



Forthcoming Parliamentary Elections (2015) in Sri Lanka: An Assessment

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Introduction

The Sri Lankan Parliamentary elections, which are going to be held on August 17th, pose a challenge to President Sirisena's government, which came to power in January. A number of developments took place after the Presidential elections in terms of constitutional amendments and economic and social policy changes with the help of coalition partners representing all the political parties. The new government of Sri Lanka was successful, to some extent, in garnering public support to reform the agenda. However, the biggest challenge is to win the upcoming Parliamentary elections that will eventually pave the way for the implementation of promised reforms. This is not an easy task, given the fact that each political party and coalition of parties are trying to win the confidence of voters by putting forward various alternative policy options through election manifestos and public statements. In this context, it is important to look into the issues raised by various political and civil society groups and how it might influence the chances of two main Prime Ministerial candidates in this election, the current Prime Minister, Ranil Wickramasinghe and former President, Rajapaksa.

Promises Made by UPFA, UNFGG and TNA Coalition

The UPFA

The United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) manifesto is a 12 point programme named "Guarantee for the future". The Prime Ministerial candidate, Rajapaksa is leading the campaign. The 'manifesto speaks about recommencing stalled development projects, employment to youth and basic social security to private and public sector employees'.¹ On the question of ethnic reconciliation, the UPFA promised a political resolution within six months to ensure the unity of Sri Lanka and a political solution, which will be based on the 13th amendment of the Constitution backed by India. It also promised to implement the recommendations of Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) within a year. These aspects are included to assuage the fears of minority Tamil population regarding the process of reconciliation and accountability. Minority parties were responsible for the defeat of former President in the last Presidential elections.

In the last Parliamentary elections 2010, the 'UPFA won 144 seats out of 225. The United National Front (UNF) led by UNP won 60 and TNA won 14 seats'.² The defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan government led by Rajapaksa helped in gaining 60 per cent of overall votes. However, political developments after the Parliamentary elections in 2010, particularly the defeat of Rajapaksa in 2015 Presidential elections, led to changes in the UPFA alliance. The Sinhala hard line party, Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), for instance, left the coalition. The UPFA strength in the Parliament fluctuated since then.

Despite the Presidential election defeat, Rajapaksa is contesting the elections to come back to power. However, to win the post, Rajapaksa has to win the confidence of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) members. The SLFP is divided between Sirisena and Rajapaksa groups. The former President, Mahinda Rajapaksa's decision to contest the Parliament elections to come to power as the Prime Minister is not acceptable to the President. According to the President, he had to 'endorse Rajapaksa's candidature to run in the Parliamentary elections to prevent a split in SLFP', as some members of SLFP are in favour of Rajapaksa.³ A few members, who are opposed to 'Rajapaksa contesting elections were expelled from the SLFP, as they extended support to the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) coalition.'⁴

Winning the confidence of youth is important to gain maximum number of seats in the Sinhala dominated areas. Rajapaksa, in his campaign, is trying to target the youth by offering employment opportunities (1.5 million jobs) and by targeting political parties having a base among rural youth, such as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). In an election rally, he said, “The JVP had failed to include one word regarding mass killings of their members under the UNP government in 1980s in its election manifesto.”⁵ In the 2005 Presidential elections, JVP endorsed him along with JHU. In 2010, it supported Sarath Fonseka’s candidature, a former Army General during Rajapaksa’s tenure. There are a few factors, which may work in favour of Rajapaksa:

- One is the issue of corruption charges against Rajapaksa family. To his advantage, the corruption charges could not be proven as of now, despite having high-level Anti-Corruption Unit led by the Prime Minister, Ranil Wickramasinghe.
- The hype about ending all China backed projects proved false and Sri Lanka recently held joint defence exercises with China.
- Impending UN report on war crimes (as demanded by the international community) is effectively used to garner support for Rajapaksa. Sinhala Buddhist groups, such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), and JHU’s campaign against concessions to Tamils groups, such as allowing banned websites to function, etc. may work in his favour.
- Rajapaksa is contesting from Kurunegala district, the third largest district dominated by Sinhala population.

The UNFGG

The United National Party (UNP) led by the Prime Minister, Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe is leading the coalition called the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG). Minority political parties, such as Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) and All Ceylon People’s Congress (ACPC) are some of the coalition partners. The UNFGG manifesto titled, “A New Country in 60 Months: Five Point Plan” talks about growth in the economy, fighting corruption, enshrining freedom for all, investing in infrastructure and improving the education system’.⁶ The five point agenda aims at achieving the goal of good governance by including civil society in the policy implementation process.

The manifesto has also promised a change in the composition of the Constitutional Council to include civil society representation. During the previous regime led by Rajapaksa, the civil society came under a lot of scrutiny due to campaign for human rights protection and accountability.

On the question of religion, the manifesto mentions that apart from facilitating Buddhist education, it promises to provide free access to all Hindu places of worship, security to Islamic places of worship and re-establishment of the Christian Affairs Ministry. These promises, if implemented, will pave the way for the much needed reconciliation process.

On the economic front, Ranil Wickramasinghe promised to create one million jobs and 45 Economic Development Zones (EDZ) throughout the country. The campaign of UNFGG is focused on countering the Rajapaksa campaign and labelled it as “counter revolutionary” and against the mandate given by the people in the January 2015 Presidential elections.⁷ The manifesto also promises to provide devolution of power, while retaining the unitary structure of the state. It also talks about introducing the new electoral system. However, these electoral promises need to get the support of political parties, which are part of the coalition.

