



The February 10th Local Authorities Election in Sri Lanka: What the Results Imply for Reconciliation Process

*Dr. Samatha Mallempati**

Introduction

The local authorities election which was held on 10th February 2018, gave a clear majority to the former President of Sri Lanka Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa's party the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). The election result is a setback to the operation of bi-partisan National Unity Government formed after the 2015 elections by both the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP). In the local elections both the parties the SLFP and the UNP contested on a separate platform. The election results also indicate that the next two years i.e before the next presidential elections in 2020, the government based on bipartisan approach will face numerous challenges in achieving national reconciliation through constitutional reforms and in curbing corruption as envisaged during the formation of the government.

The result

According to the election commission of Sri Lanka out of 340 local authorities seats, the SLPP won 231 seats, the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITEK) won 40 seats in Tamil dominated North, the UNP won 37 seats, the SLFP 6, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) five seats, Ceylon Workers Congress (p.wing) three, National Congress two seats, Independent Group three and others won thirteen seats. For the first time local authority elections were held under the new mixed electoral voting system, replacing the preferential voting of previous years. Under the mixed electoral voting system '60 per cent of the candidates have been elected under the first-past-the-post system with 40 per cent through the proportional representation system. The government also enacted a law to make it binding on all political parties and independent groups to field at least 25 per cent female candidates".

Issues raised during the campaign

Corruption, economic development, peace and reconciliation were the main issues that were taken up during the campaign by political parties and leaders for the local elections. Unlike the last Presidential elections in 2015 where the main Sinhala and Tamil political parties came on a common platform to defeat the incumbent Rajapaksa government, this time around the SLFP led by the President Maithripala Sirisena and the UNP led by the Prime Minister (PM) chose to contest on a separate platform.

The campaign of the President of Sri Lanka, Mr. Maithripala Sirisena as the leader of the SLFP, focused on the issue of corruption under the rule of former President Rajapaksa. He urged the voters to vote against the corruption and for a clear political policy or philosophy and not for “a new party created with personal agenda of protecting the thieves, which will have no existence”². Regarding the efforts his government has taken to address the issue of corruption, he mentioned about a Presidential Commission that was constituted to inquire into allegations of large scale frauds and malpractices in Sri Lankan Airlines and Mihin Lanka. He took a strong position on people involved in corruption and said ‘those who are responsible for frauds will be revealed to the country shortly and they will be prosecuted’.³

The President of Sri Lanka also cautioned people of false campaigns regarding division of the country saying ‘under his government there will be no opportunity to divide the country and efforts are on towards building a united country and ensuring peace and reconciliation’⁴. Addressing gatherings in the North the President promised ‘to open the AB-21 road Kankasanthurai to Point Pedro, which had been closed since June 20, 1990.’⁵

The UNP and its leader the PM, Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe’ campaigns focused on economic development that took place under the National Unity Government. The UNP leadership ascertained that it is trying to “fix the mistakes of the past and trying to build a stronger economy for a better future for all Sri Lankans”⁶. According to the UNP, ‘the government led by Ranil created more than 400,000 jobs, helped over 200,000 secure a home, reduced fuel prices by 22%’ provided Rs. 20,000 to pregnant women, cut serious crime by a third and increased public sector salaries by Rs. 10,000’⁷. The UNP campaign mainly focused on PM’s economic policy and its benefits. Unlike the President, the UNP particularly the PM kept a distance from criticising the President or the SLFP and also dissuaded the back benchers who are critical of the President.

The SLPP or Rajapaksa’s campaign focused on transforming the country “into a paradise” by taking up health and poverty issues. The Joint Opposition (JO) coalition accused the government of ‘betraying the country politically by engaging with the separatists groups such as Global Tamil Forum (GTF)’.⁸ Rajapaksa also criticised the PM of promising free wi-fi for all instead of fertilisers for farmers’⁹. Rajapaksa based his campaign on old rhetoric about Tamil Eelam and warned the voters that the present government policies will lead to the formation of Tamil Eelam.

The TNA campaign focused on the various reports pertaining to constitutional reforms such as steering committee report, subcommittee reports. And for the Tamil parties, ensuring protection of human rights and implementation of UNHRC recommendations on transitional justice was the main plank of the campaign.

Is the election outcome a verdict against the National Unity Government?

The election result has led to doubts on the political and economic policies pursued by the government since 2015. The government had taken a few initiatives in terms of reconciliation such as initiating public debate on changes to the present constitution and creation of independent bodies through 19th Amendment to the Constitution. It also took an initiative to manage the national debt and change the course of the economy to a more export oriented and outward economy based on the Vision 2025 document. According to the PM's economic policy statement in Parliament in 2017, the country is able to sustain a 'steady GDP growth rate of 4.4 per cent, maintain the unemployment rate at 4.2 per cent and reduced the budget deficit to 5.4 per cent'¹⁰.

