

# **After the presidential elections: In Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Lanka, Many fear the rise of majoritarian sentiment in Sri Lanka**

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**In Sri Lanka, with the longest history of universal suffrage in Asia, every election excites the nation, and that will be the case with the upcoming parliamentary polls.**

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Less than a fortnight after Sri Lanka's November 16 presidential elections, the country is faced with two realities. One, a new regime buoyed by its triumphant support base and eager to consolidate an iron political grip. Second, a political opposition in utter disarray, with some citizens consumed by anxiety.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa's ascent to the presidency has made his supporters euphoric that the country is finally on the path of security, development and prosperity. On the other hand, the UNP, whose candidate Sajith Premadasa lost with over 42 per cent of the votes, is in shambles. Instead of mounting a strong oppositional force, the party has descended to infighting over leadership.

These dynamics of power consolidation and political disarray in the two main political camps and unbridled triumphalism and widespread fear across the voter divide are threatening the significant democratic space gained over the last five years.

In this scenario, critics of the Rajapaksas and more broadly, Sri Lanka's Muslim and Tamil minorities that voted overwhelmingly against Gotabaya, are paralysed by fear, as the majoritarian rule they dreaded is before them.

Following the presidential election, an interim government with a new cabinet of ministers is in place, with the president's brother Mahinda as the prime minister. But it is the upcoming parliamentary elections that will determine the balance of power to rule the country over the next five years. The regime will eye a two-thirds majority in parliament, necessary for major constitutional changes.

At immediate risk after the parliamentary elections are the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution — for power-sharing and democratic checks on executive power. Both amendments were rushed into existence for political expediency, and both are broadly seen to be incomplete. However, any change to them by the Rajapaksa regime are likely to be deemed regressive.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's political economic trajectory is shifting gears, but without considering the many lost opportunities in the post-war decade. And as the country's economic troubles aggravate

amidst a global downturn, will the new government learn from previous failures? Or, will they opt to address long-festering political and economic woes by consolidating authoritarian populist power?

In this context, the months ahead are crucial not only for strengthening parliamentary opposition, but also checking the military's role in civilian life and ensuring the independence of the judiciary and media. It is also the time to bolster dissent that can withstand the authoritarian juggernaut.

While a decisive election victory might make a leader seem invincible, much of the strength and stability of his new government will depend on how it addresses the economic crisis. Since the Easter terror attacks, state revenues have dropped drastically, prompting austerity measures and across-the-board cuts on state investment. Sri Lanka's trickling economic growth, rising foreign debt, disregard for domestic production and neglect of the rural economy, are going to be major challenges. Neither the president's technocratic champions nor the prime minister's populist measures are going to solve these problems.

How, then, will the new government consolidate power? It will be a combination of the president's authoritarian moves, veiled in the promise of technocratic efficiency and seeming aloofness from politics, and the prime minister's hard-nosed political moves in parliament, with populist manoeuvring. The dual power centre will try to discipline and disable the judiciary, media and people's movements. They will seek validation from their long-nurtured nationalist social base, may re-activate the security apparatus for surveillance and crackdowns, and lean on the most forthcoming external actors for financial support — be it India, China, the US or the capital markets.

Therefore, the need of the hour is dissent — in parliament, in the public sphere, and within communities. If polarising and dividing form the mechanics of consolidating power, it is through bridging divides and uniting people — across ethnic and religious groups — that resistance can hold.

Ideologically, the first wall of defence should be against the Islamophobic forces that have gained traction among the majority population. Politically, dissident parliamentarians should find the wherewithal to protect the hard-won liberal freedoms. Organisationally, trade unions and movements should prepare to struggle against the neo-liberal transmutation of their social and economic life.

In Sri Lanka, with the longest history of universal suffrage in Asia, every election excites the nation, and that will be the case with the upcoming parliamentary polls. Turning the democratic clock back may not work for even the craftiest authoritarian populist regimes, but that also depends on the reconfiguration of oppositional parliamentary forces and more importantly, galvanising resistance.

