

Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: How India can Work with Gotabaya S Narayan



Summary

Gotabaya Rajapaksa's victory in the recent presidential election in Sri Lanka has been welcomed cautiously in India. As the person responsible for the elimination of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Gotabaya has won on the strong plank of Sinhala vote, without conceding to any of the requests of the minority Tamils or Muslims. There is also concern about the pro-China tilt of the earlier Mahindra Rajapaksa regime. Indian and Tamil Nadu politicians need to deal with Gotabaya and suggest ways in which there can be better integration within the groups in Sri Lanka. More importantly, India can play a role in the economic revival in Sri Lanka.

There have been rapid developments after the victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the recently held presidential elections in Sri Lanka. He was quick to comment that, though the minorities did not vote for him, he was president for all of Sri Lanka, a clear indication of his tilt towards the Sinhalese majority population which had overwhelmingly supported him. The swearing in ceremony took place at Anuradhapura, considered sacred to the Buddhists, again a clear indication of allegiance to the Sinhalese voters who had overwhelmingly supported him.

There has also not been any indication of reaching out to the minorities. The Rajapaksa brothers are back in power, with his brother, Mahinda as Prime Minister. There was news that he was planning to appoint Muthiah Muraleedaran, a cricket star hailing from an up country plantation Tamil family, as Governor of Jaffna, which would certainly not be welcomed as the Jaffna Tamils look down on the plantation Tamils. There has been no specific statement about reaching out to the minorities or any healing touch that has to be offered.

India was cautious prior to the elections, and, immediately after the results, congratulated Gotabaya. The worry for India is the Rajapaksa brothers' earlier proximity to China and Chinese investments. However, India has also seen that the Maithripala Sirisena government, on which it had hopes, actually dithered on Indian projects such as the railway to Jaffna and the Jaffna port project, while going ahead with several new Chinese projects, including the Colombo port area development project. The Indians have reached out to Gotabaya and he will be in Delhi on 29 November 2019 to meet with India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar.

The Tamil Nadu political parties have not welcomed this victory. For them, Gotabaya, and indeed the Rajapaksa brothers, represent the violent hand of the state that crushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Eelam movement. Gotabaya, in particular, is associated in their minds with the last days of the war against LTTE when a large number of civilians were killed. Therefore, Thol. Thirumavalavan of the Viduthala Siruthaikal party, Vaiko from Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and M K Stalin from Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have given statements that this victory is a dark day for the Tamils. There is little

cheer in Tamil Nadu over the change of events. The Sri Lankan Tamil parties, which have banked on support from Tamil Nadu, are also in a dilemma, as their efforts in backing Sajith Premadasa have backfired. The Muslims too are uncertain about what the new government would mean for them. Gotabaya has expressed himself very strongly against Islamic terrorism, and the Muslims are anxious to know what this would mean for them.

Going forward, India is pinning its hopes on a few steps that Gotabaya's government could take.

The first is the China card. India was very hopeful of a strong support from the Sirisena government, in encouraging investments from India, clearing Indian projects and the like. In the years of Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe rule, this did not happen. On the contrary, these leaders, who promised so much, could not deliver, and Chinese influence continued to grow.

There would be definitely expectations in New Delhi that the new government would adopt a more balanced approach in encouraging investments from India as much as it does from China. It does appear that the Rajapaksas would be around for some time and that there is no coherence in the opposition. As such, India would be determined to work hard with this dispensation to ensure that relationship is strengthened. At a time when economic growth in Sri Lanka is sub four per cent, Sri Lanka needs trade with and assistance from India to get its economy back on an even keel.

Second, it would be obvious to the Gotabaya government that alienating the minorities, including the Tamils and the Muslims, would be a short sighted policy. Indian would certainly expect some rapprochement signals. It is unlikely that the kind of federal structure that the Tamils had earlier demanded will come to pass, nor would there be any significant efforts at looking into what the Tamils call 'war crimes'. However, there is certainly an opportunity to put the past behind and open up opportunities for greater integration of the society. For this, Gotabaya would have to reach out to his own supporters, the Sinhala voters, to assure them that societal integration would be in their own interest. This another conversation that India would need to have with Gotabaya for it is unlikely that he would get any advice on dealing with minorities from his Chinese friends.

Third, it is important that there is some way forward in economic development initiatives. Project performance from India is definitely far slower than that from China but India needs to promise and perform more. This is an assurance that Gotabaya could extract during the forthcoming meeting.

Finally, there needs to be a nuanced position that India needs to take between the different minority constituencies. The Jaffna Tamils are the closest to the Tamil diaspora and the Tamil Nadu political parties. As such, they are the most vociferous and influential group. The plantation Tamils have less of a voice in Tamil Nadu but need support and development assistance much more than the others. The Muslims, on the other hand, need reassurance that there would be no victimisation on the pretext of religion. India has to use all its diplomatic skills to ensure that the relationship continues to be a smooth one.

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