

THE SRI LANKA CRISIS IS A CAUSE FOR CONCERN TO INDIA

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Developments have come at a rapid pace in Sri Lanka since President Maithripala Sirisena appointed his predecessor Mahinda Rajapaksa as the prime minister after sacking incumbent Ranil Wickremesinghe on October 26. Mr Wickremesinghe described the move as unconstitutional and said he was determined to prove his majority in Parliament. The numbers appeared to be in favour of Mr Wickremesinghe when Mr Sirisena dissolved Parliament and called snap elections for January 5. Adding yet another twist to the developments was the decision on Sunday by Mr Rajapaksa and 44 others to quit the Sri Lanka Freedom Party led by Mr Sirisena and join the Sri Lanka Podujana Peremuna, a party established by Mr Rajapaksa's brother. Sri Lanka is witnessing an intense power struggle, with long-gestating problems between Mr Sirisena and Mr Wickremesinghe coming out into the open. Three key political parties, including the one headed by Mr Wickremesinghe, that have an absolute majority in Parliament and an election commissioner have now challenged Mr Sirisena's dissolution of the legislature in the Supreme Court.

Mr Sirisena's actions have been widely criticised by the international community and China is the only country so far that has recognised the appointment of Mr Rajapaksa, who relied heavily on Beijing for political and financial support during his controversial tenure as president. One of the key reasons for differences between Mr Sirisena and Mr Wickremesinghe was whether Sri Lanka should tilt towards China or India. However, when India studies these developments, it would be wise not to look at them only from the prism of China. Rather, it must take into account the consequences for India of continuing instability in the island nation.

For now, India has adopted a "wait and watch" attitude towards the crisis in Sri Lanka though officials privately acknowledge that such political upheaval in a strategically located neighbour is a cause for concern. India's top leadership will most certainly have begun working the phones with all channels in an attempt to resolve the crisis and uncertainty as developments in Sri Lanka will have an impact on Tamil Nadu. The lessons learnt from handling the earlier political crisis in the Maldives will be of help to the foreign policy mandarins and in the long run, New Delhi can help by working with its neighbour to strengthen democratic institutions, something for which it is infinitely more qualified than other regional powers.

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