

# SADF COMMENT



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## 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka: A Referendum for Democracy

On Monday, August 17, Sri Lanka's 15 million strong electorate went to the national polls for the second time this year. Among analysts, there is no doubt that this was not only a 'popular vote', which decided over the new composition of the country's 225-seat-parliament, it was also a referendum regarding the basic nature of Sri Lanka's political culture. Furthermore it was a choice of destiny over the future course of national reconciliation, the need for political revamping to fix political-administrative aberrations, and the pledge of the minorities in a civil war-torn country. More concretely, it was a decision whether the authoritarian strongman and former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa representing the vision of a 'strong state' based on an extreme, ethnic exclusive brand of nationalism, should be allowed to return to power or not? In sharp contrast, there was the alternative option to continue the notion of democratic political reforms and inclusive, consensual-based politics in order to improve good governance in multi-ethnic and multi-religious Sri Lanka- despite the fact that it started slow and tenacious - personified in President Maithripala Sirisena and incumbent Prime Minister (PM) Ranil Wickremesinghe. The latter phenomenon marks a process that started just some months ago. Despite all speculations about potential electoral scenarios, the people's vote was clear and defined an important critical juncture in the country's history: Rajapaksa should resign and give up his political ambitions to return to

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power, as well as face the legal consequences for abusing power during his time in office (19 November 2005 to 9 January 2015) as well as for establishing an autocratic, nepotistic and clientelistic regime (controlled by his family and friends) which was accused for severe human rights violations, suppressing freedoms, and war-crimes. Keeping this in mind, one must state that Rajapaksa is one of the most controversial and divisive figures in contemporary Sri Lanka. Some segments of the Sinhalese majority see in him a national hero, who ended the three decade old civil war and embodies the country's protector of the Sinhalese Buddhist heritage. For other people he is a despotic autocrat who was running the country in a brutal and corrupt way, especially on the expense of religious and ethnic minority. As such, the vote was also an expression that dynastic rule, political feuding and violence has no space anymore in Sri Lanka's political landscape.

In sum, the 2015 parliamentary elections were relatively free, fair and peaceful (also a novelty in Sri Lanka) in which Rajapaksa was defeated once again, blocking his return to power. By assessing the elections results (Rajapaksa/ United People's Freedom Alliance/95 versus Sirisena & Wickremesinghe/United National Front for Good Governance: 106 & Tamil National Alliance: 16) one can state that months after losing his presidency; his political leverage and social base shrunk considerably. This is a process which already started last January, as Sirisena toppled Rajapaksa as president and subsequently replaced him as leader of the SLFP, and since then consequently removed loyalists of his predecessor from senior positions. Therefore, the country was spared from a most likely unrestricted political struggle between incumbent President Sirisena and a potential new PM Rajapaksa. Such a political conflict would not only paralyse all efforts to bring the country forward but also possesses the risk of initiating a process in which the country could slide back into widespread violence and armed upheaval.

Nevertheless, besides strengthening remarkable his and the prime ministers position, Siresena will have to continue compromising with oppositional parties to win over their support. In this context, it is important to be aware that during the last months, besides having 'normative control' over the major parties in government and opposition, Sirisena could not gain much political capital out of this advantage. In contrast, he had to struggle to achieve effective control, to stabilize his position, and to keep Rajapaksa at bay.

However, the 'political duo' Sirisena and Wickemesinghe were able to widen their lead and make decisive gains to improve the stability and realm of their government after several months

of minority rule. This is significant, since the government is in urgent need for a stronger mandate to be able to carry out much desired (and promised) reforms, namely to create a government possessing a two-thirds majority required to pass proposed major constitutional reforms. Until now, the Siresana-Wickemesinghe cooperation produced already positive outcome, like the 19th constitutional amendment and the removal of power from the president to the prime minister.. However, much more has to be done, especially regarding the inclusion of minorities and national reconciliation. As such, the latest election results provided Sirisena and Wickemesinghe significantly more space to continue with their reform policy. Last but not least, Sri Lanka's people demanded and the country's electorate created a new political environment feature by new landmarks: Communalism and blatant political rhetoric on the expense of the countries minorities is not enough to win elections anymore. The time has come that politicians have to deliver good governance instead of covering misrule and autocratic political behaviour under the shadows of ethnic outbidding. Taken the particular war-ridden history and the multi-cultural and ethnic and religious plurality of Sri Lanka into account, national unity, consensus-based politics, and reconciliation are the new and only way forward.