
THE RAJAPAKSE PRESIDENCY: CONSEQUENCES FOR THE PEACE PROCESS

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Mahinda Rajapakse is the fifth President of Sri Lanka. Those of us who have followed his career for the last 35 years would be happy for him, for his extraordinary endurance, his people-friendly skills and his great tendency for consensus politics, which will be tested to the maximum during his challenging six-years Presidency.

There are specific characteristics of the Mahinda Rajapakse victory, which will have major consequences for the peace process. His victory characterizes a paradigm shift in the thinking and articulation of key policy changes with regard to federalism, the role of Norway as facilitator, the Ceasefire Agreement, and the question of pluralism and democracy in the Northeast.

Mahinda received an overwhelming majority of the Sinhalese Buddhist vote. Further analysis goes to show that the large majorities that he received in the deep South was a confirmation of returning as President “a son of the soil,” a man from Ruhuna as a man of their own to be the first President from the South.

In the other districts where the Sinhalese vote was predominant, Mahinda received smaller but effective majorities. Another interesting feature of his victory is that he did not rely on the outgoing President or her brother Anura, the Prime Minister designate, for his success. Throughout his political career Mahinda was patient and cultivated his constituency with great diligence, in spite of the many obstacles placed before him. His resilience and sustainable and endearing personal qualities is a mark of his leadership qualities.

Although the previous President had rightly claimed as her legacy that she had influenced her party’s direction towards a federal solution with effective power-sharing to the minorities in the North-East, the Sinhalese Buddhists endorsed the Mahinda Chintanaya, which called for the defence of a unitary state with limited devolution of power. I see this as a fundamental shift in position of the SLFP. Some would argue that Mahinda restored the SLFP to its original paradigm, i.e., a Sinhalese majoritarian

consciousness as the dominant discourse in the country, with tolerance and respect for minorities.

Mahinda’s victory also demonstrated that he did not rely on the support of the minorities, whether they are Tamils, Muslims or the Christians to deliver his Presidency. His total reliance on the Sinhalese-Buddhist vote provides for a new direction and focus throughout his six-year Presidency. He is the first President to have received over 60% of the Sinhalese-Buddhist vote. Through this vote bank he has demonstrated that a Presidency can be won without the support of the minorities.

Further he has demonstrated that his judgment in creating an alliance with the JVP was correct. The JVPs’ organizational strengths coupled with the JHU’s campaign amongst the Sinhalese Buddhists brought him rich dividends. The JVP demonstrated its organizational skills by the efficient grassroots campaign that it conducted with house-to-house campaigning and rigorous expansion of its vote bank as a result. The notion that the JHU vote bank would return to the UNP was erroneous.

The vote of the Sinhalese Buddhist population also endorses their serious concerns with regards the direction of the peace process and its uneasiness with regard to the role of the international community, the role of Norway for its alleged partiality and the status of the Ceasefire Agreement.

The JVP has called for a review of the role of the Norwegian facilitator; and the President has not mentioned Norway in his inaugural speech but instead stated that he would try to seek the support of India and the Asian neighbours. Further he has called for a review of the Ceasefire Agreement and a rejection of the Joint Mechanism (P-TOMs) signed by the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE.

Another important facet of the Mahinda Chintanaya is the commitment to a pluralist democracy in the Northeast. This means that whilst recognizing that the LTTE will be the principle party to the negotiations, it recognizes the role of other stakeholders, such as the Muslims who have promised representation at the high table, but also of other Tamil stakeholders such as the EPDP and the Karuna faction.

The Karuna faction has already endorsed their support for the new President. The President has stated that he would hold a round of discussions with other stakeholders before initiating talks with the LTTE. This roundtable-discussion approach was also pursued by President Jayewardene and President Premadasa, which only served to delay the negotiations but also minimize the concessions, that could be given to the Tamils.

On the other hand, it must be recognized that the majority of the Tamils in the Northeast did not vote during the current Presidential elections. The accounts by the election monitors are very clear and unanimous. In Jaffna and the Wannu there was an effective enforcement of a boycott by the LTTE. Despite assurances by the LTTE and the TNA that the people were free to vote, there was significant intimidation and fear instilled upon the Tamil people not to vote. This means that over 700,000 voters were deprived of their fundamental and inalienable right to vote for a candidate of their choice.

An examination of the election results in the previous Presidential elections show that the Tamils had not voted in large numbers in the 1994 or 1999 elections, showing less than 10% of the vote cast to the PA governments. A further examination of the votes in the Colombo district demonstrated that the Tamils did not vote in large numbers. This means that the Tamil people as a whole have not reposed their trust in either of the Presidential candidates.

