Defeat of Divisive Politics

By Ahilan Kadirgamar

The parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka held risks of polarisation and the re-emergence of authoritarian politics. But the Lankan voters rejected divisive politics for the second time this year. The United National Party (UNP) will likely form the new government, while the moderating presence of President Maithripala Sirisena as leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the engagement of smaller parties like the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) will help reinforce democracy.

Despite the significant change that followed his defeat in the January 2015 presidential elections, Mahinda Rajapaksa's attempt to make a comeback through Parliament had created much confusion for the voting public. The Rajapaksa-led United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) regrouped its patronage networks and mobilised its business allies, marshalling a well-oiled campaign to bring back the former President. The communal campaign harped on the war victory, propagated hate, and instilled fears of the LTTE re-emerging with a UNP government.

In the North, the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) took up a more aggressive Tamil nationalist stand, attempting to make it to the Parliament by challenging the TNA, which dominates the Tamil constituency. Up country, the Ceylon Workers Congress continued its crass politics in coalition with the UPFA.

Rather than the victory of any single party, the significance of this election is the defeat of such divisive and bankrupt actors, particularly the Rajapaksa-led UPFA, the TNPF and the CWC. None of the parties provided a credible political alternative or serious debate on the social, economic and political issues facing the country. The Lankan electorate, in a reflection of its long democratic tradition voted prudently to reject polarisation and reinforce the process of democratisation that began with the presidential elections in January.

During the six troubling post-war years under the authoritarian Rajapaksa regime, the minorities had come under increasing attack . The Muslims, who suffered the most relentless attacks in recent years, backed the UNP to ensure the UPFA's defeat. The up-country Tamils, in turn, for the first time voted out the CWC to open the space for a new politics in their region.

Separatist rhetoric

In this context, the Tamil nationalist party, the TNPF, projected a separatist agenda, drawing on support from the pro-LTTE sections of the diaspora. The TNPF and its supporters in the so-called Tamil Civil Society Forum, carried away by their own aggressive campaign and social media theatrics, expected a few seats. The Jaffna voters, however, proved sober, and the TNPF did not get a single seat, managing a mere five per cent of the vote in Jaffna, even lower than the UPFA. An independent group of former LTTE cadres — who gained considerable international media attention — got even fewer votes.

The war-weary Tamil population in the North and East has given a clear message, giving strength to TNA leader R. Sampanthan's call for a negotiated political solution in the year ahead. However, the TNA faces increasing criticism for the failure of its Northern Provincial Council to address the war-torn peoples' social and economic needs. In fact, the diaspora-leaning TNA Chief Minister Wigneswaran, on a one-track nationalist political trip, backed the TNPF in the last weeks of the campaign. Two years of bankrupt leadership, together with his recent support for the TNPF, point to his political immaturity and perhaps signal an end to his short stint in politics.

Challenges before UNP

For the UNP-led coalition, there will be major challenges. First, to once and for all address the "national question" and the legacy of the war, which previous UNP regimes raised without finding a solution. Will the UNP with the support

of President Sirisena, who is already in the process of regaining control of the SLFP from Mr. Rajapaksa, initiate a credible political process engaging the minorities? How will actors like the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is part of the UNP coalition, and the band of nationalist opinion-makers be engaged or counterbalanced? Early movement on a political solution may well create the conditions to address issues of accountability for war-time abuses and for a process of reconciliation.

The other major challenge is the dismal national economy. The right-wing UNP has historically confronted the rural masses and the urban working classes with its pro-business bias and liberalisation policies. Its ideologues have been calling for an economic transformation characterised by the inflow of global capital, rapid urbanisation and cuts in the public sector spending and social welfare. Such a direction will inevitably dispossess the marginalised, aggravate inequalities, and result in uneven regional development.

Ranil Wickremesinghe was bestowed the prime ministership without winning an election in January, and yet he could not put the remnants of the Rajapaksa regime in the dock. Lack of leadership and vision on the part of the UNP continues to be a perennial concern. The new UNP government with a coalition of political parties will have to mature quickly to address the range of concerns. Prosecution of corrupt politicians and business tycoons who amassed great wealth during the decade of Rajapaksa authoritarianism is one concern. The other is a credible domestic process to address war-time accountability, which will inevitably come on the agenda with the upcoming UN Human Rights Council Report to be released next month.

Looking ahead

In recent decades, Sri Lanka has been reduced to a place of violence and the analysis of its politics has become overly ethnicised. This election, both in its absence of violence and the diversity of voting across the country, refutes the simplistic reductionism that has informed international engagement. It is the nationalists, bent on divisive politics, who are most comfortable with that characterisation, although they are frequently shaken by the politics of Lankan voters.

Mahinda Rajapaksa was a wounded politician after his defeat in January, and he chose the most virulent communal rhetoric to attempt a comeback, amid serious accusations of plunder and pillage. This defeat will be the end of a decade that steered the country towards increasing militarisation and polarisation for the singular goal of consolidating one regime's political and economic power. The parliamentarians who contested with him will either jump ship to join the UNP or come under the fold of Mr. Sirisena controlling the SLFP.

In the decade before Mr. Rajapaksa's divisive politics took hold, the Chandrika Kumaratunga led regime shifted the country's political discourse in the direction of devolution and national integration. Provided there is the requisite leadership, in a few years the country's mindset could change towards equality and co-existence. The aftermath of parliamentary elections is the time to begin work on a national consensus for political solutions.

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