



Q&A

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Sri Lanka's Presidential Election Brings Back a Polarising Wartime Figure

Gotabaya Rajapaksa's decisive victory in Sri Lanka's presidential election reflects voters' concerns over security, poor economic prospects and ineffective governance – but also indicates the country's dangerous ethnic polarisation. Many worry that Rajapaksa, a Sinhalese nationalist, will energise anti-Muslim campaigning and further alienate the Tamil community.

What happened?

On 16 November, Gotabaya Rajapaksa – who served as defence secretary during the final phase of Sri Lanka's brutal civil war – won a decisive victory in Sri Lanka's presidential election.

Although Rajapaksa's victory was not a surprise, the margin of his win exceeded expectations among many analysts. The candidate of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and brother of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, Gotabaya (who, like Mahinda, is widely known by his first name) captured 52.25 per cent of the vote. His main rival, Sajith Premadasa, candidate of the ruling United National Party (UNP), came in second with 42 per cent.

Gotabaya, who has been linked to atrocities committed at the end of the war, is a polarising figure in Sri Lanka, and Saturday's vote revealed sharp divisions in the electorate

along ethnic lines. Although both candidates were from the ethnic majority Sinhalese community, Rajapaksa, who ran a strongly Sinhala nationalist campaign, was the outsize winner among the Sinhalese, securing such a huge majority that he needed few if any votes from ethnic Tamil or Muslim voters. By contrast, overwhelming majorities of Muslim and Tamil voters – who together make up roughly a quarter of the population – cast their ballots for Premadasa.

Of the record 35 candidates on the ballot, two who seemed positioned to command enough votes to affect the outcome did less well than expected. Anura Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the left-wing Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, won only 3.16 per cent of the vote, and former army commander Mahesh Senanayake, running as the candidate of a new, civil society-backed political party, won less than half a per cent.

The presidential campaign was one of Sri Lanka's most peaceful, with only a handful of violent incidents. One concern highlighted by Election Commissioner Mahinda Deshapriya was the unprecedented amount of "fake news" spread on social media and in mainstream media outlets as well. Most of the disinformation targeted Premadasa's campaign, including a particularly damaging story reported by pro-Rajapaksa outlets during the final days claiming Premadasa had signed a secret pact with the main Tamil party, the Tamil National Alliance, in exchange for its support.

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What accounts for Gotabaya's decisive victory?

Voters' security concerns, Sinhalese ethno-nationalism, Sri Lanka's economic straits, the current government's infighting and the SLPP's organisational strength were the main factors driving Gotabaya's victory.

Although Premadasa had a credible shot at winning, Gotabaya was widely seen as the front runner from the start. Backed by his brother Mahinda, who remains popular among Sinhalese voters but was constitutionally prevented from running for another term, Gotabaya faced in Premadasa an opponent who was a senior minister in an unpopular, divided and ineffective government.

Tapping into widespread feelings of anger and vulnerability stemming from the government's failure to prevent the devastating ISIS-inspired Easter Sunday attacks on Christian churches and hotels – notwithstanding advance warnings from the Indian government – Gotabaya put a promise to deliver “security” and “eradicate terrorism” at the centre of his campaign.

The combination of Gotabaya's pledge to prioritise security and his ethno-nationalist message resonated especially with the many Sinhala voters who remember the key role he played as defence secretary in the 2009 military victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or Tamil Tigers. Gotabaya enjoyed the active support of influential Buddhist monks who have long promoted the idea that Tamils and Muslims threaten Sri Lanka's Sinhala Buddhist character – a sentiment that has increased among Sinhalese since the Easter bombings. Given the Rajapaksa family's popularity among Sinhalese voters, Premadasa needed overwhelming support from Muslims and Tamils to have any chance at victory, a reality that led the SLPP to argue that a Premadasa presidency would be hostage to minority interests.

The governing UNP's unpopularity also gave Gotabaya a big boost. With economic growth rates weak and debt repayment obligations

high, the UNP government has had little revenue with which to deliver significant benefits to poor and middle-income Sri Lankans. The sharp fall in tourism following the Easter bombings added to the difficulty that large numbers of Sri Lankans have had making ends meet.