The government is also trying to focus on the potential of the Indian Ocean and emerge as an important player in India Ocean by improving its infrastructure along the coast as well as engaging actively with bodies such as India Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The political environment has improved which is evident from the increased engagement and confidence the leaders show in engagement with countries which were critical of its human rights record of the past such as the US and the EU. The EU, in 2017 restored the GSP + status to Sri Lanka based on its improved human rights record.

The above are examples of Sri Lankan government's policy direction in economic, political and strategic sphere. However, in recent months differences surfaced between the UNP and the SLFP over handling of corruption cases against Rajapaksa family as well as the Central Bank Bond scam. The PM appointed the former Governor of Central bank Mr. Arjuna Mahendran, despite objections for the same within the party, particularly from the Member of Parliament and the current Deputy Minister of National Policies and Economic Affairs Mr. Harsha Desilva. The MP reportedly opposed the appointment, because Mr. Arujuna's son-in-law, Mr. Arjun Aloysius was involved in controversial deals made by Perpetual Treasuries in bond markets, a firm connected to Arjun Aloysius.

The President appointed a Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCoI) in January 2017 to look into the irregularities and persons involved in the bond scam. The former Finance Minister Mr. Ravi Karunanayake of UNP was made to resign due to his alleged involvement in the scam and for taking monetary favours from Mr. Arjuna's family'¹¹. Meanwhile, the PM appointed the Thilak Marapona Committee to examine the report submitted by the PCoI. The committee recommended the removal of the former Minister Mr. Ravi Karunanayake as the deputy leader of the party. The Central Bank Bond Scam was an issue that affected the victory of UNP at the elections. Even though the 'UNP claimed during the elections that the party believes in

transparency and the PM himself appeared before the Commission, it seems that the campaign of the SLPP on the issue made an impact on UNP vote base¹².

The decision by the SLFP and the UNP to contest election at local level separately to secure their own political party interests also caused the damage. Rather than going to the people with the agenda of National Unity Government and achievements which took place due to the bi-partisan government at the centre, both the parties leaders were involved in trading charges against each other at the local level campaign putting at risk the future of the coalition government. The SLFP and the UNP also underestimated the influence Rajapaksa has over the electorate. The SLPP cadre are the base of SLFP and he could manage to get around 44 to 45 per cent of votes in this election. This shows that Rajapaksa is able to maintain his support base in the last three years. In the last Presidential elections, he got around 48 per cent of votes.

Another factor which might have influenced the voters is the slow progress in cases involving Rajapaksa and family which the PM admitted after the election results. And differences of opinion also exist between the UNP and the SLFP over the constitutional reforms. For instance, there is no consensus on abolition of executive Presidency as the SLFP is in favour of executive Presidency and the UNP is in favour of abolition. Recommendations of various committees for constitutional reforms such as Steering Committee report were projected by JO as detrimental to unity of the country and the SLFP and the UNP were unsuccessful to counter the debate at the local level. The JO could touch upon the local issues such as price rise and rise in cost of living standards of the people.

The result provided an opportunity for the JO led by Rajapaksa to question the continuation of National Unity Government and soon after the election he demanded dissolution of Parliament and early Presidential elections. Rajapaksa applied the same tactic in the last Presidential elections when he called for elections prior to the expiration of his term in 2011 and won the elections. The 2015 Presidential elections were also held before the scheduled time but he was defeated by the Sirisena and Ranil Wickramasinghe coalition.

For Rajapaksa, winning the next Presidential and Parliamentary election is important to avoid any action against him and his family on corruption charges as well as with regard to human rights violations which took place during and after the war with the LTTE in 2009. The Presidential Commission of Inquiry to Investigate and Inquire into Serious Acts of Fraud, Corruption and Abuse of Power, State Resources and Privileges (PRECIFAC) which was constituted by the government had recommended to do away with Rajapaksa of, civil rights for life. Whether the recommendation is going to be implemented in future remains to be seen. The western diplomatic community has raised concerns over the return of former President Mr. Rajapaksa to power in future, which might put at risk the progress achieved so far on initiatives taken for reconciliation particularly pertaining to human rights situation in the country.

The result also led to the debate on change of PM and formation of SLFP led government supported by the JO which demanded the replacement of PM with SLFP candidate, which was rejected by the PM. Reports also suggests that the President and the Prime Minister had talks regarding changes to the leadership of the National Unity Government. Reportedly the President asked the PM to resign to pave the way for new PM and the proposal was rejected by Ranil Wickramasinghe. Instead the PM proposed that the SLFP should join the United National Front (UNF) led by the UNP¹³. The UNP has 106 members in Parliament presently. The election outcome also indicates that Maithripala Sirisena has minimum control over the party.

