

ISSUE BRIEF

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Sri Lankan Poll Results Augur Well for Relations with the U.S.

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Monday's parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka will bring to power a coalition government headed by Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), which is expected to continue democratic reforms and efforts toward ethnic reconciliation that were started six months ago. This is welcome news for the U.S., which has been pressing Colombo to improve the human rights of its minority populations—especially the Tamil community—following the end of the 26-year civil war in 2009.

The new government also is expected to adopt a more balanced foreign policy that will emphasize ties to the U.S. and India, rather than leaning primarily toward China like the previous Mahinda Rajapaksa regime. The U.S. must capitalize on the election results by reaching out to the new government and proposing initiatives aimed at strengthening political, economic, and security ties. This will help promote stability and democracy in this strategically located island nation that sits at the maritime crossroads of Asia and the Middle East.

Sigh of Relief

There had been concerns that Mahinda Rajapaksa—who was unseated as president in January due to allegations of corruption, nepotism, and

authoritarianism—would manage a political comeback and be elected prime minister. President Maithripala Sirisena, who had previously served as Health Minister in Rajapaksa's cabinet when he ruled the country from 2004 to 2014, decided to break from the government last year and run against Rajapaksa in January. Six months after defeating Rajapaksa for the presidency, Sirisena dissolved parliament in June, calculating that Rajapaksa—tainted by corruption allegations and no longer with access to the levers of government—would fail to eke out a new victory for the premiership. The gamble paid off.

The elections were marked by high voter turnout (around 80 percent) and remarkably low levels of violence. Wickremesinghe's UNP took 106 of the 225 parliamentary seats, while Rajapaksa's United People's Freedom Alliance captured 95 seats. With support from smaller parties, Wickremesinghe will be able to form a solid coalition government backed by Sirisena and his allies.

Although the majority of Sri Lanka's Sinhala population had supported Rajapaksa for ending the civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), large sections of the population started to resent Rajapaksa's efforts to centralize power by firing judges, installing relatives to key cabinet posts, and repressing the media. Recent revelations that his security guards may have murdered a rugby star who had a conflict with Rajapaksa's son put a further damper on his election campaign in the weeks running up to the polls. Furthermore, Sirisena wrote an open letter to Rajapaksa last week indicating that if his party won the majority of seats, Sirisena would seek to prevent Rajapaksa from assuming the premiership.

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The U.S. can now breathe a sigh of relief with relative confidence that the positive changes begun under Sirisena will continue. Sirisena committed to a program of reform and anti-corruption and made good on his promise to restore parliamentary democracy by seeing through the passage of the 19th amendment to curb the powers of the presidency. The key provisions of the 19th amendment included reinstating the two-term limit on the presidency, curbing the president's ability to dissolve parliament, and reviving the Constitutional Council establishing independent commissions for the judiciary and police.

Other steps the Sirisena government took to rejuvenate the democratic process included initiating corruption cases against Rajapaksa and members of his family, lifting censorship of certain Web sites, and introducing a Right to Information Act. To encourage ethnic reconciliation, the Sirisena government handed back 1,000 acres of land from the military to civilians in the war-ravaged Northern Province and welcomed United Nations officials investigating human rights cases into the country. During a visit to Sri Lanka in March, I visited with human rights advocates who said the new government fostered a friendlier environment in which to conduct their work and that they felt freer to conduct investigations. The government still had a long way to go to address human rights problems in the country, but at least the human rights organizations felt less fearful about reporting the problems.

More Balanced Foreign Policy

Wickremesinghe is expected to build on the new foreign policy direction Sirisena pursued over the past six months, including putting ties with India, China, Japan, and Pakistan on equal footing—a significant departure from Rajapaksa's pro-China policies. The Rajapaksa government's decision last year to allow a Chinese submarine to dock twice at a Sri Lankan port alarmed Indian officials, who are wary of China's increasing influence in their backyard. Sirisena promised to take a balanced approach between India and China and to avoid antagonizing India and even put on hold a \$1.4 billion Chinese investment in a Colombo port city project, vowing to carefully review the terms of the contract before moving forward.

In response, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Sri Lanka in March, the first bilateral visit by an Indian prime minister to the country since 1987. India recognizes that it has catching up to do to match Chinese levels of economic investment. India has loaned Sri Lanka around \$1.7 billion compared to China's \$5 billion over the past decade. The new Sri Lankan government will continue to court Chinese investment to finance infrastructure projects and seek to maintain cordial relations with Beijing, even as it reaches out to New Delhi.

There has also been marked improvement in U.S.–Sri Lankan ties over the past six months, a trend Wickremesinghe will undoubtedly seek to deepen. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Sri Lanka in early May shortly after the 19th amendment passed and hailed the country's return to democracy. U.S.–Sri Lankan relations had soured under Rajapaksa, mainly over his government's lack of attention to international human rights concerns.

What the U.S. Should Do

The U.S. must capitalize on the historic election results in Sri Lanka and reach out to the new government to improve economic, political, and security cooperation. More specifically, the U.S. should:

- **Offer technical support and legal mechanisms to help Sri Lanka implement a restorative justice program that strengthens the overall legal and law enforcement systems in the country.** The U.S. must bolster programs aimed at assisting the Sri Lankan government to investigate and document human rights abuses and to develop systems of accountability. The Sirisena government established a Task Force on Reconciliation and has engaged with South African officials to learn from their experience with post-conflict reconciliation. The U.S. can provide assistance that encourages the government to move forward with steps like releasing lists of detainees, freeing uncharged detainees, criminalizing disappearances, and starting a serious discussion on devolution of powers. Working with the U.S. and international agencies to address these issues would demonstrate that Colombo takes seriously the findings of the U.N. report on suspected human rights abuses during Sri Lanka's civil war, scheduled for release next month.

- **Resume military training programs and revive security cooperation.** The U.S. Congress imposed restrictions on military assistance to Sri Lanka when the Rajapaksa government failed to address the issue of civilian casualties, especially in the final days of the war. The U.S. should make clear that it stands ready to reestablish military training programs and regular military exchanges so long as the new government takes steps to improve human rights and implement accountability mechanisms for past abuses.
- **Restart discussions on an MCC compact.** Shortly after the establishment of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) under the Bush Administration in 2004, Sri Lanka was designated as one of 17 countries eligible for MCC funding. These discussions foundered, however, when government-LTTE peace talks ended and the fighting resumed in 2005. As the new Sri Lankan government implements reforms and makes efforts toward ethnic reconciliation, the U.S. should consider on a priority basis Sri Lanka's eligibility as an MCC recipient. MCC funding could be particularly useful in encouraging business development and reviving economic activity in the war-torn areas of the north and east.
- **Invite the new prime minister to the U.S. for a visit.** Washington must not waste any time in reaching out to the new government and extending an invitation for an official U.S. visit. U.S.-Sri Lankan ties have stagnated for far too long, and the U.S. should make clear that it supports the new direction the country is taking and is eager to partner with it in strengthening democratic institutions, building economic cooperation, and pursuing mutual security interests.

Conclusion

The U.S. must take advantage of the major opening presented by the election of the UNP coalition in Sri Lanka. It is an opportunity for Washington to encourage peace, reconciliation, and stability in a country occupying a pivotal position in the Indian Ocean region. The U.S. should move forward on a variety of initiatives to shore up ties while encouraging the new government to uphold its commitment to unifying the country around an agenda of ethnic reconciliation.

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