

Return of the Rajapaksas in Sri Lanka



SMRITI S PATTANAİK

THE victory of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) in Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections held on August 5 was very much anticipated, although the extent of the victory was speculated on. The victory is impressive and marks the second innings of the Rajapaksa brothers under the newly formed SLPP. The election also marks the death of two grand old parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—and the massive fragmentation of the political parties representing the minority Tamils and the Muslims, who constitute more than 20 percent of Sri Lanka's population.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had lost the election in 2015 to Maithripala Sirisena, has been sworn in as the prime minister of Sri Lanka. Rajapaksa had formally joined the SLPP on November 11, 2018, a party founded by his brother Basil Rajapaksa in 2016, after he and his supporters decided to break away from the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) headed by the then President Sirisena. The SLPP made its mark as a political party when it received 40.47 percent of the votes leaving UPFA and the United National Party (UNP), led by the then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, far behind. Later, in the presidential election held on November 16 last year, Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected as the President, securing 52.25 percent of votes, which indicated his soaring popularity.

The loss of the UPFA in which the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was the major alliance partner was a gain for the SLPP. This election also ended the political career of former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the chairman of the UNP whose party could not even win one seat, and former President Maithripala Sirisena of the SLFP and chairman of UPFA, whose party just

became an appendage of the SLPP to survive Rajapaksa's political onslaught. From the womb of these two grand old parties, two brand new parties have emerged and pushed the mother parties to oblivion—the SLPP and Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) led by young leader Sajith Premadasa, son of the former assassinated President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

The political clash between Ranil and Sajith came out in the open, especially after the presidential election. Sajith was nominated by the UNP but Ranil Wickremesinghe kept the control of the party in his hand, ultimately leading to the split. Sajith Premadasa's

division from within. Former chief minister of the Tamil majority Northern Province, CV Vigneswaran, left the TNA in 2018 and formed his own party. There were other smaller Tamil parties who contested in the elections, resulting in the division of Tamil votes.

The Sri Lankan Muslims were also equally divided. While Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was part of SJB, the All Ceylon Muslim Congress, Muslim National Alliance, National Congress and All Ceylon Makkal Congress contested the elections separately. Most of the divisions are the result of the emergence of hardliners within the minority parties. The SLPP manifesto gives priority to

tourism and remittances from the Gulf. The first quarter of the financial year shows a 1.6 percent negative growth rate for the economy. The total outstanding external debt as a percentage of GDP stood at 66.6 percent and annual debt service payments accounted for 79 percent of total debt service payments in 2019. It is unlikely that the tourism sector, which contributes 5.7 percent to GDP, would be back on track soon. This indicates a bleak prospect.

The government is now likely to push to amend the 19th amendment to the constitution, which is one of the poll promises. This amendment diluted the power of the executive president

issue and addressing the alienation of the Muslim minority. Successive governments have undermined the TNA by not addressing the long pending political issues concerning the Tamil minorities within the constitutional framework of Sri Lanka. This has given space to hardliners within the community, which explains its poor show in the election, winning only 10 seats compared to the 16 in the last parliament that helped it to emerge as the official opposition party in the parliament. Similarly, after the Easter attacks, Sri Lankan Muslims are increasingly feeling alienated. They have been demonised, labelled as terrorists and their businesses and shops have been attacked and boycotted by headline Buddhist monks. It requires the political will of the Rajapaksas, whose landslide victory is attributed to the massive Sinhalese Buddhist votes it received, to address the political and identity issues of the minorities.

On top of that, the SLPP has not hidden its majoritarian agenda. The polarisation of the post-war polity is evident and is reflective of the SLPP's victory. It is true that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is seen as a bulwark against separatism and terrorism, and the manner in which he handled the last phase of the war has led to him being regarded as a saviour of the country by the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. Depending on how this majoritarianism is going to manifest, the extent of radicalisation of the ethnic and religious minorities will be determined. One has seen the manifestation of this radicalisation in the past. It is hoped that the return of the Rajapaksa brothers would not see the repetition of the last Rajapaksa regime that was characterised by enforced disappearances, establishment of high security zones, massive corruption and alienation of the Tamil and Muslims in Sri Lanka. Majoritarianism has its own trajectory, but they are also the only leaders who can address the alienation of the minorities.

