

Sri Lanka: Losing the reform moment, once again

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Contents

- [Winning Coalition](#)
- [Failed commitments](#)
- [Additional factors](#)
- [Catch-22](#)

Within just three months in power, the National Democratic Front (NDF) coalition seems to be disintegrating. All indications are that the unity that the NDF coalition partners showed in the pursuit of their common objective of dislodging the Mahinda Rajapaksa family from power has largely dissipated.

The signs are also that President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, the two pillars on which the NDF government is built, have developed somewhat conflicting agendas and interests. They don't seem to publicly support each other's positions on controversial issues, as they did in the recent past. Meanwhile, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a key partner of the coalition, is targeting Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and his UNP, in a move to re-build its own political identity and constituency. The JVP, which supported the coalition from outside, is promoting its own political agenda and interests, and in the process has emerged as the most vociferous critic of the NDF government.

Meanwhile, the civil society movements, that actually built the political space and the agenda for the NDF to emerge as a force capable of defeating the Rajapaksa rule, are moving away from the coalition. Many of them are disenchanted and even disillusioned with the government, which came into power on the platform they built for years. They do not seem to trust the capacity or commitment of the government to carry out its promises of constitutional and governance reforms.

The government's move only to partially reform, not to abolish, the executive presidential system has disappointed many civil society groups. Similarly, the government's disregard for the consequences of the proposed electoral reforms on ethnic and social minorities shows its unwillingness to listen to all stakeholders. It also shows how the electoral reform agenda has been hijacked by major parties and those with electoral support exclusively in the Sinhalese majority community.

Whither the reform agenda that brought Maithripala Sirisena, Ranil Wickremesinghe and their allies to power? This is the question through which Sri Lanka's current political processes can be understood and evaluated.

Winning Coalition

The reform coalition that ended the Rajapaksa presidency was a unique political development occurred towards the end of 2014. This coalition had three components the unity of which was the essential precondition for bringing down the monolithic regime of President Rajapaksa, by peaceful, electoral means. The first was the grand inter-party alliance forged among the major opposition parties, led by the UNP, the JHU and the JVP, and later joined by others. The second was the inter-ethnic alliance that brought together major political actors of Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Up Country Tamil communities. The third was the alliance between opposition political parties and civil society movements. The split that occurred in the ruling SLFP in November widened the political space for this broad coalition to mobilize the masses. It also brought a new partner to the coalition, a small section of the SLFP. Against the backdrop of this triple alliance, the NDF could emerge, rather dramatically, as a winning coalition.

As Sri Lanka's recent political history has repeatedly demonstrated, a regime change under the executive presidential system required two basic preconditions: (a) a tripartite coalition, as outlined above, and (b) a split within the ruling party leading to a break-up of the monolithic unity of the regime. The regime change that occurred on January 08 was indeed facilitated by these two factors.

It is this winning coalition that seems to be on the path to disintegration at present. In the background of this development are two new political factors. The first is the failure of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime to fulfill its key reform promises and commitments. The second is the impending parliamentary election.

Failed commitments

The key factor that has contributed to the weakening, if not breaking-up, of the alliance between the NDF political coalition and civil society movements is the regime's incapacity to fully implement the major reform promises, as pledged in the 100-Day Programme. Although it was an attractive election strategy, the 100-Day Programme was too idealistic and ambitious to implement. It has both constitutional and governance reform promises.

Any constitutional reform initiative to abolish the executive presidential system, which was the central demand of the civil society movement, required the parliamentary support of the SLFP which still commands the majority in parliament. In the governance reform agenda, investigating corruption occurred under the previous regime and punishing the corrupt, was the most important promise. It required a law enforcement and bureaucratic machinery with the capacity, commitment and autonomy to combat economic and political corruption.

On both these counts, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime became a hostage of an uncooperative SLFP and a feeble law enforcement bureaucracy. The SLFP parliamentary group minus the Rajapaksas did not require much political shrewdness to hard bargain with its new leader, President Sirisena, in such a way that its support for the government's survival could effectively delay and then undermine Sirisena's reform project. Meanwhile, as it has become abundantly clear during the past several weeks, a state machinery that has been subjected to a culture of corruption, inefficiency and institutional decay, can hardly be deployed to take the necessary first steps in the implementation of governance reforms.