Unlike in general elections where the Tamil National Alliance contested, the Tamils have not voted significantly for a Sinhalese President. The reasons, which the LTTE had provided in their many interviews and press statements, are that they did not trust either of the Presidential candidates. They had also criticized the lacklustre performance of the Ranil Wickremesinghe government with regard to delivering on the peace process, ignoring the fact that he was operating within a framework set by a hostile President. On the other hand, Ranil avoided any consultations or discussion with the LTTE so as not to prejudice his vote bank in the South.

What the LTTE decisions mean in the future is that it does not rely on the southern political entity to grant any concessions of substance on the Tamil national question and that negotiation with the South, if it does happen, will be acrimonious and positional bargaining all the way.

Given the circumstances, Ranil Wickremesinghe has not done badly. It is also clear that wherever there was a multiethnic composition in the South that Ranil received effective majorities except for Colombo. What this voting pattern

demonstrates is that the minorities wherever they voted endorsed a vote for a federal system, for continued negotiations and the implementation of the Ceasefire Agreement. It is also to be noted that Mahinda secured a wafer thin majority to gain the Presidency, i.e., 50.2%, whilst Ranil obtained 48.4%. The overall picture demonstrates that the Sri Lankan polity is deeply divided and polarized on ethnic and religious lines.

Consequences for the Peace Process

Mahinda in his acceptance speech stated commendably that, as President he will be the President of all the peoples in the country. He has called for peace in the mind and peace in action and called for reconciliation of all the divided entities produced by the election. Mahinda has still not made any gesture towards the opposition. Whilst Ranil had openly stated that bi-partisan consensus on the national question was sine qua non in the future negotiations, we have yet to see him demonstrate his position in action.

Ranil's absence at the meeting called by the Elections Commissioner, as well as his absence at the inaugural session of the President does not accord with his pronouncements during the election campaign. Mahinda's first challenge is how he would forge such a consensus. It is clear that gaining consensus through consultations with the parties of the opposition, i.e., the UNP, the SLMC and the CWC will be vital for his negotiations strategy. Further he would do well to expand his political base to invite the UNP, the SLMC and the CWC, to be co-partners in a grand coalition. Efforts to buy over votes and cross-overs will only lead to greater polarization.

Another challenge he will face is how to accommodate and recognize the Karuna faction as a stakeholder in the peace process. The Karuna faction did not do so well in the elections in the East.

The Ceasefire Agreement recognized two parties to the conflict i.e. the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, and any formal recognition of any other armed faction would be to revoke the Ceasefire Agreement. The LTTE position has been that all armed factions in the North-East should be disarmed including the auxiliary forces.

To achieve these objectives, a review of the Ceasefire Agreement will be high on the agenda. Mahinda in his inaugural speech called for a review of the peace process and stated that he would not tolerate political killings and child abductions and called for a human rights framework.

However, judging by past experience, recognition of the Karuna faction would be seen as a declaration of war.

The President in his election speeches stated that he was prepared for bilateral talks with the leader of the LTTE. We have to wait and see if this call by the President will be reciprocated. All previous efforts to have face-to-face talks with the LTTE leader have failed. There is, however, great merit in face-to-face talks and this should be tried with utmost vigour.

Another vexed question he will face immediately is whether he will agree to a de-merger of the North-East since the date for the extension of the de-merger will fall on November 23. The JHU and the JVP have called for such a de-merger and this decision will be a litmus test for the new President. Accepting the de-merger would be another open declaration of war.

Another challenge facing the Mahinda Presidency is how to deal with the Norwegian role. It is one thing to demonize Norway in election platforms and another for a sober assessment of Norway's role. The President's agenda in the next few weeks will be an early visit to India, where he is likely to plead for a greater role for India.

Another assurance the President has given to the electorate is to expand the base of the international community's involvement, i.e., to India, China and Russia to share the burden of the peace process.

Expanding the Co-Chairs group to involve others is certainly a good idea, but whether India would agree to a prominent role in the negotiations process or will agree to widen the role of others is questionable. The hallmarks of India's policy towards Sri Lanka are to expand economic cooperation through loans and trade but not to be involved in the negotiations process. India is likely therefore to suggest that Norway continues its role. In any case the two parties have to agree on the role of the facilitator.

A formidable advantage that the new President will bring to the table is that he has the full and unequivocal backing of the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority for starting talks with the LTTE. It means that he will not have to face opposition from the South for restarting the negotiations, but also that he will have the legitimacy to deliver on whatever he can manage to give to the LTTE. From other international experiences, it could be said that those who represent the majority population are better able to negotiate and deliver, such as the recent concessions given to the Palestinians by Sharon in Israel.

