campaign was that Mr. Rajapaksa was not the brand he was — no longer the easily marketable electoral commodity. In fact, the UPFA campaign failed to generate any new wave of support for the coalition, or its prime ministerial candidate.

This failure has now become clear even in districts where the UPFA won comfortably. In almost all those districts, the UPFA's share of votes has been reduced and some have shifted to the UNP. In the final count, the total number of votes that the UPFA could get is a little over 4.73 million, a significant drop from 5.79 million votes

which Mr. Rajapaksa polled as the presidential candidate, just seven months ago.

## Cracks in the UPFA

Meanwhile, the power struggle between President Sirisena and Mr. Rajapaksa for control of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and UPFA too may have worked against the latter's electoral fortunes. In that power struggle, Mr. Rajapaksa put a great deal of pressure on Mr. Sirisena to declare him the prime ministerial candidate of the UPFA of which Mr. Sirisena became the leader when he was elected President in January.

The antagonistic personal and political relations between the two intensified when the UPFA, effectively controlled by Mr. Rajapaksa, tried to derail Mr. Sirisena's reform programme. During the height of the parliamentary election campaign, Mr. Sirisena publicly declined to appoint Mr. Rajapaksa as prime minister, even if the UPFA won the majority of seats. Two days before the election, Mr. Sirisena sacked the secretaries of the

SLFP and the UPFA, who were Rajapaksa loyalists. This battle for control of the SLFP and the UPFA obviously created an unanticipated crisis within the Rajapaksa camp. While it may have closed the ranks of the hardcore supporters, many demoralised SLFP/UPFA sympathisers may have stayed home on the day of election.

The final figures of the strength of each political party and coalition have not yet been officially declared. With its national list seats, the UNP-led UNFGG is likely to have the final tally of about 105 seats, still short of a majority in parliament. The UPFA, on the other hand, will emerge as a very strong opposition with about 92 seats. A strong opposition is not a bad thing for good governance which Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe have been promoting as a very strong brand of politics. However, if they want to introduce any new constitutional reforms, they will need the UPFA's support to secure the two-thirds majority. If the kind of hostile politics of the enemy-friend bi-polarity, in an almost Carl Schmittian paradigm, that the two camps advanced during the past few months continues, the reform agenda might suffer once again.

Among the new government's immediate challenges will be the handling of the UN Human Rights Council report on the alleged war crimes, due in September, just in a few weeks. The UNHRC and the government are likely to cooperate on an agenda of compromise, but at the risk of provoking anger among Tamil activist constituencies, at home and abroad. Effective devolution of power to the North and East and constitutional reforms in that direction too will return to the political debate sooner than later. During the election campaign, the UNP and its coalition partners took an exceedingly cautious stand not to commit to a political solution along a federal framework. With new signs of radicalisation of politics in the North, and despite its impressive electoral gains in the province, the ITAK may find it difficult to openly back the government if it tries to down play the political reform and reconciliation agenda.

(Jayadeva Uyangoda is Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Colombo.)

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindu

(dated August 19, 1965)

## Export target cut

Owing to shortages of several agricultural commodities, the Board of Trade has reduced the export target for the current financial year from Rs. 875 crores to Rs. 850 crores to Rs. 860 crores. At its meeting here [New Delhi], the Board felt that the export target for the Fourth Plan as a whole should not exceed Rs. 5,100 crores. Even this target, it felt, could be realised only if production programmes were adhered to and the export assistance schemes were kept on a firm stable and long-term basis. Export earnings fell by about Rs. 11 crores in the first quarter of the current year mainly due to fall in earnings from sugar and vegetable oils. However, the future prospects in respect of these and other items like H.P.S. groundnuts, cotton piecegoods and cotton textiles were considered satisfactory by the board.

## Rocket launched from Thumba

A Judi-Dart rocket, the fifteenth in the present series, was successfully launched at 12-40 I.S.T. from the Thumba Rocket Launching Facility near here [Trivandrum]. The Test Director, Mr. H.G.S. Murthi said that both the rocket and the payload performances were

satisfactory. The chaff ejected from the rocket was acquired by the ground radar two minutes after the launch at an altitude of 64 kilometres. The radar continued to track the chaff for 19 minutes more up to an altitude of 32 kilometres. Mr. Murthi said that two Nike-Apache rockets with magnetometer payload were scheduled to be launched by the end of September. The tests would be for the measurement of electron density in the ionosphere in the equatorial region.

## Crude price cut

India will next year save Rs. 11.5 crores in foreign exchange partly because of the price cuts effected by the Western companies in imported crude and partly because of the anticipated increase in crude output at Ankleshwar. India will save an additional Rs. 1.5 crores in foreign exchange in a single transaction with a western oil source for the supply of aviation fuel. These points have been brought out in an official statement on oil policy tabled in the Lok Sabha to-day [August 18, New Delhi]. The statement said India had arranged with the Soviet Union for the supply of substantially large quantities of kerosene and high-speed diesel oil to meet the gap between indigenous production and demand.

# Defeat of divisive politics

The new UNP government will have to quickly address a range of concerns from prosecution of corrupt politicians to providing a credible process to address war-time accountability

Ahilan Kadirgamar

The parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka held risks of polarisation and the re-emergence of authoritarian politics. But the Lankan voters rejected divisive politics for the second time this year. The United National Party (UNP) will likely form the new government, while the moderating presence of President Maithripala Sirisena as leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the engagement of smaller parties like the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) will help reinforce democracy.

Despite the significant change that followed his defeat in the January 2015 presidential elections, Mahinda Rajapaksa's attempt to make a comeback through Parliament had created much confusion for the voting public. The Rajapaksa-led United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) regrouped its patronage networks and mobilised its business allies, marshalling a well-oiled campaign to bring back the former President. The communal campaign harped on the war victory, propagated hate, and instilled fears of the LTTE re-emerging with a UNP government.

