Sri Lanka: New Political Situation With Sirisena-Rajapaksa Alliance – Analysis

By Srimal Fernando and Megha Gupta*

In the last couple of months, the South Asian region has seen a trend of uncertain political changes. Since the end of July, Pakistan followed by Maldives, have seen a transformation in their political leadership with new policy directions towards this region.

On the October 26, India’s southern island neighbor, Sri Lanka, also experienced a sudden shift of governance with the sacking of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe by the President Maithripala Sirisena. The President had claimed that “the name of a high profile Minister had surfaced during investigations of the assassination plot by the Criminal Investigation Department, which had been suppressed due to political interference.” (Sunday Times) This had been justified by the President as being the main reason for the removal of the Premier Wickremesinghe and his Cabinet. Unfolding this event, the unity government comprising of United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and United National Front (UNF), the historically opposing ideological party alliances had collapsed with the UPFA pulling out of the national government.

Just after a few hours, the President Sirisena had appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as the new Prime Minister and declared it constitutional under the 19th amendment. The President of the Bar Association of Sri Lanka had also stated that “When a coalition partner left the unity government, the Cabinet automatically stood dissolved. Accordingly, the Prime Minister, too, ceased to hold office. In such a situation, the President is empowered to appoint a new Prime Minister who, in his opinion, commands the support of a majority of members in Parliament.”
However, the outgoing Prime Minister has challenged this move as being unconstitutional since he has a parliamentary majority of 106 members as compared to Rajapaksa’s Sri Lanka Podujana Paramuna (SLPP) and Sirisena’s UPFA combined coalition comprising of 95 members. Hence, now to form a government both Mahinda and Wickremesinghe need to prove a parliamentary majority of 113 in a 225-member parliament.

Currently, the Parliament has been postponed for three weeks by the Sri Lankan President and it has been anticipated that this could be a move by Sirisena-Mahinda alliance to gain time to consolidate members from the smaller parties for the required majority in the coming days.

There are several challenges that the Sirisena-Rajapaksa government might face after coming to power. One being the presence of a strong opposition mainly from the parties dominated by Tamil and Muslim communities. Also, the current coalition that Rajapaksa is building will be dominated by cross over parliamentary members with different ideologies. Furthermore, the new former President as a Prime Minister now would not enjoy the same privileges as before and Sirisena as the head of all the three forces would be enjoying absolute powers. Rajapaksa on assuming office, would also face the challenge of foreign debts mainly borrowed from China along with the rising oil prices.

There will also be a need to find a reasonable settlement of gaining a greater Sri Lankan stakeholdership over the leased out vital nerve centres. Lastly, it would be important for the government to settle the minority issues by pursuing accommodative political settlements.

Meanwhile, the Western world is asking the new Sri Lankan government to act as per the constitution. On similar lines, the closest friendly neighbor India is closely observing the unfolding events in Sri Lanka. As an academician, one can argue that Rajapaksa’s current foreign policy approach could be more favorable towards India as compared to his previous policy position from 2005 to 2015. This reasoning is justifiable as just a month back, Mahinda Rajapaksa had visited India to deliver a lecture on Indo-Sri Lanka relations and during this visit Rajapaksa had simultaneously met the Indian Prime Minister.

With this background, India might have an advantage with Sirisena-Rajapaksa government to implement stronger foreign relations with the neighboring island country. In the recent past,
India’s more neutral approach and non-interference policy has also made it succeed in the Maldives scenario, where India was able to reconcile its foreign policy with Ibrahim Solih’s victory. It is clear that there is a chance for India and the international community to engage more proactively with the Sirisena-Rajapaksa government such that a conducive environment can be created for the South Asian region.

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