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[Home](#) > Sri Lanka: Victory of Rajapaksa- What it means to Tamil Polity?

Sri Lanka: Victory of Rajapaksa- What it means to Tamil Polity?

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The victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa was much anticipated in the recently held 16th November presidential elections in Sri Lanka given the course of national politics after the evaporation of false euphoria over the success of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in keeping Mahinda Rajapaksa out of power since 2015.

Rajapaksas are back in saddle more firmly than ever before and their grip over Sri Lankan polity is near complete with the becoming of Mahinda Rajapaksa as the prime minister. Sinhalese along with the radical Buddhist clergy are celebrating the success of Gotabaya Rajapaksa as the restoration of political stability and national security state. While Muslims are looking over their own shoulders with worry about their safety and future, Muslim leadership is mulling about its own survival in power. Tamils are disheartened but not broken although Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is in a mood of disdainful resignation. It is, however, time to reflect than to throw in the towel.

Tamils are a strong political society with poor self belief. Tamils have strongly and consistently maintained their collective political opposition to the 'Sinhala Only' polity of Sri Lanka as revealed in every election since 1977 without any exception. But unfortunately Tamils could only decide whom they do not want to elect and not choose who they want to be represented as their leaders at the national level.

The presidential elections-2019 is no exception to this historical deprivation of political right and an irony of majoritarian democracy. Could anyone with little knowledge of politics in Sri Lanka and of all times, after the brutal resolution of ethnic conflict in May 2009, deny the truth that Tamils had to choose between Mahinda Rajapaksa and Sarath Fonseka in 2010 and later in 2015 between Mahinda Rajapaksa and Maithripala Sirisena? Both Sarath Fonseka and Maithripala Sirisena served as the Commander-in-Chief of the Sri Lankan Army and Defence Minister respectively during the first reign of Mahinda Rajapaksa as president of Sri Lanka during the period 2005-2010.

Ranil Wickremesinghe though known as a man who brokered the so called peace process in 2002 with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) laid all the trappings of war with deep inflictions against Tamils in the long run. He also managed to sidestep all questions regarding the war crimes and accountability mechanism in his usual and evasive style since 2009. It is therefore not correct to say that Tamils voted in large number to Sajith Premadasa as revealed in the 2019 - presidential elections. It is once again a negative vote without any fruition as in 2010 & 2015 presidential elections. Tamils are destined to this pattern of political behavior unless they begin to evaluate their own political strengths and weaknesses.

There are two constant and unchanging signs in Sri Lankan politics. First, irrespective of the change in party and leadership, the DNA of 'Sinhala Only' polity is the same as ever before and unlikely to change. Some Sinhalese politicians are more ruthless than the others but all are uniformly combative in resisting Tamils. Secondly, the collective consciousness of Tamils as revealed electorally since 1977 is intact even though weakened without a voice and direction over a decade and more. It is time for Tamils to reflect on their positive political power than negative vote strength.

The presidential elections-2019 has brought in many opportunities for the Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese alike. First, Sinhalese need not depend on Tamil votes for their desired political outcomes if the ground is sufficiently determined. Gotabaya Rajapaksa was on record after the declaration of results that he was elected by the Sinhalese vote. While North Central, Central excepting Nuwara Eliya, Western, North Western, Southern, Uva, and Sabaragamuwa provinces voted uniformly in favour of Gotabaya Rajapaksa at an average of 58.31%, Northern and Eastern provinces have voted overwhelmingly for Sajith Premadasa at average of 75.97% (Nuwara Eliya: 58.28%) marking a clear polarization of votes and choices. Secondly, Tamils need to break free from the illusion of lesser evil among the Sinhala political parties and leaders serving their cause as saviors of democracy. Sri Lankan democracy has several layers and Sinhala political class is adept with the popular culture of masks.

Tamils must now rise to the occasion of meeting the man, without a mask, who is known among them as a cruel war criminal with little pretensions about norms in politics and etiquettes of war. Tamils have nothing more to lose than gaining, however little, in standing up to him. This may seem unrealistic at this stage but time will reveal the trappings of power as well as the fact it will not be long before that past will catch up with Gotabaya Rajapaksa. He is a man in multiple knots both at home and abroad.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa is known by his own acts as a terminator among his family members and admirers, as ruthless dictator among his detractors and political enemies and more notably as a sly operator among those who know of his history of White Van abductions and political murders. Even the small quotient of conscientious among the Sinhalese share a grain of Tamil sorrow and pain over the unaccountability of Rajapaksas and the new president whose hands are stained with the blood of the likes of Lasantha Wickrematunge.

