

Maithripala Sirisena: A President Mired in Controversy

Chulanee Attanayake and Roshni Kapur

President Maithripala Sirisena has become one of the most controversial Presidents in Sri Lanka's history. From winning the Presidential elections against his former political chief, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and leading a minority government to appointing his former political foe, Ranil Wickremesinghe, as the Prime Minister for eight months until the General Elections in 2014 and more recently replacing him with Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister, Sirisena has courted one controversy too many. On 9 November 2018, he sprang another political surprise by unconstitutionally dissolving the Parliament. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to provide an understanding of Sirisena's political career, and his motives and actions.

Background

Maithripala Sirisena is one of the oldest members of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). A centre-left nationalist, he promoted his party's democratic socialist political ideologies and progressive economic agenda and was often associated with nationalist Sinhalese parties. Sirisena began his political activism as a [young member](#) of the Communist Party of Ceylon in his teen years. At 17, he joined the SLFP Youth Organization and became its Secretary. In 1971, he joined the All Ceylon SLFP Youth Organization and entered into national politics. In 1978, he joined politics full-time after resigning as a *Grama Niladari* (Chief Government Officer).

Sirisena first became a Member of Parliament in 1989, representing the Polonnaruwa District. Since 1994, he has held several cabinet portfolios, including being the Minister of Agriculture and Minister of Health, and was acknowledged and commended as one of the most successful ministers in Rajapaksa's government.

Rise to Presidency

Sirisena was known as one of Rajapaksa's longest-standing and closest allies until he defected from the party to contest against him in the Presidential elections in 2015. Sirisena won the election with 51 per cent of the votes against Rajapaksa's 47.58 per cent, becoming the 7th President of Sri Lanka.

Whilst the rising anti-incumbency sentiments against Rajapaksa were a decisive factor in Sirisena's victory, the latter's background and reputation also appealed to the masses. Unlike many other former presidents and prime ministers in Sri Lanka, Sirisena hailed from a non-political, middle-class farming family. Coming from the Sinhalese-heartland and a similar demography as Rajapaksa, he appealed to the [Sinhala-speaking majority](#) as an alternative amid the rising resentment against Rajapaksa. There was also complementary overwhelming [support](#) from the minority communities in the Northern and Eastern districts despite his active role during the protracted war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

Eelam, including serving as the Acting Defence Minister during the last few weeks of the war. The Rajapaksa government's failure to address the psychological and emotional grievances of the Tamil minorities and then overlooking anti-Muslim riots in June 2014 ensured the minorities voted in favour of Sirisena.

The 100-Day Manifesto

While corruption allegations, increasingly authoritarian demeanour and allegations of nepotism diminished Rajapaksa's popularity, Sirisena focused his campaign on anti-corruption, transparency, post-war reconciliation, as well as bread and butter issues. The most attractive of all was his '100-Day Manifesto' which promised a range of political, administrative and legal changes, including curtailing the powers of the executive presidency, enforcement of the rule of law, improving governance and increasing the salaries of public servants. Domestically, he pledged to achieve a balance of power between the executive and the Parliament while he also pledged to balance Sri Lanka's foreign relations between the East and the West.

However, Sirisena's success in delivering these promises is debatable. In an opinion [poll](#) on constitutional reforms piloted by the country's Centre for Policy Alternatives in April 2017, only 1.1 per cent of the respondents said that the government's performance has been excellent and does not require further progress. This was reiterated during the [Local Government Elections](#) in February 2018 during which the coalition of the SLFP, the United People's Freedom Alliance and the United National Party gained 45.99 per cent of the total votes compared to the 44.69 per cent single-handedly gained by Rajapaksa's newly-formed Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna.

Following this defeat, the existing ideological differences between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe grew over the months, resulting in the President unconstitutionally replacing his sitting Prime Minister with [Rajapaksa](#).

Battle for Supremacy

Ever since assuming the presidency, Sirisena has failed to deliver on his electoral promises. He has been accused of nepotism multiple times. The Central Bank [scandal](#) late last year involving 10 billion Sri Lankan rupees (\$\$69.66 million) further decreased public confidence. At the same time, the lack of proactive measures by the government after the anti-Muslim riots in Ampara and Kandy earlier this year questioned his commitment to ethnic harmony.

On the contrary, Sirisena was consolidating more power as he even enquired from the Supreme Court the possibilities of [extending his term](#) until 2021. Following his defeat at the LGE, Sirisena became increasingly [insecure](#) about his political status as it was rumoured that he was looking for [replacements](#) for the Prime Minister.

Sirisena's popularity has eroded leaving him little room to contest the next Presidential elections on his own merit. He needs Rajapaksa's vote bank and support. It appears that Sirisena's ability to stay in power hinges delicately on his ability to manage his alliance with Rajapaksa. This alliance, however, suffered a huge blow on 11 November 2018 when

Rajapaksa defected from Sirisena's party, throwing Sri Lanka's fragile political situation into further disarray.

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Dr Chulanee Attanayake is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at chulanee@nus.edu.sg. Ms Roshni Kapur is a Research Assistant at ISAS. She can be contacted at roshni@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.