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## **Suspension of Sri Lankan PM: A Strategic Move?**

*By Roshni Kapur*

### **Synopsis**

*The suspension of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and his replacement by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was a strategic move that has been many months in the making.*

### **Commentary**

THE UNPRECEDENTED suspension of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was a well-planned move that has been many months in the making. Last week, President Maithripala Sirisena dismissed Wickremesinghe and inducted former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as the new prime minister.

He then suspended parliament until 16 November 2018 to prevent Wickremesinghe from proving his majority among the parliamentarians. The embattled leader insists that he is still the prime minister, refusing to vacate Temple Trees, the prime minister's official residence. He has also requested the Speaker of Parliament to convene an emergency session for him to demonstrate his majority.

### **Weakening Government**

Sirisena said the main reason for sacking his prime minister was due to the alleged involvement of a cabinet minister in an attempt to assassinate him. However this story is simply an excuse. Sirisena has been planning to get rid of Wickremesinghe for months. Sirisena, who hails from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), appointed Wickremesinghe from the United National Party (UNP) as his prime minister as part of an alliance.

Tensions between the SLFP and UNP were simmering for some time due to policy

differences on economic policies and day-to-day administration. These tensions were further aggravated when both parties lost bitterly to Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) during local elections.

Sri Lanka has been witnessing one crisis after another ever since the anti-Muslim riots in Kandy city; a no-confidence motion against Wickremesinghe; and the temporary suspension of parliament in April 2018.

Sirisena is well aware that his chances of returning as president are slim given the government's poor performance in the last three years. An opinion [poll](#) conducted by the country's Centre for Policy Alternatives in April 2017 stated that only 1.1% of the respondents thought that the government's performance has been excellent and does not require further improvement.

Public approval of the government's performance plunged further due to its inability to tackle corruption, inflation, unemployment and post-war grievances. The country was listed as 91 out of 176 countries in Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perception Index. Corruption is entrenched at every level of the state's administration where companies have reported instances of bribes and other forms of unwarranted payment especially in the public procurement processes. The government was also hit by the Central Bank bond scandal where the onus fell on Wickremesinghe.

Sirisena not only decided not to contest the next presidential elections without the UNP's support but also to covertly reach out to Rajapaksa for a political alliance. The Statesman [reported](#) earlier this year that the president has been cutting deals with Rajapaksa. He has now leveraged on Rajapaksa's strong support from the country's Sinhalese community mainly in the Southern, Western and Central districts. Their loyalty to Rajapakse, the former president, has not only remained intact but grown stronger with the Sirisena government's poor delivery.

### **Game of Luck**

Sri Lankan politics has indeed been a game of luck. Sirisena was the General Secretary in Rajapaksa's government before he defected to contest the 2015 presidential elections. His election campaign, with the backing of UNP, ran on a platform of anti-corruption, economic reform and transitional justice. Luck was on his side as he won 51.3% of the total vote over Rajapaksa who received 47.6%. Most of the voters were from the Tamil and Muslim minority communities who saw Sirisena as a beacon of hope who will usher in a new brand of politics.

In contrast, Wickremesinghe's political career has been riven with bad luck. He has been prime minister for four different tenures since 1983. He had an uneasy relationship with former President Chandrika Kumaratunga when she prematurely dissolved parliament that had the UNP's majority support of legislators.

There were also disagreements on the peace process with the Tamil rebels. The question now is whether his ouster will spell the demise of his political career or will he manage to make a comeback in the forthcoming presidential elections.

While Wickremesinghe's supporters insist that his dismissal is unconstitutional and

have echoed their support, 20 legislators are reportedly already planning to switch sides. Defecting from a party and joining the opposition is a common trait of Sri Lankan politics. Unlike other democracies where politicians have an ideological backing and loyalty to their respective parties, it is not uncommon for government officials in Sri Lanka to change parties for their political gain.

### **Strongman's Comeback**

Rajapaksa's comeback as prime minister shows that he was a key player in the country's political landscape all along, even when he sat as an opposition legislator. He is unable to contest as a presidential candidate due to the constitutional limit of two terms. His appointment as prime minister has now reduced the chances of one of his brothers to stand as a potential nominee.

There are rumours of infighting taking place within the Rajapaksa family. Dynastic politics runs deep where Rajapaksa has aspirations for his son, Namal Rajapaksa, to stand for president when he becomes eligible.

However, his new appointment may not necessarily indicate that the country will allow China to make further inroads. After all, the handing over of Hambantota port to China on a 99-year lease was formalised during the current government's tenure. Rajapaksa was the one who opposed the move where he said that the deal was too generous to China.

Rajapakse's recent visit to India in September 2018 for a public lecture could be an attempt to reset ties between the two. Only time will tell whether Sirisena's good luck will stay with him during the next presidential elections.

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*Roshni Kapur is a Research Assistant at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She contributed this to RSIS Commentary.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)