

**Retaining confidence: on Sri Lanka surviving the no-trust vote**

The resounding defeat of a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in Sri Lanka's parliament provides an opportunity for its bickering leaders to reassess their priorities. However, it may not end the prevailing political uncertainty as the three-way competition among President Maithripala Sirisena, Mr. Wickremesinghe and their common rival, former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, is likely to continue. The confidence of parliament has been numerically settled in favour of the Prime Minister now, with Tamil and Muslim parties backing him in the crucial vote, but in electoral terms the question of political supremacy is still open. For nearly two months, the power-sharing arrangement between Mr. Wickremesinghe's United National Party and President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party has been unravelling. Their national unity government came under strain after both parties, contesting separately, lost to a party backed by Mr. Rajapaksa in local body elections in February. Mr. Sirisena held Mr. Wickremesinghe responsible for the debacle, seeing in the results an expression of public anger against the government's poor performance on the economic front and a bond scandal in the central bank helmed by the Prime Minister's appointee as governor. A sudden outbreak of communal violence targeting Muslims last month worsened the political situation. The 'Joint Opposition' consisting of loyalists of Mr. Rajapaksa moved the no-confidence motion, despite lacking the numbers needed to bring down Mr. Wickremesinghe, citing the bond scam and the sectarian violence as major grounds. The aim was obvious: to deepen the wedge between the President and the Prime Minister, in the hope that some of the SLFP members now in the ranks of the government would abandon Mr. Wickremesinghe, and that he would face a leadership tussle within the UNP.

**Sri Lanka: A clarifying vote**

Mr. Sirisena's hostility to Mr. Wickremesinghe could not tilt the scales in favour of those battling for the latter's ouster. The fear of a return to the days of Mr. Rajapaksa's political dominance possibly deterred more members from joining the bandwagon. With the no-confidence motion out of their way, there ought to be some recognition that matters of far greater import await attention. The local body poll results have given sufficient indication of the people's concerns over the economy and unemployment. Investigation into past crimes and corruption seems to be slow. In addition, the process of framing a new and inclusive constitution needs to be expedited. Sri Lanka has made a commitment to the international community that it would promote accountability and reconciliation as part of its post-war transformation. This needs the President and the Prime Minister to work together, de-emphasising their political differences. The two leaders came together in 2015 and got a mandate from the people for good governance and institutional reform. Sri Lanka needs a reboot to bring these objectives back on track.

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