Mafia State
Sri Lanka’s Latest Elections Laid to Rest

By Marwaan Macan-Markar

The development of democracy in Sri Lanka took a big step forward in August’s legislative election, only seven months after the surprise ouster of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in polls in January.

Undeterred, the wily Rajapaksa hoped last month’s election would see him return to power, but his legacy of rampant corruption and poor governance thwarted that.

Although fragile, new President Maithripala Sirisena’s government could well signal a new stage in Sri Lanka’s development and change its strategic relationship with the US and China, writes Marwaan Macan-Markar.

AS CAMPAIGNING for Sri Lanka’s parliamentary elections entered its final stretch, a story of an alleged murder and an official cover-up emerged to frame the political stakes. The local media provided extensive coverage about the victim, Wasim Thajudeen, a popular national rugby player, who had died mysteriously in May 2012. Fresh police investigations dismissed the official version that had been floated three years ago: that he was a victim of a car accident, after which the vehicle had caught fire. A grisly picture of torture and murder was presented as the more likely scenario.

Thajudeen’s body was exhumed a week before the elections, setting off a frenzy of commentary in local Twitter circles, the blogosphere and the press. Some were expecting a denouement before August 17, when the country’s 15 million registered voters were to go to the polls. That would have been a blow to former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, a candidate at the polls seeking to restore his political fortunes. After all, the death and cover-up of the rugby star’s end had occurred during Rajapaksa’s authoritarian rule. It was known then that his three sons had muscled their way to dominate local rugby just as an offspring of Gadaffi had done in the soccer fields of Libya. And one of these sons had been fingered in the Thajudeen case (although denied by the Rajapaksas).

But this exposé was not an exception. By mid-August, Sri Lankan voters had gleaned more accounts of unprecedented impunity that had taken root under Rajapaksa’s nearly 10-year rule as Sri Lanka’s all-powerful executive president. Besides the abductions and murders of those who crossed the Rajapaksa clan’s path, the public were privy to the scale of national assets that had been plundered in the millions of dollars to fatten the bank accounts of members of the same clan and their cronies. The tone was set by the former president, himself, who, together with two brothers, controlled more than 50 percent of the national budget by the end of 2014. Elsewhere, an aging relative, appointed to run the national airline, had treated the female staff as if they were members of his harem. One more kin, a restaurant owner, had been sent as a diplomat to a European capital, where he had used his time as an arms merchant. And political allies who profited from the narcotics trade were given a free hand to convert Sri Lanka into an international drugs transshipment hub. No wonder the leitmotif that came to characterize the Rajapaksa regime was summed up in two words: the “mafia state.”

Believers of political miracles can take heart in the Sri Lankan story. It has been nothing short of momentous during the first seven months of 2015. For one, the public revelations of the mafia state affirm how much political space has opened up in the south asian nation since the beginning of the year. They were, on all accounts, hard to imagine by the first week of January. For Rajapaksa was supremely confident of winning an unprecedented third term in office at that month’s presidential polls. His
pet themes served him well as he campaigned across the country as the seemingly invincible candidate of the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Top of that list was his pride as the country’s “warrior king.” His acolytes also hailed him as the maharajana, meaning “great and virtuous king” in Sinhala, the language of the country’s majority Sinhalese-Buddhist community. There were accolades showered after government troops defeated the Tamil Tiger rebels during his first term in office. That military triumph, which ended a nearly 30-year civil war, assured him a secure second term in a 2010 presidential election. Yet there was supposed to be more power in store: Sumanadasa Abeygunewardena, Rajapaksa’s favourite astrologer, had forecast that the 2015 presidential poll would be a cakewalk for the incumbent. The stargazer even predicted a fourth term for the war-winning leader, giving rise to the prospect of Sri Lanka having its first president-for-life. It sat well with Rajapaksa, who had set his sights on building a dynasty.

But what the occult had foretold was wishful thinking. Troubled by what they were reduced to — a life of fear — a majority of Sri Lankan voters went for an alternative to Rajapaksa’s imperial presidency. That was a shock defeat for the strongman in January. The new choice for the presidency was Maithripala Sirisena, a former Rajapaksa ally and senior member of his own UPFA. Voters rallied around the themes of good governance and anti-corruption that shaped the political campaign led by a solemn Sirisena. He was backed by a broad coalition drawn from many political shades, including leftists, Sinhala liberals and the country’s Tamil and Muslim minorities, whom Rajapaksa had alienated with his ultra-Sinhalese heroics. The groundwork for Sirisena’s triumph — he secured 6.2 million votes to Rajapaksa’s 5.7 million, with voter turnout an impressive 81 percent — was laid by the United National Party (UNP), which had been in opposition for 17 of the past 20 years. To cement this rare moment of bipartisanship, Sirisena named Ranil Wickremesinghe, the UNP’s leader, as the prime minister of a seven-month caretaker government. It was during the days of that fragile coalition that Sri Lankans awoke to the fact that the mafia state, sans its godfather, could very well be history.