There are other parties such as JVP, JHU, SLMC and the Tamil political parties such as TNA are having their own interests and have the capacity to influence public opinion. Their support is crucial for the government to survive and currently the parties are not in favour of dissolution of Parliament as demanded by the JO. But the JVP asked the government to accept the SLPP as principal opposition in Parliament. Presently the leader of the opposition in Parliament is Mr. R. Sampanthan of TNA. The Tamil leader during a debate in Parliament after the election results objected to the comment made by the Rajapaska that, 'lotus bud (the SLPP Symbol) will bloom in Tamil dominated areas if he comes to power.' For the TNA it is important to have a stable government in the midst of constitutional reform process and there is a hope that the government will address transitional justice issues. The UNHRC has given two years time for the government to work on recommendations. But the slow progress in delivering the promises made with regard to reconciliation is leading to disenchantment with the government and decline in support to moderate voices and increasing support base for parties having strong nationalist idiom.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka celebrated the 70th independence Anniversary on 4th February. During the speech the President pointed out the need for achieving national priorities such as reforming political institutions such as provincial councils, local government institutions, parliament, legislature and presidency. He also said that, 'as corruption in politics has become a major threat, barrier and a challenge to the progress of the nation, there is an imperative need to ensure political reforms from top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top, from local governments to Presidency and from Presidency to local governments'.¹⁴

However, the local authority elections which were held on 10 February 2018, once again reflected that the path to true reconciliation in Sri Lanka is going to be a difficult and complex exercise. The elections once again opened the same old discussions and debates on unitary state, possibility of separation of Tamil dominated areas and the need to protect the sovereignty and integrity of the nation from separatists' forces perceived to be emerging from ethnic minority communities. Achieving peace and reconciliation was a promise the National Unity Government made after coming to power. However, the results indicate that the government in the last three years could not gain the confidence of minority population in the North as well as in the South in Sinhala dominated areas, despite initialising measures at constitutional reforms. The deep divisions within Sri Lankan society based on ethnicity and religion once gain came to the surface

and the political parties whose campaign was based on these deep divisions won the local council elections with absolute majority.

The Amnesty International 'listed Sri Lanka as unsafe country for Muslims as Sri Lanka saw a rise in Buddhist nationalist sentiment last year, including attacks against Christians and Muslims'.¹⁵ The election result also demonstrated that the National Unity Government which came to power in 2015 on platform of freeing the country from corruption and bringing in economic development through various economic reforms has not been successful in its endeavour.

The decision to continue with the coalition is a positive step and Maithripala Sirisena and the UNP government might continue till the next elections. Meanwhile, they will try to work out a formula to run the government such as cabinet reshuffle and introduction of new economic policy. However, under the present political scenario, initiatives taken at reconciliation might suffer as both the UNP and SLFP will try to increase their base among Sinhala voters before the Presidential elections. In this process the measures aimed at reconciliation might suffer. Presently the support of Tamil parties is crucial for the survival of the government. Therefore, it is important that the government deliver on the promises made to Tamil minority community for stable and peaceful Sri Lanka.

Another aspect is the running of local bodies and even though the SLPP will be running the local bodies, the smooth implementation of projects and increasing investments in local projects might help the government to get back the confidence of people. The combined percentage of votes all the parties received excluding SLPP is around 55 per cent and this alone shows that there is a significant scope for continuation of government and implementation of policies.

**Dr. Samatha Mallempati, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ Election is peaceful due to the new electoral system introduced by UNP – PM, 10 February 2018, http://www.colombopage.com/archive_18A/Feb10_1518275980CH.php

² In the fight against corruption, I have full faith in people – President, 7nFeb 2018, <http://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/?p=5227>

³ Those who are responsible for frauds in SriLankan Airlines and Mihin Lanka will be punished – President, 4 february 2018, <http://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/?p=5203>

⁴ Every effort will be taken to safeguard unity of the country and not to divide it – President, 6 February 2018, <http://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/?p=5221>

⁵ Kankasanthurai – Point Pedro road, which was closed for 27 years will be open to public, says the President in Jaffna, 5 february 2018, <http://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/?p=5209>

⁶ <https://unp.lk/our-plan/>

⁷ UNP Building a Stronger Economy, <https://unp.lk/our-plan/>

⁸ Will transform country into a paradise: MR, 20- February 2018, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Will-transform-country-into-a-paradise-MR-145436.html>

⁹ Wi-Fi, the burning issue of the country: MR, 7 February 2018, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Wi-Fi-the-burning-issue-of-the-country-MR-145319.html>

¹⁰ Economic Policy Statement, made by the Hon. Prime Minister – 20.10.2017, http://www.pmooffice.gov.lk/download/press/D00000000062_EN.pdf

¹¹ Shamindra Ferdinando, “Bond scams, Geneva process and RK’s resignation”, 15 August 2017, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=170033

¹² We’ve extended our fullest cooperation during investigations, Ranil Wickramasinghe, 7 February 2018, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/We-ve-extended-our-fullest-cooperation-during-investigations-145321.html>

¹³ Ranil refuses to resign during talks with Maithripala, 13 February 2018, <http://colombogazette.com/2018/02/13/ranil-refuses-to-resign-during-talks-with-maithripala/>

¹⁴ Fight against corruption is the self defence of the nation – President, 4 February 2018, <http://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/?p=5183>

¹⁵ In world report Sri Lanka listed among countries unsafe for Muslims, 22 February 2018, <http://colombogazette.com/2018/02/22/in-world-report-sri-lanka-listed-among-countries-unsafe-for-muslims/>