

RAJAPAKSA'S RETURN COULD LEAD TO CLOSER SRI LANKA-CHINA TIES

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Yet again, one of India's key neighbours has been roiled by a political crisis that has all the signs of being a messy and protracted affair. Tensions had been brewing between Sri Lankan President, Maithripala Sirisena, and former premier, Ranil Wickremesinghe, for some months now, especially over economic matters, but few had anticipated the sudden removal of the prime minister on Friday. Wickremesinghe's ouster paved the way for the return of strongman and former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had stepped up efforts to return to centre stage ever since his party scored a major win in local elections in February. The crisis took another turn on Saturday when Mr Sirisena suspended parliament until November 16 just as Mr Wickremesinghe was asserting his right to be given a chance to prove his majority in Parliament.

Once Mr Sirisena had decided to end his alliance with Mr Wickremesinghe, the right thing for the president to do would have been to dissolve Parliament in order to hold elections. The developments appear to suggest that Mr Sirisena and Mr Rajapaksa are more intent on retaining power and consolidating their positions before a presidential election due in 2019 and a national election the following year. Mr Rajapaksa, who crushed the Tamil Tiger rebels after a 26-year civil war, continues to face allegations of war crimes, corruption and nepotism, though he has denied any wrong doing. His return has already triggered fears in some quarters about a slide back to an era of repression of political opponents and the media.

Mr Rajapaksa, who continues to be very popular in Sri Lanka for shaping the victory over the LTTE, is also perceived as being closer to China, though he visited New Delhi in September for talks with India's top leadership, while Mr Wickremesinghe was seen to be closer to India. Mr Rajapaksa's return could lead to closer ties between Sri Lanka and Beijing at a time when India is engaged in a gruelling race for influence with China in the neighbourhood. Despite the fears of Sri Lanka sinking deeper into a "debt trap", Mr Rajapaksa could again turn to China for renewed funding for major projects. So far, India has not formally reacted to the events in Sri Lanka, other than officials saying they are closely monitoring the developments in Colombo. The foreign policy czars in India could redeploy some of the lessons they learnt from the political uncertainty in the Maldives earlier this year while handling the unfolding situation in Sri Lanka.

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