

Sri Lankan president seeks improved relations with India

S. Jayanth
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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has indicated that he is keen to improve relations with India after its national election was won by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). On May 26, Rajapakse visited New Delhi along with other South Asian leaders to participate in the inaugural ceremony for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and have a chance for brief discussion with him.

Over the past five years since the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, relations with the previous Congress-led government in New Delhi have been strained. Rajapakse has continuously evaded India's call for a "political solution" to the war in the form of a power-sharing arrangement with Tamil elite in the north and east of Sri Lanka. New Delhi is also hostile to the Colombo government's growing economic, political and military ties with Beijing, which it regards as a regional rival.

The stance of the new Modi government has been the subject of considerable media speculation in Colombo. Expressing a certain nervousness in ruling circles, the *Sunday Times* editorial on May 25 cited one analyst who wrote that while no "substantial change" was expected in India's policy towards Sri Lanka, there would probably be "a greater assertiveness and result orientation."

As a sign of "friendliness" just before leaving for New Delhi, Rajapakse ordered the release of all fishermen from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu who had been arrested by the Sri Lankan navy for allegedly crossing into "Sri Lankan waters." In recent years, the navies of both countries have arrested fishermen for entering their territorial waters. It is one more sign of the strained relations.

Rajapakse also tried to include Northern Provincial

Council Chief Minister C.V. Vigneswaran in his team to visit India, in a gesture aimed at showing that his government maintained good relations with Tamil elites. Vigneswaran, who belongs to the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), rejected the offer and reiterated his demand for land and police powers to be given to the Northern Provincial Council.

In talks with Modi, Rajapakse reportedly promised to expedite the Sampur coal power project with India and expand economic and commercial cooperation. The agreement for the Sampur project was signed five years ago but its implementation has been repeatedly held up by the chauvinist anti-Indian opposition, provoking dissatisfaction in New Delhi. After returning to Colombo, Rajapakse ordered the attorney general to take steps to implement the power project.

The Sri Lankan president also issued an invitation for the Indian prime minister to visit Sri Lanka, which Modi accepted.

Behind the diplomatic niceties, however, sharp tensions remained. India's external affairs secretary, Sujatha Singh, issued a statement after talks between the two leaders indicating that Modi had bluntly insisted on a "process of national reconciliation" to ensure "aspirations of the Tamil community for a life of equality, justice, peace and dignity in united Sri Lanka." According to the statement, Modi declared that the "full implementation of the 13th amendment and going beyond would contribute to this process."

The 13th amendment to Sri Lankan constitution was part of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord signed in 1987 between Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. It promised limited autonomy on a provincial level to the Tamil elite in return for Indian assistance in disarming the LTTE. Successive Colombo governments have refused

to fully implement the amendment due to trenchant opposition from Sinhala chauvinist forces.

Modi's push for a power-sharing deal in Sri Lanka have nothing to do with defending the democratic rights of ordinary Tamil people. As well as appeasing the state government in Tamil Nadu, Modi is using the issue of "Tamil rights" to pressure the Rajapakse government for greater influence in Colombo.

New Delhi is well aware that Rajapakse wants India's support to ward off US pressure on Sri Lanka over human rights abuses. In March, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting passed a US-sponsored resolution calling for the UN Human Rights commissioner to initiate an investigation into human rights violations during the final months of the war against the LTTE.

A UN expert panel has already estimated that at least 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed during the final period of fighting, mainly by the Sri Lankan military's indiscriminate shelling and air attacks. India and the US both backed the Sri Lankan government's war. However, Washington is now using these war crimes to press the Colombo government to end its ties with China. This is part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling it militarily.

India abstained on the UNHRC resolution not to ease pressure on the Rajapakse government, but out of concern that it could face a similar intervention in the future. However, in exchange for its support, India has a price—it also wants Colombo to distance itself from Beijing. During his election campaign Modi and other BJP leaders accused the former Congress government of being soft towards China and indicated they would pursue a more aggressive policy.

Under the previous BJP-led government during 1999–2004, India developed close relations with the US that took further strides with the re-election of Congress. As part of the "pivot", the Obama administration is keen to develop even closer strategic relations with India under the Modi government.

The statement by India's external affairs secretary Singh making public Modi's insistence on implementing the 13th amendment has embarrassed the Rajapakse government. Cabinet minister and chief government whip Nimal Siripala de Silva told a press

conference: "No one will be able to dictate to us. It is our duty to find solutions to our own problems in our own ways."

De Silva's comments were clearly aimed at pacifying the Sinhala chauvinists including those within the government's own ranks. At the same time, he immediately added that the government was not about to start a diplomatic "confrontation" with India.

Rajapakse and his government are clearly worried that the Modi government will intensify its demands even as Colombo faces mounting pressure from Washington over human rights and war crimes.



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