

Sri Lanka Crisis: A Failure Of Institution-Building And Nation-Building

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The crisis unleashed in Sri Lanka by President Maithripala Sirisena's [sacking of Prime Minister](#) Ranil Wickremasinghe, and the unexpected comeback of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, reflects deep underlying flaws in a country struggling to transition from authoritarianism to democracy and from war to peace.

Pure Dirty Politics

Seen through the prism of individual protagonists, the constitutional deadlock and head-spinning cloak-and-dagger maneuvers by former allies turned foes turned renewed friends—Sirisena and Rajapaksa—reveal how devious politicians are in this volatile Indian Ocean island.

Betrayal of trust, backstabbing, and opportunism are, of course, part and parcel of competitive politics in many parts of the world. But these negative traits have been carried to an extreme cutthroat level in Sri Lanka where respect for institutions and consensus about how the country should be governed have gone for a toss.

Sirisena saw the writing on the wall when his party fared badly in local body elections in February 2018.



Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena in a phone conversation with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Oct. 17, 2018. (Photograph: [@MaithripalaS/Twitter](#))

Sensing that his own political ambitions of running for a second term as president would be doomed if he remains stuck in a coalition with a Prime Minister like Wickremasinghe whose popularity was declining, he switched sides and hitched his wagon to an ascendant Rajapaksa.

Lurid tales of an [assassination plot](#) against the President where the Prime Minister was allegedly complicit suggest that Wickremasinghe, or some of his aides, were also desperate to survive using any means available. None of the three main sides in this ruthless scramble for power bothered for constitutional propriety, the mandate of voters or the global image of the country.

The Authoritarian Bug

Undoubtedly, the principal politicians are guilty of undermining constitutionalism and democratic norms.

But Sri Lanka has a structural legacy problem of an arbitrary and authoritarian exercise of power that precedes Sirisena, Wickremasinghe, and Rajapaksa.

The concept of an ‘Executive Presidency’ since 1978 has vested excess concentration of power in the hands of strong-willed heads of state such as J.R. Jayewardene (1978-1989), Chandrika Kumaratunga (1994-2005) and Rajapaksa (2005-2015).

Accumulation of vast prerogatives in the hands of Presidents at the cost of Parliaments, Prime Ministers, and civil society has been challenged, most recently by Wickremasinghe through the eighteenth amendment to Sri Lanka’s fourth Constitution. But these attempts have run into stiff status quo-ist pushback from Presidents hailing from both the mainstream Sri Lankan political parties. One of the reasons why Wickremasinghe had to be booted out by Sirisena was that the former was backing a draft fifth Constitution that would introduce checks and balances against misuse of presidential authority.



Sri Lanka's sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickeremesinghe interacts with his supporters at his official residence in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on Oct. 27, 2018. (Photograph: AP/PTI)

Reforms toward liberalisation of Sri Lanka's polity are essential for a more moderate and less autocratic form of state power to emerge.

The current climate of a 'constitutional coup' must be understood in terms of the lack of will and consensus about such an evolution.

As long as the question of the tussle between the French model of an ultra-powerful presidency versus the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy is not settled, Sri Lanka will face repeated bouts of uncertainty and skulduggery.

Ethnic Polarisation

The second core factor that led to the breakdown of the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe combine is the unresolved ethnic question and contestation over the makeup of the state between a unitary and a federal system.

Despite the crushing defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam through Rajapaksa's no-holds-barred counter-insurgency in 2009, none of the leading Sinhalese political parties which have taken turns to rule since then have offered meaningful autonomy or justice for the war-ravaged Tamil and Muslim minorities of Sri Lanka.



Women fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam stand on the rebel side of a border crossing in Omanthai in north-central Sri Lanka on 15 February 2002.

Ideologically, Wickremasinghe's United National Party is inclined to be magnanimous in post-war reconciliation and reconstruction wherein ethnic minorities develop a sense of equality and belonging to Sri Lanka. But over the last three years, Wickremasinghe could not fulfill expectations raised by his electoral promises. Inquiries into war crimes against Tamil civilians during the armed conflict have been stonewalled and the military still calls the shots in the North and East of the country with hardly any delegation of powers to local Tamil and Muslim elected representatives.

Wickremasinghe's Constitutional revamp formula of "maximum devolution" to the provinces while keeping "one undivided and indivisible country" sounded like a reasonable compromise, but it was denounced with howls of outrage by Rajapaksa and the resurgent Sinhalese Buddhist right-wing as a sellout.

