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Political upheaval in Sri Lanka: Internal and external consequences of the parliamentary elections on 5 August 2020

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SWP Comment

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Political Upheaval in Sri Lanka

Internal and External Consequences of the Parliamentary Elections on 5 August 2020

Christian Wagner

The results of the 16th parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka mark a political upheaval in several respects. First, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), founded in 2016, and its allies now have a two-thirds majority in parliament. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother President Gotabaya Rajapaksa therefore have a free hand to push through a new constitution. This will strengthen their power and the privileges of the Buddhist majority. Second, the poor performance of established parties – such as the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which have shaped political developments since independence in 1948 – seems to indicate a change among the elites. Third, the fragmentation of the Tamil parties weakens their recurring demand for greater regional autonomy. If the Rajapaksa brothers return to an authoritarian course, as they did during Mahinda's last term of office, which ended in 2015, political polarisation will increase again, both within the Sinhala majority and among the minorities.

In retrospect, the outcome of the 2020 election will perhaps appear to be an even more profound upheaval than that of the 1956 election. The victory of the then newly founded SLFP over the UNP gave Buddhist nationalism a voice, and its supporters subsequently aggravated the conflict with the Tamil minority. Following the elections, the government and opposition will be made up of two parties that competed in a national election for the first time. The SLPP and Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and their political leaders have both emerged successfully from internal party disputes in which they politically marginalised their former parties – the SLFP and the UNP – and their elites.

Changes in the Party Spectrum

Within the UNP, Sajith Premadasa – the son of President R. Premadasa, who was assassinated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1993 – prevailed over Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as the top candidate for the presidential election in autumn 2019. In spring 2020, Premadasa founded the SJB, which was joined by other parties, including Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), and the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA). In May, there was a break with the UNP, which ran as a separate party in the election.



Results of the parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka on 5 August 2020

Party	Seats won	Seats by National List	Total number of seats in parliament	Share of votes (in %)
Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)	128	17	145	59.09
Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)	47	7	54	23.90
Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK)	9	1	10	2.82
Jathika Jana Balawegaya (JJB)	2	1	3	3.84
Ahila Ilankai Thamil Congress (AITC)	1	1	2	0.58
Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP)	2	0	2	0.53
Thamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP)	1	0	1	0.58
Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)	1	0	1	0.57
All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC)	1	0	1	0.37
National Congress (NC)	1	0	1	0.34
Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)	1	0	1	0.30
Other parties	2	2	4	3.43
Total number	196	29	225	100.00

Source: Election Commission of Sri Lanka: http://elections.gov.lk/en/elections/PE_RESULTS_2020_E.html (accessed 14 August 2020).

Mahinda Rajapaksa began his political career in the SLFP and was prime minister in 2004/05 before being elected president in November 2005 as a candidate of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). After internal party disputes, he was unexpectedly defeated in the January 2015 presidential election by his former health minister M. Sirisena, who opposed the dictatorial tendencies of the Rajapaksa family. The SLPP, which had only been founded in 2016 by former SLFP and UPFA supporters, quickly became the new political platform for the Rajapaksa family. Basil Rajapaksa, Mahinda's youngest brother, was a key factor in the SLPP's success in the 2018 local elections.

After Gotabaya Rajapaksa won against Sajith Premadasa in the November 2019 presidential election, he appointed an interim cabinet and his brother Mahinda as prime minister. Mahinda Rajapaksa had already been president from 2005 to 2015. His brother Gotabaya was the defence

minister responsible for the military success over the LTTE in May 2009.

In March 2020, President Rajapaksa dissolved the parliament. As a result of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the election had to be postponed until 5 August. The election campaign was dominated by the economic crisis, the security situation following the devastating attacks on Easter Sunday 2019, the growing tensions between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority, and the handling of the pandemic. Despite the restrictions caused by the pandemic, the turnout was 71 per cent.

The victory of the SLPP was significantly higher than expected at just under 60 per cent. With the six seats of its allies – the EPDP, the TMVP, the SLFP, the NC, and the ACMC – it won a total of 151 seats, and thus a two-thirds majority in parliament.

The changes in the Sinhala party landscape has also affected the minorities. The fragmentation of the Tamil parties weakens the demands of established forces such as

ITAK and the AITC for greater regional autonomy. In contrast, parties such as the EPDP and the TMVP, which had emerged from opposition to the LTTE, work closely with the government in Colombo. The attractiveness of Rajapaksa's election promises, such as better economic development, was also shown by the fact that SLPP MPs were elected in 21 of 22 electoral districts, including Tamil areas.

