

Sri Lanka: democracy prevails - Rajapaksa regime voted out

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Refuting the analysis of pundits that Mahinda Rajapaksa is invincible, the Lankan Muslim, Tamil and Sinhalese citizenry went to the polls in large numbers and defeated the authoritarian Rajapaksa regime. The space that opened up with the 2015 Presidential Elections eventually blew the lid of repression and cleared the oppressive cloud of fear that suppressed the people, corrupted social and state institutions, and silenced dissent.

As the Opposition finally got its act together, forming a coalition of actors from the two major political parties and Sinhala Buddhist right to the ethnic minority parties and coalesced around a formidable “common candidate,” Maithripala Sirisena, the people voted out the Rajapaksa regime for going beyond its mandate. This may well be a lesson for future regimes that question the democratic ethos of the Lankan citizenry.

Sri Lanka is falsely framed as a country solely polarised by ethnic divisions between Sinhala Buddhists and Tamils, and that framing has been shattered by the alliances created with nominations for Presidential Elections one month ago. The election victory, which became possible with the overwhelming support of the minorities, including the Up-Country Tamils, Muslims and Tamils in the North and East, is testament to the potential for the ethnic minorities to work with sections of the majority Sinhala community, when the fate of the country is at stake.

Indeed, it was the humiliation of the Tamil community through continued militarisation, the attacks on the Muslim community by the regime’s proxy the Bodu Bala Sena and the continuing social and economic exclusion of the Up-Country Tamils, that ensured the decisive minority vote. The regime also believed that it could neglect economic concerns of the broader population through its development policies benefiting a financialised urban economy, while paving the path to victory by peddling ethnic chauvinism.

This post-war moment for democratisation and reconciliation has been long awaited since the end of the war five years ago, but there remains much work ahead on issues that were untouched during the intense election campaign. The opposition coalition focused on overthrowing the regime, avoided the contentious issues of demilitarization, the national question, and did not offer a viable plan for economic upliftment of the people. These three issues will test the credibility of the future government.

Will it begin a process of demilitarisation given that a post-war country should reduce its military and provide other avenues of employment and a decent life for the young men and women recruited during the war? Will it be able to reach a broad national consensus towards a political settlement with devolution of power and power-sharing to address the grievances of minorities since independence? And will it be able to reform the crisis prone neoliberal economy, which continues to increase inequalities and exclude large sections of the population? When the celebrations are over, the loose coalition that formed the Opposition is likely to unravel. There is likely to be reconfiguration of political forces with the new cabinet and parliamentary elections in the near future. The political culture in the country has deteriorated over the decades with the rot of

patronage politics. Given the democratic space that has emerged the citizenry should be vigilant; only the people's lead and participation can set the country on the path of equality and justice.

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* "Sri Lanka presidential polls: democracy prevails". COLOMBO, January 9, 2015. Updated: January 9, 2015 14:29 IST:

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/ahilan-kadirgamar-on-the-sri-lankan-poll-verdict/article6771676.ece>

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