

# **Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Likely Impact on Social Cohesion in Sri Lanka**

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*As the new president of Sri Lanka, Gotabaya Rajapaksa's policies will have a great impact on the development of the country. His figure, for many reasons, is a controversial one. Looking at his past and at his promises during the election campaign, the paper seeks to investigate the impact Gotabaya's presidency might have on the social cohesion in Sri Lanka.*

## **Introduction**

Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected the eighth president of Sri Lanka for three key reasons. First, he credibly promised security and the absence of terrorism in the country. Second, he provided a feasible plan to improve Sri Lanka's economic performance. And third, he promised the implementation of the Buddhist unitary state, long demanded by a Buddhist Sinhalese majority. Gotabaya's clear vision for Sri Lanka has won him the election but what impact will its implementation have on the social cohesion of the island state's conflict-ridden society?

Gotabaya is not only considered a hero by his Buddhist Sinhalese electorate for the military defeat of the seemingly invincible terror organisation, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but also respected by his opponents for the successful pursuit of his plan – irrespective of their rejection of this plan in the first place. The reputation of successfully solving complex problems and implementing his strategies against all odds has surely helped Gotabaya outpace his major opponent, Sajith Premadasa. The obviously more clearly defined and outlined – and more realistic – plan to improve the economic performance of the country and to increase the liveability of the Sri Lankan population likewise had its impact. The perception that Gotabaya knows what he is doing also made his claim to the unitary Buddhist state and the “righteous society” more credible than Sajith's many exuberant promises of security, prosperity and equality.

When it comes to social cohesion, however, Gotabaya does not have such credible credentials in bridging the diverse rifts within the Sri Lankan society. Feared for his uncompromising pursuit of defeating the LTTE, the allegations of war crimes as well as the repressive regime of his brother, former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, the liberal political strata's and minorities' trust in his willingness to create a safe state for all ethnic and religious communities is low. It is also for this reason that the regions, in which the ethnic and religious minorities are a majority, voted for Sajith instead of Gotabaya.

## **Trust in the State – Irrespective of Ethnicity and Religion**

Gotabaya's agenda for the actual implementation of the Buddhist unitary state, the policies directed at strengthening Buddhist institutions and thus his implicit rejection of the 13<sup>th</sup>

amendment to the constitution – the disputed amendment giving more autonomy to the provinces – at first glance does not seem to point to the bridging of gaps between the diverse ethnic and religious communities within the Sri Lankan society. Members of the Tamil community and, since the early 2000s, also the Muslim community, seek to shape the regions in which they are the majority according to their ends, independent from the island's centre. The Tamil's violent struggle, as well as the Muslims' more recent politicisation, is linked to the demands for an autonomous place for them and the freedom from another community's dominance. Gotabaya's rejection of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment, thus, is a major obstacle to their political ambitions.

However, the president taking a clear stance and showing a clear vision for the state might offer the opportunity to put an end to a decade-long dispute. The structure of the state has been contested based on identity claims and this contestation has frequently escalated into violence. If one looks particularly at the root causes for the different waves of radicalisation, the president's clear vision might provide a ground for stability and the de-politicisation of identity. Setting the outlook of the state in a way acceptable to the majority of Sri Lankans and making it non-negotiable might allow for a shift in the focus of political contention to non-identity issues.

The requirements for the success of this strategy, however, are manifold. First of all, trust in the state beyond ethnic or religious affiliation needs to be built. Gotabaya already took one step into this direction in his inaugural speech. There, he had pointed out that he sought to be the president not only of those who voted for him, but also for all Sri Lankans.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in his election manifesto,<sup>2</sup> he addressed issues which had furthered the Tamil population's grievances since the end of the civil war. Acknowledging that "mistakes" were made during the final phase of the war ("humanitarian mission"), Gotabaya stated his willingness to correct them.<sup>3</sup> Private land in the Northern region now under government control shall be given back to the people who own it. Housing shall be provided for families affected by the war.<sup>4</sup> There are plans for a preferred recruitment for government jobs in the Northern and Eastern provinces, as well as a focus on Tamil language skills for the recruitment of police officers in the Northern and Eastern provinces.<sup>5</sup> This strategy aims to make the minorities, in particular the Tamils, stakeholders in the state. Moreover, the strategy includes measures to assure the Tamil population of the state's respect and support for Tamil culture, among others, by sponsoring the construction of Tamil cultural centres.<sup>6</sup>

