

# Sri Lanka: The Bloody October



## Regional Diary

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What Sri Lanka needs at this juncture is a healing process; the opposite is likely to take place if Rajapaksa returns to power.

Nobody even within Sri Lanka expected during the start of October 2018 that the country would plunge into a political and constitutional crisis in a matter of two weeks. On 26 October, the President Maithripala Sirisena removed Ranil Wickremesinghe and appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as the new Prime Minister.

While a section questions the constitutional validity of the Sirisena's decision to sack an elected Prime Minister and appoint another person without consulting the Parliament, another section is apprehensive of the political fallouts the crisis regarding internal governance, national reconciliation and accountability efforts.

The international community is more worried on five counts: ongoing accountability initiatives relating to human rights abuses during the last phase of "Eelam War" vis-à-vis the LTTE, rehabilitation and reconstruction process, especially in North and East of Sri Lanka; growing extreme nationalism led by the Buddhist majority against the minority communities, especially the Muslims; the future of political process, especially the forthcoming elections; and the Chinese role in influencing domestic governance to achieve its own significant interests.

India also shares the above five concerns, perhaps with a different priority order. An essential Indian interest would be the implications of recent initiatives to balance Colombo's relations with Beijing and New Delhi. Facing general elections in 2019, BJP's ambitions to find a political space in Tamil Nadu, and the Dravidian party politics over Sri Lanka – both would feed into a possible Indian response to the emerging equation in Colombo.

### Profiling the Political Crisis: Sri Lanka's Bloody October

Multiple crises broke out in October, with Sirisena sacking Wickremesinghe and appointing Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister is the most significant and dangerous.

First, the sacking has led to a constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka. While in the last few decades, there have been multiple political crises and instability, but as a country, Sri Lanka has been following a constitutional path. Despite the violence, the change of government has been orderly and following an electoral process. By sacking Wickremesinghe's government that enjoys the majority in the Parliament, Sirisena has set a dangerous precedent in Sri Lankan politics. One sincerely hopes, this is an aberration and does not get repeated in the future.

Second, the sacking also highlights the difference between the most critical institutions in Sri Lanka – the Presidency and the Prime Minister. Sirisena was elected as the President in 2015, primarily due to the support from the UNP led by Ranil. Had the UNP not agreed to Sirisena being the joint candidate, there is no way the latter could have defeated Rajapaksa in 2015. Sirisena is neither a popular leader nor does he belong to a party that has considerable seats in the parliament. Sirisena was a part of Rajapaksa's government and was not a big name when he was elected as the President.

Once he was elected as the President in 2015 with the support from Ranil's UNP, it was expected that both would work together. Subsequently, in the Parliamentary elections later in 2015, Ranil was able to form the government and become the Prime Minister. Both Sirisena and Ranil came up with a programme and promised accountability, de-

velopment and reconciliation. At this crucial juncture, the divide between the two institutions is unfortunate.

Third, the divide also highlights the opportunistic politics by Rajapaksa and Sirisena. According to reports, the decision to sack Ranil and appoint Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister was made in a meeting between Sirisena and the Rajapaksa brothers in early October. What followed later should be a political conspiracy to overthrow an elected government, with a majority in the Parliament.

Sirisena could not along with Ranil. And Rajapaksa could not wait until the next elections to assume power. Following the local elections in early 2018, a section believes Rajapaksa is on his way to make a comeback. Ranil's UNP fared poorly in the 2018 local elections; his party's performance has been widely considered to be ineffective. His promises ranging from economic to political have not been, and there has been a public dissatisfaction. Sirisena and Rajapaksa have understood the public perception on the UNP and have decided to strike using unconstitutional means. This should be a first in Sri Lanka's political process.

Fourth, the statement of Sirisena on the eve of Ranil's India visit, accusing RAW of attempting to assassinate him, has created an unpleasantness between the two countries. Given the recent history between India and Sri Lanka, where there has been a rapprochement at multiple levels, Sirisena's statement does a grave injustice to the institution he holds. Ranil had to do firefighting; so was India's High Commissioner in Colombo.

