

'WON'T ALLOW OTHER COUNTRIES TO PUSH FOR SEPARATISM'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Gotabaya Rajapaksa Special Arrangement

Sri Lanka will not allow other countries to achieve their geopolitical needs by introducing “separatism under the guise of power devolution” in the island nation, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has said.

“The government does not wish to be associated with the power struggles in the Indian Ocean region by the global giants,” Mr. Rajapaksa said, adding that the sovereignty of Sri Lanka would not be betrayed, a report in the state-run *Daily News* said on Monday.

Speaking at a ‘Discussion with the Village’ event in the southern Matara district on Saturday, he appeared to be responding to India’s intervention at the UN Human Rights Council last week. Although India abstained from voting, it supported the international community’s call in the resolution for devolving political authority, holding of elections to provincial councils and implementation of the 13th Amendment that guarantees a measure of power devolution to the provinces.

Greater scrutiny

The Council adopted the resolution — with 22 countries backing it — that called for greater scrutiny of human rights in the country, including through an international evidence gathering mechanism, while flagging possible recurrence of human rights violations, citing recent policy decisions impacting Sri Lanka’s Tamil and Muslim minorities.

In addition to pegging the international call for devolution to the geopolitical needs of “other countries”, Mr. Rajapaksa’s remarks also linked the demand for greater power devolution to separatism, although Sri Lanka’s Tamil political leadership has repeatedly underscored the need for enhanced powers for provinces within a “united, undivided and indivisible” Sri Lanka.

“We will face the Geneva challenge without fear. We will never succumb to pressures. We are a free nation. We will not be a victim of big power rivalry in the Indian Ocean,” the President said, a week after the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution.

The statement assumes significance in the wake of persisting calls from some within his government, including senior Ministers, for the abolition of the provincial council system and the 13th Amendment.

Less than a fortnight before the vote on the Sri Lanka resolution in Geneva, amid Colombo’s hectic diplomatic outreach seeking support from members, Mr. Rajapaksa “instructed the relevant parties to take steps to expedite the provincial council elections by either withdrawing the Provincial Council Amendment Bill or rectifying its anomalies,” a statement issued by the Presidential Media division said on March 13.

Provincial elections

According to local media reports, the holding of provincial council elections is likely to be discussed in Monday's [March 29] weekly Cabinet meeting.

After being elected President in November 2019, Mr. Rajapaksa stated that he would focus more on development rather than devolution. In an interview to *The Hindu* on November 30, 2019, during his first visit to New Delhi after assuming office, Mr. Rajapaksa said the previous push for "devolution, devolution, devolution" had not changed the situation in Sri Lanka.

Full devolution of powers as promised by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1987 could not be implemented "against the wishes and feeling of the majority [Sinhala] community," he noted, while the legislation envisages power devolution to all provinces in the country, including those with a Sinhala-majority.

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