



Sri Lanka Parliamentary Election 2015 Result: What Direction Will Foreign Policy Take?

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Introduction

Ranil Wickramasinghe was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. The 17th August 2015 parliamentary election in Sri Lanka was significant, as it once again reaffirmed support to the National Government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. In this context, this issue brief will try to look into the composition of parliament; factors that contributed to the victory of United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) coalition; and the position of the new government and political parties on issues related to foreign policy and the new government's possible policy towards India, China and the US.

Composition of the Parliament

The UNFGG 'coalition has secured 45.66 percent vote, which is three percent more than Mahinda Rajapaksa led United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), which secured 42.38 percent. In terms of the total seats secured, the UNP secured 93 seats against the UPFA's 83 seats and won in 11 Districts compared to UPFA's victory in 8 Districts. Tamil Parties have won in three Districts. On the basis of its performance, the UNP got another 13 seats out of the 29 seats to be allotted for the national list, thereby pushing its tally to 106 out of total 225

seats. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi have secured 14 seats and Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) got four seats'.¹ The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) have won one seat each.

Composition of the Parliament			
PARTY/GROUP NAME	District Based	National Based	NO OF MEMBERS
United National Party	93	13	106
United People's Freedom Alliance	83	12	95
Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi	14	2	16
People's Liberation Front	4	2	6
Eelam People's Democratic Party	1	0	1
Sri Lanka Muslim Congress	1	0	1

(Source: Department of Elections, Government of Sri Lanka)

Although falling short of a simple majority by seven seats, the support of SLFP and Tamil Parties helped to form the government. In contrast to the 'previous elections, where attack on candidates, public meetings and violence were rampant, this election was comparatively peaceful'.² This was an indication of people's desire for a peaceful society, which has experienced three decades of ethnic conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE.

Factors that contributed to the Victory

The 66 year old politician has taken charge as the Prime Minister for the fourth time in his career spanning over four decades. Wickremesinghe “was first appointed as the Prime Minister in 1993-1994 after the assassination of former President Ranasinghe Premadasa. He was also elected as the Prime Minister in 2001-2004 when the United National Front (UNF) Government won the parliamentary elections in 2001.”³ Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed as Prime Minister for the third time by President Sirisena after winning the 2015 Presidential election, where Sirisena contested against his leader Rajapaksa after revolting against him with the full backing of the UNP. President Sirisena as well as Chandrika Kumaratunga, who are from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to which Rajapaksa also belongs, curiously worked for the defeat of Rajapaksa and the victory of opposition party leader, Wickramasinghe in this election. Clearly, it is a curious mix of complex political equations.

President Sirisena’s support for Wickramasinghe as the Prime Minister and allowing him total control over Financial Crimes Investigation Division after the 2015 Presidential elections led to investigations into Rajapaksa family’s corruption. He further kept his word and restricted the powers of the President. His expression of opposition to Rajapaksa’s candidature in the Parliamentary elections and an open letter to him stating that he would not appoint him as the Prime Minister even if the UPFA were to win the elections was another clear indicator as to where he wanted his supporters to vote. He had also reshuffled the leadership of SLFP by expelling thirteen members of the party, even as the election results were trickling in, to pave the way for his loyalists in the leadership of the party, including the former President Chandrika Kumaratunga. This was an important move and a signal from President Sirisena that ‘he would have the final say regarding the appointment of the new Prime Minister’.⁴

In line with his stand on Prime Minister candidate, the SLFP led by President Sirisena extended support to Ranil to form the Government. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed in this regard between the SLFP and the UNP on 21 August 2015. The MOU is meant to support the UNP led government for a period of two years initially and can be extended further by both parties. The agreement focussed on issues of economy, reconciliation, party crossovers, health and education and foreign policy. It also states that the ‘parliament will be transformed into a Constitutional Council; the executive President system

will be reviewed; changes will be brought in the electoral system; rules and regulations will be enforced to deal with corruption and a non aligned foreign policy will be followed with a special focus on Sri Lankan identity'.⁵ These issues were also touched upon in the election manifesto of both the parties and the MOU reached after the election has provided the ground for collaboration in the implementation process. It remains to be seen how the SLFP and UNP will work towards realising the above mentioned objectives.

