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### **SRI LANKA PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2015: AN OVERVIEW**

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The astounding victory of the Maithripala Sirisena has not only stunned Rajapaksa, but also the international community. Political discourses are brimming with the analysis of this magnificent triumph. Resonant in views of Dr. Oliver Walton, University of Bath, “Sri Lankans are shocked at the scale and manner of Rajapaksa’s defeat, which has brought his tenure to an abrupt halt after nine highly controversial years.”<sup>i</sup> News reports are flooded with the amazement and have equated Sirisena with ‘dark horse’, ‘true son of the Sri Lankan soil’ ‘president of new era’, ‘the mild-mannered giant-killer,’ etc. On one hand where the recent victory is seen as a new dawn ushering in the Sri Lanka, on other hand it is also seen as a challenging time for Sirisena both at home and abroad. The article is an attempt to present an overview on Sri Lanka Presidential Elections 2015 in a nutshell.

#### **Sri Lanka Presidential Elections 2015:**

The Sri Lanka Presidential Election 2015 was held on 08 January 2015. Overall around 19 candidates contested for the elections, out of which two main opponents emerged, viz a viz, Rajapaksa from more than the decade old party, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and Maithripala Sirisena from newly created party, the New Democratic Front (NDF). Although there were more than a dozen of contestants, however the fight between the two main contenders was quite evident during the elections as well as after the result. The other candidates lost the elections even before it started. The Media Release 27, issued by the Sri Lankan Commissioner of Election, Mahinda Deshapriya, clearly depicts the picture election campaigning in these lines, “ *It is clearly evident that the ten candidates out of 19 who are contesting for the presidential elections which is to be conducted on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2015 are not actively campaigning to promote their candidature. By now,*



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*three of them declare their consent to support to another candidate in public. It is also reported that another few attempts of candidates who declare their support or resignation and therefore promote or demote the candidature of another candidate.*"<sup>ii</sup> Later on, after elections result were declared, the election commission confiscated the bonds, worth Rs 9,00,000, deposited by 17 candidates who contested in the presidential elections as none of the 17 candidates were able to acquire the minimum benchmark of more than 1% of the votes.

### The elections and voting profile:

An estimated 70 % of the populace voted, around fifteen million voters casted their votes in total nine provinces, including 22 districts and around 12,314 polling booths spread across the country. The provinces are as follows: <sup>iii</sup>

S.No	Province	Districts
1.	Central Province	Matale, Nuwara-Eliya, Kandy
2.	Eastern Province Ampara	Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee
3.	Northern Province	Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Mannar
4.	Southern Province	Galle, Matara, Hambantota
5.	Western Province	Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara
6.	North Western Province	Kurunegala, Puttalam
7.	North Central Province	Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa
8.	Uva Province	Badulla, Moneragala



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9.	Sabaragamuwa Province	Ratnapura, Kegalle
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### The results:

The dramatic elections were an overconfident move by then, ruling president Mahinda Rajapaksa to secure his position as the President for the third consecutive term. As per the mandate, Maithripala Sirisena acquired 51.28 % while Mahinda Rajapaksa secured 47.58 %. In figures although Sirisena secured 6,217,162 votes, Rajapaksa got 5,768, 090 and others contestants' secured 138,201 votes. Nevertheless, in the close contest, Sirisena succeeded with narrow margin of 449,072 votes.

