

ISAS Brief

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Politics of ‘Good Governance’ in Sri Lanka’s Parliamentary Polls

Sri Lanka’s latest parliamentary election, slated for 17 August 2015, is important not only for the political-comeback bid by former President Mahinda Rajapakse but also for the focus on issues of ‘good governance’ in a climate of higher prime ministerial stakes than before.

Ayesha Kalpani Wijayalath¹

The 15th parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, set for 17 August 2015, acquire unusual significance following the adoption of the 19th Amendment, which enhanced the power of the Prime Minister in what still remains a presidential system. With the prime minister being accountable to parliament, this general election will be watched closely in the new context. The overall political climate in the country had undergone a dramatic change, with Mr Maithripala Sirisena defeating the-then incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse in the election for the country’s chief executive in January this year. Mr Sirisena, who had earlier parted company with Mr Rajapakse for

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contesting that election, announced a 100-day programme aimed at bringing about “good governance”. As part of this programme, he also promised to hold fresh parliamentary elections. Although the previous parliament was dissolved almost four months after the 100-day deadline, the current general election is still seen to be in line with the President’s plans.

It is under this backdrop that an essential question arises – Can the country expect the same focus on good governance as was witnessed on 8 January when the presidential poll was held? Though the question cannot be entirely answered until the results are announced, the following developments and factors have a significant bearing on the minds of the voters:

1. ‘Bring back Mahinda’ Campaign and Sirisena’s Decision

The victory of Mr Sirisena did not erode the popularity of Mr Rajapakse in its entirety among the majority Sinhala-Buddhist masses. Unlike any other outgoing president or prime minister, Mr Mahinda Rajapakse gathered his supporters at Madamulana, his private residence in Hambantota and addressed the masses on several occasions, highlighting the fact that President Sirisena won the elections as a result of minority votes. This, according to Mr Rajapakse’s supporters, will lead to the re-emergence of the time of terror and international intervention to the detriment of Sri Lanka’s territorial integrity.

With the dissolution of parliament, people were eagerly waiting to know whether Mr Sirisena would offer Mr Rajapakse their party’s nomination for the parliamentary poll. There were various rumours circulating until it was officially announced, to the dismay of the rainbow-coalition of revolutionists, that President Sirisena had decided to offer to nominate Mr Rajapakse to contest under the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA).² This created shock waves in the country. While some felt jubilant, the others felt dejected. Some attempted to rationalise and justify President Sirisena’s action; for some others, it was nothing but a revolution betrayed. Never in Sri Lanka had such ambiguity and uncertainty metamorphosed into a political crisis. In this, President Sirisena seemed to be finding a compromise between his supporters, (Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the Janatha Vimukthi

² President Sirisena is the leader of the UPFA.

Peramuna (JVP) et al), on one side, and Mr Rajapakse and the majority Sri Lanka Freedom Party's parliamentarians. The people remained the audience, spell bound by the latest developments.

2. Sirisena's Address to the Nation

It wasn't until sometime after the controversial decision regarding the nomination of Mr Rajapakse that Mr Sirisena decided to address the nation on 14 July 2015. It was an exposition of the reasons behind his decision, the main argument being that had he not offered nomination to Mr Rajapakse, he would be deliberately marginalising him and weakening the UPFA/ Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).³ Not awarding nomination to Mr Rajapakse would then be a rallying point for the former President and his allies to strengthen his popularity. This was considered injurious to Mr Sirisena's own support base. Mr Sirisena implied that, instead of acting as an undemocratic leader, he now gave the platform to Mr Rajapakse to prove his popularity.⁴ Further, President Sirisena feared a split in the UPFA had he refused to nominate Mr Rajapakse. However, it was ironical to that eminent members of the SLFP and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), both belonging to the UPFA, joined the United National Party (UNP)⁵ and formed the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG), thus, eventually creating a split in the UPFA itself.