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Crowds at a rally in Sri Lanka showing their support for the Rajapaksa brothers

PHOTO: LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI/AFP/GETTY

supporters strongly believed that under the leadership of Ranil, the party would lose the parliamentary elections. This prediction proved correct as the UNP that dominated the last parliament could not win a single seat this time.

The SLPP has got nearly a two-third majority in the 225 member parliament. Including the national list, it has 145 seats with 59.09 percent of votes, the SJB has 54 seats with 23.9 percent of votes, and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) won 10 seats with 2.82 percent of votes. In spite of the Covid-19 pandemic, voter turnout was an impressive 71 percent.

This election is one of the most fractured elections in Sri Lanka in recent times, in terms of minority politics and their votes. The TNA witnessed

national security, friendly non-aligned foreign policy, a corruption-free polity and economic development, apart from its promise to promulgate a new constitution. It needs to be noted that the last Unity government attempted to promulgate a new constitution that addresses long standing political grievances of the Tamil minority and determine the place of religion, but it could not muster the majority as the unity of the National Unity Government was marred by the power struggle between the president and the prime minister, which paralysed the government from the very beginning.

The most challenging job for the government would be to fix the economy, which is dependent on

as established in 1978 and transferred them to the parliament, and made the prime minister more powerful, on whose advice the president would appoint the cabinet. Unlike before, the parliament cannot be dissolved before four and a half years. It revived the Constitutional Council and established independent commissions who would be appointed by the parliament rather than the president. This restored the credibility of independent commissions that was originally mandated through the 17th amendment to the constitution and reversed by the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa through the 18th amendment.

Another key focus would be the long pending political settlement of the Tamil

Taking responsibility for our actions



I was trying to manoeuvre my way through a small gap between a security barricade on my left and the moving trail of vehicles on my right, when a speeding car almost went over my foot. Hugely relieved to have avoided it, I murmured a little prayer.

The pavement, meant for pedestrians like me, was stocked with bricks, while concrete and rods occupied a good part of the road. Being a regular user of the road, I knew that this had been the status quo for more than six months. With no other alternate feasible path, thousands use this road everyday, putting themselves at risk. Amongst the pile of construction materials was propped a signboard with details of the ongoing project and a "sorry for the inconvenience" note at the bottom. This is a common scenario, particularly in urban Bangladesh and understandably so, given the fast-paced urbanisation taking place in the country.

However, one question, is this the right way to go about it? Does that "sorry" note suffice for the imposed restrictions on one's freedom of movement for a prolonged period? Could the contractor have done his job in a more responsible way, generating minimal inconvenience for fellow passersby?

For most of us in Bangladesh, there seems to be a rush to get over with one's committed task, never mind how it is done but as long as it is done. The municipality man who sprays for mosquito control, the road cleaners, store-keepers, pharmacists, doctors, school teachers and other professionals

and administrators are all doing their respective duties, but how responsibly so? Is the mosquito spray a genuine one or are the cleaners working sincerely and at the right time? Do the pharmacists make sure that customers are informed about the expiry dates of their drugs? Is the school teacher ensuring full comprehension of the students so that they don't need private lessons after school? Are patients being prescribed the right tests and referred to the right doctors? Are authorities adequately and



PHOTO: STAR

sensitively addressing public woes? We, very often, refer to duty as being synonymous with responsibility. However, there is a fine yet a weighty difference between the two. Duty is a certain task that one has committed to perform as a part of one's job. Responsibility refers to the state of completing the task in an accountable way, taking the onus of any consequence—positive or negative—that may emerge in the process. In the construction instance cited above, the

contractor would have been executing his duties responsibly if he had ensured the least infringement of his activities beyond the boundaries of his site. Duty without responsibility can bring about disastrous consequences. To cite a recent example, the setting up of a separate ward for Covid-19 patients by a private hospital without adhering to safety and security norms, led to the tragic death of several patients, when a fire broke out in the ward.

Given the ramifications of one's



actions on others' lives, a critical path to achieving sustainable development is to make informed choices that balance both personal and social objectives. This involves taking into consideration the rights and freedoms of others and how they will be affected by our actions. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's discipline of consequential evaluation talks about the need to take responsibility for the consequences of one's choice. If we can practice (or at least start with) taking responsibility for our choices and

actions, the development efforts will get substantially magnified.