Moreover, under the UNP, government policymaking, including on economic issues, was confused and often contradictory. The increasingly toxic relationship between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe exacerbated the government's ineffectiveness. In October 2018, Sirisena attempted to remove Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replace him with Mahinda Rajapaksa, a move that courts ruled unconstitutional but that helped cement an impression of chaos in the country's governing ranks. Premadasa proved unable to separate himself clearly enough from the government's unpopularity.

The SLPP's strong island-wide organisation also benefited Gotabaya. The Rajapaksas and their supporters built up the party methodically since forming it in 2016 to be the political vehicle for the Rajapaksa family's return to power. Big wins in the February 2018 local government elections strengthened the party at the grassroots level. Unlike Gotabaya, who had carefully laid the foundation of his campaign over the previous two years, Premadasa was named the UNP candidate just days before the campaign began, after a bitter struggle with party leader and prime minister Wickremesinghe. From that point on, the Premadasa campaign was playing catch-up while holding a weaker hand than Gotabaya, with flimsier party organisation and less funding and media support (most private media are owned by Rajapaksa allies and backed Gotabaya strongly, and more than a few outlets spread disinformation on his behalf).

What is the Rajapaksa family's return to power likely to mean for Sri Lanka's longstanding ethnic tensions?

The strongly Sinhala nationalist character of Gotabaya's campaign, his reliance for the win almost entirely on votes from Sinhalese, and

his brother's policies during his ten years in office (2005-2015) all suggest that persistent ethnic and religious tensions – which increased following the Easter bombings – could dangerously sharpen under Gotabaya's presidency.

Many fear that the new political landscape will bring renewed energy to the long-running campaign of anti-Muslim hate speech, violence and economic boycotts led by militant groups claiming to defend Buddhism. These groups first flourished under the Mahinda Rajapaksa presidency in 2013 and 2014, when they received support from the police and military intelligence, then under Gotabaya's control as defence secretary. Anti-Muslim campaigning waned in the first year after the Rajapaksas left office in early 2015 but ultimately grew even more violent, with eyewitness and video evidence indicating the involvement of members of their SLPP party in attacks on mosques and Muslim businesses and homes in March 2018 and in the aftermath of the Easter bombings in May 2019. Gotabaya has always denied any support for militant Buddhist groups, but he is widely seen by Muslims as hostile to their community's economic and social well-being. The strong support that Muslim voters and political leadership gave Premadasa leads many to worry that the community will now be targeted for its perceived disloyalty. Post-election attacks on a mosque in the southern city of Galle and a surge in anti-Muslim hate speech on social media since the results were announced have already bolstered these concerns.

Gotabaya has indicated little interest in helping heal the bitter ethnic divisions that endure in the wake of the country's devastating 26-year civil war, which pitted the government against an insurgency led by the Tamil Tigers

and left 100,000-150,000 people dead. Grievances and political marginalisation of Tamils gave rise to decades of inter-ethnic violence that included abuses and rights violations by both government and Tamil Tiger forces. Throughout the war and in its aftermath, Gotabaya has opposed reforms that would address Tamil concerns, including ones that would decentralise power and give the Tamils greater control over their own affairs. Both he and the SLPP denounced efforts by the outgoing UNP-led government to draft a new constitution that would move in this direction by, among other things, expanding the powers of the provinces, arguing that such changes threaten national security and the Buddhist and unitary nature of the state.

The risk of renewed Tamil militancy is very low, however, given the destruction of the Tamil Tigers and their support base and the enormous number of troops still stationed in the north, where the Tamil population is concentrated, ten years after the end of the war. Surveillance of northern Tamils is extensive, with military intelligence informers reportedly placed in every village. The Rajapaksas and the SLPP have denounced even the modest reduction in the military's footprint in the north that occurred since the change of government in 2015, claiming that it endangers national security; and they are unlikely to relax further the military's presence in Tamil-majority areas. Tensions are likely to simmer nonetheless. The presidential election coincided with the 1,000th day of continuous protests by Tamil widows and family members seeking information about the fate of loved ones who disappeared during the war, many of them after surrendering to the army.

