



Sri Lanka Presidential Elections 2015: Issues and Challenges Ahead

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In Sri Lanka's January 8th Presidential elections, the common opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena defeated the incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa by securing fifty-one per cent of votes, whereas the incumbent president could secure a little above forty-seven per cent. It was contested on issues of corruption and growing authoritarianism of the Rajapaksa regime, which was in power since 2005.

The election was significant because, for the first time, the incumbent president sought a third term by amending the Constitution of Sri Lanka. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution was introduced in 2010 to allow the incumbent president to contest for any number of times. This election took place two years earlier than the actual schedule, following the United People's Freedom Alliance's (UPFA) performance during the Uva provincial council elections in last September. The UPFA coalition won the election with narrow margin and the voting share had also decreased.

Secondly, this election was the second presidential election after the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 2010 elections, Rajapaksa won against the opposition candidate, General Sarath Fonseka, by securing 57.88 per cent of the total votes polled, where as the opposition candidate secured 40.15 per cent. The military defeat of the LTTE worked in favour of Rajapaksa. Even in the general elections of 2010, the UPFA

coalition got two thirds majority in the parliament and that provided absolute authority to Rajapaksa to implement political, social and economic policies without any hindrance. Seemingly, the military defeat of the LTTE did not work in his favour in this election. The minority communities' votes played a decisive role in defeating Rajapaksa. Tamils and Muslims comprise above twenty five percentage of Sri Lankan population (according to 2012 census government of Sri Lanka).

The reasons for the defeat were growing inflation, lack of economic opportunities for educated youth, and resentment of rural population against foreign companies involved in the agricultural sector. For example, even though the national annual growth rate is at seven per cent, it did not actually improve the economic condition of the Sinhala rural poor and also failed to provide employment to the youth. According to the Human Development Report (HDR) 2014, unemployment rate for the people aged between 20 to 40 years for the past decade in Sri Lanka was around 40 per cent. There were a number of instances of people dying after using fertilizers and fuels for agricultural purposes supplied by foreign companies particularly in the Rajarata area. There was also an issue of automatic transfer of land to foreign companies for public purposes without the consent of the land-holders. Therefore, the rural Sinhala population, which had been rallying behind Rajapaksa since 2005, has now turned its attention to livelihood issues.

The Tamil community also played a significant role in this election. Majority of the Tamils took anti Rajapaksa stand in 2005 and 2010 elections. In 2010 elections, despite the fact that the opposition candidate, General Sarath Fonseka, was one of the persons responsible for the operations against the LTTE, which also killed many argue more than 40,000 civilians, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) chose to vote for him, just to defeat Rajapaksa. Even in this election, the TNA, who claims to represent the Tamil community, chose to vote for the opposition candidate. The Northern Province overwhelmingly voted for Maithripala Sirisena. For instance, in Jaffna and Vanni districts, Maithripala secured above seventy per cent of votes. Increasing militarisation in Northern Province and slow progress in rebuilding war torn areas and failure in offering a concrete political solution

even after the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 worked against Rajapaksa. The support extended by the minority Tamil community to Maithripala Sirisena was in expectation of speedy implementation of rebuilding in war-torn areas apart from ethnic reconciliation. It remains to be seen how he is planning to solve the national question of reconciliation with Tamil community, given the fact that the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) is vehemently opposed to any concessions to the minorities in power and decision making process.

Apart from the Tamil minority, the Muslim minority community also voted against Rajapaksa. Organised attacks by Sinhala Buddhist organisations on innocent Muslims in the South of the country last year led to the withdrawal of Sri Lankan Muslim Congress support to the Rajapaksa government. This has reflected in the voting percentage in Muslim dominated Eastern Province. Maithripala Sirisena, for instance, could secure above 81 per cent of the total votes (2, 59,166) polled in Batticaloa district, whereas the incumbent president got 16 per cent of the total votes polled. Rajapaksa regime's total failure in condemning and containing the Sinhala nationalist organisations, such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), which was responsible for the riots against the Muslim community, also worked against the candidature of Rajapaksa.

The opposition was united in criticising the government on corruption charges. If we look at the issues propagated by the opposition during the campaign, the opposition directly targeted the Rajapaksa family, which many argue was involved in rampant corruption and was selling the country to extra regional powers. Sirisena, in his election manifesto touched upon the foreign policy issue and, according to the manifesto, Sri Lanka's "image has been destroyed due to incorrect and naive foreign policy and strategies", which resulted in Sri Lanka's isolation from the international community. This was in reference to the growing distance from the West, European Union and the isolation Sri Lanka has been facing in the international fora. Sri Lanka was the first country in South Asia to adopt liberalisation policies in the 1970s and the Bretton Woods institutions were instrumental in directing country's economic policy since then. However, the rift has increased between West and Sri Lanka in the past decade owing to the country's growing

relationship with China and alleged human rights violations committed by the government during and after the final phase of the war with the LTTE.

During the election campaign, the opposition also brought to the fore the issue of China's involvement in the country. The opposition pledged to scrap the \$1.34 billion Chinese funded Colombo Port city project citing threats to the environment. There was also the issue of the amount of money spent in constructing roads by the Chinese firms. The opposition alleged that 'India's IRCON was executing a road project in the north of the country at the cost of \$2.5 million per km, while the Chinese firm is constructing railway lines in the south at a cost of \$10.5 million'. The opposition charged the Rajapaksa government that it was pushing the country towards bankruptcy. However, traditionally, both the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) governments maintained good bilateral relations with China despite ideological differences. It needs to be seen whether local grievances or economic rationality would determine new government's policy towards China.

The challenges before the new government is that Maithripala Sirisena appealed to the rural Sinhala youth as well as to the minority communities that he will stabilise the country in two stages. In the first stage, a National Unity Alliance Government will be established comprising all the political parties and people's representatives, who are willing to join the government to solve urgent issues in hundred days. At the second stage, he promised to build an ideal country through the implementation of a six year programme to be drafted after the general elections to be held this year. Maithripala Sirisena was supported by the opposition UNP, JHU, TNA and Democratic Party along with members of SLFP, the party he served as General Secretary till recently. He promised to build the unity of political parties to solve nation's problems. However, this will be a tough task given the fact that on important political and economic issues, the political parties supporting Sirisena do not share the same outlook.

In this context, how India and Sri Lanka relations are going to shape up with the

change of government in Sri Lanka is the question. In areas of development cooperation involving development assistance, economic and security cooperation between the two countries, cooperation is likely to continue. However, there are politically sensitive issues, which can strain India and Sri Lanka relations in the future. For instance, India and Sri Lanka bilateral relations will depend on whether the new government will consider India's concerns about the reconciliation process with Tamil minorities. The implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka is an option that can devolve powers to the provinces. However, the fact is that majority of Sinhalese do not support devolving considerable powers to the minorities through this Amendment. Therefore, the new president has to work towards creating national consensus for political resolution of ethnic problem, involving majority and minority political parties. There is also the question of fishermen issue and both the countries need to find a permanent solution involving the fishermen on both sides.

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