Lastly, Muslims have slowly and steadily emerged as separate political entity in Sri Lankan politics besides demonstrating themselves as great survivors in an ethnically divided polity. The drift away from Tamil identity despite their common linguistic traditions and the politics of revenge against Tamils without looking back and exploring space for reconciliation has placed Muslim community at the mercy of 'Sinhala Only' disposition of Sri Lankan politics. There are inexplicable contradictions brewing between the moderates and fundamentalists usually brokered by the mainstream Muslim politicians who for long served the cause of Sinhala nationalism until the baton was turned against them.

Bodu Bala Sena has been more than active in its tirades against Muslims since 2010 and the Easter attacks in early 2019 has only placed the State under its disposal in consistent with its perception of Muslims. In the making over the years, given the geographical contiguity and religious homogeneity, the idea of Muslims as a nation is taking roots in an island where there are already two nations in one country. This mixed seed of Muslims as a separate nation is growing albeit painfully. Muslim sentiments and electoral politics will continue to demonstrate its unique articulation of being away and different from the Sinhala and Tamil political currents. In refusing to acknowledge this transition in Muslim psyche in Sri Lankan politics, Tamils too are walking with blindfold without evaluating the fallout between the Sinhalese and Muslims. Though time is not ripe for rapprochement between Tamils and Muslims yet one should explore steps to end the era of bitter silence.

While Sinhalese have had the opportunity of experimenting with different party-political alternatives without altering their quotient of stakes in power, Tamils have conceded and consistently accepted what the Sri Lankan party system and politics could offer by placing their hopes, at least electorally, upon TNA as their sole representative voice since 2009 without self-introspection. It is time to dump TNA and search for a party-political alternative with more honest, transparent and collective leadership. Sambandhan is tired and well beyond his time while Sumintharan is far from articulating truth about the peoples' conditions, aspirations and demands.

Jaffna University Students' Union has addressed more substantial issues and even placed the Sri Lankan government on notice a greater number of times than TNA in the recent past. TNA has been appeasing both the Tamils and Sri Lankan power elites to survive in power by switching to appropriate language of political communication at appointed occasions like national elections and global forums with doublespeak. TNA has been the major beneficiary of Tamil negative votes which it has managed to convert as a bargaining chip with the Sinhala political parties and gain de facto status vis-à-vis the Indian government. TNA has learnt to balance between the pressures of Colombo and New Delhi and at the same time working with the select Tamil Diaspora networks by exploiting the state access in the West and India. TNA has kept the Tamils of North and East away from claiming access to direct politics within Sri Lanka and face-to-face

interaction with the international community. But the Rajapaksas have placed a dagger on the heart of TNA politics and cut off its relevance by exposing the political myth. Relevance of TNA must cease with the return of Rajapaksas and the new power dispensation in Colombo. Does this mean that Tamils will be thrown before wolves?

Tamils need not fear the Rajapaksas and the new president Gotabaya Rajapaksa is weaker than one wants to believe. He does not dare yet what is political. His success rests in deep dark acts of terror and brutal solutions with the State machinery under his disposal. He has legitimized State terrorism in the name of Sinhala nationalism and throttled Sinhala dissent through disseminating fear into the psychosis of Sinhala political society. The neurosis of Sinhala politics suffers from two different but interrelated diseases. First, historical contempt and hatred against Tamils built into the polity of Sri Lanka. Secondly, the methods of brutal repression and ruthless terror has actually served the cause of ruling elites in evoking fear consistently deep down the spine of Sinhala civil society. Sinhalese are themselves an unequal, caste ridden and class based society. Authoritarianism and terror have only served as two edged sword in resisting the Tamils in North and East and keeping the Sinhala tide under control in South. Rajapaksas have taken terror to new lows and spread it across the streets. This is the difference between Rajapaksas and the other powerful clans in Sinhala politics.

A captain is as good as the team so is the leader and the state of economy to a country's success. Gotabaya Rajapaksa also suffers from huge trust deficiency even amongst the considerable sections of the Sinhalese community besides the Tamils and Muslims of Sri Lanka. Above all, Sri Lanka faces a crushing \$34.4bn in foreign debt, amounting to 45 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), the total of all finished goods and services produced by an economy. Sri Lanka is already neck deep into the China's debt-trap diplomacy with enormous political and geo-strategic implications which India cannot afford to overlook for long. Though India, Japan, USA, and the European Union may show interest to bail out Gotabaya Rajapaksa temporarily yet the Rajapaksas style of running Sri Lanka like their family fiefdom and the unbridled corruption will keep Chinese in company like any other Chinese backed authoritarian regime with little or no accountability process in Southeast Asia or Africa.