Yet that rare triumph for Sri Lanka’s besieged democracy could not be savoured for long. By mid-2015, Rajapaksa had begun to plot his return to power at the August 17 parliamentary elections. He was as ambitious as before, making grand claims that his UPFA would bag a majority in the 225-member legislature. And, that he added, would make him the frontrunner to become the next prime minister. To get there, he once again played to his strengths, appealing only to the Sinhalese-Buddhist vote, which accounts for 70 percent of the national electorate. And to burnish his “warrior king” title, the 69-year-old switched from his traditional bailiwick in southern Sri Lanka to the northwestern district of Kurunegala. It was a strategic move on two counts: Kurunegala is the third-largest electoral district and nearly a third of the families had a relative serving in the armed forces by the end of the civil war. President Sirisena was hardly impressed, despite being the head of the UPFA in Sri Lanka’s complex political matrix. He tried to torpedo Rajapaksa’s campaign with a critical speech to reveal who was Sri Lanka’s political boss since January. That included an assertion of the president’s constitutional prerogative to choose his prime minister, which, Sirisena pointedly remarked, would not be Rajapaksa.

Fear of what a Rajapaksa political restoration would mean — the resurrection of the mafia state — pushed a majority of voters to keep it in check. For the second time this year, they threw their weight behind a coalition led by the UNP. The latter received more than 5 million votes, amounting to over 45 percent of the ballots cast, against the UPFAs 4.73 million votes. That ensured the UNP secured 106 seats, giving it a comfortable 11-seat edge over the UPFa’s 95 seats under the country’s proportional representation system.

Yet the election outcome is more than a window to understanding the political sentiment among the 70 percent who voted to choose a new lot of parliamentarians. The verdict is a deepening of the political transition towards accountable government that began to unfold at January’s presidential poll. This stirring of the electorate has consequently raised Sri Lanka’s political capital as a prospective Asian democratic model.

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Biswal’s words would have been reassuring to the new Sri Lankan administration. Washington, she stated, would prefer a domestic tribunal, which sits well with Wickremesinghe’s view. What a contrast to America’s bullying tone during the Rajapaksa years, when Washington dangled the threat of an international tribunal, as some African despots have been hauled before. Those years marked the nadir of US-Sri Lankan ties.

There is another subtext in Washington’s carrots to Colombo. The change of political fortunes paves the way for America to make up for lost ground in a country that has, since 2005, gained in strategic value for its location in the Indian Ocean. That period saw China spread its influence to secure a vital beachhead close to one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes. And Rajapaksa warmed to such ties, tilting Sri Lanka away from India, a long-standing regional ally, and the Western bloc. Consequently, Chinese military assets flowed into the country, with arms sales hitting US$1.8 billion by the time the war ended. Soft power was also dished out in large dollops through loans that had reached US$5 billion by 2014. They largely bankrolled post-war infrastructure. And some were Rajapaksa’s vanity projects, such as a harbor and airport in his home constituency. And the Chinese invested in a harbor and airport in his home constituency. But China’s hopes of stealing a march over India and the US in the increasingly contested waters of the Indian Ocean have, for now, run aground in Sri Lanka. A glaring reminder of China’s predicament since the presidential poll is the stalled work on a US$1.4 billion development project on Colombo’s shores. President Sirisena has frozen this Chinese-financed venture to reclaim land from the sea and build an upmarket urban island. And the Chinese investors are in a funk, given the stock that Beijing’s foreign-policy mandarins had placed in China’s largest investment in Sri Lanka. That was underscored a year ago, when President Xi Jinping dropped by the island to inaugurate the Port City project. Now, in contrast, Chinese diplomats are trying to make amends with the post-Rajapaksa administration.

But the victors profiting from this changed political landscape will also have their own share of headaches to contend with in the months ahead. The trouble that Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have had cobbling together a bipartisan cabinet, with ministers drawn from the UNP and UPFA, serves as an early hint. Catering to diverse party whims over policies could see it come apart. Then there are the wiles of Rajapaksa, now reduced to an opposition parliamentarian, with which to contend. He has trodden on the case Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have made favouring consensus politics, which was marked by a historic agreement signed by the UNP and a major bloc in the UPFA to form a “national government.” And the hardliners in Rajapaksa’s midst play up the fact that his support within the majority Sinhalese-Buddhist voters remains formidable, as the two elections confirmed. They do have a point: after all, his actions to challenge the new government could determine whether Sri Lanka’s political transition is a false dawn or not.

That is not all. Pressure on the bipartisan administration will also rise from beyond parliament. Since the polls, voter expectations have been raised for a clean and transparent government to replace the Rajapaksa oligarchy. That tone has already been set in social media, which came of age as an influential force during this year’s elections. Such vigilance will matter in pressing the new administration to unearth the skeletons of the mafia state. It will also matter, fortunately, in raising the alarm if there is a hint of a repeat under another guise.

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