On the other hand, the former President in 1994 received 62% of the vote but failed to deliver peace to the country.

Lessons from Previous Negotiations

There are many lessons that should be learnt in the 25-year-old protracted civil war in Sri Lanka. I do hope that these lessons are seriously considered and put into operation.

Leadership is of prime importance. The highest priority should be given to the negotiations process and an able team of people appointed to take the process forward. Those selected must be of the highest calibre, with a profound understanding of the conflict over the last 25 years.

There has to be a clear strategy, an architecture and design. Pragmatism, however attractive, should be discounted. A bi-partisan agreement in the South will be imperative, and all efforts should be made to include the UNP in the decision-making process. Further, the views of the SLMC and the CWC and their involvement would surely strengthen and consolidate the President's negotiations strategy. One of the major lessons from the last 25 years is not to only focus on the 'high table' i.e. negotiations between the principle parties. Whilst focusing on the 'high table,' efforts must be made to organize smaller tables to resolve many of the intractable issues.

The Muslim question will be high on the agenda. The Eastern province has always been a serious source of violence and instability. Efforts must be made to promote coexistence and reconciliation but also to provide security and protection to the minorities living in the East. Every effort must be made to have a clear communications strategy and keep the population informed.

Every effort must also be made to alleviate the fears of the minorities, and meaningful steps taken to ensure their human rights are taken seriously. The dismal performance of the non-implementation of the Tamil language as a national language must be addressed immediately.

The Tamil people in the North-East have no confidence in the Sinhalese governments, and therefore it is by actions that this perception has to be fundamentally changed.

Providing significant resources to the war-torn areas, addressing the suffering of the war refugees and tsunami refugees becomes a categorical imperative. The international community has played an important role in providing an

umbrella of support for the peace process and this support must be maintained whilst expanding the base of that support in Asia. The role of the facilitator becomes crucial, and any outstanding issues should be sorted out immediately.

Everybody will keenly await the Martyrs Day speech by the leader of the LTTE. His speech will indicate the parameters

upon which the peace process is to be resumed new leader with proven qualities of leadership and patience and remarkable ability to build consensus has been elected in the South. All peace-loving people of this country will wish him well and give their highest level of cooperation in taking the country through these stormy waters. ■

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THE SINHALA PEOPLE HAVE NOT REJECTED A FEDERAL SOLUTION

Lal Wijenayake

Resumption of hostilities between the LTTE and the government forces soon after the election of a new President has stunned the country. But it was expected as the logical outcome of the communal politics that took centre stage in the run-up to the election.

The extremely communal campaign that was spearheaded by the JVP and the JHU has deeply divided the masses on ethnic lines and has led to the clear polarization of the masses on the basis of ethnicity, as evidenced by the events following the election, such as the stand taken by the parties representing the plantation Tamil community.

In essence the campaign designed and executed by the JVP and the JHU was to challenge the minorities on questions of political power. The most prominent slogan, also the one that attracted even the otherwise non-communal Sinhala voter, was the call to the Sinhala people to show the minorities that it is possible to have a government at the centre without the support of the minorities, so that the government would be free to govern without submitting to the 'unreasonable demands of the minorities'.

The extremely divisive propaganda that was carried on in the state media, especially the electronic media, unnerved the minorities while it meant to touch the hearts of the Sinhala people.

The direct challenge to the political power of the minorities was welcome fodder to the LTTE being from their point of view entrapped in a fragile ceasefire and a stalled peace process.

Finding itself unable to reach out due to the pressure exerted by the international community, the LTTE made use of this opportunity to break its shackles and move out challenge the government on the basis that the Sinhala people had rejected a federal solution to the ethnic problem and the framework set out in the Oslo communiqué to explore a solution.

The pressure brought on the LTTE by the international community was a direct result of the government led by Ranil Wickremasinghe offering a federal solution with the right to internal self-determination.

The isolation of the LTTE internationally was the outcome of the offer of a federal solution by Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickremasinghe and not solely due to the clever diplomacy of our much-respected late Lakshaman Kadrigamar, as popularly believed.

In this background it is necessary to see whether in fact the Sinhala people have rejected a federal solution. The stand of the two main political parties UNP and SLFP on a federal solution remains unchanged and the traditional left parties, the LSSP and CP have stood firmly for a federal solution. Therefore it is not correct to say that the Sinhala people have rejected a federal solution.