

Towards a Rajapakse future

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The president now has to set out ruling, and healing, a divided island. Will he?

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The outcome of Sri Lanka's presidential election removed the only real impediment to the dynastic project of the ruling Rajapakse family. Unsurprisingly Mahinda Rajapakse won the election. He obtained 57.9 percent of the valid vote, in sharp contrast to the 40.2 percent polled by his main rival, Sarath Fonseka, the former head of the Sri Lankan Army. As a consequence, President Rajapakse is within striking distance of establishing his family's dominance over Sri Lanka for the foreseeable future.

His spectacular performance at the polls has made it possible for his ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to hope for a two-thirds victory at the upcoming parliamentary election.

This would enable the president to effect the necessary constitutional changes to avoid mandatory retirement at the end of his second presidential term, either by removing presidential term limits or by replacing the executive presidency with an executive premiership sans term limits. The continuous airing of songs hailing Mahinda Rajapakse as the 'King of Sri Lanka' – by both state-owned and private television stations – is indicative of the Rajapakse future that is awaiting the divided island.

Though polling itself was peaceful, barring some marginal incidents, the election campaign was far from free and fair. As an obviously dispirited Elections Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake admitted after the election, the state media and some state institutions acted in a markedly partisan manner throughout the campaign. Still, President Rajapakse's large majority cannot be attributed (except incidentally) to the widespread abuse of state resources. Rather, he won because a majority of the Sinhalese constituency backed him, as a mark of appreciation for defeating the LTTE without making political concessions to the Tamils. For his part, Fonseka lost because his campaign failed to persuade disillusioned Tamils and demoralised members of the opposition United National Party (UNP) to overcome their apathy and vote for him in sufficient numbers.

No message

Notwithstanding the decisive victory over the LTTE and the consequent restoration of territorial unity and integrity after a hiatus of almost three decades, Sri Lanka remains a divided land, politically and psychologically. As the results of the presidential election demonstrate, the fault lines are ethnicity and religion, though an urban-rural divide is also discernible. Rajapakse won overwhelmingly in Sinhalese-majority districts, while Fonseka won in those districts in which Tamils and/or Muslims predominate. Rajapakse was clearly the choice of the Sinhalese; equally clearly, however, he was not the choice of either the Tamils or the Muslims. For his part, Fonseka failed to make any inroads into Rajapakse's Sinhalese base. Rajapakse was able to get just 33.9 percent of the

votes in the north and the east, while Fonseka's average in the provinces outside of these two areas was just 35.1 percent.

These facts cannot but have an impact on the future trajectory of the Rajapakse administration, making it more 'Sinhalese' than 'Sri Lankan' in its attitude towards the minorities. Rajapakse contested and won the presidential election of 2005 on a revanchist platform, aiming to regain 'lost' territory; consequently, during his first term, he made a conscious effort to shift Sri Lanka towards a Sinhala-supremacist paradigm. After 2005, policies and practices, rhetoric and tactics that were considered Sinhala chauvinist, and thus unacceptable in the post-1987 conjuncture, came into vogue again.

This politico-ideological framework was evident during the presidential election campaign of 2010, with Rajapakse himself using coded racism to muster Sinhalese support. The Rajapakse campaign focused on 'the need' to save the 'nation' from a 'resurgent separatist threat', a euphemism for Fonseka's electoral alliances with the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). Rajapakse himself accused SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem of "trying to revive the separatist movement once spearheaded by the LTTE". Rajapakse's attitude towards Tamil concerns and demands was dismissive at best; at a meeting with media heads, he declared that the 13th Amendment, which focuses on devolution, had become "reduced to a mere political slogan", and stated that he had no special message for the Tamil people.

Rajapakse was Sri Lanka's first 'Sinhalese only' president, since he won his first term almost exclusively with Sinhalese votes. That fact had a major impact on his policies and practices during his first term - his unwillingness to come up with a political solution to the 'ethnic problem' and his callous conduct towards civilian Tamils during the 'Fourth Eelam War' being central cases in point. The results of the 2010 election are likely to reinforce the president's Sinhalese bias. At the official post-victory press conference, Minister Champika Ranawaka, leader of the hardline Sinhala Buddhist party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a constituent of the ruling alliance, announced that the regime would work towards a "constitutional change suitable for the country".