In retrospect, perhaps Sirisena was preparing his political charge sheet to sack Ranil when he made that RAW comment. Why would the RAW want to eliminate him? Probably, he used the imagined threat and accused Ranil's government of not investigating the case.

### What Next? Forecasting the Implications

The unconstitutional sacking of Ranil and appointment of Rajapaksa highlights the end of an experiment that started in January 2018, with the election of Sirisena as the President. He joined hands with Ranil, despite the political differences of the parties that they represent (SLFP and UNP respectively). Though Sirisena was guiding a faction of the party that he belonged to earlier, still it provided an opportunity for the two leading parties of Sri Lanka to come together. The unity government then in 2015 was the need of the hour to address post-war reconstruction.

The war with the LTTE had taken a toll not only on the economy but the entire developmental process that Sri Lanka had witnessed earlier. With a relatively open economy and a high development index (in the South Asian standard), Sri Lanka was much ahead in the region in many indices.

In particular, the reconstruction process in the North would become the biggest victim. India has repeatedly been emphasising the slow pace of reconstruction process. The domestic politics within Sri Lanka was not favourable to the above; Ranil was walking a delicate balance on the subject.

Second was even more important – the post-war reconciliation between the majority Sinhalese and the minority communities – Sri Lankan Tamils and the Muslims. An essential aspect of Sirisena-Wickremesinghe experiment was the support of minorities. The unity government was expected to take the process forward; with Sirisena and Wick-

remesinghe at the helm, it was expected that the Parliament would be able to avoid partisan politics and move ahead.

The national reconciliation process is already facing a serious challenge from the extreme Sinhalese nationalist, led by the leftwing and rightwing groups. With the breakdown of this process and the appointment of Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister, the situation is likely to get worse between the main communities. Rajapaksa is known for feeding on the Sinhala hardliners; his ascension is likely to open the old wounds and even create new ones. What Sri Lanka needs at this juncture is a healing process; the opposite is likely to take place if the crisis does not come to an end. Rajapaksa is the problem; appointing him as the PM cannot be an answer.

Third, along with the national reconciliation process, another fallout would be the slow accountability process. The human rights excesses committed during the final phase of the Eelam War under (and by) the Rajapaksa regime has been questioned at the international level. There has been a reluctant effort to address the abuses; the UN and other institutions have been demanding a fair process. During the recent years, "Geneva" has become a bad word in the extreme Sinhalese political lexicon.

Accountability process also had another essential aspect within the Sri Lankan governance process – dealing with the corruption issues and resolving the disappeared cases. Rajapaksa government was considered as one of the most corrupt ones; there have been numerous cases against the Rajapaksa brothers on multiple counts of corruption. Given the legal processes in South Asia, it would not be easier to pursue the cases in a short period. If Rajapaksa returns to power, that would be the end of these cases.

Also during Rajapaksa's tenure, numerous people, according to open literature – from media to civil society activists have disappeared. Referred as the "White Van" phenomenon, the regime was accused of brutally silencing opposition – either through targeted assassinations or using force illegally. The media and the civil society in Sri Lanka are slowly limping back, with a self-healing process. Rajapaksa's return would end this self-healing and create an environment of fear of panic.

Fourth, the politics over Sri Lankan Tamil issue in Tamil Nadu led by the Dravidian political parties were getting normalised. Except for the occasional outbursts over the capture of Tamil Fishermen by Sri Lanka, the Tamil politics was finding its domestic roadmap. With 2019 elections approaching, one could expect the return of Sri Lankan Tamil issue within the Tamil Nadu politics.

Finally, the relations between Colombo and Beijing. Rajapaksa was known for his proximity to China. In fact, most the corruption has taken place with the enormous Chinese projects. Rajapaksa was trying to tilt Colombo towards China and even used the Beijing card tactfully vis-à-vis India. The Ranil government was trying to find a middle path. Rajapaksa would undo the same.

Much would depend on the judiciary and the Parliament when it gets reconvened. One is not sure of the judiciary; its independence has been heavily compromised earlier. As a result, much depends on the Parliament. Sirisena has purposefully postponed the Parliament to encourage horse-trading.

Will Sri Lanka stay the political course?