However, the major focus of Gotabaya's strategy is not based on identity and concessions to the minorities' culture. His focus is on economic and agricultural development and the betterment of livelihoods. While this plan was pursued by former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, as well, Gotabaya seems to have learned from his brother's mistakes. Economic

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<sup>1</sup> See also his tweet from the 17.11.2019, "I am the President of not only those who voted for me but also those who voted against me and irrespective of which race or religion they belong to."

<sup>2</sup> Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. <https://gota.lk> (last accessed 15.11.2019).

<sup>3</sup> Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 77,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 78,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

development without the improvement of trust would not allow for the inclusion of the minorities and the construction of a stable state. Turning former *rebels into stakeholders* in the state seems to be a key factor to ensure potential success.

Building trust into the state after years of civil war and the rule of the LTTE in the North and East will not be easy. The focus of Gotabaya's strategy on the youth and the women might offer an opportunity to build trust through an improved image of the state in the long run. Gotabaya's strategy is to provide the youth with special funds for their own businesses and to improve their education. The development of universities, vocational training centres and other educational institutions, in particular, in the country's North<sup>7</sup> might improve the relationship between the youth and the state. Furthermore, the different loan schemes for female entrepreneurs, particularly those troubled with micro-finance loans,<sup>8</sup> might additionally help to see the state as a supporter rather than oppressor of these people.

### **Addressing the Conservative Buddhist Strata**

Gotabaya is also clearly focussed on addressing the political demands of the more conservative strata of the Buddhist community. In his manifesto and throughout the election campaign, Gotabaya made it clear that the Sinhalese Buddhist culture is at the core of his vision for the state and society. While this focus makes it more difficult for other members of the society, such as the secularists and people with other religious or ethnic affiliations to identify with the state, it might reassure the Buddhist Sinhalese community and therewith put an end to the expansion of radicalisation of the wider Buddhist society. The fear of losing a safe place and a perception of Buddhism under threat have exacerbated the support for radical groups within the Buddhist community. Taking up some of their more moderate demands might "take the wind out of the sails" of the radical Buddhist groups. Gotabaya's plan to establish a central fund for Buddhist nuns, to uplift Pirivena education and to establish a programme called "Budu-puth Ma-piya Harasara", which sets positive social incentives for families giving a child to the Sangha,<sup>9</sup> can be seen as such. Programmes like this, combined with the restructuring of the security apparatus<sup>10</sup> and the trust in Gotabaya's capability to provide national security, can rebuild the trust in the state among the detached members of the Buddhist Sinhalese community.

### **Including the Villagers**

Next to the rift between ethnic and religious groups and the state, Gotabaya has promised to address the needs of people living in the villages and the cities. In addition to the development-centred approach, the security needs of rural population were taken up in the election campaign. *The villager*, who has been of central concern in Buddhist Sinhalese political thought, has faced a series of threats and challenges. Environmental disasters like floods and landslides, and clashes with wild elephants frequently destroy the livelihood of

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<sup>7</sup> Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> Compare these plans to the demands by Ven. Wimalajothi Thero, former head of the Bodu Bala Sena. See among others the transcription of an interview with him in Waha (2018) (<https://www.nomos-shop.de/infoPopup.aspx?product=39911&tab=3>).

<sup>10</sup> Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 12-13ff.

the villagers and lead to the death of a number of people. Gotabaya's election manifesto included a long-term strategy to address these issues.<sup>11</sup> This included the development of an early warning system and the provision of permanent emergency shelter facilities. However, plans were proposed in the past. Gotabaya would need to ensure tangible improvements so as to convince the rural population that the state also takes an interest in their needs.