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What are likely to be Gotabaya's first political moves as president?

Gotabaya has stated publicly that the popular Mahinda will soon join the country's leadership as prime minister. UNP leader Wickremesinghe remains in the post for now, but his ability to hold on to the parliamentary majority needed to

remain in office is eroding. Within hours of the final voting results' release, key UNP ministers announced their resignation. The UNP may decide to support parliament's dissolution in the coming days or weeks, which would set the stage for a general election, in order to avoid large numbers of its parliamentarians crossing over to the SLPP and backing Mahinda as prime minister. Under the constitution, the president himself cannot dissolve parliament until it has sat for four and a half years, a threshold that will be reached in mid-February.

Gotabaya may also try to strengthen presidential powers. Just hours after Gotabaya was declared the winner, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who serves in parliament and is head of the SLPP, issued a statement criticising the constitution's Nineteenth Amendment, which the Sri Lankan parliament passed just after Mahinda lost the presidency in 2015 and that reduced the powers of the office. The amendment strengthened the prime minister's role, re-established a two-term limit on the presidency, and reinforced independent commissions on human rights, police, the judiciary and civil services. Many welcomed the end of the all-powerful executive presidency. Others have argued that the Nineteenth Amendment, by dividing executive powers between the president and prime minister, produced weak and confused government. Mahinda Rajapaksa's statement hinted strongly that the SLPP would push for parliament to revoke the amendment and re-concentrate powers in the presidency.

Should a strong presidential system be re-established, there will be reason to worry that it will come at the expense of the margin of independence that the judiciary and police have gained since 2015. Even in the absence of constitutional changes, there is little chance of progress in the numerous criminal cases pending in the courts against Gotabaya and other members of the Rajapaksa family and their close associates. Mahinda has sought to delegitimise these as politically-motivated "persecution and harassment". The dozens of high-profile cases

of political assassinations, abductions, disappearances and attacks on journalists that took place under the earlier Rajapaksa administration, which the police have been investigating with relative vigour since 2015, are certain to go nowhere or be dropped.

What are the implications of Gotabaya's presidency for relations with international institutions and countries with which it has key economic and security ties?

The Rajapaksa family's return to power and their strongly Sinhala nationalist agenda pose major challenges to efforts by certain countries and international bodies to support post-war reconciliation and accountability. These are goals that the outgoing UNP government notionally supported but for which it failed to build a strong domestic constituency. For his part, Gotabaya has made it clear that his government will turn its back on commitments that Sri Lanka previously made in relation to the UN Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) 2015 resolution on reconciliation and accountability, which the UNP-led government co-sponsored. The resolution called for numerous reforms designed to address Sri Lanka's violent past, including the establishment of four transitional justice institutions. The UNP government viewed two of these – a truth-seeking commission and a special court to investigate and prosecute alleged international crimes during the war – as too controversial to establish. The two institutions that did get off the ground – the Office of Missing Persons and the Office of Reparations – are likely to be weakened or even dismantled under Gotabaya. It is unclear whether the new government will encourage the passage of a new resolution at the UNHRC repudiating the 2015 resolution, or wait for the current resolution to expire in March 2021 and seek to block any efforts to renew it. Either way, UNHRC member states that have been part of the push for reconciliation and accountability should work to keep the council engaged on the

core concerns addressed in the 2015 resolution and to maintain close oversight of Sri Lanka's human rights record.

India, Japan and Western governments will all be concerned at the prospect that the Rajapaksas will strengthen relations with China, which during the election made clear of its preference for Gotabaya and the SLPP. Economic and political ties between Sri Lanka and China grew during Mahinda's presidency; the Chinese-built and now Chinese-leased port in Hambantota is a flagship example. China's

competitors' worries that the port could eventually be used for Chinese military purposes are certain to increase now that the Rajapaksas are back in power. Gotabaya's government should not be expected to move quickly or decisively in that direction, however, preferring instead to maintain balanced relations with all of Sri Lanka's donors and trading partners. The Rajapaksas are probably hoping that they can use their closer ties with Beijing to leverage continued economic support from other governments fearful of "losing" Sri Lanka to China.