

Forthcoming Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka: Initial Observations

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Summary

Sri Lanka is all set for its parliamentary polls on 5 August 2020. The political configurations that were formed during the presidential election in late 2019 have remained largely intact. As Sri Lankans prepare to exercise their democratic rights amidst a health crisis, this paper explores the configurations and trends, as well as the key themes in the elections.

Introduction

After months of political uncertainty and rescheduling, the parliamentary polls in Sri Lanka have been finally fixed for 5 August 2020. This election could arguably be a historic and landmark one for a multitude of reasons. This is the first time Colombo is holding the polls amid an international pandemic. Sri Lanka is experiencing the longest hiatus without a functioning parliament since the Election Commission had to postpone the parliamentary polls on two occasions due to the rising number of COVID-19 positive cases before finalising this new date. For the first time in history, Sri Lanka will be keeping the ballot boxes overnight under special security before counting begins the following day. The usual practice is to count the ballot papers on the night of the Election Day.

This election also sees two former presidents – Mahinda Rajapaksa and Maithripala Sirisena – contesting in their respective constituencies to be re-elected to parliament. It appears that Mahinda's comeback in the 2015 parliamentary election after being defeated in the presidential polls has set some precedence. It will also see the two oldest major political parties since independence, the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), not being the frontrunners in the elections. Rather, their breakaway factions, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), are likely to garner the most number of votes.¹

Political Configurations

The Government

The SLPP's 2020 parliamentary election campaign is led by incumbent Prime Minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa who is greatly admired by the public. He also has the reputation of being a crowd puller in election campaigns, as witnessed during the recent campaign rallies. He is appreciated for his strong leadership despite the short period in which he has been in

¹ D P Satish, 'Sri Lanka to elect new parliament on Aug 5 amid pandemic. Will strongman Mahinda create record by staying in power?', *News18.com*, 22 July 2020. <https://www.news18.com/news/india/sri-lanka-to-elect-new-parliament-on-aug-5-amid-pandemic-will-strongman-mahinda-create-record-by-staying-in-power-2727743.html>. Accessed on 1 August 2020.

office. His party has used the same election manifesto that was used in the 2019 presidential polls, which comprises long-term and comprehensive policies.

Gotabaya's administration was confronted with a health crisis soon after coming into power and his government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is considered to be a test case for his leadership. The government's quick response to the health emergency helped Sri Lanka prevent a community spread and kept the number of infected patients within manageable levels. Gotabaya is also admired for his efforts in embracing the values of meritocracy and technocracy.

However, this will not nullify the reservations of some voters about the older Mahinda's controversial past when he was the president from 2005 to 2015. There are accusations that his presidency was riven with nepotism, autocracy, corruption, erosion of state institutions and attacks on the media and civil society groups. Mahinda is also blamed for implementing the 18th Amendment to the constitution that removed the term limits for the president, resisting to establish the Constitutional Council that would have allowed independent commissions to keep a check on the judiciary and police, and enabling him to further centralise his power. Hence, the SLPP's election promise to abolish the 19th Amendment to the constitution has garnered some criticism.²

It is interesting to note that the political configurations formed during this election are similar to those created in 2019. Despite some inter-party issues during the preparation of the nomination list, a loose coalition has been formed between the SLPP and SLFP. During the early negotiations of the coalition, the SLFP demanded 30 per cent quota in the nomination for its contestants, co-leadership in the party and a common symbol that was not representative of either parties.³ However, the SLPP was unwilling to accept any of these demands, which led the SLFP to back-paddle on its earlier terms and conditions and agree on a coalition on the SLPP's terms. Nonetheless, both parties agreed that there is leverage in presenting themselves as a united front.

The SLPP has also received the support of some Tamil parties such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party and Ceylon Workers Congress, indicating that the Tamil parties in the North and East are divided, and have ended up contesting under the umbrella of different alliances.⁴ It is also interesting to note that Sirisena is contesting his home seat of Polonnaruwa as an ordinary member of parliament.⁵

² Ranga Jayasuriya, 'A case against 2/3 majority', *The Daily Mirror*, 3 August 2020. http://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/A-case-against-23-majority/172-192763?fbclid=IwAR2i0fqz2XLZ12zFJhfV8zcX4GFA0-Mm6HREbXbWN1kUO4NM6Pf-Ugy-uA#.XyLICcANI_s.facebook. Accessed on 3 August 2020.

³ Nuwan Senarathna, 'SLPP says willing to have no string attached talks with SLFP', *DailyFT*, 8 February 2020, <http://www.ft.lk/news/SLFP-says-willing-to-have-no-string-attached-talks-with-SLPP/56-695317>. Accessed on 2 August 2020.