The UNP is trying to ‘reach out to the 5.7 million voters, who voted for Rajapaksa in Presidential elections by promising more investments’.⁸ The Sampur power project and a second coal power plant with the help of India and an oil refinery in the China Bay, Trincomalee are given as examples of its thrust on development.

In the North, the PM promised mega development projects, such as ‘the Jaffna University; resettlement of Jaffna people on their own lands; development of Palaly Airport and drinking water project’.⁹ On the question of finding persons missing during and after the war, the PM promised to set up a permanent office to find them.

There are good chances of Ranil’s continuity as the Prime Minister, because it is only a little over six months ago that the people supported his candidature as the Prime Minister. Since the Tamil political parties’ support is decisive in gaining support for his candidature in the Parliament, Ranil can expect a positive response, as Tamil parties had vehemently opposed Rajapaksa as the President in the recent past.

The TNA

The manifesto of Tamil National Alliance (TNA) clearly stated its disappointment with the present constitutional arrangements. The TNA is the coalition of Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) and Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK). According to the TNA manifesto, the present Constitution favours the "majority and imposes a majoritarian hegemony on the Tamil people."¹⁰ Therefore, TNA favours a power sharing arrangement that would recognise Tamil speaking Northern and Eastern provinces as the historical habitation of the Sri Lankan Tamil minority and believes that those people are entitled to the right to self determination. Therefore, "devolution of power on the basis of shared sovereignty should be on the land, law and order, education and agriculture."¹¹ On the question of reconciliation and accountability, the TNA expects that the Sri Lankan government will fulfil resolutions adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and respect the forthcoming UN investigation report on human rights violations during and after the war. Apart from these issues, the issues of demilitarisation, resettlement and abolition of Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) figure in the manifesto.

TNA's demand for self determination was criticised by the United Citizens' Front (UCF) and JVP on the basis that the demand is a threat to the sovereignty of Sri Lanka.¹² The arrest of LTTE leaders in Tamil Nadu recently is also fuelling speculations about the revival of the LTTE among hard line Sinhala political parties. This speculation would help the UPFA coalition in gaining votes in Sinhala majority areas.

The difference of opinion regarding the implementation of the 13th amendment as a final political solution by some of the Sinhala and Tamil political parties shows the complexity involved in arriving at a political solution. The Chief Minister of Northern Province, C.V. Wigneswaran said that the "13th amendment can never be the final solution".¹³ Whereas, the UPFA is promising a solution based on the thirteenth amendment and the UNP is of the opinion that the federal solution suggested by the TNA is not feasible. In this context, the political resolution of Tamil ethnic question has become complex, even after the war ended in 2009.

Possible Scenario

Even if the UPFA manages a victory, a lot will depend on whether Sirisena invites Rajapaksa to become the Prime Minister. Rajapaksa's eligibility to hold the post is the subject of an intense debate and there are some technical issues, which can stop him from becoming the PM. While the appointment of the Prime Minister is the prerogative of the President, it needs to be seen whether Sirisena would show the courage to deny the post to the leader of the largest coalition. Clearly, under the 19th amendment, the Prime Minister has been rendered more powerful than the President. Article 42(4) leaves it to the discretion of the President by stating that "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." However, 'legal experts opine that this Article cannot be seen in isolation. Article 31(2) and Article 92 state that no person, who has been twice elected as President, shall again be qualified thereafter to be elected to the post by the people. And in case, Rajapaksa is elevated to the post of the Prime Minister, he cannot act as a President in case a situation arises'.¹⁴ Rajapaksa cannot be elected by the Parliament to such a post even temporarily. This clause may give an advantage to Sirisena to choose a person acceptable to the majority in the Parliament.

Conclusion

The electoral combinations are favouring Rajapaksa's opponents. However, the larger-than-life image of Rajapaksa and his appeal to Sinhala majority cannot be altogether wished away. He might manage to win more MPs from his coalition to win the elections and emerge as the main contender for the post of the Prime Minister. Analysts also claim that the elections have been timed to stop a come-back by Rajapaksa, pre-empting the rise in his popularity if criticised by the UN Report on War Crimes. The timing is seen by some as aimed to give his ally Wickramasinghe an edge. Whichever coalition comes to power, political, economic and security policy of the coalition government will have a direct bearing on the India- Sri Lanka relations.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

End Notes

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 - ³ Ramakrishnan T, “Sirisena against Rajapaksa’s Candidature for PM’s Post,” *The Hindu*, 15 July 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sirisena-against-rajapaksas-candidature-for-pms-post/article7422569.ece>.
 - ⁴ “SLFP Membership of Rajitha Senaratne and Four Others Suspended,” 28 July 2015, <http://newsfirst.lk/english/2015/07/breaking-sfp-membership-of-rajitha-senaratne-and-four-others-suspended/105405>.
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 - ⁶ “The United National Front for Good Governance Released its Election Manifesto,” 24 July 2015, [Asiantribune.com/node/87467](http://www.asiantribune.com/node/87467).
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 - ⁸ “UNFGG will not Let Down 5.7mn Voters Voted for MR- PM”, 28 July 2015, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/81143/unfgg-will-not-let-down-5-7mn-voter-voted-for-mr-pm>
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 - ¹² “TNA’s Manifesto a Threat to SL Sovereignty: Tissa,” 26 July 2015, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/80967/tna-s-manifesto-a-threat-to-sl-sovereignty-tissa>.
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