In districts where Maithripala Sirisena succeeded are: Jaffna (74.42%) Vanni (78.47%), Trincomalee (71.84%), Anuradhapura (53.59%), Polonnaruwa (57.8%), Puttalam (50.04%), Mahanuwara (54.56%) , Digamadulla (65.22%), Nuwara-Eliya (63.88%), Colombo (55.93%), Gampaha (49.83%), Badulla (49.21%) and Batticaloa (81.62%). In districts where Mahinda Rajapaksa succeeded are Kurunegala (53.46%), Matale (51.41%), Moneragala (61.45%), Kalutara (52.65%), Hambantota (63.02%), Ratnapura (55.74%), Kegalle (51.82%), Matara (57.81%).<sup>iv</sup>

### A glance at Maithripala Sirisena political career:

Born on 3 September 1951, young Sirisena's interest in politics was quite evident during his school days. Later on he developed close association with Comrade Shanmugadasan who headed the China Wing of the Sri Lanka Communist Party. At the age of seventeen (17) he became the General Secretary of the Polonnaruwa Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) Youth Organization.<sup>v</sup>

Talking on his deep ties with Comrade Shanmugadasan, Sirisena in one of his interview said, *"My father was a diehard UNPer and had a high regards for Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake. But I was inclined towards the Communist Party (CP - Peking) led by N Shanmugadasan from my tender age. I*



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*was a supporter of the Communist Party from the age of 12"....I called Shanmugadasan 'comrade' but the age difference between us was more than 40 years. My father used to ask me as to how a 50 year old man became my comrade".<sup>vi</sup>*

Subsequently, in 1971 he was detained and jailed for 15 months for his alleged involvement in Marxists led revolt known as *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* Insurrection, against then ruling Government of Ceylon (Former name of Sri Lanka) under the Prime Ministership of Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Later on he was again arrested after eight years for organizing a public protest.<sup>vii</sup> In 1989 his political journey brought him to the Sri Lanka's parliament as a member of parliament from Polonnaruwa district.

Thereafter in 1994, Sirisena held various important positions in the departments of irrigation, agriculture, environment & natural resources and health etc. His agricultural background, past professional experiences in various fields provides him extensive knowledge to work at grass root level for the betterment of both rural and urban population.

To conclude, the recent elections in Sri Lanka reflects how desperate the Sri Lankan population was to change the political order of the day and their dissatisfaction with Rajapaksa's political functioning. However, in the midst of the celebrations, the newly elected government under the leadership of Sirisena has numerous and multidimensional challenges like revamping the existing Chinese centric foreign policy shaped by his predecessor, mending the ties with the western countries, especially on issues of cooperation with reference to human rights abuse during the civil war, controversial Tamil issue, power distribution between north and east regions, and withdrawal of troops from Northern region etc. The future seem to be positive, the expectations quite high, but how far Sirisena's government will be able to deliver is yet to be seen.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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i Weerawardhana, Dr. Chaminda. "Sri Lanka Stunned? Sri Lanka's 2015 Presidential Poll and [un]warranted Exclamations." Groundviews. January 12, 2015. Accessed January 15, 2015. <http://groundviews.org/2015/01/12/sri-lanka-stunned-sri-lankas-2015-presidential-poll-and-unwarranted-exclamations/>.

ii See more: [http://www.slections.gov.lk/pdf/pre2015/media%20release/MR\\_27%20English.pdf](http://www.slections.gov.lk/pdf/pre2015/media%20release/MR_27%20English.pdf)

iii "Administrative Organization of the Department." Department of Sri Lanka Elections. Accessed January 14, 2015. <http://www.slections.gov.lk/ep.html>.

iv Results have been taken from the Department Of Elections, Srilanka website.

v Rasika Somarathna, "'A true son of the Sri Lankan soil,'" *Daily News*, January 10, 2015, accessed January 11, 2015, <http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=features/true-son-sri-lankan-soil>.

vi "Sirisena says he comes from a strong UNP family," *Dailymirror.lk*, April 04, 2014, accessed January 10, 2015, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/news/45444-sirisena-says-he-comes-from-a-strong-unp-family.html>.

vii Shihar Aneez, "Sri Lanka elections: The 'traitor' standing between President Rajapaksa and an unprecedented third term," *The Independent*, accessed Tuesday 06 January 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/sri-lanka-elections-the-traitor-standing-between-president-rajapaksa-and-an-unprecedented-third-term-9961382.html>