⁴ D P Satish, 'Sri Lanka to elect new parliament on Aug 5 amid pandemic. Will strongman Mahinda create record by staying in power?', op. cit.

⁵ Arjuna Ranawana, 'Opinion: Sri Lanka ruling party is ahead with 12 days to go for Parliamentary polls', *Economynext*, 25 July 2020. <https://economynext.com/opinion-sri-lanka-ruling-party-is-ahead-with-12-days-to-go-for-parliamentary-polls-72348/>. Accessed on 1 August 2020.

Main Opposition (UNP and SJB)

The UNP and SJB had filed separate nomination lists and decided not to form an alliance to contest in the forthcoming election even though they have a similar vote base. There are speculations that the two factions had internal disputes over the party symbol and appointed general secretary. Their fractious relationship was brought to the fore when many UNP leaders, including former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, decided not to attend the SJB's launch in March 2020.

The SJB's relationship with the UNP is a rather complex and ambiguous one, given that the former had to seek the approval of the UNP's Working Committee before its formation. Conventional wisdom would have propounded that one could be a member of both the UNP and SJB. However, the UNP Working Committee has been cancelling the membership of its members who sought nominations to contest under the SJB ticket at the upcoming elections.⁶ However, no decision has been made to revoke the membership of Sajith Premadasa and Ranjith Madduma Bandara who are the coalition leader and the general secretary respectively.

The remaining UNP members think that Premadasa is a stronger contender than Wickremesinghe for the upcoming polls. The UNP Deputy Leader and former housing minister received a respectable 42 per cent of the national vote at the 2019 presidential polls in his nearly impossible task to bring about the re-election of the highly ineffective and fragmented Yahapalana government. Hence, it is not unreasonable for many UNP members to cast their blame on Wickremesinghe's poor leadership rather than Premadasa's election campaign for the party's electoral loss at the presidential election.⁷

The SJB, which released its election manifesto on 20 July 2020, has reiterated the party's commitment to not only protecting Buddhism's special place, but also the rights of other religions in the country. Premadasa's manifesto also covers key populist issues, including housing and social development.⁸ He is leveraging on his track record of initiating grassroots projects to reach out to the underprivileged communities. Besides receiving votes from the poorer sections of society, Premadasa is also likely to garner minority votes. His quick response towards the deadly Easter Sunday attacks by visiting the three churches that were attacked and the mosques that were targeted by retaliatory mobs garnered him recognition.

Furthermore, the SJB presents a democratic and civic alternative to the perceived communal and majoritarian government led by Gotabaya. The SJB has signed a memorandum of understanding with 12 political parties and civil society organisations, including the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, United Left Front and

⁶ 'UNP expels 54 members contesting under SJB', *The Daily Mirror*, 28 July 2020. http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/UNP-expels-54-members-contesting-under-SJB/108-192796. Accessed on 1 August 2020.

⁷ Roshni Kapur and Chulanee Attanayake, 'Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: The Prospect of a Sajith Premadasa Victory', ISAS Insights, No. 587, 15 November 2019. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/sri-lankas-presidential-election-2019-the-prospect-of-a-sajith-premadasa-victory/>. Accessed on 2 August 2020.

⁸ 'Sri Lanka-SJB releases manifesto ensuring priority for Buddhism', *MENAFN*, July 2020. <https://menafn.com/1100512752/Sri-Lanka-SJB-releases-manifesto-assuring-priority-for-Buddhism>. Accessed on 1 August 2020.

the Tamil Progressive Alliance.⁹ It is projecting itself as a political force that brings together a diverse range of ideologies, political interests and perspectives. It is unclear how Premadasa would be able to satisfy the competing and conflicting interests of its coalition members. For instance, the minority parties which are members of the SJB are against giving a special place to Buddhism and consider this practice to be discriminatory towards other religions. The JHU, for instance, is a right-wing Sinhala Buddhist nationalist party advocating for a unitary state as opposed to a federal system which is promoted by the minority parties.

Political Trends

The political trends in this election are not very different from that of the 2019 presidential polls. As usual, the election is a competition between two parties even though Sri Lanka is a multi-party democracy. However, the bipolar contest this year is between two new parties, which are breakaway factions of older parties. The SLPP is leveraging on its popularity wave following its two consecutive victories (2019 presidential and 2018 local elections). It is worth noting that the elections are being held at a time which is advantageous to the party. Gotabaya's presidency is in the honeymoon period and his popularity is at a high.¹⁰ Moreover, the internal party frictions between the UNP and SJB are likely to strengthen the support for the SLPP that has presented itself as a strong and stable contender.

Demise of Older Parties

A new political culture is gradually being formed with new political contenders and a gradual demise of the older parties. Although Sri Lankan politics has undergone major changes in the last few decades, the UNP and SLFP have not only survived, but also contributed to major developments in the nature of their political practices and traditions, tenacity, popular mobilisation and state-society relations.