A Rajapakse constitution is likely to reflect the president's Sinhalese bias, a function less of ideological predisposition than of politico-electoral necessity. Consequently, a Rajapakse constitution is likely to reverse the trend towards pluralist democracy inaugurated by the 13th Amendment, and recast Sri Lanka formally and legally in the old Sinhalese-supremacist mould. Tamil (and Muslim) opposition to such a move, and the government's reaction to that dissent, could now recreate the old ethnic conflict in new (though hopefully peaceful) guises. It may also give rise to deep-rooted frustration that will keep the conflict alive in the minds of the disgruntled minorities.

Ominous beginning

In Sri Lanka, the post-election tradition is for the victor to crow and the vanquished to cry foul. This time around, the inconceivable overtook both reactions. In a surreal move, President Rajapakse got the army and police to surround the hotel in which Fonseka and other opposition leaders were staying. For almost 24 hours, downtown Colombo resembled the capital city of a Latin American autocracy. The fact that the 'siege' ended peacefully does not in any way mitigate the outrageous nature of the deed, nor reduce its portent, especially because this was no isolated event. The election campaign contained many such incidents, indicative of the regime's willingness to use excessive force against the unarmed, democratic opposition - such as the failed attempt to search the office of the leader of the opposition, Ranil Wickremesinghe, for illegal weapons.

The 2010 election campaign was also characterised by the persistent breaching of the necessary

divide between the ruling party/family and the state. Not only did the ruling party abuse state resources; members of the ruling family also became involved in the campaign to an extent unprecedented since 1977. The best case in point was the key role played in the campaign by Tarunyata Hetak (A Tomorrow for the Youth) and Nil Balakaya (The Blue Battalion), two organisations founded and headed by the eldest presidential offspring, Namal Rajapakse.

The development symbolised a tendency towards substituting traditional party entities with newly created organisations owned by the ruling family. It marked not just the full takeover of the ruling party by the Rajapakses – including, in addition to the president, brother Chamal, the minister of irrigation, water management, ports and aviation; brother Gotabhaya, the secretary of defence; and brother Basil, an appointed member of parliament, senior presidential advisor and unofficial ‘development czar’. It also indicates a gradual merging of the ruling family and the state. The election campaign contained other unsavoury developments as well, such as senior army officers, in uniform, acting as the propaganda mouthpieces of the incumbent president and his government. The cumulative result of these abnormalities was the superimposition of the Rajapakse seal – not just on the ruling party and the government, but also on the Lankan state.

Buoyed by his overwhelming victory, President Rajapakse is likely to go for parliamentary polls as soon as it is feasible. Given his need to win a two-thirds majority to get the constitutional amendment he desires, it would make sense to strike while the iron is hot – before the glory of the victory is dimmed, before the reeling opposition revives, and before reality (in the form of increased economic hardship) intervenes. President Rajapakse is thus likely to act in an increasingly repressive manner towards the defeated and weakened opposition. The regime looks particularly likely to crack down on the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, one of the few remaining potential sources of effective opposition.

Throughout his first term, President Rajapakse worked to gain the support of the Sinhalese majority for his dynastic project by depicting himself (and his brothers) as saviours of the (Sinhalese) nation. The outcome of the 2010 presidential election has demonstrated the success of this strategy. During the campaign, Rajapakse equated a vote for Fonseka with a vote for separatism; now, the parliamentary election too is likely to be fought as a political war between the ‘patriots’ and ‘traitors’, with the entire opposition cast in the latter role. This would enable the regime not only to retain the support of the Sinhalese majority, but also to justify repressive measures against the democratic opposition and continued marginalisation of the minorities. These seem to be the ingredients of the Rajapakse future.

P.S.

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