While India showed more restraints during the presidential elections-2019 (after pulling a democratic coup in 2015) due to facts of dice revealed at the ground, Chinese, on the other hand, pumped the flow of election funds steadily for the Rajapaksas and kept the official aid (read as strings) under suspense until the trends became clear with the declaration of results. Given the reality that Sri Lanka is increasingly placing its strategic assets (including ports and airports) and the debt economy under the Chinese hammer, China can pound Sri Lanka to concede more with strong implications for India and its geo-strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region.

This is the key point that highlights the current relationship between the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the government of India marked by decades of poor judgment of each other's relevance for potential transformation of ground realities. While India refuses to see the Tamils as a strategic community with the vast coastline of North & East of Sri Lanka and to secure the interests of India, Indian government should ensure the survival of Tamils in their own territory. Tamils have consistently failed to impress upon India and the world powers about the strategic potential of North and East of Sri Lanka.

LTTE at the height of its prowess never placed the security assets, including Trincomalee, for a diplomatic bargain or political negotiation. Despite the Sri Lankan government's consistent efforts to deface the Tamil identity of the Eastern province with steady and growing Sinhala settlements, Trincomalee is the historical port city of Tamils with enormous socio-cultural narratives and remains a core strategic interest for India. Trincomalee is also among the finest natural harbours in the world. If Tamils of Sri Lanka and the Indian government do not wish to explore the opportunity and rethink over their postures in the last few decades, Trincomalee is more likely to fall into Chinese lap with the building of an aircraft maintenance facility. In Sri Lankan government's plan of allowing Chinese to build road and infrastructures in North and East lies a double edged sword of gaining smooth access inside the Tamil country as well as contain the political engagements of India by encouraging a close strategic face-off between China and India.

While USA and European Union may want to wait and watch the developments in Sri Lanka cautiously, Tamils from Sri Lanka and the Tamil Diaspora spread across the world must continue to engage the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and upgrade their access with the international governments with a simple demand of observing the course of 'Transitional Justice'. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's refusal to acknowledge the United Nations and international accountability mechanism is not going to make him stronger than pushing Sri Lanka as a banana republic with the return of authoritarian ways combined with the rampant corruption of his family members while the fragile economy wrapped under the Chinese carpet of debt diplomacy. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's skill will be on trail with the challenge of how far he can drag his country out of Chinese control and keep the suspicious Indians away from meddling in island politics.

Tamils possess strong political will but require a realistic appreciation of strategic potential of themselves and their traditional homeland – North & East of Sri Lanka. Politics alone, not military, could provide lasting and permanent solutions. After every structural, military and systemic attack against the Tamils over seven decades, what is political yet remains. Tamil political demands are intact and survived even after the brutal military resolution of the ethnic conflict in May 2009. There is more to ponder for the Rajapaksas and Gotabaya Rajapaksa now.

Tamils must invite the dark room heroes to the lights of political arena because they fear transparency in politics and accountability mechanisms both at home and abroad. Gotabaya Rajapaksa as he says that he has been elected by Sinhalese voters but will serve as the President of all, Tamils can now safely presume that he and his armed forces will not treat the Tamil women as trophies.

Tamil politics requires self-discovery of political, economic, educational, professional and strategic resources at disposal both at home and abroad. Tamils are more prolific, articulate and better placed than the Rajapaksas at this moment of history to speak truth. But they need a simple and strategic shift in their posture. Tamils have for long shown their back to the seas while demanding for concessions from Colombo and the time has come for surveying the vast ocean before them with the self belief in their rich and long history as a seafaring culture. The course of shift will become real only when Tamils stop begging for solutions from India and demonstrate the rare courage and determination to invite India as a trusted partner. Indian Ocean offers many new opportunities in the 21st Century and the Indo-Pacific paradigm will bring more countries on board.

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Tags:

Rajapaksa [1]

SL Tamil Politics [2]

Category:

Papers [3]

Countries:

Sri Lanka [4]

India [5]

Topics:

Political [6]

Islamic Affairs [7]

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[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/sri-lanka>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/india>

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[7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/islamic-affairs>