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## Sri Lanka's Elections: A Clear Mandate?

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*Eight months after the dramatic end of three decades of separatist war, Mahinda Rajapaksa's decisive reelection as president of Sri Lanka gives him an opportunity to move the country forward on multiple fronts: political reform, economic renewal, and reengagement with international players including the United States. His big challenge will be to recognize that peacemaking still lies ahead of him. For the United States and more broadly for the West, it is time to recognize that the formulas for political reform that were put forth in the past 20 years are effectively dead. These countries will need to find a new way to communicate with a leader, and a country, in no mood to listen to countries that they believe provided bad advice over the past two decades.*

**A thumping victory:** Mahinda Rajapaksa was reelected president of Sri Lanka on January 26, defeating retired army general Sarath Fonseka by 58-40 percent, with 74 percent of the population voting. The election campaign was marred by violence and intimidation, but election day itself was peaceful. General Fonseka has not accepted Rajapaksa's victory. After the election, he was briefly holed up in a hotel surrounded by troops; in the subsequent days, rumors that he would be arrested have swirled. However, other observers who have no reason to favor Rajapaksa have not confirmed any suggestion of massive fraud, and the results were consistent all over the country.

**Post-election scene:** General Fonseka accused President Rajapaksa's camp of vote rigging, and he registered complaints with the electoral commission. His accusations are unlikely to get any traction and yet immediate cessation of his efforts seems unlikely. President Rajapaksa's side has begun a campaign against members of the independent press. Chandana Sirimalwatta, an editor of a pro-opposition newspaper, was asked to report to the Criminal Investigations Department on January 29. At that time officials were preparing to obtain an order from the government that could allow a 90-day detention under the country's wartime emergency laws. The newspaper had backed General Fonseka and has repeatedly reported on allegations of government corruption. Authorities also asked a Swiss radio journalist to leave Sri Lanka after she asked critical questions at a post-election press conference. President Rajapaksa has begun a large reorganization of the country's military. Several senior commanders have been forced into compulsory early retirement. The government is accusing them of breaching military discipline, but many believe they are being forced into retirement because they supported General Fonseka in the election.

**The run-up:** In the months following the military victory, Rajapaksa's reelection had seemed a foregone conclusion. However, the surprise candidacy of General Fonseka, just retired as army chief, made the outcome of the election harder to predict. Both men claimed credit for overseeing a complete (and brutal) end to a long-running war against the LTTE. The president had the advantage of being an incumbent. However, many voters resented the dominance of Rajapaksa's immediate family in the government (his brother Basil served as his special adviser, while another brother, Gotabhaya, was secretary of defense). Voters also complained about corruption and soaring inflation under President Rajapaksa's first administration.

General Fonseka, having won the military victory for Rajapaksa, dramatically broke with the president and became a rallying point for a normally incompatible collection of opposition forces. The first general to run for president of Sri Lanka, he secured the backing of the principal opposition party, the pro-business United National Front, as well as the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a former member of Rajapaksa's coalition. Just before the election came the biggest surprise endorsement—Chandrika Kumaratunga, Rajapaksa's immediate predecessor and the representative of the family that for 50 years had dominated the Sri Lanka Freedom Party to which they both belonged.

Fonseka also lined up the support of the Tamil National Alliance, a group of constitutional Tamil politicians who in a desperation move had endorsed the LTTE just before the previous election. This transformed the campaign. With the

Sinhalese electorate traditionally divided more or less evenly between the two major parties, presidential elections have often turned on the Tamil vote. True to form, both candidates campaigned in Tamil areas.

In the end, Rajapaksa secured strong majorities in all the Sinhala-majority constituencies, and Fonseka won decisively in Tamil-majority areas. The results reflected demographics and a low Tamil turnout, estimated at 30 percent, probably due in part to the difficulty of getting to the polls for Tamils displaced following the war. Interestingly, this is a case of history repeating itself: a poll boycott declared by the LTTE helped President Rajapaksa win his first presidential election.

**Rebuilding the economy:** The central theme of President Rajapaksa's campaign was rebuilding a united country after the civil war. His election manifesto focused especially on the economic dimension of this task, on growth and employment via massive infrastructure development across sectors—ports, aviation, energy resources, and roads. The president also wooed voters with public-sector wage hikes and subsidies.

Sri Lanka's central bank forecasts that the economy will grow up to 6 percent in 2010 as the end of the conflict boosts income from the agricultural and tourism sectors. This year the country is expected to receive some 600,000 foreign tourists with the *New York Times* naming Sri Lanka its top tourist destination for 2010. Annual remittances, mostly from Sri Lankans abroad, have rebounded from a minor slump due the global financial crisis. In the eight months since the end of the civil war, the Sri Lanka Stock Market Colombo All-Share Index (CSEALL) has nearly doubled, reaching 3,591 the day before the presidential election. Both the World Bank and the IMF are expected to provide funds to the island nation. The loans and the conditions attached, however, are expected to help fight politicians' urges to delay economic reform.