### **Ahilan Kadirgamar**

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## **Comment: The return of the Rajapaksa regime**

**Sri Lanka's great liberal democratic experiment has now been overcome by authoritarian populism.**

The 2019 presidential election will be a watershed in Sri Lankan history. The Rajapaksa regime was decisively defeated in both the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections. Since then, remnants of the regime have persevered to rebuild. Rejected nationally and isolated internationally, their crafty politics, ideological consolidation, and political mobilisation ensured a powerful political base among the Sinhala constituencies. While the minorities, worried about their future, voted overwhelmingly against presidential candidate and former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the Sinhala political base, built by the Rajapaksas, has brought them back to power.

### **Road to power**

The Rajapaksa camp took the risk of forming their own party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, which has now engulfed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. They built a base in their Sinhala constituencies by engaging the rural population and lower middle classes. They spoke to the discontent with a long-neglected drought and deteriorating economic situation. They turned the corruption discourse that had damaged them in power back onto the incumbent government, as the Central Bank bond scandal exposed the newly appointed Central Bank Governor and provided an irredeemable blow to the promise of "good governance".

They tested their strength and gained confidence with the local government elections of 2018, where their newly constructed party machine made a landslide victory in the Southern constituencies. They kept Parliament at boiling point with no-confidence motions, and even attempted a parliamentary coup, with President Maithripala Sirisena appointing Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister. They capitalised on the Easter attacks, and claimed to be the only actors who can address national security, even as the President and Prime Minister pointed fingers about the security lapses that could have averted the disaster. Not only did they miss no opportunity to attack the government over the last four years, but also worked incessantly on the ground to build up their base, whether with the disgruntled Sinhala rural masses, the bureaucrats comfortable with their politics of patronage, the business classes that sought to gain from their economic policies, or the chauvinist social movements that thrived on their backing for majoritarian and xenophobic politics. With the presidential election victory, the Rajapaksa juggernaut now looks well poised to consolidate power for the long haul.

Each of the gains of the Rajapaksas was in fact a failure of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government. The coalition government was rocked by infighting, and its aloof leadership with grand projects of trade liberalisation and foreign investment neglected people's everyday concerns. With the global Islamophobic discourse on the rise, the government did little to confront the chauvinist forces that ideologically mobilised the Sinhala constituencies by constructing the Muslims as the new enemies. Amid acute joblessness, soaring living costs, mounting household debt and people's still rural livelihoods, coupled with fear since the Easter terror attacks, the people turned to a "strong leader" for relief from gripping insecurity. These are the grounds on which Sri Lanka's great liberal democratic experiment of 2015 has now been overcome by authoritarian populism.

If the neoliberals under Ranil Wickremesinghe lost the plot on the economy, there was nevertheless liberal progress with state and social institutions. Militarisation and surveillance in the country, in the North and East in particular, was considerably reversed with democratic space providing room for freedom of expression and protests. Military-held lands in the North were released to their

private owners. The judiciary regained independence. The media and social movements gained the confidence to critique the state. The excessive powers of the executive presidency were clipped, and independent commissions for human rights and right to information were strengthened.

In this context, the normalisation away from an excessive security mindset hung over from the war years were undone by the Easter attacks, and the room for scrutiny of the security apparatuses are now shutting down. Independence of institutions are also now at risk: either through legislative moves with consolidation of power in Parliament or through crass politicisation. These are blows to the democratic space gained over the last five years.

It is those concerns that brought the loose set of actors opposing the return of a Rajapaksa regime. What was necessary, however, was a strong coalition that also addressed fundamental political-economic concerns, but that was not to be with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) seeking to build a third force and United National Party (UNP) leader, Mr. Wickremesinghe, seeking to undermine his party's candidacy to ensure his own leadership of the party.