Minority Tamil political parties led by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) have also extended support to Ranil Wickramasinghe's government. Given the fact that minority parties' support was crucial in the electoral victory of the President in the last Presidential elections, the issue of reconciliation is going to take a prime place in the coming days. However, difference of opinion regarding the final political settlement may derail the reconciliation process and the new government will have to work towards finding a common ground between political parties on the issue.

Political Parties' Position on the Issue of Foreign Policy

On the question of foreign policy, President and Prime Minister of Sri Lanka's stated policy was to remain a Non-Aligned country and follow a balanced approach towards the West, India and China'.⁶ Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, in an interview to the Hindu before the elections, pointed out that 'India, China and the West are welcome to play a role in Sri Lanka's development and Sri Lanka is trying to restore its relations with the West.'⁷ These positions taken by both the leaders point to the fact that strengthening economic relations with all to obtain best from the bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation is the main objective of the present government and, more or less, there is consensus on this position between the two major political parties, the SLFP and UNP.

However, the lack of consensus between political parties on upcoming United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) report on war crimes in Sri Lanka might create strains in the functioning of the National Government. The UNP, in its manifesto, took a position that it will "work on the UNHRC report in relation to war crimes in discussion with the UN, its member states and all ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka and provide a response within the

country's legal framework.”⁸ Whereas the SLFP took a much harder position on the issue and its manifesto pointed out that “it would like to implement a foreign policy to respect the independence and sovereignty and protect the good name of Sri Lanka and its war heroes against ‘separatist’ war crime allegations.”⁹ This dichotomy may create problems in implementing the decisions taken at the foreign policy front.

The TNA took a position that, ‘direct foreign investment in the North-East provinces should be facilitated, resulting in the creation of new industries and employment opportunities for youth’.¹⁰ This may not be acceptable to the Sri Lankan government. As far as the JVP, the fourth largest party in the parliament, is concerned, ‘Sri Lanka should not align with imperialists and colonial powers and try to improve relations with SAARC countries’.¹¹ The following sections briefly touch upon the possible policy of the new government in Sri Lanka towards India, China and the US.

India

Sri Lankan President's first overseas official visit to India in February 2015 and Indian Prime Minister's visit to Sri Lanka in March this year indicated that both governments are keen to strengthen the bilateral relations between the two countries. Rajapaksa government's close relationship with China was viewed with suspicion by India and it had not taken well his claims that the ‘Research and Analysis Wing had assisted in his defeat’.¹² Ranil Wickramasinghe also ruffled feathers when he stated that the Indian fishermen straying into Sri Lankan territory would be shot. However, when Prime Minister Modi visited the island nation, some fishermen were released and an agreement has been reached on that matter. Similarly, the Civil Nuclear Agreement has also been worked out and many infrastructure Projects are in the pipeline. Both the governments are keen to use the friendly dispensation to pursue infrastructural projects in Sri Lanka. Development assistance given to Sri Lanka, particularly to Northern and Eastern provinces, is significant because of its focus on rebuilding, resettlement, capacity building, rail and road connectivity between North and South. India is keen to expand its ties to new avenues like Science and Technology, Oil Exploration, Agro-Based industry, transportation and other related sectors. However, India and Sri Lanka relations will also depend on how both the governments will address politically

sensitive issues, such as Tamil ethnic issue and fishermen issue as well as the security in Indian Ocean region.

