

Observation of the 2015 Sri Lankan Presidential Election

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On January 8, 2015, Sri Lanka conducted its seventh presidential election since the inauguration of its 1978 constitution. The fiercely contested election saw voter turnout reach a historic high of 81.52%. The election resulted in a victory for Maithripala Sirisena, the candidate representing a coalition of opposition parties, who garnered 51.28% of the vote to defeat the incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who won 47.58% of the vote. Though lead-up to the election had been marred by sporadic incidences of violence, the election day remained peaceful. At midday the following day (January 9) election results were announced, and that same afternoon Sirisena was sworn in at Colombo's Independence Square, concluding a peaceful political turnover.

Rajapaksa, who also served as chairman of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), was first elected president in 2005. In 2009, he ended Sri Lanka's civil war, attaining hero status that secured him a second presidential term in 2010. Rajapaksa used his party's advantage as ruling party in Parliament to pass the 18th amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution, abolishing the provision that limits a president to two successive terms in office and affording himself the opportunity to continue on as president indefinitely. Rajapaksa's second term was set to continue into 2016, but in November of 2014, he decided to hold elections two years early. Rajapaksa based his decision on the calculation that the opposition camp would be unable to put forward a candidate capable of challenging his power within the short timeframe.

The victorious Sirisena originally served as both general secretary of the SLFP and the Sri Lankan minister of health, and enjoyed prestige and popularity. In mid-November 2014, Sirisena led several dozen cabinet officials and parliamentary representatives in defecting from the ruling party; he was subsequently put forward as a presidential candidate by a coalition of opposition parties that included Sri Lanka's largest opposition party, the United National Party (UNP). He also received full support from the ethnic minority parties the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). Additional support for Sirisena from former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga also undermined the legitimacy of Rajapaksa's candidacy.

The core of Sirisena's support has come from Sinhalese Buddhists in rural villages. These members of the lower middle class were moved to antipathy for Rajapaksa and his family early on by the significant degree of control over the state exercised by the Rajapaksa family. An elder brother of Rajapaksa served as the speaker of Parliament, while one of his younger brothers served as Secretary of Defense and another as Minister of Economic Development; his son was a member of Parliament and his nephews also held high offices in government. People jokingly referred to Sri Lanka as the Rajapaksa Kingdom.

As sitting president, Rajapaksa made use of his incumbent advantages, using administrative resources and drawing on media advertising to

promote his campaign, but he was ultimately defeated. The primary reasons for this unexpected outcome are as follows:

First is the religious factor. Sri Lanka's largest Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, had always supported the government, but in late-December of 2014, it withdrew from the ruling coalition and threw in its lot with the opposition camp. SLMC leader Rauff Hakeem even went so far as to resign his position as Minister of Justice, dealing a serious blow to Rajapaksa's campaign.

Second is the ethnic factor. Sinhalese (who are primarily Buddhist) make up 74% of Sri Lanka's population. Tamils account for 18.2% of the population (with Sri Lankan Tamils making up 12.6% and Indian Tamils making up 5.6%). Muslims account for 7.4% of the population (Muslims of Arab or Sri Lankan descent make up 7.1% with Malaysian Muslims accounting for 0.3%). Animosity between the Sinhalese and Tamils had already begun to simmer during the era of colonial rule. The Sinhalese seized power upon independence, and successive Sinhalese administrations, including under Rajapaksa, habitually excluded and discriminated against the Tamils. Conversely the Tamils had long sought opportunities to overthrow Rajapaksa.

The loss of traditional supporters and strong opposition from ethnic minority and Muslim groups are the factors that contributed to Rajapaksa's electoral defeat. International observers have generally acclaimed this election as a turning point for Sri Lankan democracy. The new government should forthrightly address domestic human rights issues and initiate the process of truth and reconciliation. Whether the

new President Sirisena has the wisdom to form a cross-ethnic, cross-religion governing coalition to lead Sri Lanka into a new era remains to be seen. **BT**

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