A Vote for Continuing Change

By Jayadeva Uyangoda

There are two significant political consequences following Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections. First, the majority of voters have given a verdict in favour of completing the partial political change that began with the presidential election of January 8 this year. Secondly, and no less important, it has dashed the hopes of the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa to return to power as Prime Minister.

Parliament was dissolved on June 27 under some peculiar circumstances, although it could continue till April 2016. President Maithripala Sirisena and the coalition that backed him had promised during the election campaign to call fresh parliamentary elections after 100 days of assuming office. In any case, the new coalition was a minority government, with only about 65 members in the 225-member legislature. Regime stability required a parliamentary majority through fresh elections.

The final tally of seats obtained by the United National Party-led coalition, UNFGG (United National Front for Good Governance) does not however, constitute a majority — a minimum of 113 seats — in the new legislature. This was a scenario predicted by many analysts. Under the existing system of proportional representation and in the present balance of political forces in the country, no party or coalition could get a working majority unless there was a massive wave of support, as in 2010 when the Mahinda Rajapaksa-led United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition won the election with just two seats short of the two-thirds majority. That was under unusual circumstances of the Rajapaksa government having won the war against the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Political stability

In post-civil war Sri Lanka, electoral politics has reached a degree of normalcy that does not facilitate electoral waves, as evidenced by Tuesday's results. The UNP's coalition has managed the highest number of parliamentary seats, yet is short of a clear majority, followed by the Rajapaksa-led UPFA. The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK), the main Tamil party, has won 14 seats from the Northern and Eastern provinces, with one national list seat coming into its final tally. However, the ITAK is not likely to join any coalition and may support the government from outside. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has five seats and is most likely to follow the ITAK's stance by staying neutral in the post-election coalition formation. This makes it necessary for President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to invite at least a dozen MPs from the opposition UPFA to join their government. The idea of a national government, which both Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe have been promoting for the past several months, will certainly provide the political cover for such crossovers in the run up to the finalisation of the new government and its cabinet.

The question that helps us to understand Sri Lanka's current trends in politics is not why the UNP-led coalition won the highest number of seats but why the Rajapaksa-led UPFA coalition failed to gain a majority. Two factors seem to have contributed to Mr. Rajapaksa's second defeat within just seven months. The first is a failure to learn political lessons from the January defeat and second is the erosion of Mr. Rajapaksa's personal electoral appeal.

The Rajapaksa camp should have learnt one crucial lesson from the January defeat — the need to erase the trust deficit between the former President and the ethnic and religious minorities. When Mr. Rajapaksa lost the presidential bid in January, he still polled the highest number of total votes from the Sinhalese-majority districts, but he received virtually no support from the minority-

dominant electorates. On the other hand, the victory of Mr. Sirisena, Mr. Rajapaksa's challenger, was facilitated by the ethnic and religious minority voters throughout the country and particularly from the Northern and Eastern provinces. Mr. Rajapaksa and his political managers do not seem to have acknowledged the crucial need to address the minority alienation. Their parliamentary electoral strategy was primarily based on the nationalist appeal to Sinhalese Buddhist voters, wrapped in the language of national security and patriotism. They also seem to have calculated that they could emerge as the party with the highest number of parliamentary seats on the strength of Sinhalese votes alone and then poach UNP members to secure parliamentary majority, as Mr. Rajapaksa had successfully done in the past. In fact, during the two final weeks of the election campaign, the Rajapaksa camp intensified its communal appeal to the Sinhalese electorate in subtle and not so subtle ways. The results of the election clearly indicate that in almost every electoral division with sizeable presence of ethnic and religious minority populations, the UPFA has fared even worse than it did in January.

The loss of Mr. Rajapaksa's personal appeal is also a factor that found no acknowledgment in the UPFA camp. He was immensely popular only among the Sinhalese voters and even that suffered a setback after his defeat in the January presidential election. Then, the investigations that the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration launched into allegations of corruption, abuse of power and even murder, although some of these investigations had a political agenda, had severely damaged his image as a political hero. What emerged during the election campaign was that Mr. Rajapaksa was not the brand he was — no longer the easily marketable electoral commodity. In fact, the UPFA campaign failed to generate any new wave of support for the coalition, or its prime ministerial candidate.

This failure has now become clear even in districts where the UPFA won comfortably. In almost all those districts, the UPFA's share of votes has been reduced and some have shifted to the UNP. In the final count, the total number of votes that the UPFA could get is a little over 4.73 million, a significant drop from 5.79 million votes which Mr. Rajapaksa polled as the presidential candidate, just seven months ago.

Cracks in the UPFA

Meanwhile, the power struggle between President Sirisena and Mr. Rajapaksa for control of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and UPFA too may have worked against the latter's electoral fortunes. In that power struggle, Mr. Rajapaksa put a great deal of pressure on Mr. Sirisena to declare him the prime ministerial candidate of the UPFA of which Mr. Sirisena became the leader when he was elected President in January.

The antagonistic personal and political relations between the two intensified when the UPFA, effectively controlled by Mr. Rajapaksa, tried to derail Mr. Sirisena's reform programme. During the height of the parliamentary election campaign, Mr. Sirisena publicly declined to appoint Mr. Rajapaksa as prime minister, even if the UPFA won the majority of seats. Two days before the election, Mr. Sirisena sacked the secretaries of the SLFP and the UPFA, who were Rajapaksa loyalists. This battle for control of the SLFP and the UPFA obviously created an unanticipated crisis within the Rajapaksa camp. While it may have closed the ranks of the hardcore supporters, many demoralised SLFP/UPFA sympathisers may have stayed home on the day of election.

The final figures of the strength of each political and party and coalition have not yet been officially declared. With its national list seats, the UNP-led UNF is likely to have the final tally of about 105 seats, still short of a majority in parliament. The UPFA, on the other hand, will emerge as a very strong opposition with about 92 seats. A strong opposition is not a bad thing for good governance which Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe have been promoting as their patented brand of politics. However, if they want to introduce any new constitutional reforms, they will need the UPFA's support to secure the two-thirds majority. If the kind of hostile politics of the enemy-friend bi-polarity, in an almost Carl

Schmittian paradigm, that the two camps advanced during the past few months continues, the reform agenda might suffer once again.

Among the new government's immediate challenges will be the handling of the UN Human Rights Council report on the alleged war crimes, due in September, just in a few weeks. The UNHRC and the government are likely to cooperate on an agenda of compromise, but at the risk of provoking anger among Tamil activist constituencies, at home and abroad. Effective devolution of power to the North and East and constitutional reforms in that direction too will return to the political debate sooner than later. During the election campaign, the UNP and its coalition partners took an exceedingly cautious stand not to commit to a political solution along a federal framework. With new signs of radicalisation of politics in the North, and despite its impressive electoral gains in the province, the ITAK may find it difficult to openly back the government if it tries to down play the political reform and reconciliation agenda.

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