

Sri Lanka: Retrospective View on January 2015 Elections

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The 6.2 million people voted on January 2015 to oust the existing regime might have had compared two scenarios prior to casting their vote. It went wrong. The outcome is the first generalized crisis in the country since its independence.

In spite of the ambiguities embedded in the constitution over the next date of the presidential poll, there is no doubt that it should be held prior to May 2020, the latest. From the perspective of the people in the country, it is pertinent to rethink about the decision that they made on January 2015. Since the 6.2 million people voted on January 2015 to oust the existing regime and to elect a new government, it is not unfair to assume that these voters might have done although unconsciously some kind of scenario development for next five years on the performance of the new regime. Scenario development and planning is a scientific exercise deployed by actors such as business firms, environmental organizations. However, we laymen also engage in the same exercise in our day-to-day lives. It is neither a prediction nor a projection, but a more flexible reading of the future that is unvaryingly uncertain.

The 6.2 million people voted on January 2015 to oust the existing regime might have had compared two scenarios prior to casting their vote. The first would have been the envisioned situation that would be created in case the incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa got elected. The second would have been Sri Lanka in 2020 under Wickramasinghe- Sirisena regime. The 6.2 million people would have thought that the second was the better option even though it was not one hundred percent perfect. Nonetheless, now it is clear that the scenario that had been developed with regard to the second option is incorrect and the Wickramasinghe- Sirisena regime has finally ended up being the worst regime in the seventy years since the independence. Let us first see how this mental exercise is performed.

Scenario Development

What is meant by scenario development? Philip van Notten defines “scenarios” as: “consistent and coherent descriptions of alternative hypothetical futures that reflect different perspectives on past, present, and future developments, which can serve as a basis for action.” Hence, the method of scenario development and planning combines known facts about the present and the future with key driving forces identified by considering social, technical, economic, environmental, and political (STEEP) trends. Since adequate information are available with regard to the present situation, it is much easier to develop scenarios because the drivers that would determine the future may easily be recognized.

By 2015, Mahinda Rajapaksa had been in power for ten years. Under his leadership, the internal armed conflict came to an end when security forces were able to defeat comprehensively the LTTE

decimating its principal leadership. This helped him to come to power for the second time in 2010. The steps taken after the election were hard to be defended. The 18th Amendment was added to the Constitution repealing the constitutional limit of presidential tenure to two terms and placing the independent commissions set up by the 17th Amendment under virtual presidential control. There were allegations about the regime's involvement in killing and harassing its opponents and corruption associated with huge infra-structure projects. There appeared to be multiple drivers working towards more and more authoritarian rule. In spite of some positive results in economic front, for a citizen who preferred more democratic and corruption free country the argument that the existing regime should go was a convincing one.

What Went Wrong?

The academics, professionals and the Colombo civil society who led the campaign against the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime in prior to 2015 presidential poll had presented a convincing argument over the necessity of regime change. Of course, some of these groups did not base their action on situational analysis but based on their own political agenda. Many Colombo civil society organizations are heavily depended on the contributions by Western nations.

In a context when the US and its allies and India wanted badly to oust Mahinda Rajapaksa for its close links with China, they used Colombo civil society organizations to lead the campaign not specifically on the issue of Chinese involvement but on the issue of democracy and human rights. In the present world context both democracy and human rights are being used as what Michael Foucault said, the technology of governance by the imperialist powers.

In my view, the government that came to power in January 2015 may be described as the worst government in the last 70 years whatever the measure being used. In other words, Sri Lanka is experiencing today its first generalized crisis since independence. Generalized crisis is a crisis that occurred simultaneously in every field, economic, political, social, and cultural. Both the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are being steered by visible and invisible foreign hands. Human security is in its lowest. This has extended even to the field of sports.

Let us confine ourselves to people who were really concerned about democracy, human rights and all those goodies and followed wittingly or unwittingly the Western plan of regime change in 2015. I must emphasize I do not put all those people into one basket. What went wrong as far as they were concerned? If they make a retrospective assessment of 2015 decision, what would be their verdict?

Scenario Development, Test 2

As I argued above, these multifarious groups had correctly understood the prevailing situation and the drivers that would be in operation under a future Rajapaksa regime, namely Test 1. Nonetheless, they have failed in scenario development Test 2. Their situation analysis was incomplete and inadequate, and they failed totally to understand the drivers that would be at work after the election. A critical point they missed in the situation analysis is the developing tension in the Indian ocean region. Secondly, the coalition that was formed was not more than a hotchpotch with opposing intentions and conflicting policies. When the honeymoon was over, the issue of succession of power came to the fore, such a coalition may not be maintained.

The neoliberalist economic policies and the Western leanings of the main partners of the coalition drove the country eventually for an economic collapse on the one hand and the security collapse on the other. Hence, "scenarios" as "consistent and coherent descriptions of alternative hypothetical futures that reflect different perspectives on past, present, and future developments, which can serve as a basis for action" were developed with wrong assessment of the situation and the failure to

identify the drivers and their directionality. The outcome is the first generalized crisis in the country since its independence.

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