Domestic Political Challenges

The new government of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa includes five members of his family. In 2014, the Rajapaksas controlled about 70 per cent of the state budget through the departments they headed. It is constitutionally questionable that President Gotabaya also held the post of defence minister.

The biggest challenge is to revive the economy. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the country was in a state of economic crisis. In regional comparison, Sri Lanka coped with the pandemic relatively well. By mid-August there were fewer than 3,000 infected and only 11 dead. However, the slump in tourism and remittances has further exacerbated the economic situation.

Thanks to its two-thirds majority in parliament, the SLPP will be able to keep one of its election promises – a new constitution – presumably without much resistance. Prime Minister Rajapakse has already announced his intention to reverse the curtailment of the president's powers, which was implemented in the 19th amendment to the constitution.

In June 2020, President Rajapakse set up two task forces, which presumably indicate the future direction of the constitution, and thus new domestic political lines of conflict. The first task force is to promote the Buddhist heritage in the Eastern Province. The Rajapakse family enjoys strong support from the Buddhist-nationalist clergy, which is claiming further rights for the "holy land of Buddhism" in the new constitution. The rebuilding of Buddhist temples in the

Eastern Province will revive in a new form the conflict that has been smouldering for decades between the Tamil minority and the Sinhala majority. This could also affect the Muslim minority, whose main settlement area is in this province. In recent years, tensions between Buddhists and Muslims have increased. Reservations against Muslims have increased further since a local branch of the "Islamic State", whose leaders came from the Eastern Province, carried out attacks on Easter Sunday 2019 in which more than 250 people were killed.

The second task force, composed mainly of members of the army, police, and intelligence services, will be dedicated to building a "safe country, a disciplined, virtuous and just society". President Gotabaya Rajapakse, former defence minister, has already filled senior administrative positions with a number of former military officers. This threatens a "securitisation" of Sri Lankan democracy and a resurgence of the authoritarian tendencies observed during the last term of Mahinda Rajapakse and his brothers, which lasted until 2015.

Foreign Policy Challenges

On the foreign policy front, the Rajapakse government will continue to try to find a balance in its relations with China and India. In 2019, China and the Asian Development Bank were Sri Lanka's largest creditors, each with 14 per cent. In 2017, the then-government had to lease the port of Hambantota in the south of the country to China for 99 years to settle debts. The district of the same name is the political home province of the Rajapakse family. In spring 2020, Sri Lanka received another loan from China in the amount of \$500 million to combat the effects of the pandemic.

India is particularly involved in the reconstruction of the Tamil areas that suffered in the civil war which ended in 2009. President Rajapakse's statement that economic development rather than political decentralisation is the solution to the prob-

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lems of the Tamils was also a setback for New Delhi. The 13th constitutional amendment, co-initiated by India in 1987 as part of its efforts to settle the civil war, is still the political basis for greater Tamil self-determination.

The promotion of Buddhism in the Eastern Province could, in connection with the Indo-Chinese rivalry, also give the Tamil conflict a new geopolitical dimension: for example, if Chinese infrastructure projects or Chinese-sponsored excavations of Buddhist sites are carried out at the expense of Tamil smallholders or Hindu temples. Such a scenario would be particularly challenging for India, as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi likes to present himself as a patron of Buddhism.

The new political constellations will also put an end to the discussion on the investigation of war crimes in the final phase of the civil war in spring 2009. A report by the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) in 2011 documented a number of war crimes committed by both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army. At that time, the current president, Gotabaya Rajapakse, was the defence minister and responsible for the military actions of the armed forces, which was also directed against the civilian population. In spring 2020, the then-government announced that it would continue to cooperate with the UN Human Rights Council, which has repeatedly discussed these issues.

Outlook

The clear democratic mandate and the weakness of the opposition are likely to pave the way for a new version of the authoritarian rule of the Rajapakse family observed from 2005 to 2015. Rarely before in Sri Lanka's democratic development have the personal and political conflicts of the Sinhalese parties had such a strong impact on the political constellations within the two largest minorities. Therefore,

domestic political polarisation is likely to increase rather than decrease: between Sinhalese parties, between the Sinhalese majority and the minorities, and within the Tamil and Muslim minorities.

On the foreign policy front, the new government will find a balance between India and China to revive Sri Lanka's reconstruction and economic development. In view of the geopolitical rivalries, it is difficult for German and European politicians to exert any influence on domestic political developments. One lever is the regular review of the trade privileges Sri Lanka enjoys under the Generalized System of Preferences Plus. Among other things, the granting of these privileges is conditional on compliance with human rights and governance standards. Domestic political developments in Sri Lanka will therefore continue to require considerable attention in Berlin and Brussels.

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