In the North, the Tamil National Peoples' Front (TNPF) took up a more aggressive Tamil nationalist stand, attempting to make it to the Parliament by challenging the TNA, which dominates the Tamil constituency. Up country, the Ceylon Workers Congress continued its crass politics in coalition with the UPFA.

Rather than the victory of any single party, the significance of this election is the defeat of such divisive and bankrupt actors, particularly the Rajapaksa-led UPFA, the TNPF and the CWC. None of the parties provided a credible political alternative or serious debate on the social, economic and political issues facing the country. The Lankan electorate, in a reflection of its long democratic tradition voted prudently to reject polarisation and reinforce the process of democratisation that began with the presidential elections in January.

During the six troubling post-war years under the authoritarian Rajapaksa regime, the minorities had come under increasing attack. The Muslims, who suffered the most relentless attacks in recent years, backed the UNP to ensure the UPFA's defeat. The up-country Tamils, in turn, for the first time voted out the CWC to open the space for a new politics in their region.

## Separatist rhetoric

In this context, the Tamil nationalist



THE WAY AHEAD: "Lack of leadership and vision on the part of the UNP continues to be a perennial concern." Picture shows UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe addressing a rally earlier in the month.

— PHOTO: REUTERS

## The war-weary Tamils in the North and East have given a clear message supporting TNA leader R. Sampanthan's call for a negotiated political solution in the year ahead

party, the TNPF, projected a separatist agenda, drawing on support from the pro-LTTE sections of the diaspora. The TNPF and its supporters in the so-called Tamil Civil Society Forum, carried away by their own aggressive campaign and social media theatrics, expected a few seats. The Jaffna voters, however, proved sober, and the TNPF did not get a single seat, managing a mere five per cent of the vote in Jaffna, even lower than the UPFA. An independent group of former LTTE cadres — who gained considerable international media attention — got even fewer votes.

The war-weary Tamil population in the North and East has given a clear message, giving strength to TNA leader R. Sampanthan's call for a negotiated political solution in the year ahead. However, the TNA faces increasing criticism for the failure of its Northern Provincial Council to address the war-torn peoples' social and economic needs. In fact, the diaspora-leaning TNA Chief Minister Wigneswaran, on a one-track nationalist

political trip, backed the TNPF in the last weeks of the campaign. Two years of bankrupt leadership, together with his recent support for the TNPF, point to his political immaturity and perhaps signal an end to his short stint in politics.

## Challenges before UNP

For the UNP-led coalition, there will be major challenges. First, to once and for all address the "national question" and the legacy of the war, which previous UNP regimes raised without finding a solution. Will the UNP with the support of President Sirisena, who is already in the process of regaining control of the SLFP from Mr. Rajapaksa, initiate a credible political process engaging the minorities? How will actors like the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is part of the UNP coalition, and the band of nationalist opinion-makers be engaged or counterbalanced? Early movement on a political solution may well create the conditions to address issues of accountability for war-time abuses and for a process of reconciliation.

The other major challenge is the dismal national economy. The right-wing UNP has historically confronted the rural masses and the urban working classes with its pro-business bias and liberalisation policies. Its ideologues have been calling for an economic transformation characterised by the inflow of global capital, rapid urbanisation and cuts in the public sector spending and social wel-

fare. Such a direction will inevitably dispossess the marginalised, aggravate inequalities, and result in uneven regional development.

Ranil Wickremesinghe was bestowed the prime ministership without winning an election in January, and yet he could not put the remnants of the Rajapaksa regime in the dock. Lack of leadership and vision on the part of the UNP continues to be a perennial concern. The new UNP government with a coalition of political parties will have to mature quickly to address the range of concerns. Prosecution of corrupt politicians and business tycoons who amassed great wealth during the decade of Rajapaksa authoritarianism is one concern. The other is a credible domestic process to address war-time accountability, which will inevitably come on the agenda with the upcoming UN Human Rights Council Report to be released next month.

## Looking ahead

In recent decades, Sri Lanka has been reduced to a place of violence and the analysis of its politics has become overly ethnicised. This election, both in its absence of violence and the diversity of voting across the country, refutes the simplistic reductionism that has informed international engagement. It is the nationalists, bent on divisive politics, who are most comfortable with that characterisation, although they are frequently shaken by the politics of Lankan voters.

Mahinda Rajapaksa was a wounded politician after his defeat in January, and he chose the most virulent communal rhetoric to attempt a comeback, amid serious accusations of plunder and pillage. This defeat will be the end of a decade that steered the country towards increasing militarisation and polarisation for the singular goal of consolidating one regime's political and economic power. The parliamentarians who contested with him will either jump ship to join the UNP or come under the fold of Mr. Sirisena controlling the SLFP.

In the decade before Mr. Rajapaksa's divisive politics took hold, the Chandrika Kumaratunga led regime shifted the country's political discourse in the direction of devolution and national integration. Provided there is the requisite leadership, in a few years the country's mindset could change towards equality and co-existence. The aftermath of parliamentary elections is the time to begin work on a national consensus for political solutions.

(Ahilan Kadirgamar is a political economist with the Collective for Economic Democratisation in Sri Lanka.)

## CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

>> In "Reject mercy pleas of 2 convicts, Pranab told" (August 18, 2015), there was a reference to the President commuting the death sentence of *only* Man Bahadur Dewan. Actually, on November 15, 2012, he commuted the death sentence of Atbir also.

It is the policy of *The Hindu* to correct significant errors as soon as possible.

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