The crux of this speech, however, was President Sirisena's pledge not to reverse the trajectory of a "new era, culture of good governance and rule of law", for which he had got a mandate. He firmly stated that he would not appoint the former president as prime minister even if the UPFA were to win a majority of seats in parliament, as there were other suitable leaders in the party to be appointed as PM.⁶ This address to the nation interpreted as a blow for the electoral prospects of Mr Rajapakse and the UPFA, as this

³ UPFA is a political alliance in which the SLFP is the major constituent.

⁴ Perera, Jehan, "Derailing Former President Rajapakse's Comeback Bid", Colombo Telegraph, 20 July 2015. Available at [/www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/derailing-former-president-rajapaksas-comeback-bid](http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/derailing-former-president-rajapaksas-comeback-bid)

⁵ UNP is headed by Mr Ranil Wickramasinghe

⁶ Perera, Jehan, "Derailing Former President Rajapakse's Comeback Bid", Colombo Telegraph, 20 July 2015. Available at [/www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/derailing-former-president-rajapaksas-comeback-bid](http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/derailing-former-president-rajapaksas-comeback-bid)

address might influence the voters to give priority to issues of corruption and abuse of power.⁷

3. The Other Players: JVP & TNA

- ***Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)***

The JVP is, by far, the most popular party amongst the educated Sinhalese in the country. It is seen today not only as the third force but also the only alternative to the two-party neo-liberal politics, i.e. the UNP and the SLFP and their respective coalitions which have held power since Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) gained dominion status.⁸

The JVP had proved itself, in the brief period it had Ministers in the national cabinet (2005-2006). They championed the causes of anti-corruption, accountability and transparency in handling public funds. It is known to be a disciplined party with talented orators, majority of whom are graduates. It was also an architect of the regime change in January 2015.

Despite being constantly accused of committing atrocities during the 1971 and 1989 insurgencies, the JVP has indeed come a long way in proving itself, both by ideology and practice, to be worthy of being part of the country's legislature. It is expected that the current parliamentary elections will be advantageous for the JVP in securing a considerable number of seats.

- ***Tamil National Alliance (TNA)***

The TNA, being the largest Tamil political party in the country, enjoys exclusive power in the North and East provinces. It is expected to play a crucial role in the new parliament.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Weerawardhane, Chaminda, "Sri Lanka's JVP: Political prospects & challenges", Colombo Telegraph, 22 July 2015. Available at www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sri-lankas-jvp-political-prospects-challenges/

Observers also predict that the TNA will win over 15 seats from the North as it hardly has any competition in the province.⁹

However, upon the launch of its election manifesto, the TNA once again espoused its aspirations in terms of devolution of power. The TNA stressed the need for self-determination and the re-merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces under a federal structure as a solution to the North-East problem. The manifesto also called for the release of the UNHRC's report on the alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka.¹⁰ The TNA being part of the change in January 2015, observers believe that its election manifesto might be detrimental to the tactics of the Good Governance Front in attracting Sinhala-Buddhist votes.¹¹

4. March 12 Declaration

There was much controversy regarding the elected MPs in the last parliament as many were said to have been elected largely due to their monetary power and by earning money through corrupt deals.¹² It was evident that professionals and intellectuals moved away from contesting elections. Members of the legislature were accused of murder, illegal business transactions and policies against environment and basic rights of the people.¹³

It is under this backdrop that the March 12 Declaration was thought of to transform the political culture of Sri Lanka. This was signed by the political party leaders including President Sirisena. This Declaration urged all political parties to adhere to the following basic principles in nominating candidates¹⁴:

- I. Should not be a criminal

⁹ Jayakody, Rasika, "President circumvents Central Committee Trap", Daily News, 8 August 2015. Available at <http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=features/president-circumvents-central-committee-trap>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Abeygunawardane, Vidya, "Wake up with March 12 Declaration for a sound Parliament", Daily Mirror, 29 June 2015. Available at <http://www.dailymirror.lk/77863/wake-up-with-march-12-declaration-for-a-sound-parliament>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Abeygunawardane, Vidya, "Wake up with March 12 Declaration for a sound Parliament", Daily Mirror, 29 June 2015. Available at <http://www.dailymirror.lk/77863/wake-up-with-march-12-declaration-for-a-sound-parliament>

- II. Free of bribery and corruption
- III. Free of anti-social trades
- IV. Environment friendly
- V. Not abusing authority
- VI. Free of abusive financial contracts
- VII. Close to their electors
- VIII. Adequate opportunities for women and youth

This timely initiative and the President's commitment to fulfil good governance criteria for electoral office will also have a bearing on the voters.

