

Sri Lanka: After the elections

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For the second time in seven months, the majority of Sri Lankan voters have reaffirmed their commitment to continue with the regime change that began in January this year. The United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG), a coalition led by the erstwhile United National Party (UNP), has also successfully dashed the hopes that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa had of coming back to power, this time as the Prime Minister. The constituency of voters that backed the UNFGG consists of Sri Lankans of all ethnic and cultural communities, in contrast to the predominantly Sinhalese-Buddhist vote which Rajapaksa and his United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) polled. Thus, Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic, multicultural and pluralist democracy has prevailed over the prospect of a continuation of ethnic majoritarian democracy.

Notwithstanding this good news, Sri Lanka's politics is far from being settled and stabilised. Although the UNFGG emerged with the highest number of parliamentary seats, with 106 Members of Parliament (MP), it still lacks a majority in the 225-seat parliament. The UPFA has 95 MPs. The North-East-based Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi, formerly known as the Tamil National Alliance, has obtained 16 seats. President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have advanced the concept of a "national government"—a broad coalition of all parties, yet anchored on a bipartisan alliance between the UNFGG and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which is the mainstay of the UPFA—to avoid such an eventuality [of losing control of the legislature to a Rajapaksa rear guard offensive].

Meanwhile, the current attempts at forming a national government have also exposed the fault lines of contemporary Sri Lankan politics. In order to secure a comfortable majority for the government, President Sirisena has offered parliamentary seats through the national list as well as cabinet positions to a number of defeated candidates of the SLFP. In order to isolate Rajapaksa within the SLFP, Sirisena has also invited a number of its senior and second rank leaders to the new government by offering them ministerial posts. This has seriously damaged the new government's much-publicised claim to ethical governance, or *yaha palanaya*. Civil society groups have come out strongly against what they see as return to political corruption. This is an early warning of the fragility of the governance reform promise of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition.

Dealing with political issues of the ethnic conflict should be at the top of the new government's agenda. An immediate challenge on this front concerns the return to the reconciliation and state reform promises. That Tamil minority voters unambiguously voted for regime change makes it obligatory for the new coalition government to be genuine and resolute in fulfilling its commitments.

However, the reconciliation and state reform agendas can be quite complex. On the one hand, Sri Lanka's post-civil war reconciliation process is excessively internationalised, with the United States, the European Union and the United Nations playing a direct role in trying to shape the form, content and trajectories of reconciliation. The previous government of Mahinda Rajapaksa resisted this and in the process mobilised a strong Sinhalese nationalist opinion against what was called "Western interference." The parliamentary election results clearly indicate that Rajapaksa's nationalist constituency remains intact, even if weakened. Managing this opposition will be a priority of the new government.

Central to the question of political reform in Sri Lanka are three themes. The first is the continuation

of the constitutional reform exercise, resuming from where it stopped with the passing of the 19th amendment. It only reformed, but not abolished, Sri Lanka's much dreaded executive presidential system of government. Abolition of the presidential system and return to the old-style parliamentary democracy requires not only a two-thirds majority in parliament, but also a consensus within the ruling coalition. Some ideologically influential sections within the UNFVG coalition are opposed to the return to a fully-fledged parliamentary system on the argument that it would weaken the Sri Lankan state and its capacity to successfully fight any future secessionist threat.

The second is electoral reforms, moving away from the system of proportional representation to a mixed system. It is on the question of electoral reforms that the government's 100-day programme, launched soon after the January presidential election, faced the most severe of tests. No political consensus was possible on how the electoral reforms should be advanced. The trend that emerged during complex negotiations among political parties appeared to discriminate against the ethnic minority and small parties.

The third political reform theme is no less complex. It is about advancing the regional autonomy rights of the minorities, both Tamil and Muslim communities, through greater devolution. Sri Lanka's political parties remain deeply divided on this issue too. While Tamil parties argue for greater regional autonomy, within a united Sri Lanka, even the more reformist of the Sinhalese political parties—the UNP, for example—have been cautious about where to go from the existing 13th amendment. Any further progress in the autonomy project calls for a political alliance among a majority of political parties on the basis of moderation and pragmatism.

Can Sri Lanka begin a new political journey with democratisation, reconciliation, peace-building and good governance as key themes and goals? Or will this be another false start?

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*<http://www.epw.in/comment/after-lankan-elections.html>