## **Shadows of the Past**

The end of the civil war, in which civilians as well as the LTTE leadership were been killed, remains to be an open wound. Internationally and nationally, the Sri Lankan army has been condemned for alleged war crimes, while others have celebrated their victory against one of the most elaborate terror organisations.<sup>12</sup> The questions of how to address potential wrong-doings by the soldiers, as well as the treatment and reintegration of former LTTE fighters are highly emotional and contentious. While then-president Mahinda Rajapaksa was willing to develop the former LTTE-held areas economically, little was done to reappraise the past. Gotabaya was seen as a key figure in the military defeat of the LTTE. His presidency offers the opportunity to him to look into potential wrong-doings by members of the army and to address these without being regarded as 'smudging the war heroes'. However, he himself is alleged to be responsible for potential war crimes perpetrated by members of the army. In addition, reprocessing the crimes and human rights violations by the LTTE needs to be made part of a successful reappraisal. For the Muslim community in the East and the Tamil victims of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and abroad, accounting for the LTTE past is essential.

## **Memories and the Transnational Dimension to Lacking Social Cohesion**

While Gotabaya might increase the trust in the state, which is a necessary requirement for improving the social cohesion in the country, he cannot solve the problem of a lack of inter-communal trust alone. Despite all the hopes put into the president to improve the overall situation in the country, one has to admit that no president can do it all. The conflict between the Tamils and the Muslims, the Buddhists and the Muslims, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, and others, are deeply ingrained in their respective collective memory. Atrocities on all sides will not be forgotten soon.

Exclusivist political demands by members of the minorities and the majority alike have gained support from the wider respective communities. The question of the particularly religious contestation of the public sphere and potential boundaries therein remain. Issues like the halal certification and the Arabianised dresses of certain Muslim groups now lie at the heart of the problem and, after the Islamist attacks and the subsequent communal clashes, have gained in salience. While the clarification of these boundaries and the implementation of policies can be dealt with by the government under the president's guidance, it requires public support and a willingness to back potential compromises. A community's clear dissociation from violent and extremist groups might be one first step to

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<sup>11</sup> Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> The US, Canada, member states of the European Union and India, among others, label the LTTE a terror organisation.

building the trust between communities, needed to back compromises touching the most sensitive issue of identity.

Moreover, the transnational dimension of many of these conflicts continues to impact the developments in Sri Lanka. Members of the diaspora influence the political developments in the country from abroad. Some of them are still hailing the LTTE and the political aim of a separate state. At the same time, Islamist organisations seek to gain ground in South Asia and Southeast Asia and attempt to influence the Sri Lankan Muslim population to join their cause.

Finally, the influence of the great powers in the region and in Sri Lanka will challenge the trust of the people in the state and the president. The protest following the Chinese 99-year lease of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka's south, in which many Buddhist monks were involved and took the lead, is a case in point. Gotabaya's support within the Buddhist community and the trust in him will also depend on his stance taken towards Chinese influence in the country. At the same time, this is also partially true for Indian involvement in Sri Lankan policies, particularly those relating to the Tamil minority.

## Conclusion

The strengths and the weaknesses of Gotabaya have been fittingly summarised in a joke which came up in the presidential election. "Gota is a man with a plan and a van", it ran. It referred to Gotabaya's clear vision for Sri Lanka, his ability to achieve his ends and following uncompromisingly through with his plans, while on the other hand, it referred to the presidency of Gotabaya's brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, in which Gotabaya had served, most notably, as the defence minister. During that period, people were claimed to have disappeared forever after they were taken away in a white van. The white van policy of the regime spread fear among the Tamil community, as well as members of the majority community and journalists who were critical of the government. While Gotabaya is not Mahinda Rajapaksa, there is link which should not be forgotten.

Putting the joke aside, there is great potential in Gotabaya's presidency. This is also true for his ability to creating social cohesion in the country. However, like a double-edged sword, there are several challenges for the people, the state and democracy. It is for Gotabaya, the eighth president of Sri Lanka, to decide which way he will take the country.

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