Sri Lanka Political Weather Analysis – June 2015

The Social Scientists' Association (SSA)¹⁵ polled 1,500 people across Sri Lanka on a variety of issues ranging from economy to ethnic tensions and obtained their views and opinions. According to the SSA report, some of the key questions and findings are as follows¹⁶:

¹⁵ The Social Scientists' Association (SSA) is an organisation working to investigate the way in which social change is contouring the multiple realities faced by communities in Sri Lanka and South Asia. Available at <http://ssalanka.org/>

¹⁶ Sri Lanka Political Weather Analysis Report. Available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/269576572/Sri-Lanka-Political-Weather-Analysis-June-2015>

1. Ethnic Relations

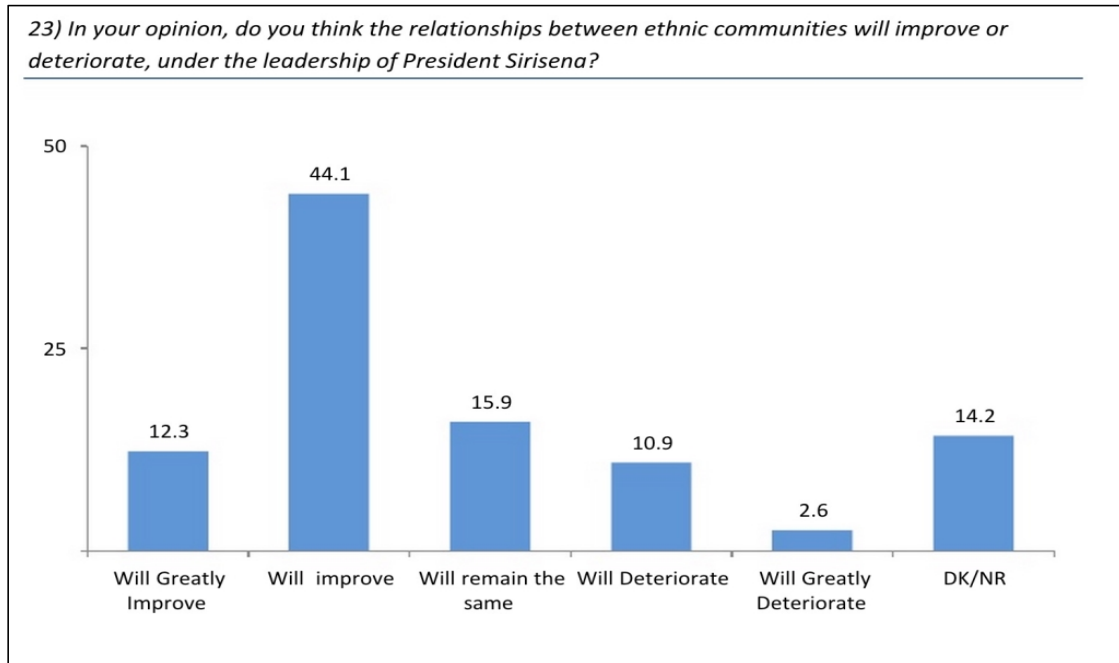


Figure 1: 44.1% of the respondents trust President Sirisena to improve ethnic relations. The numeral 23 refers to the sequencing of the questions posed in the survey. DK/NR stand for Don't Know/No Response