### **Electoral outcomes**

In this context, the electoral map reveals certain divisions. The Tamil- and Muslim-heavy regions of the North and East, the UNP and up-country Tamil strongholds of the Central Highlands, and the minority-heavy and UNP strongholds around Colombo voted for Sajith Premadasa, while the vast majority of the other electorates voted for Mr. Rajapaksa.

The electoral map may immediately hint at a polarised country along ethno-nationalist lines, but a deeper look into the politics of each region may reveal different dynamics. The voter turnouts in the Northern constituencies were much higher than in the past, despite neither candidate addressing their aspirations and a crass call from the Tamil nationalist fringe for boycott of the elections. In voting overwhelmingly for Mr. Premadasa, the Northern constituencies have entered the realm of national politics seeking to shape it as opposed to the decades-long approach of exclusionary politics that refused to even consider national changes. Similarly, while the simplistic narrative of the Sinhala voter supporting a majoritarian regime may be tempting, in reality it is perhaps lower and middle class economic disenchantment and youth disillusionment that ensured a mass vote for Mr. Rajapaksa.

While the responsibility for the defeat of the liberal democratic experiment of 2015 falls squarely on Mr. Wickremesinghe and Mr. Sirisena, salvaging what is left of that democratic space now becomes the task of the dispersed actors and forces that have to regroup ahead of the imminent parliamentary elections. The Muslim and Tamil minority parties that sought to keep the Rajapaksas at bay, the failed third force experiment of the JVP with allied left forces, and various social movements now have the unenviable task of defending the democratic space from an authoritarian populist regime about to consolidate power.

### **Ahilan Kadirgamar**

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## **Rajapaksa redux and a democracy in peril**

**The return of an authoritarian oligarchy in Sri Lanka could be stopped by a united stand of democratic forces.**

Sri Lanka is again at the crossroads with presidential elections due before December 9, 2019. The political drive since the newly formed Rajapaksa-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which swept the local government polls in February 2018, has culminated in Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the much feared former Defence Secretary and younger brother of the former President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, being named presidential candidate.

The Rajapaksa regime, which decimated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and consolidated considerable power around a family until it was dislodged in January 2015, may now be on the verge of recapturing state power and drastically changing the political landscape for the next decade, if not longer. Even as the United National Party (UNP) in power is dillydallying on its presidential candidate, the SLPP is moving fast in an electoral game that the Rajapaksas have proven to be masters at.

### **Reshaping democratic space**

The rise of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, after what seemed like decisive regime change in January 2015, is in good measure due to the failures of the current Wickremesinghe-Sirisena government. Neither did the new government hammer through the allegations of corruption and rights abuse levelled against the Rajapaksa regime nor did it provide a meaningful programme to address economic woes. Rather, infighting and self-serving manoeuvres within the government have brought its stated plans, from economic reforms to a constitutional political settlement, to a standstill.

Despite the many political and economic failures of the current government, the significant shift over the last five years has been the opening of democratic space. The climate of fear and continuing militarisation were to a great degree reversed. In the war-torn regions, where there was fear to even speak in private during the post-war years under Rajapaksa rule, people now take to the streets demanding the release of military-held lands, answers on those who have disappeared in the war and relief for the rural indebted. Throughout the country, with the fear of abductions gone and repression decreasing, dissent and the culture of protests have returned along with greater freedom for the media.

### **State power and nationalists**

This democratic space is greatly at risk with a Gotabaya Rajapaksa presidency. Sri Lanka has gone through bouts of authoritarian rule and gruelling periods of state repression particularly during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna insurgencies in the south and the escalation of the civil war. However, while the current conjuncture may not witness similar mass violence unleashed by the state and armed movements, it is loaded with the dangers of a deeper political shift.

