

Sri Lankan 2010 presidential elections: a door shut on reconciliation?

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With the end of the war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Sri Lanka finds itself at a cross-roads: one path leads to peace and reconciliation between Sri Lanka's ethnic communities; the other leads to dictatorship and authoritarianism. The government's victory against the LTTE has put an end to the 25 years of terrorism that annihilated the island and brought hope for a peaceful future. But as the elections have shown, Sinhalese and Tamils do not share a similar view of their future together. This is bad news for inter-ethnic peace and cohesion.

The presidential election results are hardly surprising. Mahinda Rajapaksa, the incumbent president and national hero, won by a margin of 17%, following his successful campaign against the LTTE. However, the opposition candidate, General Sarath Fonseka, dominated in Tamil areas such as Jaffna and Vanni. Fonseka -although responsible, as the former Army Chief, for leading the national troops to victory in April 2009 - is perceived by many Sinhalese as a traitor. He accused the government of being responsible for the alleged war crimes committed by the troops on civilians during the last attack against the LTTE and he appeared willing to make concessions to the Tamils.

Fonseka's motivation for such conciliation was probably political, and, in retrospect, a miscalculation. It was predicted beforehand that the Sinhalese vote would split between the two war heroes, Rajapakse and Fonseka, and that the minority Tamil vote would then decide which man would win at the ballot box. Accordingly, Fonseka planned to woo Tamil voters with concessions. The plan backfired: even though his promises to the Tamils were far from significant, the very idea of concessions to the Tamils turned many Sinhalese voters away from Fonseka and towards Rajapakse.

In the wake of the elections, reconciliation will be all the more difficult. The victor is a man whose mandate is to offer no tangible concessions to his political and ethnic opponents. The clear geographical fracturing of the vote reflects the exact map of the war as the North and the East, the former LTTE strong-holds, voted for Fonseka and the South voted for the incumbent president. The majority of Sinhalese are thus not ready to accommodate the Tamils politically. Tamils are a wounded community, and although the recent annihilation of the LTTE leaves a vacuum for political representation, their strong will for political determination has prevented them from bowing to the State. The third ethnic group, the Muslims, is also greatly concerned by the recent election result. In such circumstances, and given the explosive nature of the inter-ethnic relations so far, Rajapaksa might be left with only two choices: concessions or repression.

He already gave his response to this quandary by ordering the arrest of General Sarath Fonseka, on charges of sedition, just a few days after the elections and by dissolving the parliament in order to consolidate his mandate. If he wins a large majority in the general elections, Rajapaksa will secure an iron grip on power and the current suppression of freedom of speech and of the opposition will become close to a dictatorship.

This is a harrowing prospect not just for the Tamils, but also for the Sinhalese. Not only are the perspectives for reconciliation very slim, and democracy a fading concept, but drawing on Rajapaksa's first mandate, the economy of the island is also unlikely to improve.

Crippled by corruption, the lack of infrastructure and a brain drain created by the war, the Sri

Lankan economy was close to bankruptcy last year. People are desperate to see the kind of prosperity they hoped for 40 years ago, when the island was deemed more economically vibrant than Singapore.

Nepotism and corruption have been common rule under Rajapaksa's government and although Fonseka was a highly flawed candidate, his willingness to eradicate both would have been most welcome.

His recent arrest also means that the opposition is devoid of a charismatic leader. Despite his involvement in the war against the LTTE, Fonseka had managed to rally all sides under his banner, including the Tamil National Alliance, a (former) political mouthpiece for the LTTE.

It is thus not simply reconciliation and inter-ethnic cohesion between the Tamils and the Sinhalese that is jeopardized by the re-election of Rajapaksa, but Sri Lankan democracy itself. Without a strong opposition, press freedom, and with the unlimited powers given to the executive presidency model and a majority in the Parliament, Rajapaksa will have near-absolute rule. It seems highly unlikely he will direct his efforts towards a harmonious cohabitation with the Tamil minority. The Tamils must now face the prospect of defeat - once more - in politics, in everyday life, and in equal access to opportunities within Sri Lankan society.

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