2. Good governance

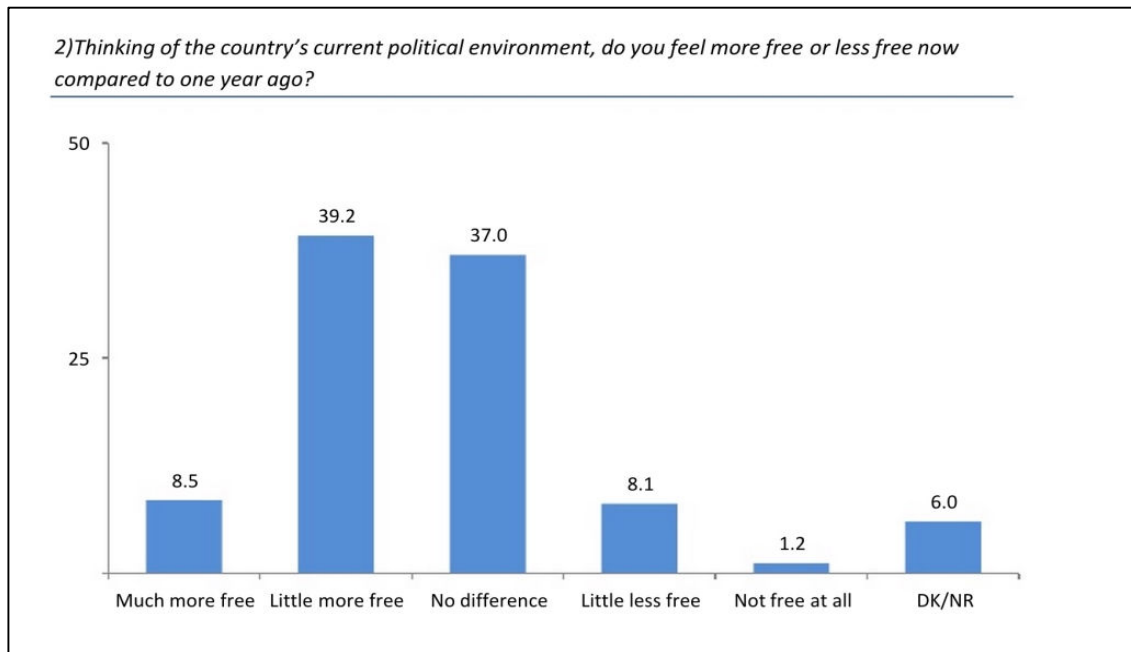


Figure 2: Few people seem to feel less free whereas more people feel free or no difference. The numeral 2 refers to the sequencing of the questions posed in the survey. DK/NR stand for Don't Know/No Response.

