

## Recalling the mandate

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

Last week, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe survived a no-confidence motion against him, saving the country's first national unity government from a devastating fall. Now, with President Maithripala Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe agreeing to stay united and reshuffle the cabinet, the government can, at least to some extent, deliver on the mandate it received in 2015.

However, this is neither simple nor straightforward for the two leaders, after having tried to undermine each other in a visible power struggle within the ruling alliance. The local government polls in February saw the worst of it, especially with Mr. Sirisena going after the Prime Minister in public, citing a major scandal at the central bank under the leadership of a governor hand-picked by Mr. Wickremesinghe. The rift cost them and their parties — Mr. Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Mr. Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) — dearly in the polls. The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), a new political formation supported by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, outdid them in most councils.

After trading blame for the local election defeat, the coalition partners had reconciled their differences temporarily, agreeing on a partial cabinet reshuffle. Only weeks later, the power struggle erupted again. This time, some legislators from Mr. Sirisena's camp sided with Mr. Rajapaksa's supporters in parliament, known informally as the 'Joint Opposition' (JO), and mooted a confidence vote against the Prime Minister. Rather than stand with his Premier, Mr. Sirisena allowed some in his party to back the JO-led move. Days before the no-trust vote, he also took away the central bank, the policymaking National Operations Room and other institutions from Mr. Wickremesinghe's charge.

However, Mr. Wickremesinghe appears to have made the right moves to win the confidence vote in the House. He was backed in no small measure by the minority parties, particularly the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the official opposition in parliament. Simultaneously, he contained UNP backbenchers, promising substantive party reforms to address disgruntlement about his long hold — nearly 25 years — on the party leadership and accusation about an elite coterie within the party. A 12-member "politburo" has been elected to oversee internal reform by April 30.

To Mr. Wickremesinghe's credit, he has managed the revolt within the UNP, the challenge from the partnering SLFP and the threat to his office from the SLPP rather tactfully, at least for now. With his survival, the national unity government has a better chance of remaining stable for the last two years of its tenure.

But problems remain. The government may be stable, but not necessarily strong, for the two parties in the coalition see each other as adversaries, not partners. Mr. Wickremesinghe may have emerged stronger in parliament, but is not necessarily powerful with assured electoral support on the ground. Moreover, he has to work with Mr. Sirisena, significantly weakened since 16 of his own MPs who voted for the no-confidence motion now want to sit in the opposition along with Mr. Rajapaksa's allies. Effectively, the SLFP that Mr. Sirisena desperately tried to hold together has split further. His rival and former boss, Mr. Rajapaksa, seems poised for a comeback in the next general election.

Going by the message from the local polls, the initial promise of Mr. Sirisena's presidency has waned, and his growing tendency to pander to the hard-liners and strident nationalists among Sinhala Buddhists is hard to miss. The Prime Minister's economic policies, heavily tilted towards big international trade agreements and a greater role for private players, speak little to the most

basic economic concerns of a large section of the electorate, especially the rural Sinhalese and urban poor.

But if the two leaders cast aside their differences, they can focus on vigorous implementation of measures to address the grievances of their core electorate in the time that remains for their government. That will include resolving pending post-war concerns of the Tamils — particularly about private land that the military is yet to return to civilians who were displaced, the release of political prisoners and those forcefully disappeared.

Mr. Wickremesinghe must not take the TNA's vote in his favour for granted. Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe's ascent to power in 2015 would have also been impossible but for the Tamils and the Muslims. Equally, they could not have formed this historic national unity government without the support of a significant section of the Sinhalese. The leaders must swiftly reorient themselves to the 2015 mandate.

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