Calls from extremist politicians, military men, and Buddhist clerics to reject any tampering with Sri Lanka's repressive unitary framework which privileges the central government and entrenches privileges for the ethnic

majority Sinhalese have been so deafening and electorally potent that Wickremasinghe had to backtrack.

To boot, Sirisena played a sly game of posing as a liberal while fearing the wrath of hardline Buddhist fundamentalists if he genuinely joined hands with Wickremasinghe to change Sri Lanka's 'ethnocratic' system where the Sinhalese Buddhists get first-class citizenship rights and minorities are subjugated.

Rajapaksa's revived fortune today owes not only to the poor economic performance of the Wickremasinghe government since 2015 but also to the lingering ethno-religious chauvinist tendency among conservative Sinhalese who see Rajapaksa as their saviour against a liberal multicultural future.

Fear that Buddhism would be sidelined as the favoured state religion has been drilled into the hearts of many Sinhalese due to memories of the war with the LTTE, historically inherited racial anxieties and their exploitation by rightist populists like Rajapaksa and soft majoritarian politicians like Sirisena.



Sri Lanka's prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, hands over inaugural documents to an official during his duties assuming ceremony in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on Oct. 29, 2018. (Photograph: AP/PTI)

The Foreign Hands

Much of the international attention during Sri Lanka's current crisis has fallen on the geopolitical rivalry between India and China and how the two Asian giants are aligned with different local sides in Sri Lankan politics.

The Rajapaksa camp's critique that Wickremasinghe was parceling out prime infrastructural assets to India and turning Sri Lanka into a "sub-colony" of India rehearses a conspiratorial drumbeat of right-wing Sinhalese nationalists for decades. This charge is factually wrong because Wickremasinghe had actually upset India by delaying many of its proposed developmental projects in Sri Lanka.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi even conveyed his displeasure to Wickremasinghe just six days before he was overthrown by Sirisena.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi, on Oct. 20, 2018. (Photograph: PIB)

Despite the hard rightist portrayals in Sri Lanka of Wickremasinghe as a 'pro-India' politician, he hobnobbed with China and sought Chinese

investments in Sri Lanka. In some instances, even if he wanted to favour and award infrastructure deals to India, Sirisena is believed to have used his overarching presidential control over foreign policymaking to stay the Prime Minister's hand.

Given the rapid shifts in alignments and policy positions, one interesting possibility is that Rajapaksa has also swiveled since the days when he was a blatantly pro-China politician. His September 2018 visit to India, meeting with Modi, and assurances that his vision is for an "inclusive" Sri Lanka that understands India's "special concerns" convey that all is not lost for India as it looks on at the island's troubles with concern.

Moreover, if Rajapaksa does finagle a parliamentary majority and his pairing with Sirisena works out this time, the former will be quite constrained this time as Prime Minister compared to the era when he himself was President and abused power like a dictator. Security and foreign policy authority vests with the office of the President rather than the Prime Minister in the current Sri Lankan Constitution which looks set to remain in place due to Wickremasinghe's ouster.

India will, therefore, continue to engage closely with Sirisena to protect its strategic interests, while trying to further encourage Rajapaksa's possible mellowing down and sobering transformation.

By no means is China guaranteed that its writ will again run freely and unimpeded in Sri Lanka like during the heydays of Rajapaksa's power from 2005 to 2015.



Chinese President Xi Jinping, accompanied by then President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka, inspected the South Container Terminal of Colombo Port, on September 17, 2014. (Photograph: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

A Quest For Democracy And Equality

The question of whether India or China wins or loses from the latest shake-up in Sri Lankan politics is not just crucial to strategists in New Delhi, Beijing, and Washington. It also matters to ordinary Sri Lankan people. The real issue is how India and China figure in the context of the two big domestic structural impediments bedeviling Sri Lanka— authoritarianism and majoritarianism.

- As a stable and evolved democracy with a successful integration of linguistic and religious minorities, India is the template that Sri Lanka should aspire to emulate.
- China, on the other hand, prefers a centralised, hard authoritarian Sri Lanka like what was witnessed when Rajapaksa was President and his police state committed rampant human rights violations.

If Sri Lanka has to break out of the vicious cycle of political instability derived from its abusive and discriminatory state structure, only closeness to India can prod it in a progressive direction. As to the economic benefits which China brings with its deep pockets, it is apparent to most Sri Lankans that they are already caught in a 'debt trap' and in danger of ending up in servitude to Beijing.

To paraphrase Martin Luther King, the arc of Sri Lanka's moral universe is long, but it ultimately must bend towards India.

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