3. Rule of law

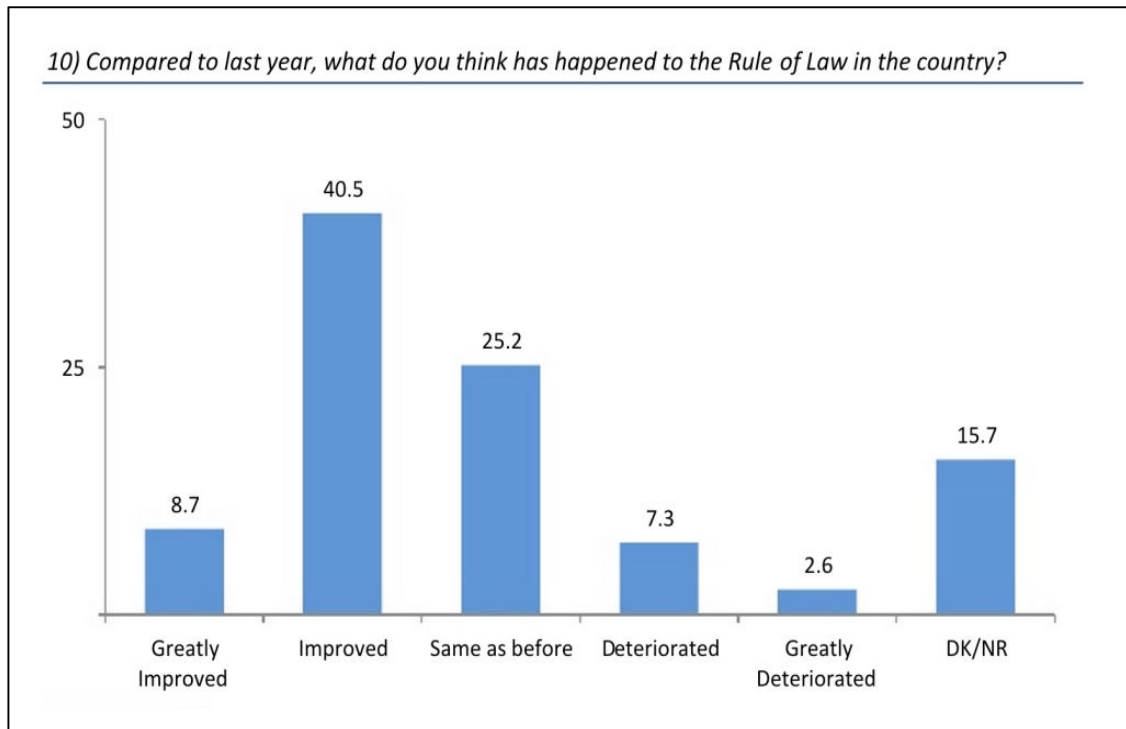


Figure 3: 49% of the respondents feel that the rule of law has improved whilst less than 10% feel that it has deteriorated. Numeral 10 refers to the sequencing of the questions posed in the survey. DK/NR stand for Don't Know/No Response.

4. Infrastructure

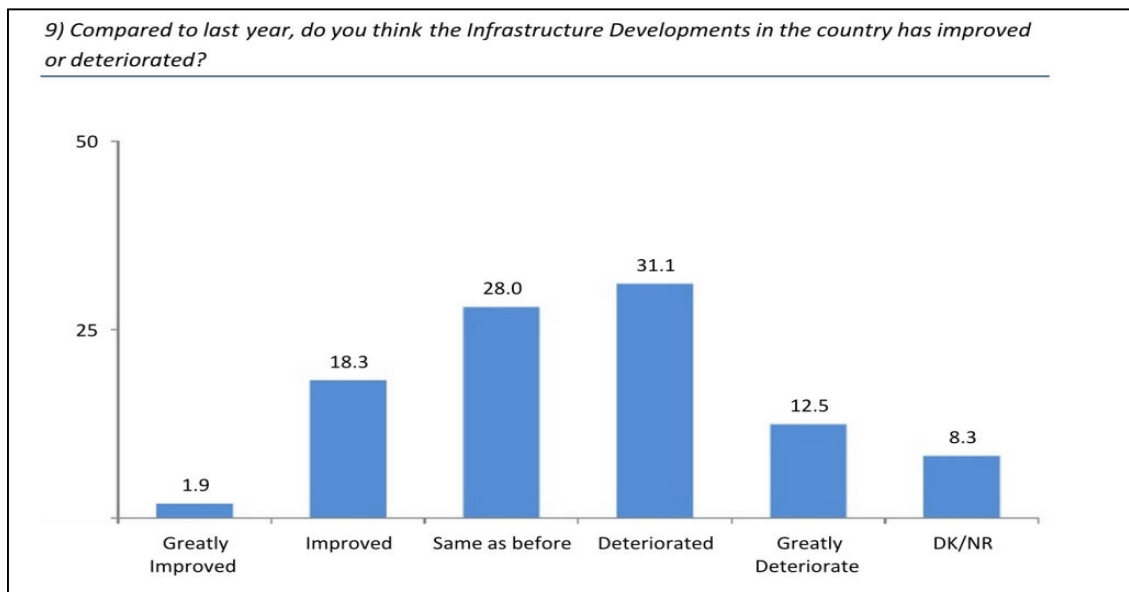


Figure 4: The people broadly agree that infrastructure projects have declined. The numeral 9 refers to the sequencing of the questions posed in the survey. DK/NR stand for Don't Know/No Response.