China

There seems to be a perception that Wickramasinghe has an anti-China bias. This perception is not without reason and has developed over a period of time spanning his political career. His closeness towards the West for attracting aid for pulling out a war-ravaged country during his different terms as the Prime Minister is one cause for such a perception. His election time pronouncements during the Presidential elections in January 2015 and in its run-up also strengthened such a perception. The involvement of China in the internal affairs of the country, particularly in its economy, was made an election issue by the combined opposition parties. China was accused of pursuing indirect colonization and it was claimed that the Nation would be turned into a colony. The borrowings under Rajapaksa regime from China was criticised and so were the mega investments. The \$1.63 billion Currency Swap Deal and investments were criticised for the apparent high interest rates, which would push Sri Lanka into indebtedness. The most contentious issue, however, 'was the ambitious Colombo Port City project'.¹³ The earlier regime showcased it as its dream Project. Because "the USD 1.4 billion project was estimated to generate 83,000 local jobs and, when fully completed, is expected to attract international investments with a total value estimated at USD 13 billion."¹⁴ Wickramasinghe and others alleged massive corruption and environmental costs going to the extent of proclaiming that the Project would be scrapped.

However, the above positions taken regarding investments of China softened gradually. Now the government is exploring options, such as guarantee from China for transparency in the implementation of Projects and reduced interest rates. Environmental safeguards may be sought and the terms of lease for the Colombo Port City as well as the land given on free hold basis may be re-negotiated to convey a strong message to his vote-bank that China or the Chinese company will not have sole proprietary rights over the Project. Because, according to the Finance Minister of Sri Lanka, Mr. Ravi Karunanayake, this arrangement will guarantee that 'foreign powers will not control land in another country'.¹⁵ The new Prime Minister would be keen to review some of the terms of the project and come

to an Agreement that may be perceived as being more favourable to the Island Nation, as the delay in doing so will result in the escalation of losses.

A few of the Projects that were put in place during the earlier regime will also be in for tough scrutiny, not so much due to any anti-China position, but rather due to a sense of urgency to politically finish Mahinda Rajapaksa and his coterie. Some of the highway projects; an airport in Hambantota; the Southern Port, which has failed to meet revenue targets; a cell-phone tower described as an architectural splendour due to its lotus-like appearance; and some of the financial commitments of the period are all likely to undergo scrutiny for that very reason.

The President of Sri Lanka had earlier outlined the Foreign Policy in his election manifesto, apparently supported by Wickramasinghe, where it was 'clear that Sri Lanka would pursue policies that would maintain equal relations with the "principal" Asian countries, such as India, China, and Pakistan'.¹⁶ Experts feel that there is not going to be a 'major change in bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and China, and Wickramasinghe will have to work around a policy in continuity with this position'.¹⁷ Notably, the 'strategic cooperative partnership' with China under Rajapaksa may have to be re-packaged to assuage the concerns of his electorates and India as well as the United States (US).

The US

The US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Ms. Nisha Biswal visited Sri Lanka after the parliamentary elections. This was an indication of US's interests in improving political and economic relations with the island nation, which suffered in the past due to US's stand on human rights violations in Sri Lanka in the UNHRC. On the political front, the US shifted its stand on international investigation into war crimes to that of supporting domestic mechanism for investigation. This position underlines a clear support of US government to Sri Lankan government's reconciliation efforts. However, this shift in US's stand got a mixed response. As the government welcomed the US stand, the TNA in a statement said that, 'it will support the domestic investigation if it has foreign participation'.¹⁸

To push forward the reconciliation process, the Sri Lankan government will have to arrive at a consensus with all the political parties and stake holders to form a team acceptable to all.

On the economic front, 'the US extends its support to resettlement and education in Sampur with a commitment of one million US dollars in resources'.¹⁹ There are also indications of partnership 'with the American Millennium Challenge Corporation for aid in projects in agriculture and irrigation, infrastructure, water supply and other sectors'.²⁰ According to the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka both the countries agreed on prioritizing closer economic cooperation as the United States is Sri Lanka's single largest export market and twenty three percent of Sri Lanka's total exports enter the US market.

Conclusion

The present coalition clearly underlined its priorities and the Prime Minister has already hinted that the USA, India, China, Japan, Middle Eastern and European countries could be potential partners in development. Prime Minister Wickramasinghe will try to manoeuvre a balance, particularly with China, the US and India. It remains to be seen how the new government will balance political and economic relations to get maximum benefits from cooperation with all.

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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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