During its decade-long-tenure, the Rajapaksa regime used state power to consolidate its oligarchic ambitions. The significant difference in its current avatar is the mobilisation of considerable popular support and the consolidation of its nationalist base while in the opposition. During its previous stint, it actively politicised the military and bureaucracy and ensnared sections of the business classes. Over the last two years, however, the calls for a return of the Rajapaksa regime are emanating from sections of retired military officers, the business lobby and the bureaucracy. A craftily built Sinhala Buddhist nationalist base, by mobilisations against Muslims who are construed as the new enemy, binds this constituency. Such a social base combined with state power can drastically change the

character of state and society.

The failed 52-day political coup in October 2018, which was engineered by President Maithripala Sirisena to install Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister, illustrated a capacity to rapidly politicise state institutions. It is due to the independence of the judiciary and the military that their short stint in power was not prolonged. Nevertheless, the political coup exposed their desperate hunger for power and the support that was readily available for them within the bureaucracy.

A Rajapaksa victory in the presidential elections will create the momentum for a major victory in the parliamentary elections. A repeat of events following the elections in 2010 just after the end of the civil war, with drastic changes in Parliament and constitutional amendments leading to further consolidation of state power under a Rajapaksa oligarchy, may reverse curtailment of the executive presidency that came with the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment of 2015. The Rajapaksa administration of the past has time and again manoeuvred the legislature and the judiciary, as with its record of swiftly buying over parliamentarians or sacking a Chief Justice with ease, when the judiciary resisted its influence.

The main challenge for the Rajapaksas is going to be the handling of the broader citizenry that in recent years has internalised democratic freedoms after three decades of war and the authoritarian post-war years. With the repressive mechanisms of the state disrupted, if not dismantled after regime change, and the difficulty in justifying militarisation in non-war times, their project of authoritarian consolidation is bound to face resistance. Consequently, they may resort to amassing tremendous power and smashing any resistance to their political and development agenda, leading to more severe measures than the past.

The economic programme and priorities of another Rajapaksa government are likely to be the urban-centred neoliberal policies that they themselves initiated, which the current government wanted to accelerate but failed to do without mustering the political will. Indeed, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, as Defence Secretary after the war, brought the Urban Development Authority under the Defence Ministry as he mobilised considerable investment in urban real estate, coupled with brutal slum demolitions and evictions for the “beautification” of Colombo. The Rajapaksa governments, from their first term in 2005 to the second term in 2010, shifted emphasis from the rural to the urban. And this time around, with the strong backing of the urban professional and business lobby, Gotabaya Rajapaksa will be looking for results, possibly crushing any obstacle in the path of his development drive.

### **Islamophobic discourse**

Ideologically, while an Islamophobic discourse began to take hold in Sri Lanka some two decades ago with the U.S.-led “global war on terror”, it was after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka that the Rajapaksa regime, and Gotabaya Rajapaksa in particular, began supporting reactionary forces such as the Bodu Bala Sena. During the latter years of the Rajapaksa regime, proto-fascist goon squads carried out pogroms against Muslims. With the continued ideological growth of Islamophobia, anti-Muslim attacks have continued with impunity even after regime change. This chauvinist nationalist segment is further emboldened after the Easter Sunday attacks, in April.

For a country with a comprador elite on all sides, sovereignty will be peddled to the masses as the ultimate national treasure and combined with an expansive security complex. However, economic concerns could force a new Rajapaksa regime to succumb to the market and cut deals with external powers. In the past, they were the first to sell sovereign bonds in the international markets. And with time, they will align with one or the other great power depending on the fear of the stick they wield and the carrots they offer.

With the current conjuncture of geopolitical instability and the emergence of authoritarian regimes around the world, the conditions seem worryingly conducive for a Gotabaya Rajapaksa regime. The convergence of retired military actors, an extractive business lobby, a nationalist bureaucracy and an organised chauvinistic base, when combined with state power, spell danger not just of authoritarian nationalism but a fascist takeover of the state. It is democracy that is at risk, and ironically, it is elections that might pave the route to shutting down that democratic space. The return of the Rajapaksa oligarchy can be stopped by only a united stand of the fractured democratic forces.

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