That said, it is also true that the reach of responsibility stretches to a multitude of actors and cannot be narrowed down to a single line of individual liability. One's actions are contingent on a maze of underlying causes and existing conditions. For instance, in our construction case, the contractor's actions would be dependent on a host of actors and conditions including, among others, building material suppliers, transport owners and availability of skilled labour. While there is little that can be done in the short run about existing conditions such as the availability of labour, the actors do have a critical role to play by way of delivering responsibly. If we take the case of the transport owners, they must exercise utmost caution, discipline and consideration during the transportation and delivery of heavy construction materials.

In our daily interface with many actors in development, we are often subject to a boorish demeanour—as if to say that we should be grateful for the work they are doing for a better future for us. While we all look forward to a better life, there is no reason to think that they enjoy any kind of immunity on account of that. It must be remembered that the public expect these actors to perform their jobs with utmost responsibility.

Unfortunately, the values and institutions that have developed in Bangladesh have a colonial flavour, with the masses accepting things the way they are. With a greater focus on outputs rather than outcomes, we have fallen into the trap of path dependency, wherein the past trends have continued and determine the current state. This path dependency has yielded preconceived notions and unwritten rules of the game

at the cost of the overall welfare of the nation.

Every society has its own norms of behaviour. What is acceptable in one society may not be so in another. It is easy to overlook something that is not right, be it out of convenience or compulsion or just plain indifference. Leaders can choose to ignore, law enforcers can turn a blind eye and citizens can opt to remain mute spectators, but eventually that leads to a point when the wrong becomes right. It is then that we face the harsh consequences of not owning up to our responsibilities. We can evade responsibilities today but we will have to face the consequences someday.

The ability to perform assigned tasks with due responsibility cannot be drilled into individuals overnight. It has to be instilled in a person through developing a sense of ownership and accountability for one's actions. And to inculcate these values, the key element is ethics. It is through ethics that one learns the values of integrity, honesty and discipline. Ethics teaches a person to think critically, to put oneself in others' shoes and to contemplate on the practical consequences of personal and collective actions. Ultimately it boils down to sound and proper education. The essentiality of education in fostering development is well-known and ethics must form an integral part of that education. This is imperative if we want to produce better citizens—citizens who have the ability to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong. In delivering our responsibilities, both the means and the ends are equally important for a sustainable tomorrow.

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QUOTABLE Quote

ALEX HALEY (1921-1992) American writer.

Either you deal with what is the reality, or you can be sure that the reality is going to deal with you.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Remove rinds from
- 5 Misplaced
- 9 Kind of wave or basin
- 10 Kind of kitchen
- 12 Tests
- 13 Feel in the dark
- 14 Muscular-looking, in slang
- 16 Make a choice
- 17 Hardens
- 18 Corduroy features
- 21 Snaky shape
- 22 Straightened up
- 23 Lassoed
- 24 Reporters' exclusives
- 26 In what way
- 29 Corset's cousin
- 30 Fizzy drink
- 31 Gorilla or gibbon
- 32 Dropped down
- 34 Petty arguments
- 37 Indian social class
- 38 Potpourri bit
- 39 Fixes copy
- 40 Refuse
- 41 Painter Magritte

DOWN

- 1 Sprites
- 2 Makes suitable
- 3 Highway exits
- 4 Different
- 5 Trip segment
- 6 Crew need
- 7 Fall guy
- 8 Rewarded good
- 9 Far from wordy
- 11 Brooklyn team
- 15 Needed fixing, as a faucet
- 19 Mid-March date
- 20 Performed
- 22 Hammer or hacksaw
- 23 Fishing pole
- 24 Drank daintily
- 25 Dream up
- 26 Accepts a driver's invitation
- 27 "Swan Lake" role
- 28 Walks in water
- 29 Shocked sound
- 30 Black card
- 33 Bakery worker
- 35 Light brown
- 36 Cunning

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	L	A	N	A	C	O	O	L	S
I	O	N	I	A	A	D	M	I	T
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT