

## Sri Lanka in 2018

### *Seeking a Way Forward*

#### ABSTRACT

The highlight of Maithripala Sirisena's presidency came in its very beginning when he ended a decade of autocracy by restoring democracy. And when rivalry with his own prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, devolved into a constitutional crisis, Sirisena was forced to abide by the democratic norms he had restored.

**KEYWORDS:** Sinhala, Sirisena, Sri Lanka, Tamil, Wickremesinghe

#### BACKGROUND

The year 2018 saw turmoil at the top of Sri Lanka's complex polity, with power dynamics shifting as the president, prime minister, and other major players struggled to keep their nation (and themselves) afloat amid tensions that late in the year prompted a constitutional crisis. This analysis starts with a brief background on the island nation, which in recent years had been rent by civil war, against a backdrop of 450 years of colonial rule that ended with Independence in 1948.

In a bid to stay in power, mainstream parties, dominated by Sinhalese politicians, placated the Sinhalese Buddhist majority by making Sinhalese the official language (1956) and giving Buddhism special status (1972). But these new constitutional moves, together with massive affirmative-action policies favoring the Sinhalese, resulted in discrimination against Tamil-speaking communities in the north and east. After moderate Tamil politicians failed to convince their Sinhalese counterparts to bring parity among the ethnic communities, disillusioned Tamil youth, who had been disenfranchised of their opportunities for higher education and employment, took to arms, demanding a separate state and organizing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

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*Asian Survey*, Vol. 59, Number 1, pp. 108–113. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2019 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2019.59.1.108>.

Eelam (LTTE), a rebel group. Accelerating tensions between Sinhalese and Tamil communities ensued, following a major pogrom by nationalist Sinhalese against the Tamil minority in the south of Sri Lanka in 1983. This event galvanized leading Tamil insurgents occupying areas in the north and east of the island.

After many attempts to regain control, the government in 2009, under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, prosecuted a decisive and intensely violent war, routing Tamil insurgents but also indiscriminately killing thousands of Tamil civilians. The end of the civil war that year witnessed a great number of human rights violations by the Sri Lankan army, with 100,000 people killed, many thousands dismembered, and hundreds of thousands displaced. Rajapaksa used the victory to consolidate his power, but his increasingly repressive measures, including tacit approval of Buddhist-nationalist violence against Christians and Muslims, spurred his loss in the presidential elections of January 2015 to one of his own cabinet ministers, Maithripala Sirisena.<sup>1</sup>

#### SIRISENA'S PRESIDENCY

Sirisena became president of Sri Lanka by joining hands with the United National Party, a traditional rival to his own Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which had split its support between him and Rajapaksa. He began his government by pledging transparency and accountability. To his credit, Sirisena started his reforms immediately by considerably reducing the executive powers of the presidency, reviving the independence of the judiciary and police, and restoring freedom of the press. But his precarious position in the unicameral parliament stemmed from an uneasy coalition with the United National Party; a crisis within his own party, where loyalties were split 50–50 with Rajapaksa supporters; and difficulty placating a Sinhalese majority sympathetic to Buddhist-nationalist ideology.

Under Sirisena, considerable if erratic progress was made in restoring civil and political liberties, strengthening independent commissions, setting up a special judiciary to expose widespread fraud committed by the previous government, passing a Right to Information Act to enable citizens to access official correspondence, and establishing an Office of Missing Persons to investigate the thousands

1. For detailed background, see Sree Padma, "Sri Lanka in 2017: Sluggish in Many Fronts," *Asian Survey* 58:1 (2018): 120–26.

missing from the civil war. Even though there were few tangible results and minimal progress toward redressing Tamil grievances, the Sinhalese majority would have been more supportive of Sirisena if he had bolstered infrastructure, kept government clean, and enabled a better quality of life.

But dissidence within and beyond Sirisena's government crippled it and led to the deterioration of his presidency. Perhaps the most significant factor was Sirisena's failure to communicate effectively with his cabinet, especially with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party. Consumed by personal rivalries, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe ended their political alliance ahead of local government polls held in February 2018. A disappointed public voted out both of their candidates in favor of candidates of their common nemesis, Rajapaksa, whose faction secured 45% of the votes. Both Sirisena and Wickramasinghe dove further into a state of personal vendetta. Remarkably, they separately reached out to the popular Rajapaksa, who was eager to be restored to power to avoid multiple charges of corruption against him and his family. In April, backed by Rajapaksa's faction, Sirisena unsuccessfully brought a no-confidence motion against Wickremesinghe in the parliament. Obsessed with unseating Wickremesinghe, by the end of October Sirisena had proved himself a man of contradictions. His two actions of October 27, ousting Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replacing him with Rajapaksa, were violations of the 19th amendment to the constitution, which he himself had engineered. Only a parliamentary vote of confidence can remove a Sri Lankan prime minister.

The crisis lasted 51 days, during which time Wickremesinghe had to prove his majority twice in the Parliament. An appeals court, followed by the Supreme Court on December 18, ruled that Sirisena's actions were unconstitutional. Having no other recourse, Sirisena agreed to cooperate and invited Wickremesinghe and his newly selected cabinet to form the government. While Wickremesinghe and his UNP emerged as victors, they do have a daunting task ahead to bring the country back to normalcy by not just resolving the current crisis but also determining the way forward to resolve immediate and long-standing issues, many of which are tangled up in a historical mesh.

## **SOCIAL WELFARE**

Even with a dense population (327 people per square kilometer), Sri Lanka, a small country (65,610 km<sup>2</sup>), has a good track record in providing health care

and education. It stands at the very top of South Asian countries by these two measures.<sup>2</sup> It provides free health care and free education throughout the island, with some exceptions in remote areas that have suffered greatly from the civil war. Adult literacy is at 98.8%, and infant mortality is low (8.4 per 1,000 live births). Communicable disease is relatively rare,<sup>3</sup> and recent quality-of-life estimates and indices continue to be upbeat. Sri Lanka's human development index, as measured by the UN and released in 2018, is 76th out of the 189 countries listed, better than all other South Asian countries, including India.<sup>4</sup>

Sirisen's government moved to protect the rights of the more than one million Sri Lankan workers abroad, especially in the Middle East, but much more is needed to protect them from personal abuse by employers abroad and to improve their working conditions and wages. In terms of gender equality, Sri Lanka lags behind, at the 80th position internationally. Although Sri Lanka accorded voting rights to both men and women as early as 1931, gender inequality still persists, visible in disparities in political participation, employment, promotion, and salaries, and in significant sexual harassment in public, sexual exploitation, and uneven homicide rates. In spite of its efforts, the government does not meet the minimum standards set by the UN for the elimination of human trafficking and discrimination against women, both within families and in the public space.<sup>5</sup>

The Colombo government has rejected attempts to repeal legal codes that criminalize same-sex relations between consenting adults. Violence against minorities has not completely abated, with ultra-nationalist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena still fomenting tensions between Sinhalese and Christian and Muslim religious communities. The government has failed to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act or reform the Witness and Victim Protection Law, so Tamil youth are still subjected to ethnic profiling, surveillance, and harassment. Breaking his promise to investigate war crimes committed by military personnel, Sirisen recently lauded the military in general as "war heroes" and implied that they would be protected from prosecution.

2. <<https://countryeconomy.com/countries/sri-lanka>>, accessed October 19, 2018.

3. <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/sri-lanka>>, accessed October 19, 2018.

4. <<http://www.dailymirror.lk/155617/SL-ranks-at-latest-Human-Development-Index>>, accessed October 19, 2018.

5. <<http://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/step-it-up/commitments/sri-lanka>>, accessed October 19, 2018.

## ECONOMY

Independent Sri Lanka inherited a plantation economy, and this historical legacy continues to play a crucial role. Other than agricultural products (primarily tea, rubber, and coconuts), manufactured garments are the only significant export, providing 44% of all export earnings. Sri Lanka relies heavily on the foreign currency brought in by citizens working as laborers in the Middle East, which constituted 62% of non-agricultural earnings in 2017. Since 2002, the poverty rate has fallen by 22.7%, hovering at only 4.1% in 2016/17. Sri Lanka stands 76th in the UN's ranking of countries by income inequality, above all other South Asian nations. However, these positive comparisons do not alone placate the concerns of many ordinary citizens. The completion of the Moragahakanda Kalu Ganga reservoir, the biggest in the Mahaveli system, brings irrigation to dry lands in the Rajarata, Wayamba, Central, and Eastern Provinces and parts of the Northern, providing a boost to those areas. In addition, the Moragahakanda hydroelectric power station now generates an impressive 25 megawatts.

The island would be financially much stronger if the government did not have to divert more than one-third of the public revenue to service Chinese loan payments incurred under the Rajapaksa regime for questionable infrastructure projects. To avoid drowning in further deficits, in 2016 the Sirisena government approached the IMF for a tax overhaul. The IMF and other foreign creditors are so far satisfied with government's reforms to raise revenue and reduce debt. This is reflected in the GDP, estimated at 3.1% in 2017, with the central bank forecasting growth between 5% and 5.5% in 2018.<sup>6</sup>

However, this positive tendency is not reflected in everyday life. There is no tradition of the government providing information about how the nation's budget is spent. Many government works have stalled, making the public nostalgic for Rajapaksa's regime. Since Sirisena's takeover, with rising taxes and a falling rupee, inflation has risen sharply, from 2% to 8%.<sup>7</sup> Food prices, especially for coconuts (the oil is essential to Sri Lanka cooking), doubled in 2018, and regular hikes in gasoline and diesel prices have only weakened Sirisena's popularity.

6. <<https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/sri-lanka-2018>>, accessed October 18, 2018.

7. <<https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/01/17/sri-lankas-president-is-struggling-to-keep-his-promises-of-reform>>, accessed October 12, 2018.

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE RELATIONS

Sirisena came to power criticizing Rajapaksa's deals with China, which allegedly involved bribery, overpricing, and breaching of government regulations. As a way to pay off monthly interest and maintain loans, Sirisena walked further into debt with the Chinese by leasing them the entire new seaport built in Rajapaksa's south coast hometown, Hambantota, along with 15,000 acres of land, for 99 years while allowing the expansion of a huge land reclamation project off the Port of Colombo.

Moreover, heavy losses were piling up at the remote Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, widely derided as the world's least busy and located in Rajapaksa's home region near Hambantota. It was financed and constructed by China. Sirisena's regime sought parties interested in jointly developing and operating the airport. No country except India, which is concerned with countering China's presence in its backyard, showed any interest in investing US\$ 190 million in this joint venture. In July 2018 Sri Lanka and India agreed in principle that India would take over operation of the airport.

For the same reason, India also showed interest in developing the Palaly Airport, near Jaffna in the island's north. These and other projects, such as an oil tank farm in Trincomalee and an economic and technology cooperation agreement, have yet to be ratified. With the constitutional crisis now at hand, it is difficult to ascertain whether any of these projects will get off the ground. However, other ongoing projects, such as building model villages with India's grant of US\$ 350 million and a solar power plant in Sampur, Trincomalee, continue as of now. A proposal to build a liquefied natural gas terminal in Kerawalapitiya, near Colombo, jointly by two firms from India and Japan, is also under consideration.