5. Government under President Sirisena and PM Ranil Wickramasinghe

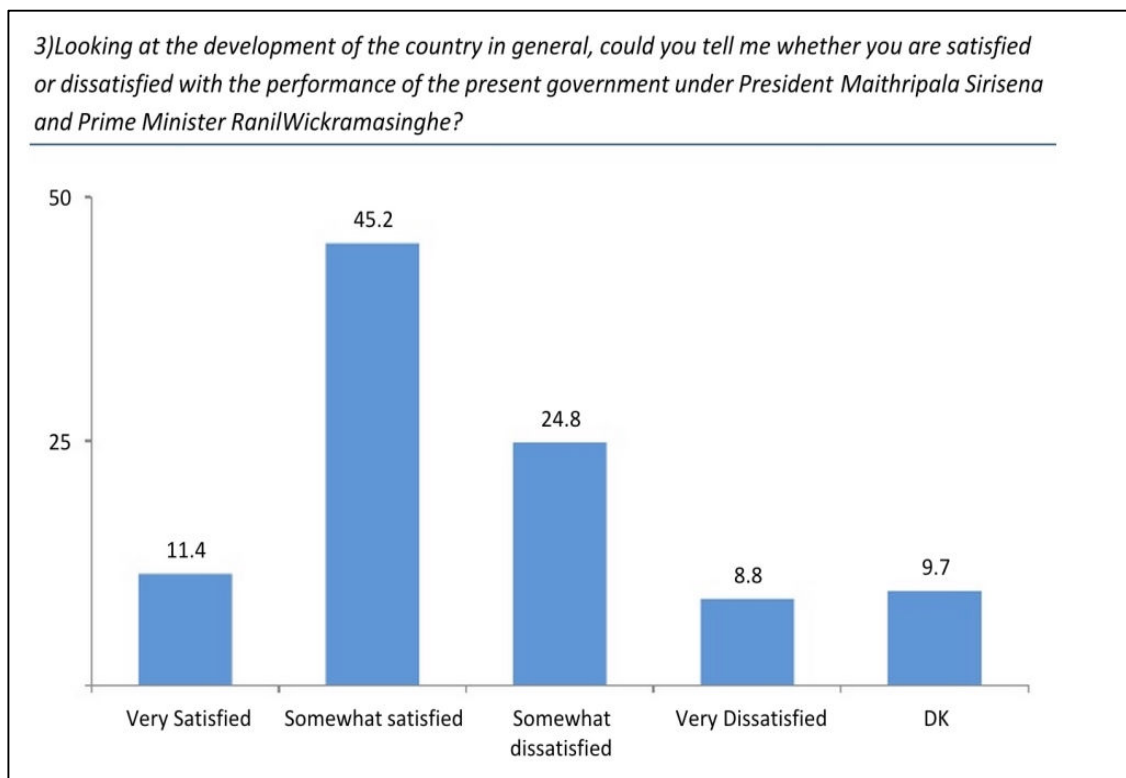


Figure 5: 56.6% of the respondents are satisfied with the government under President Sirisena and PM Ranil Wickramasinghe. The numeral 3 refers to the sequencing of the questions posed in the survey. DK/NR stand for Don't Know/No Response.

Conclusion

The above information and findings do give us a glimpse of the Sri Lankan political climate. The current government's approval ratings are pretty high, but one should also take note that these specific answers in the survey will not be entirely decisive when electing an MP from one's constituency, unlike in the case of electing an individual in a nation-wide presidential election. In a parliamentary election, the thrust of the voter is to ensure a majority in parliament from one's preferred party. Sri Lankans are known to be deeply partisan in politics, as it is a tradition to vote for the party that their families have been voting since generations. The breakthrough needed to go beyond this tradition will have to come from the younger generation which is expected to swing the final result. Hence, the floating votes are a decisive factor in this election, this being a historic

one, given that considerable amount of power is vested in the prime minister under the 19th Amendment.

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