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SRI LANKA AFTER ELECTIONS: CONTINUING UNCERTAINTY

Sri Lanka's parliamentary election, held on April 2nd, has produced an indecisive outcome, with no party, or alliance of parties, being able to obtain a working majority in the 225-member legislature. While the United National Party (UNP) has lost the election to the newly formed United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the latter's tally is 105 seats, still nine seats short of the number required to form and run a government. President Kumaratunga, who heads the UPFA, appointed Mahinda Rajapakse as the Prime Minister amidst much controversy within the Alliance. The immediate challenge of the new government is to establish a parliamentary majority. It does not seem to be an easy task—only the single-MP of the EPDP has to join the new government. Indications are that President Kumaratunga is likely to run a minority government, until some re-alignment of forces is engineered anew.

Sri Lanka's is an essentially fractured polity. The composition of the parliament, worked out on basis of proportional representation, dramatically reflects all the major fragmentations. While the UPFA and the EPDP together have 106 seats, the UNP has 82. The third largest party in the new parliament is the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) with 22 seats. TNA was openly backed by the LTTE, and its 22 seats represent a clear majority in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Meanwhile, in a surprising development, a newly launched entity of Buddhist monks, Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), has bagged 9 seats in the parliament. The plantation-based Ceylon Workers Congress contested under the UNP and claims eight seats for its members. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), meanwhile, has five MPs from the Eastern Province. The Upcountry People's Front,

which also has close political links with the LTTE, has one member in the new parliament. Thus, the opposition tally is 119 seats, as opposed to the UPFA's possible 106.

Multiple Centres

The most dramatic feature of the political equilibrium emerged out of this election is the emergence of the JVP, the LTTE and the JHU as three powerful centers of power in the new parliament. The JVP, as a member of the UPFA coalition has 40 seats under its direct control. More than a dozen Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) members in the UPFA are closely allied to the JVP. This is the real political coming of age for the JVP which had in 1971 and 1987-88 launched two insurgencies to gain control of state power through revolutionary means. Now the JVP, with its Left-nationalist policy agenda is in the real mainstream, controlling the directions of the new government.

The LTTE's presence in the new parliament is through the TNA. The strategic goal that the LTTE sought to achieve at this election is to re-establish the claim, through electoral means, that they were the 'sole representative' of the Sri Lankan Tamil people. The recent split between the movement's Vanni leadership and the Eastern command also provided the context for the LTTE to aggressively prove that point at the election. Immediately after the election, there were speculations in Colombo that the TNA's four Eastern province MPs might break ranks and join the UPFA coalition. It appears that the LTTE's Vanni leadership has ensured that the TNA will stay as 'one unit.' In the new parliament, the TNA will push forward the LTTE's political agenda.

The MP monks of the JHU will certainly add novelty to Sri Lanka's parliamentary politics, with partial saffronization of the legislative chamber. It is the PR system that ensured their election. They fielded 260 candidates who all were Buddhist monks. The JHU monks, campaigning with the promise of establishing a Dharma Rajyaya (a Buddhist Righteous State) in Sri Lanka, drew their support mainly from the urban, middle-class voters, disenchanted with the

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mainstream Sinhalese political parties. The voting pattern also indicates that the many middle-class UNP voters, who were opposed to the UNP's peace bid with the LTTE, have shifted their loyalties to the JHU which presented to the electorate a militant version of Sinhalese nationalism, along with a message of moral regeneration.

Survival and Stability

Against this backdrop, stability of the new government will require immediate changes in the combinations and permutations of the members in parliament. For the immediate survival of the UPFA as the new governing entity, it is absolutely necessary for President Kumaratunga to expand the ruling coalition. The options the President has are both limited and full of pitfalls. Actually, the way in which she will broaden the coalition will also re-shape the policies and directions of the new government. As Kumaratunga is now learning, making coalition regimes in a fractured polity is a thankless job, particularly when the smaller entities representing uncompromising agendas have a crucial leverage. The JHU monks neither offered outside support to the UPFA with a set of tough conditions. Among them are the de-merger of the North and East, abandoning of regional autonomy to preserve the unitary state of Sri Lanka and introducing legislation to ban the so-called unethical Christian conversions. If the President is keen to resume negotiations with the LTTE, accepting the JHU's conditional support will be politically hazardous.

It is still possible that President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Rajapaksa will try to persuade the CWC and SLMC to join the UPFA government. Even for survival, the best option that the UPFA leaders have is to expand the ethnic bases of their coalition. Other than ensuring a majority, such a move will also give a multi-ethnic character to the UPFA that was forged late last year as an essentially Sinhalese-nationalist coalition of forces that were weary of the UNP-LTTE peace bid. However, Sinhalese nationalist groups, who have a strong presence in the UPFA ranks, might object to the inclusion of both CWC and SLMC in their government. Their resentment will be fuelled by the popular belief among the Sinhalese that the CWC and SLMC are highly corrupt entities that thrive and survive by backing hapless Sinhalese parties in search of parliamentary majorities. Such sentiments of political purism are very much a part of the JVP's political ideology. Thus, if President Kumaratunga brings to the UPFA fold the CWC and the SLMC, she will have the added task of pacifying her Sinhalese nationalist constituencies.

Other than ensuring survival and stability, the new UPFA regime faces two other crucial and immediate challenges. The first is the

resumption of negotiations with the LTTE. The other is working towards economic recovery.

The UPFA leaders have already indicated that they wanted early resumption of talks with the LTTE. There are also indications that the UPFA's approach dealing with the LTTE will be substantially different from that of the UNP. In place of Ranil Wickramasinghe's strategy of involving the USA and the Western donor countries in the process, Kumaratunga will seek a direct and greater role for India. Given the not so friendly relations that exist between Indian officialdom and the LTTE's Vanni leadership, this particular approach to negotiations might need sometime to take concrete shape.

When the UNP-LTTE talks reached a stalemate last year, the main item in the agenda was the proposal for an interim administrative arrangement to the North and East. The LTTE's ISGA proposals were submitted on October 1, last year. Then, a series of dramatic political events involving President Kumaratunga and the UNP government overtook the significance of the ISGA proposals. However, it is not clear whether the UPFA will stick to the same old agenda for talks, treating the LTTE proposals as the central issue around which the new phase of talks should be organized.

In the economic recovery agenda, addressing Sri Lanka's acute agrarian crisis along with rapid economic growth will pose a formidable challenge to the new regime. The UPFA's economic development strategy is basically shaped by the JVP's ideology. The fact that at the elections Wickramasinghe's UNP was routed in most of the rural districts demonstrated the gravity of the agrarian crisis as well as the expectations of the vast masses of the peasantry over the new regime. This calls for a radically altered version of the Washington consensus for Sri Lanka, marking a decisive shift from the way in which the UNP handled the economic and social sectors. The UPFA is at least ideologically committed to such a change. But the question is how plausible such a policy shift is in the context of a fast-globalising Sri Lankan economy.

In any case, Sri Lanka needs a fresh beginning to address all its major challenges. The verdict of the electorate is for all the political forces to work in consensus, and not through unilateral strategies. The silver lining of the election outcome is that Sri Lanka now has a parliament which has assured representation to all major political entities in Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim societies. No shade of opinion can now complain of being excluded from parliament. However, inclusivity in governance is hard to come by as yet.

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