

Alliance divided: on Sri Lankan politics

Sri Lanka is in the throes of a political crisis after the two main parties in the ruling coalition suffered a dramatic defeat in the recent local government elections. Fissures between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, led by President Maithripala Sirisena, and the United National Party, led by [Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe](#), have deepened. The fragile 'national unity' government they run together is beset by instability and uncertainty. The local council polls, won resoundingly by the Sri Lanka People's Front, which has the backing of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, have brought to the fore popular disenchantment with the ruling parties, particularly over unemployment and rural distress caused by drought. Even prior to the elections, Mr. Sirisena disagreed often with his Prime Minister over policy measures. In his campaign, he highlighted an inquiry report that indicted some associates of Mr. Wickremesinghe in a mammoth scandal in the sale of government bonds by Sri Lanka's central bank. It was no surprise when the parties contested separately, but neither of them foresaw the outcome, which could mark the return of Mr. Rajapaksa as a major political force. After the results were out the alliance came under stress as Mr. Sirisena wanted the Prime Minister to resign, but the latter has made it clear he will stay on. Amidst efforts by each camp to form an alternative regime that would exclude the other, Mr. Wickremesinghe has said the coalition stands. There is talk of a Cabinet reshuffle as a means of settling their differences, but the durability of the alliance remains in doubt.

SLFP, UNP avert split, plan reshuffle

The coalition rides on the moral strength of the twin mandate of [2015: Mr. Sirisena's victory](#) in the presidential election over Mr. Rajapaksa, and the alliance's decisive win in the parliamentary elections held later. It is imperative to Sri Lanka's interest that the President and Prime Minister remain faithful to the original mandate, which was for good governance and institutional reform. Mr. Wickremesinghe says he is committed to it, and that he will take "corrective measures" on the economic front. The fact that economic disillusionment had in the past led to social unrest, conflict and extreme nationalism should not be forgotten. The alliance had obtained public support for its reform agenda and for showing a path away from authoritarian trends and institutional decay. It would be unfortunate if partisan interests are placed above the people's aspirations. The two leaders should seek to sink their differences and win back popular confidence. The coalition should continue to pursue the process of framing a new and inclusive constitution. It should fulfil its promises on reconciliation to the war-affected Tamils, whose backing proved crucial in their march to power. One electoral setback should not result in the project of national reconciliation falling victim to narrow political interests.

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