

Sri Lanka needs a new ideological project

Thursday 27 August 2015, by [UYANGODA Jayadeva](#) (Date first published: 26 August 2015).

The possibility of the Rajapaksa-led opposition using Sinhalese communalism to unsettle and undermine the new government of moderates is actually very real.

Contents

- [What Putinization involves](#)
- [Reasons to be cautious](#)
- [The battle for new ideas](#)

The most important consequence of Sri Lanka's recent parliamentary election is that voters have prevented the Putinization of their country and its politics.

The August 17 election brought Ranil Wickremasinghe's UNP-led coalition government back to power with an increased tally, though its 106 seats leaves it seven short of a majority in the 225-member parliament. It also prevented "strongman" Mahinda Rajapaksa from becoming prime minister in the style of Vladimir Putin. After two terms as Russia's president, Putin became prime minister for one term in 2008, and then president after that. He continues to preside over a specific political order of autocratic authoritarianism that has taken hold in after the collapse of Gorbachev's perestroika experiment.

Putin chose to become prime minister in order to overcome the constraints of term limits. For Rajapaksa, the prime ministerial race was a chance to undo the January 8 presidential verdict and return to power. Had he succeeded, he would likely have marginalised President Maithripala Sirisena in the same way that Putin as PM sidelined President Dmitri Medvedev.

What Putinization involves

A key feature of Putinization is the capture of the state by a cartel of political, business and bureaucratic elites, led by a strongman-ruler. The cartel's grip is maintained through violence, coercion and relentless attempts at monopolisation of economic and political power. Putinized politics is leader-centric. The leader is presented to the people as the indispensable and single most important factor for national unity, political and economic stability, development and prosperity, and state security.

The deployment of repressive state machinery to control citizens into submission, silence the opposition and erase any threat to the regime by means reminiscent of the role of the secret police during the Stalinist era is another feature of the Putin model. Employing state repression as a political weapon, Putin has made life extremely difficult for all those who dare to oppose or even challenge his power. It is with considerable justification that a few years ago, some Russian academics used Charles Tilly's well-known thesis of 'the state as a protection racket' to explain the political change in Russia under Yeltsin and then Putin.

Rajapaksa's presidential election campaign last year and his prime ministerial campaign—which ended in failure on August 17—offered Sri Lankan voters a Putinesque promise. Rajapaksa was president for two terms beginning 2005. He got the country's constitution changed in 2010 to enable him to run for the top job any number of times. He genuinely believed that the office of the president was his personal entitlement for life. And he also believed that Sri Lanka's politics should revolve around him and his family and, therefore, that the office of the president of the country should be inherited by one of his brothers or sons. Rajapaksa also cultivated a large group of political cronies, some of whom came from the Left parties, to propagate the doctrine, or rather the scare, that without him Sri Lanka could only descend into chaos. This propaganda had many takers, particularly among the Sinhalese electorate.

Reasons to be cautious

With their uninterrupted legacy of democracy over eight decades, the majority of Sri Lankan voters have wisely rejected the Rajapaksa project of autocratic authoritarianism twice within a space of seven months. This is no ordinary news from a country which has struggled for five years to chart a path of democratic political transformation after a protracted and violent internal war. Sri Lankan politics is now in the hands of moderate political forces led by two individuals with restrained political temper—President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe. During the election campaign, they were in fact taunted by Rajapaksa propagandists as weaklings, men who were no match for their strongman who possessed a muscular physique and thick moustache.

But has Sri Lanka's drift to authoritarianism actually been halted? The election results provide grounds for only cautious optimism. Rajapaksa's UPFA managed to secure 95 seats in parliament, just 11 short of the winner's tally, and 18 short of a parliamentary majority. Thus, although Sri Lankan voters have said 'no' to the Putinesque promise, it is not a decisive rejection. It shows that in the majority Sinhalese society, from where he and his loyalists got almost all their votes, there is still considerable space for majoritarian nationalism—as well as support for an authoritarian "strongman".

The fact is that close to half of all Sinhalese voters responded positively to the Rajapaksa camp's propaganda that the safety, security and political power of the majority Sinhalese community was at risk in the hands of those political forces that presented even a watered down and cautious vision of inter-ethnic reconciliation. During the election campaign, the UPFA-Rajapaksa-led coalition returned to the old tactic of exploiting the majoritarian fear of the minorities—in the belief that ethnic polarisation of the electorate would pay political dividends. This poses a challenge to those who have been elected to manage the post-Rajapaksa political order in Sri Lanka.

The battle for new ideas

The possibility of the Rajapaksa-led opposition using Sinhalese communalism to unsettle and undermine the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe government of moderates is actually very real. The fall-out of the much anticipated UNHRC report on alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka might offer them an opening, precisely because the report is likely to give a detailed account of the responsibilities of the government as well as the LTTE concerning the grave excesses and human right violations that occurred during the last phase of the war. It will be a time for the impassioned politics of narrow patriotism, ethno-nationalist heroism, majoritarian victimology, and Western conspiracies. This makes it necessary for the new government to turn to the ideological front as well.

An ideological alternative to the insecure and isolationist majoritarian nationalism is indeed already there in Sri Lanka in the form of pluralistic democracy and moderate nationalisms evolved in the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim social formations.

The overwhelming electoral victory of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi—earlier known as the Tamil National Alliance—over hard-core Tamil nationalist parties in the Northern province shows that Sri Lanka's Tamil society has begun to settle accounts with its past civil war and has opted for a politics of moderation and accommodative nationalism. In Sinhalese society too, this process has begun, but it has not yet been articulated in a manner that makes inclusivist, moderate, pluralist and accommodative nationalism the dominant discourse. It still remains largely confined to the political discourse of democratic civil society.

The fact that both Wickremasinghe and Sirisena are less ideological as politicians than Rajapaksa is both their strength as well as weakness. It is their strength because by de-emphasising ideology and advancing a project of pragmatic accommodation, they could appeal to the ethnic and cultural minorities as well for their support. It is their weakness because their project has not yet been articulated into a political consciousness that can be equally shared by all ethnic communities. It is a political project waiting to be presented to the masses across ethnic and cultural identities as a shared ideological bond.

Similarly, Rajapaksa's strong ideological orientation combined with Sinhalese nationalist appeal is also a source of political strength as well as weakness. He still presents himself to Sinhalese society as their savior, hope and national hero. However, that appeal has led to his total alienation from the minorities, preventing him from continuing in power. It is thus up to the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe government to offer a better ideological alternative — democratic, inclusive and pluralistic — to the Sinhalese masses.

The success of Sirisena-Wickremasinghe project for the multi-ethnic and democratic transformation of post-war Sri Lanka will depend on many factors. Key among them, of course, is ideology. Two politico-ideological projects now embedded in the politics of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese society are set to fight with each other in the months to come. The directions along which that struggle unfolds will help determine the immediate future of the country.

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P.S.

[*http://thewire.in/2015/08/26/putinization-has-been-stopped-but-sri-lanka-needs-a-new-ideological-project-9283/](http://thewire.in/2015/08/26/putinization-has-been-stopped-but-sri-lanka-needs-a-new-ideological-project-9283/)