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Sri Lanka Elections: Stronger Powers, at What Cost?

By Roshni Kapur

SYNOPSIS

The overwhelming victory of the incumbent government of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the recent elections will strengthen its position. Returning to a path of centralisation of powers, however, could limit its opportunity to get re-elected in five years' time.

COMMENTARY

THE GOVERNMENT of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has [won](#) a 'super-majority' at the recent parliamentary elections securing 59% of the votes. The main opposition, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) led by Sajith Premadasa, [received](#) around 23% of the votes.

While the government was expected to do well, its massive victory is unprecedented. Gotabaya's party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP), [secured](#) 145 seats, just five short of a two-thirds majority. It will require simply five more seats from the minor parties to make policy changes without much difficulty.

Riding on the Pandemic

The elections were held during the government's honeymoon period and its popularity was at an all-time high. The SLPP's campaign messaging resonated with many voters. It continued a similar trajectory at the 2019 presidential election by campaigning on a platform on national security, centralised leadership and economic development.

Moreover, the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis has won some praise. There was an effective management and containment of the pandemic with low mortality rate of 11 deaths and 2,900 confirmed cases.

This election has also legitimised Mahinda Rajapakasa's role as prime minister who led the party's election campaign. He has returned to power despite allegations that his presidency was plagued with corruption, autocracy and nepotism.

The return of the Rajapaksa family after a five-year hiatus has reinstated a sense of national security and political stability that was largely [missing](#) during the previous government under former President Maithripala Sirisena and former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Constitutional Amendments

The government will now have the power to make sweeping constitutional changes to strengthen the executive presidency. "We have seen in the past when governments have had a two-thirds majority (they do) not have to worry about checks and balances," historian and political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda has [said](#).

It is likely that the administration will repeal an amendment to the constitution that was passed by the previous United National Front for Good Governance (Yahapalana) government in 2015. This reform curtailed the president's powers and conferred more power to the prime minister, parliament, judiciary, police and other institutions. It also established independent commissions to keep a check on the police and judiciary.

The Gotabaya government argues that the amendment [resulted](#) in weak governance and leadership. It thinks that restoring full executive powers is imperative to enforce its plan of making the country economically and militarily stable, although no timeline has been stated. The removal of the two-term limit on the presidency will also enable Mahinda to contest the next elections.

Many analysts have contended the trend of centralisation of powers has been increasing ever since the Gotabaya administration came to power. While the military has usually played a key role in the Sri Lankan society, Gotabaya has taken it a step further by appointing many former and serving military personnel to significant civilian positions.

For instance, former major general Kamal Gunaratna has been [appointed](#) the new defence secretary and chairman of the Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka.

Human Rights and Minority Concerns

Moreover, several institutions such as the NGO secretariat are now under the defence ministry. There are apprehensions that the civic space and liberty that was restored during the Yahapalana government's tenure is under threat now.

Several international human rights groups including the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have [issued](#) a joint letter urging the current government to stop targeted arrests and intimidation of activists, lawyers and human rights activists.

There is also anxiety whether the government will take steps to protect the interests of the minority communities. Its [withdrawal](#) from the United Nations resolution 30/1 on

accountability and reconciliation in February 2020 was a clear indication it will not cooperate with the international community on wartime inquiries.

Although it assured the Tamil community that it would set up a domestic commission of inquiry, no steps have been taken so far. Rising Islamophobia that cuts across the urban and rural divide is a growing phenomenon in the country.

The forced cremation policy implemented by the government evidently hurt the sentiments of the Muslim community given that cremating a deceased body is a contravention of Islamic burial rites. The local media [propagated](#) unfounded claims that the Muslim community was responsible for the spread of the coronavirus.

Challenges Ahead

Securing a parliamentary majority is simply one challenge that the government has overcome. While constitutional reforms can wait, the shambling economy, national security and ethnic question should be prioritised. The country's economy shrank by 1.6% in the first quarter of 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic that hit the tourism sector massively.

Hence the government has a difficult task of reviving the economy and rebuilding investor confidence in the wake of the ensuing pandemic. On the foreign policy side, Gotabaya has [emphasised](#) that his administration will follow an equidistant and non-aligned foreign policy.

However diplomatic communication between Western countries and Sri Lanka could prove challenging given that there has been mutual discomfort between the two during Mahinda's presidency. The West would need to accept the ground realities and rethink its engagement with the Rajapaksas.

Although the government has its job cut out for the next term, returning to a path of alleged authoritarianism and centralisation of powers could backfire and limit its opportunity to get re-elected in five years' time. Despite Mahinda's landslide victory at the 2010 presidential elections, he was ousted at the 2015 presidential poll when anti-incumbency effects were high.

The Sirisena-led opposition that had formed a coalition with many political and civic bodies campaigned on a platform of good governance, transparency, accountability and integrity. That resonated well with the public. This time, if Premadasa manages to mobilise the key opposition, it could increase his political fortunes at the next presidential election.

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