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Sri Lanka: An Ideological Power Struggle

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SYNOPSIS

The ideological moorings of leaders in Sri Lanka, as they struggle for power, are as important as the strategic stakes of China and India in the Indian Ocean island state.

COMMENTARY

THE DE-ESCALATION of a recent constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka conceals a potential ideological struggle for power in the strategically located state in the Indian Ocean. Outwardly, the crisis spiralled down when President Maithripala Sirisena reappointed the dismissed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on 16 December 2018.

Presidential and parliamentary elections are due by 2020. Sirisena and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, on the same side now, may campaign for a 'Sri Lanka First' policy in all but name. It is not clear how long these two leaders, rivals in the 2015 presidential poll, will stay together. Their opponent, Wickremesinghe, is

likely to champion internationalism in Sri Lanka's own national interest. Of course, neither side has categorically labelled its ideology in this fashion. Therefore, a plain power struggle is what many observers see right now.

Policy Choices

Very broadly, nationalism and centre-left politics constitute the core ideology of Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Rajapaksa's political citadel too until recently. Rajapaksa's new party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, is now allied with Sirisena's SLFP. Broadly, Wickremesinghe's United National Party has traditionally been far-more internationalist. Overarching this differentiation, these three players are espousing policy preferences in sharper tones.

Rajapaksa's ideology is encapsulated in "Mahinda Chintana" (Mahinda's thoughts or concepts). He projects himself as a social democrat who seeks an "end to privatisation of the state sector". Also central to his agenda are said to be social welfare policies such as "free education and free health" and the strengthening of rural economy.

Taking credit for his presidential 'triumph over terrorism' – decimation of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 – Rajapaksa espouses such constructive agenda as "huge commitment to infrastructure development" and "traditional values".

Sirisena's statements, during the currently simmering crisis, are laced with the argument that the national interest alone should determine how to deal with foreign countries' economic interests in Sri Lanka. He calls for "clean foreign investments" and the strengthening of "local industries".

Among the urgent tasks he suggests is the fight against corruption. He wants the soldiers and former militants to be treated on an equal footing while formulating a fair deal for all communities in the post-LTTE process of national reconciliation.

Ideologically, Wickremesinghe is an internationalist and a reformist who favours political and economic liberalisation at home. He espouses free trade agreements with other countries and is not averse to hiring foreign talent at home.

As a minister for industries, science and technology in the late 1980s, he is credited with launching a significant round of economic liberalisation through such measures as financial deregulation, infrastructure development and industrial estates.

More recently, as Prime Minister, Wickremesinghe represented Sri Lanka at the launch of China's prestigious Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in 2017. He has also advocated economic collaboration among Sri Lanka, India (especially its southern states) and Singapore. By this, he is reaching out to Southeast Asia as well.

A Geo-Strategic Destiny?

Politics in Sri Lanka is increasingly driven by its geopolitics. Yet, neither China nor India was conspicuously behind one camp or the other during the recent crisis. However, Sri Lanka's geostrategic value to India and China remains undiminished. India is Sri Lanka's nearest neighbour with a strategic stake in the Indian Ocean stability. Significantly, Chinese President Xi Jinping also sees Sri Lanka as pivotal to his global connectivity project, the Belt and Road Initiative.

There was indeed a diplomatic flutter when Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka Cheng Xueyuan met Rajapaksa in the wake of his appointment as Prime Minister when Wickremesinghe was dismissed on 26 October 2018.

China confirmed the meeting but pointed out that Cheng met Wickremesinghe as well during the crisis triggered by the latter's dismissal. Beijing added that its policy was non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. By this, China signalled its aim of keeping channels open towards both Rajapaksa and Wickremesinghe.

Deeply-Layered Stories

It was during Rajapaksa's presidency until 2015 that China got the rights to build and operate a deep-sea port at Hambantota. Located at the southern tip of Sri Lanka's Indian Ocean coastline, the port is potentially usable for civil and military purposes, although there is no Chinese military base there as of now.

Rajapaksa's presumed pro-China tilt in this matter is a deeply-layered story. It is often recounted that he first requested India to develop that port but Delhi was reluctant. So he successfully explored the China option, it is emphasised. He also invited China to reclaim land near the Colombo seaport and develop a "city port", since renamed as Colombo international financial city.

Wickremesinghe, too, is associated with what many see as China's giant leap onto Sri Lanka's strategic space. Under his watch as Prime Minister, Sri Lanka Ports Authority signed a 99-year agreement with China Merchants Port Holdings in July 2017. This gave the Chinese entity a 70-per-cent stake in the commercial and administrative management of the Hambantota port.

Wickremesinghe argued that the step was to pull Sri Lanka out of a "debt trap". In his view, shared by many, Chinese loans for Hambantota port during Rajapaksa's presidency had caused a "debt trap" on account of the project's economic unviability until at least mid-2017. Beijing, on its part, continues to assert that it never laid a "debt trap" for Sri Lanka.

While Rajapaksa decisively swung towards China after India 'disappointed' him, Wickremesinghe keeps his door open towards Delhi as well. On 19 January 2019, he reportedly said Colombo was still exploring the possibility of India operating the Chinese-built Mattala airport, desolate now, and turning it into a profitable venture. He is also apparently not averse to the futurist idea of a land bridge between Sri Lanka and India across a small strip of sea.

Beyond policy preferences and actions in the run-up to elections, political charisma and the ability to strike a chord of affinity with different sections of the electorate will matter. It is too early to say who might do well in this regard, but core ideologies are

critical to the governance agenda of a geo-strategically important country like Sri Lanka.

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