

Sri Lanka's future after the historic election

By Chandrani Sarma

Singapore

WHEN Mahinda Rajapaksa called for an early presidential election last November, with no strong opposition candidate, his victory was clear. But a week after this announcement, Maithripala Sirisena announced his resignation as health minister to stand as a presidential candidate and changed the course of Sri Lanka's history.

In a historic turn, about 40 political parties jointly chose him as a common candidate to run against Mr Rajapaksa. Two months later, amid huge public celebrations, Jan 9, 2015, saw the shocking end of a decade-long rule by Mr Rajapaksa and the swearing in of Mr Sirisena as the seventh president of Sri Lanka.

Due to its strategic location, Sri Lanka's presidential election was also of heightened foreign interest. The whole world watched closely to see how the election results and the post-election period would unfold.

During Mr Rajapaksa's term, Sri Lanka became the fastest-growing South Asian nation, with trade deficit decreasing every year and several infrastructure projects being undertaken. However, his popularity had been fading due to alleged abuse of power and nepotism; his family members reportedly occupied important government posts and were estimated to control half of the country's budget.

It was widely suspected that even if Mr Sirisena won, the transfer of power would not be peaceful. However, with a fairly peaceful conduct of the election, the manner in which Mr

Rajapaksa accepted the results and upheld democracy is commendable.

As Sri Lanka enters a new era, a lot is still unclear about its future; the people eagerly wait to see what reforms the new government will bring to ensure economic and political security. With the incumbency removed, the cohesive force binding the new and diverse alliance may weaken. Mr Sirisena would have to ensure cordial relations within the alliance, in order to avoid any political unrest.

Post-2009, Sri Lanka's impressive GDP (gross domestic product) growth rate has been primarily due to infrastructure development. However, it has left the nation with a huge foreign debt. The new president would have to adopt stronger, more robust, economic reforms that focus on productivity-enhancement for long-term growth. In the recent past, Sri Lanka has received lending of US\$500 million from the Chinese government – the highest from a single country.

In return, Chinese submarines were allowed to dock at Colombo port. The new government aims to ensure a more balanced foreign policy; rebuild ties with India and the West and undo the last regime's over-dependence on China. With several Chinese-funded investment projects already underway in the island nation, this may have repercussions on Sri Lanka's economy.

Apart from adopting sound reforms, Mr Sirisena's success in living up to the people's expectation would also depend on not repeating mistakes of the past. The executive presidency, which was introduced in 1978, gave unparalleled power to the

president; a power allegedly abused by the last president and lack of political will has ensured its existence.

It remains to be seen whether Mr Sirisena, after realising its enormous power abolishes the same, along with restoring independence of the judiciary and repealing the amendment that gives any president indefinite terms in office, as promised in his manifesto.

Despite Mr Sirisena's failure to reach out to ethnic minorities, their support played a critical role in his victory. Tamil-dominated areas of the north and east saw a greater voter turnout than in the past, and are speculated to have heavily voted for him. His government's action towards minority rights may become pivotal in the prevention of resurgence of militancy in the years to come and is an opportunity that should not be lost.

Mr Sirisena's election manifesto promises sustainable economic development, energy and food security, employment, and media freedom to its people. In the path to achieve these goals, a number of hurdles lie in front of the new government, and though reforms may take time to show the desired results, there is jubilation on the streets of Sri Lanka that suggests hope, enthusiasm and the triumph of democracy.

■ The writer is research assistant at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. She can be contacted at isaschsa@nus.edu.sg. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS