India nervously watches post-election Sri Lanka

Deepal Jayasekera
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Since Mahinda Rajapakse won a second presidential term in Sri Lanka last week, India's dilemma over how to pursue its interests in the island has only intensified. New Delhi wants close ties with Colombo to counter the growing influence of rival China and open up opportunities for Indian businesses. At the same time, it is concerned that political unrest in Sri Lanka, particularly communal tensions involving the Tamil minority, will reverberate inside India, especially in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

The Indian government formally congratulated Rajapakse on his victory, but reiterated New Delhi's long-standing call for a "political solution" to the 26-year civil war in Sri Lanka that ended with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). New Delhi cautiously backed Rajapakse's war and provided some military assistance, but confronted growing political opposition in Tamil Nadu.

The call for "a political solution" is for a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhalese and Tamil elites in Sri Lanka through a limited devolution of powers to the North and East of the island. Such an arrangement would contain opposition from Tamils in southern India and also provide a potential mechanism for India to exert influence in Sir Lanka by developing its relations with the Tamil bourgeoisie.

While speaking in the most general terms about being "the president for all," Rajapakse has no concrete plans for any "political solution". Having waged a vicious war of attrition that cost the lives of thousands of civilians, the government is determined to maintain the untrammelled domination of the Sinhalese elite. As Rajapakse knows, any significant concession to the Tamil bourgeoisie would provoke howls of denunciation from the Sinhala extremists that backed his war.

The political establishment in India is well aware of this situation, which limits its ability to push Rajapakse for a change in approach. As the *Indian Express* editorial on January 28 advised: "India cannot dictate Rajapakse's agenda, but it can nudge Sri Lanka along a positive agenda." The overriding concern is that if New Delhi tries to pressure Rajapakse, he will turn to India's regional rivals—Pakistan and above all China.

In comments cited in the *Times of India*, Indian strategic analyst Kasun Ubayasiri remarked: "While it is unlikely Sri Lanka will actively alienate its northern neighbour, it is equally unlikely that the Rajapakse government will continue to woo India in the future, particularly if its alliance with China bears fruit." Writing before the election, Ubayasiri stated that Rajapakse's "return to power will benefit China's strategic interests in the region". He argued that Fonseka was more sympathetic to Indian interests, concluding the former general would be "on the Indian side of the future battle line".

New Delhi views China's growing clout in Sri Lanka as a threat to its interests in what it regards as part of its sphere of influence. China, along with Pakistan, was a major supplier of arms, ammunition and other military equipment for Rajapakse's war, without any strings attached. In return, Beijing obtained economic and strategic concessions, including an exclusive special economic zone and the contracts to build a large port at Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka.

China has developed similar port facilities in Burma, Bangladesh and Pakistan as part of a "string of pearls" strategy to develop its naval reach and protect crucial oil and other supplies shipped via sea lanes in Indian Ocean.

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As well as being concerned about the "intrusion" of China into the Indian Ocean, India faces growing tensions on its northern land border with China.

The US, which has forged a strategic partnership with India, shares its concerns about Beijing's increasing influence in the region. A report published by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on December 7, called for Washington to counter Beijing's influence in Colombo through "a broader and more robust approach to Sri Lanka that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and US geostrategic interests".

India is no doubt counting on Washington's assistance. At the same time, however, it is wary about the US achieving too much sway in its strategic backyard and is pursuing its own plans in Sri Lanka. As a *Hindu* editorial explained, the Indian ruling elites have high hopes for cashing in on the "revitalisation and development of the war-ravaged areas of the North" of Sri Lanka.

On January 11, India signed an agreement with Sri Lanka for the construction of the railway line between Omanthai and Pallai in the island's war-torn Northern Province. It is about to open a consulate in the northern town of Jaffna so as to further its involvement in "reconstruction and rehabilitation," for which it has offered a $5 billion rupee ($US108 million) aid package.

India is also involved in rehabilitation of the southern coastal railway line from Colombo to Matara by providing credit worth $US167.4 million. It has considerable investments in Sri Lanka, including in the retail fuel, telecommunication, hotel, cement, banking, tyre, rubber and information technology sectors.

In the wake of the Sri Lankan election, the Indian media has cautiously accepted Rajapakse's victory, with little or no criticism of the government's heavy-handed measures against the opposition or allegations of electoral fraud. The headlines of the *Hindu*, *Hindustan Times* and *Statesman* announced the result thus: "Rajapakse re-elected, trounces Fonseka by huge margin", "Rajapakse wins Lanka, Fonseka fears for life" and "Landslide victory for Rajapakse".

The *Hindu* editorial of January 28 was even blunter in its support for Rajapakse against General Fonseka. "The last thing Sri Lanka needed at this juncture was yet another South Asian variant of Bonapartism, or any more politicisation of the military that we have witnessed in recent months."

Amid the deepening economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka, the candidacy of Fonseka, who was the country's top general until last December, certainly raised the possibility of autocratic military-police rule. The editorial, however, remained silent on Rajapakse's own moves in the same direction—including the extraordinary dispatch of hundreds of heavily-armed troops to surround Fonseka's hotel on the evening of election day.

The editorial is somewhat surprising given Fonseka's indications that he would be more sympathetic to India and the West, and less accommodating to China. The comment, however, does highlight concerns in New Delhi that the political establishment in Colombo and the whole state apparatus including the military is sharply divided, with the potential for a political explosion that would inevitably impact on neighbouring India. That is why, on balance, the *Hindu* favoured Rajapakse, "an experienced political leader", against Fonseka, "an unpredictable adventurer".

As bitter political infighting continues in Colombo, the ability of India along with the other major powers, particularly the US and China, to play a cautious "wait and see" game and to cultivate relations with the Rajapakse regime will be undermined. But a more direct intrusion into the island's volatile politics will only magnify tensions and exacerbate what is already a deep-going political crisis.

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