Additional factors

There are three additional factors that have made life difficult for President Sirisena and the UNP-led coalition government. The first is the uncertainty about the stability and duration of the government. The possibility of defeating the Wickremesinghe government in parliament by the SLFP parliamentary group, consisting of MPs who were in the Rajapaksa camp until January 08, has been a major factor that has prevented regime consolidation. Government bureaucrats are quite sensitive to this possibility. They are just biding time until there is clarity about the durability and stability of the government and about who their political masters would be for the next five to six years.

The fact that the present parliament does not reflect the popular will that was expressed at the January presidential election is the second additional factor that has seriously hampered the new government's reform agenda. That is why the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime has been effectively checkmated by the SLFP parliamentary group led by Nimal Siripala and Susil Premjayanth, despite the fact that President Sirisena is the party President.

The best option for the government is to hold parliamentary elections in three months, and get a fresh mandate to parliament in order to implement its constitutional and governance reform programme. However, only the UNP and the JVP seem to be keen on early parliamentary elections, of course for entirely different reasons.

The third additional factor is that President Sirisena is compelled to build a constituency of his own within the SLFP, under his leadership. This has forced him to engage in a delicate exercise of political tight rope walking, since most of the MPs and ex-Ministers who are in parliament as SLFPers are political clients of the former President.

President Sirisena's predicament is that the raw material with which he is forced to build his new foundation within the SLFP is rather rotten, from the point of view of the political-ethical standards he has advanced under his *yahapalanaya* (good governance) project.

Most of the SLFP MPs who seem to accept President Sirisena as their new leader are the very same people who not only opposed him, but also derided and ridiculed him and his political vision during the presidential election campaign. Some of them are now key office holders of the SLFP under President Sirisena.

As it has now become very clear, the SLFP even under President Sirisena can hardly meet the ethical standards of the *yahapalanaya* doctrine. Thus, in constructing his constituency within the SLFP, President Sirisena appears to have been compelled to re-think his own standards of political morality.

Catch-22

Thus, in the current political context, everybody seems to be in catch-22 situations of their own making. President Sirisena seems to be allowing himself to be captured by an unreformed SLFP with no reform agenda, thereby turning his back on his own unfulfilled *yahapalanaya* and reform promises. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's offer for a *jathika aanduwa* (national government) does not appear to have any takers.

Wickremesinghe may even run the risk of losing his post of the prime minister, which he seems to be enjoying immensely, in a new and surprising alignment of political forces.

The SLFP is facing a three-way split, one under President Sirisena, the second under former President Rajapaksa, and the third perhaps aligned with the JHU. Civil society movements for democracy and good governance do not seem to have any trustworthy political allies through which they can any longer advance their reform agendas.

The voters, the sovereign masters of all political actors, are getting increasingly confused about the evolving political scene, which defies clarity, certainty, directions, and identifiable goals.

Meanwhile, in the current and evolving political circumstances, the rebuilding of the NDF coalition is most unlikely. At the forthcoming parliamentary election, the agendas of all political parties will be guided by electoral self-interest, and not a reform vision or idealism, as it was at the past Presidential election.

Even entirely new and surprising alliances might emerge, primarily motivated by electoral calculus. The desire to capture the post of 'executive prime minister' as envisaged in the proposed constitutional reform, would be at the core of the intense electoral competition between the UNP, factions of the SLFP, and the JHU for parliamentary seats. That will also open up the political space for new political alignments and coalitions, which can be described as pragmatic as well as opportunistic.

Sri Lanka's second reform moment is disappearing rather fast. The first, under the PA government of 1994, took at least two to three years to come to an untimely end. The second in 2015 seems to be taking only a few months to share that fate, rather prematurely. This needs to be stopped.

Leaders of civil society movements need to analyze this situation seriously and work out long-term strategies for political transformation and democratization, while working in alliance with political parties.

The paradoxical situation which they find themselves in is that civil society movements can only propose ideas, mobilize people and create the space for political parties to play the agential role for change; however, when political parties begin to prove themselves ill-equipped, unprepared, or unwilling to fulfill that agential responsibility, then, the civil society agenda for reform too comes into crisis.

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P.S.

*<http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=features/losing-reform-moment-once-again>