The UNP has proudly produced six heads of government in post-independence Sri Lanka under its pro-conservative capitalist ideology. Some contend that the UNP has not recuperated from the leadership vacuum following the assassinations of its key leaders and members during the civil war. As a result, the party has been performing poorly under Wickremesinghe's ineffective leadership when he took over to fill the leadership void. The party has lost two presidential, three parliamentary and several provincial and local government elections under his helm.¹¹

Similarly, the SLFP had come a long way since its inception as one of the main political parties in the country's electoral landscape since independence. It had created a strong voter base, especially among the majority Sinhalese community in the last six decades.

⁹ 'Sajith Premadasa launches new alliance before April polls', *Lokmat.com*, 3 March 2020. https://english.lokmat.com/politics/sajith-premadasa-launches-new-alliance-before-april-polls/?utm_source=english.lokmat.com&utm_medium=InfiniteArticle/. Accessed on 1 August 2020.

¹⁰ Chulanee Attanayake and Roshni Kapur, 'Sri Lanka: Debate on Holding Elections During a Health Crisis', ISAS Working Paper, No. 328, 26 July 2020, p. 3. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/328.pdf>.

¹¹ Dinuk Dharmasena, 'The UNP, SJB and intra-party democracy', *DailyFT*, 15 July 2020. <http://www.ft.lk/columns/The-UNP-SJB-and-intra-party-democracy/4-703123>. Accessed on 2 August 2020.

However, the party's legitimacy eroded under Sirisena's ineffective leadership, including dismissing Wickremesinghe unconstitutionally in 2018 and failing to stop the Easter Sunday attacks despite receiving warnings from foreign intelligence. Furthermore, the SLFP's members, including Chandrika Kumaratunga, did not take a concerted effort to prevent the party from losing its significance. Instead, she extended her support to Premadasa when he was contesting the 2019 elections.¹²

Both parties would need to do some soul-searching if they want to survive in the country's polity and not lose their significance completely. While the SJB has attracted many strong UNP members to contest under its ticket, the SLPP is gradually absorbing the SLFP.

Key Themes

Now, that the parliamentary elections are taking place a few months after a highly competitive presidential election, the key themes in the campaign sees no change. National security and economic development remain the main election planks. The immediate steps Gotabaya took after assuming office to probe into the Easter Sunday bombings attacks have been appreciated and are likely to benefit his party at the polls. Fresh investigations are being carried out by a new committee appointed by the President following a request by the Archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith. The attacks and subsequent raids revealed that Islamic radicalisation is a much deeper and ingrained problem that cannot be resolved overnight. Hence, strong calls for the state to rebuild its intelligence and military capabilities are apparent during this election and Gotabaya's previous records put his party in a favourable position.

Economic development is also another key election plank. The country grew at just 3.2 per cent in 2018, and by 2019, it was the second worst performing economy in South Asia. Gotabaya proposed new measures to rebuild the economy but the COVID-19 pandemic soon hit the country. The voters are concerned with who has the ability to revive an economy that is facing multi-faceted challenges.

The government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is also receiving great attention. The Gotabaya administration took some praiseworthy measures such as cancelling on-arrival visas for Chinese nationals, closing all educational institutions, imposing a three-day holiday followed by a nation-wide curfew and mobilising the military to oversee quarantine centres when the number of cases increased. However, the military's involvement in the health crisis and later the infections of sailors at the Welisara Navy that formed the biggest cluster of infections in the country garnered criticism on whether sufficient measures were taken to protect those who are working in the frontline.

Conclusion

Despite being a multi-party democracy, Sri Lanka will continue to be dominated by a two-party system. This time, the competition is between two new contenders, the SJB and SLPP,

¹² 'Chandrika & Welgama to support Sajith Premadasa', *Ceylon Today*, 6 March 2020. <https://archive.ceylon.today.lk/news-more/12578>. Accessed on 3 August 2020.

instead of the traditional UNP and SLFP. It is unlikely that the parliamentary elections will lead to a drastic change in the public's voting behaviour. The SLPP is likely to win but it may not secure two-thirds parliamentary majority as it is hoping for. In order to secure a two-thirds majority, it would need to take greater steps to assuage the minority communities that their rights are protected despite its Sinhala-Buddhist orientation.

While the SJB is off to a good start where it has formed a broad coalition with smaller parties and civil society groups of varying ideologies and visions, it would need to work conscientiously to prevent facing a similar fate as that of its predecessor, the UNP. Both the UNP and SLFP would need to recalibrate if they want to survive in the country's polity and not lose their significance completely.

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