

## Democracy and National Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Towards a Peaceful Equation?


BY DR. SIEGFRIED O. WOLF ON JANUARY 19, 2015


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Sri Lanka not only symbolizes the oldest and longest democratic tradition among post-colonial societies but also an authoritarian shift and one of Asia's most traumatic civil wars. The armed conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL), that mainly comprised of members of the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which claimed to represent the Island's Hindu Tamil communities, was ended in May 2009 after almost three decades of fighting. Ultimately the puzzle that needs to be solved is why was Sri Lanka not able to avoid civil war and 'quasi-dictatorship' despite its long-lasting democratic institutions? For many years Sri Lanka was perceived as a classic example for a country in which democracy facilitated majority rule and the marginalization of minorities based on a vision of ethnic exclusiveness and authoritarianism. This was reducing rather than enhancing democratic stabilization and consolidation. Sri Lanka was never able or lacked the willingness to construct a democratic multi-ethnic society (approx. Sinhalese-/Buddhist 74%, Tamil-/Hindu 15%, and Muslims 8%) and fostered exclusion of its ethnic minorities since its independence in 1948. With reference to Donald Horowitz, in the case of Sri Lanka, democracy was interpreted as a pure majoritarian rule without sufficient minority protection. As such, the political decision making processes turned out to be a problem rather than a solution due to the fact that it perpetuated domination of one group over the other. In this context political observers traditionally point out that the dialectic between majority rule and ethnic outbidding is the major aberration in Sri Lanka's political-institutional development, which produces 'undemocratic results'. This phenomenon can be described as an 'auction-like process' in which certain politicians as a mean to attain and sustain power try to outbid one another by instrumentalizing the fears and ambitions of their majority community. In doing so, Sri Lanka's minorities, especially the Hindu Tamils and Muslims, were systematically marginalized around political mobilization and ensuring of political interests during the time of elections. Furthermore, it led to an extraordinary institutional decay and portrayed how institutional structures can influence actors' behavior. In addition it also shows how democratic institutions can create in a certain societal context (e.g. where ethnicity is a politically salient cleavage and utilized for outbidding) a political dynamic, which is able to unleash

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– marginalization of minorities, i.e. how the political class (majority) and political system deal with them or protect their rights, as well as to ensure a distribution of national resources, remains intact.

Having this in mind, many observers state that 'post-conflict Sri Lanka did not make much progress in addressing any of the above-mentioned questions. The major reason therefore was the Presidency of Mahindra Rajapaksa.

The then President did not seem to have the political will to initiate institutional change in form of sustainable and credible reform programs, which would reduce various forms of discrimination and exclusion of Sri Lanka's minorities as well as strengthen democratic structures and processes. On the contrary, Rajapaksa increasingly adopted an authoritarian style of governance featured by endemic corruption, nepotism, and attempts to establish dynastic rule. His undermining of the constitutional basic structure by transforming Sri Lanka into an executive presidency turned the President into a 'quasi-dictator'. Furthermore, on-going human rights violations, a persistent presence of armed forces in the war-torn north, lack of accountability for war crimes and the absence of a noteworthy power-sharing model with former combatants have spurred criticism. Not only the Tamils, but also the Muslims suffered from the incumbent's hard-line approach on rapprochement towards the country's minorities. Growing sectarian violence facilitated by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists enjoying the goodwill of Rajapaksa's administration further bolstered the alienation of Muslims, Hindus and Christians. In sum, Rajapakse truncated the democratic process and wasted the chance for national reconciliation. Additionally, his partly promising economic policy, which led to remarkable economic growth, focused on establishing 'mega projects' has failed to benefit the poor. Consequently, he not only lost support among the minorities but also within his core constituency, the rural conservative Sinhala-majority who suffered from inflation and high living costs. The estrangement with the West and the failure to implement a constructive policy in the country's foreign policy triangle with India and China further bolstered the nation-wide frustration about Rajapaksa's 'family regime'. Therefore, it was only partly a surprise that Rajapaksa was defeated in the last presidential elections on 8 January 2015 by his former political ally Maithripala Sirisena. After the farmer-turned-politician resigned from the former government, he was able to unite the fractured opposition and benefitted from the incumbent's growing unpopularity among the Sinhalese majority as well as the minorities.

As such, the elections were more than just a symbol of hope; they were a clear statement of a vibrant civil society not willing to accept an authoritarian regime. Rajapaksa's defeat was also an expression of the need for national reconciliation based on the political and social inclusion of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, it is a signal towards religious fundamentalists in the country that the common people are not anymore willing to tolerate the use of religion for ethnic outbidding. Thus, the election results were an unequivocal vote against Rajapakse and for the return towards parliamentary democracy. In order to fulfill this mandate, the new President Sirisena has to carry out far-reaching constitutional and economic reforms, end corruption and nepotism, ensure that the rule of law applies to everyone without any ethnic and religious discrimination, to work towards national reconciliation and integration which most likely will have to encompass the issue of federal mechanisms. Until now, he has given no remarkable sign that he will differ much from Rajapaksa on issues such as reconciliation or economic policy. In this context, it will be important to observe how far Sirisena has really departed from his 'Marxist-communist-time'. This is significant in order to implement a more successful, integrated economic and foreign policy regarding China on the one side and New Delhi, Washington and Brussels on the other side. Nevertheless, the fact that Sirisena has already kept his first promise and made opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe the new prime minister -who has the reputation to be more inclusive-, the announcement of holding fresh parliamentary elections in the near future, and the high voter turn-out among the Tamil population can be seen as positive indicators for sustainable peace and democratic consolidation in Sri Lanka.

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