

## WATCHING BRIEF: A NEW ERA FOR SRI LANKA

**On 9 January 2015 a Presidential election in Sri Lanka led to an unexpected change of leader. Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had dominated the country in recent years, lost the election to his former Minister for Health, Maithripala Sirisena, thanks to a coalition of opposition groupings and strong voting support from the ethnic minorities. The paper updates the situation.**

For more than a decade, Sri Lanka has suffered from increasingly authoritarian rule and nepotism, especially since the ending of the civil war in 2009. Mr Sirisena deserted the government last year and became the opposition candidate in November. It was notable that the election was held peacefully and that the outgoing president did not seek to prevent the smooth transition of power (despite some reports that he had considered seeking military support for this).

The general response to the change has been positive. The new President has moved quickly to appoint as Prime Minister the leader of one of the other main opposition groups, Ranil Wickremesinghe, and to institute a 100-day program prior to the Parliamentary elections in April, to fight corruption and build a national consensus. A National Executive Council has been appointed including representatives from most of the mainstream political parties. The term of the President is to be set at 5 years. Jehan Perera of the National Peace Council has made the following points about the changes:

- President Sirisena has started well by moving to implement the promises he made during the campaign. An attitude of power sharing pervades the new government.
- The previous government's actions were seen as largely taken by Mr Rajapaksa and his close associates, without participation by others.
- The new government has begun to address the serious ethnic conflict that still hampers national unity, by initiating discussions with all parties about devolution of power under the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution, and by consulting India and the United Nations about how to deal with war crimes and human rights violations.

The Chief Minister of the Northern Province, Justice C.V. Wigneswaran, in a statement on 2 February, welcomed the new government. "The replacement of the military governors in the North and East with respected members of the foreign and civil services... signifies a symbolic step in the right direction in commencing the process to restore civilian administration and also hopefully in addressing the issue of demilitarisation".

Some commentators have stressed that the new government still has 'baggage' from the past,

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and that the challenges are great. However it appears that there is potential for significant change in the country, for the benefit of the people in all regions. Madurika Rasaratnam, writing on the *Hurst website* on 13 January, argued that international pressure would be important in ensuring that the hopes raised by the new government are realized. “Although Sirisena’s past performance and campaign commitments suggest he is as much a committed Sinhalese Buddhist as Rajapaksa, ongoing international pressure may inject a powerful check that could move Sinhalese leaders and society more broadly towards a just and lasting solution to the Tamil question”.

On the international level, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon reiterated that the UN would “continue to support development, reconciliation, political dialogue and accountability in Sri Lanka”. The British Prime Minister David Cameron congratulated Mr Sirisena and called on him to “support the ongoing UN Office of the High Commission for Human Rights investigation into human rights abuse”. The Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird welcomed the new president and said it would be an “important opportunity to resolve concerns regarding the devolution of power, accountability and genuine reconciliation”. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for “genuine and effective reconciliation”, and the US Secretary of State John Kerry welcomed the new government and stressed the ongoing human rights challenges.

Australian political leaders have been noticeable for not commenting publicly so far on the change of leadership in Sri Lanka. A group of Sri Lankan born Australians (13 Sinhalese and 6 Tamils) issued a statement in Sri Lanka a week before the election urging a change in government to remove “a pervasive culture of impunity and nepotism” and calling for the elimination of the post of executive president (created by Mr Rajapaksa to increase his power).

Amnesty International issued a media release on 9 January expressing appreciation to the Sri Lankan people for the peaceful election. David Griffiths, their Deputy Asia Pacific Director, said: “The new government now has an opportunity to usher in a new era of genuine respect for human rights – it’s one that must not be missed”. In particular, Amnesty called for the repeal of the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution which undermines judicial independence.

## **Quaker Action**

QPLC – along with other Quaker groups, especially in Britain - has had an ongoing concern about promoting peace in Sri Lanka. In summary, the following action has been taken in recent years:

- Since 2010 QPLC has held a series of Dialogue meetings at the Canberra Meeting House for people from Sri Lanka to meet with Quakers, government officials and NGOs to share information about developments in Sri Lanka and discuss ways in which Australians can support the people there. These meetings have been held in private, with brief notes issued to participants as an aide memoire.

- Members of QPLC have also held face-to-face meetings with officials of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, the High Commissioner for Sri Lanka, and Members of the Australian Parliament, to raise awareness of the ongoing concerns for peace in Sri Lanka.
- Visiting MPs, scholars and activists from Sri Lanka have met with QPLC members for mutual sharing of concerns.
- The most recent Dialogue session, held on 28 January 2012<sup>5</sup>, reviewed the change of government and noted the challenges facing President Sirisena in dealing with demands for - devolution, a just response to war crimes and human rights violations, the return of stolen land, and reducing the oppressive presence of the military in the north and east.

It has not proved easy to get the full range of participants in these Dialogue processes we have desired, owing to ongoing tensions across the different ethnic groups within the Diaspora. The advent of a new government in Sri Lanka raises the prospects of a wider group of participants becoming engaged.

As a result of the recent Dialogue meeting, QPLC prepared a letter for the Presiding Clerk to send to the new Sri Lankan President welcoming his commitment to a new openness and peacebuilding approach, and looking forward to initiatives to build trust and restore confidence. QPLC will continue to seek ways to enhance positive relations among the Diaspora within Australia, and welcomes information from Friends in other parts of Australia about activities that are occurring to strengthen these.

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## Sources

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