**The displaced:** The best-known problem Sri Lanka faces that results directly from the long civil war is the release and rehabilitation of the internally displaced persons. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, an organization supported by the Norwegian Refugee Council, soon after the war there were 285,000 IDPs in the Vanni district in the north of Sri Lanka. There was also a caseload of 197,925 IDPs from the period before 2006 and more than 60,000 Muslim IDPs who were expelled from the north by the LTTE in 1990. By the end of 2009, the number of IDPs in the Vanni district had fallen to 108,000. This has been a particular focus of attention for the Western countries and the United Nations. From the Sri Lankan government's perspective, it presents two dangers: the risk that remnants of the defeated LTTE could remain in the camps and could resume their activities upon release; and the danger that a dilatory response to the humanitarian plight of the displaced could reignite the resentments that fed the three-decades-long insurgency.

**Rajapaksa and the minorities:** While campaigning, President Rajapaksa gave assurances that economic and infrastructure development would reach the often-neglected north and east. However, the government's approach to the development of predominantly minority areas is contributing to minority fears and alienation. According to foreign NGOs based on the island, government plans remain unclear to local communities. Political leaders have not been consulted or informed of reconstruction plans. Military influence over policies as well as a strong military presence in these areas contributes further to the sense of unease.

Even the term "minorities" is politically loaded. In President Rajapaksa's May 19 victory speech he said, "We have removed the word minorities from our vocabulary.... There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth. Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group." While some commentators praised the speech as evidence of the president's commitment to an ethnically egalitarian Sri Lanka, others viewed the claim that there are "no minorities" as ominous. Minorities in Sri Lanka, particularly Tamils, feel as though their basic rights are under assault. A rash of threats following the end of the war, targeting Tamils and others considered lacking in patriotic zeal, created an atmosphere of potential intimidation.

**Political reform:** For close to three decades, discussion of how to create a lasting peace in Sri Lanka focused on constitutional change. The debate centered on the degree to which power would be exercised at the provincial and local levels, and on the units to which power would devolve. The military victory changed the nature of the debate. Even before the end of the war, Rajapaksa had backed away from the constitutional formulas that had been floated during previous administrations. The argument for constitutional change had been that it presented the best chance of moving the center of gravity of Tamil opinion away from the LTTE and its military campaign. Military victory, in the view of mainstream political Sri Lanka, had made this unnecessary and indeed objectionable to a victorious government.

During his campaign President Rajapaksa promised a continuation of political development in the provinces as well as free elections in the north. He spoke of "a Sri Lankan solution"—thereby implicitly rejecting the aspects of previous settlement proposals loosely modeled on the Indian constitution. He indicated that this would involve full implementation

of the existing constitutional provisions Sri Lanka adopted in 1987, when it adopted the present provincial organization and powers.

This suggests that the path to reintegration of Tamils into national political life will not run through constitutional change. The government has no appetite for it. Tamil politicians regard the present relationship between the central and provincial levels of government as a cynical trap that was sprung on them in 1987, and by extension they are mistrustful of constitutional gimmicks that could once again prove illusory. Instead, the path to reintegration will involve political bridge-building and alliance formation. The parliamentary elections due in April 2010 will be a critical opportunity to make this happen. It could be the first step in creating a new political compact; conversely, a political campaign focused exclusively on Sinhalese politics could reignite the alienation that provided the fodder for the ethnic conflict in the first place.

**Global re-engagement:** Over the past two decades, Western countries became increasingly critical of Sri Lanka's human rights record, its treatment of IDPs, and actions toward the end of the war. They have been relatively slow to recognize that the solutions that seemed promising during the periods of active political involvement by Norway, for example, are now off the table.

Rajapaksa has meanwhile burnished Sri Lanka's long-standing ties with China and also moved closer to Burma, Iran, and Libya. China has invested billions of dollars in Sri Lanka through military loans, infrastructure loans, and port development. At the same time, Sri Lanka has economic needs that the United States and Europe are better placed to supply. The first Rajapaksa administration's refusal to acknowledge any misconduct vis-à-vis Tamils and IDPs strained its relations with the EU. Sri Lanka could lose its duty-free access to the EU market for a portion of its garment exports, as well as thousands of jobs in that sector.

The stakes in new engagement between Sri Lanka and the Western nations involve more than Sri Lanka's political future. Sri Lanka is located at the nexus of crucial trading routes in the Indian Ocean. The United States has an interest in deterring terrorist activity and curbing piracy that could disrupt trade in the area. Therefore the United States cannot afford to "disengage" with Sri Lanka. This would argue for a more subtle and sophisticated approach, recognizing that the political game has changed in Sri Lanka, but also focusing on U.S. economic, trade, and security interests.

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