

Sri Lankan Presidential Elections: Road Ahead

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Mahinda Rajapaksa is re-elected for the second term, trouncing his opponent Gen Fonseka by a large margin. Rajapaksa garnered with 58.16 per cent against 39.89 per cent got by Gen Fonseka. Rajapaksa has improved his vote share right across the country except the Tamil majority north and eastern provinces where the turn out was less than 25%.

The opposition cried foul and Gen Fonseka shot a letter to the election commission alleging vote rigging and called for the annulment of the outcome. The inability of many internally displaced Sri Lankan Tamils to cast their vote because of inadequate transport between camps and villages, and also the alleged misuse of state resources by the president's side, including the use of public funds for Mahinda Rajapaksa's campaign were cited as reasons. According to the BBC, there were irregularities and some violence during the campaign, but no evidence of vote-rigging. Independent election observers also articulated the same.

The continuity President Rajapaksa in the second term is likely to further strengthen Sri Lanka's economic revival after decades of civil war. \$40 billion economy which is on the path to recovery (with big foreign investments into infrastructure and trade) will also depend on the relationship with the International Community and International Financial Institutions. Inflation and price-rise has been hounding the Sri Lankan economy, thereby weakening the Sri Lankan rupee. Therefore it is pertinent to have a strong Monetary Policy in place. Reduction in fiscal deficit and a face-lift to the Banking and Financial Institutions is on card as these are the conditions laid down by the IMF for assistance in post war nation building.

On the political front, his immediate concern would be to avoid post election violence. This may come about with the possible arrest or other actions against Gen Fonseka and his supporters. In such a situation the Sri Lankan Army's role will be a significant factor. Another worry would be the politicization of the military which has reached a new high in the recent weeks. These could strongly harm the nation building process which is in its nascent stages.

In order to maintain credibility in the International Community (which has accused the Sri Lankan leadership of mass human rights violation during the Eelam IV war) President Rajapaksa will have garner support from all sections of the political apparatus including the opposition. The moot question is will he extend hand of reconciliation to the political rivals or seek revenge? It is very important that Rajapaksa develop a working relationship with the opposition parties. Rajapaksa should also take initiative in reassuring the opposition that the government would recognize the role and duty of the opposition parties. The opposition on other hand should also play active role in the nation building efforts instead of adopting an obstructionist attitude.

The goodwill for India in Sri Lanka has been high (post LTTE defeat). Rajapaksa's second term in office would enable the two countries to continue cooperate and act coherently in all sectors including trade, security. If India builds on this good will and strengthens it further, it could give India a moral authority to nudge the Sri Lankan Government towards a political solution which could be meaningful to the Tamils and acceptable to Sinhalese.

Although Rajapaksa and Fonseka made appeasing move towards the Tamils, this did not cut ice with them as evident by the low turn out in Tamil dominated areas. The President, well it is hoped, right away embarks on the rehabilitation of displaced Tamils and reconstruction of the war-ravaged north and east provinces. Ethnic conflict though lying low is very much alive. Unless this is addressed amicably, ethnic conflict can resurrect. The political follow up to remove the widespread discrimination and alienation of the Tamil will definitely play a crucial role in bringing peace and stability in the island.

Rajapaksa acknowledged his victory as “the reflection of choice of the people of Sri Lanka and awareness of the democratic process” and asked the people to come together to build the country. Will he be able to integrate Tamils into mainstream population and wipe away decades’ old discrimination? Will he be able to translate his vision into concrete actions? How skillfully and diplomatically he handles these issue will determine the future of the island nation.