

## Pulling together

It is rare for the results of a local election to threaten the survival of the central government. But the fault lines in Sri Lanka's National Unity Government at its birth in August 2015 were too deep, and have become exposed at the first opportunity. President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe were voted to power within eight months of each other with a mandate that rejected the authoritarianism, nepotism, corruption and cronyism of the Mahinda Rajapaksa years.

The partnership of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe was meant to be the coming together of the two main rival parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, and the United National Party, at the helm of a multi-party effort for the sake of good governance and a just post-conflict order. But the failures on the economic front and apparent unwillingness to show zero-tolerance on corruption became all too glaring.

As the President and Prime Minister drifted apart, Rajapaksa acted as the magnet for disgruntled elements from the SLFP who began gravitating towards him. The UNP and the SLFP decided to contest the February 10 election to 340 municipal, urban and divisional councils independently. All three sides were looking at this as the semi-final for the 2020 parliamentary election.

An insecure Sirisena thought he could distance himself from incumbency and devoted his campaign to running down the UNP, the party heading his own government. But he brought himself no benefits either. Rajapaksa ended up sweeping the election through his proxy group, the Sri Lanka Podujana Party, and is now trying to force an early parliamentary election.

It is unfortunate that after the results, President Sirisena jumped the gun to make it clear that he did not want to work with Wickremesinghe anymore. Though both have now agreed to continue the present arrangement, it would serve no purpose — not even their own political ambitions, as the local election results have made all too clear — if their cohabitation became a platform for mutual acrimony. It is in Sri Lanka's best interests for both leaders to reaffirm their commitment to the ideals for which they came together to form the National Unity government — governance with accountability, transparency, and post-war reconciliation with justice and a settlement for Tamil demands.

The turmoil in Sri Lanka adds to the churn in the Indian Ocean region, with an authoritarian regime in the Maldives determined to hang on to power. Delhi's geopolitical interests arguably lie in the continuance of the present arrangement in Colombo and a change in Male. But trying to influence political outcomes in other countries in pursuit of strategic objectives is fraught with risk. It would be far better to inspire by example.

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