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CONTENTS

FROM THE
DIRECTOR'S DESK

FROM THE
EDITOR'S DESK

GEMS OF
WISDOM

CURRENT
AFFAIRS

SHAS MOSQUE

EVENTS

1

2

3

10

42

43

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Developing Dynamics in South Asia: A Reflection on Recent Political Change in Sri Lanka



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In just three months, South Asia has seen two significant political changes that could have far-reaching local, regional, and even global political consequences: the fall of Sheikh Hasina and the rise of new student power, and the victory of Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) in the Sri Lankan presidential elections. These events have become important milestones in South Asian politics, leading political analysts to debate their similarities and differences. The important similarity of both events is that both new power dynamics have been shaped by revolutions. That being said, this article mainly aims to delve into the rise of AKD after the presidential elections and the factors that facilitated this change, to understand the evolving dynamics of Sri Lankan politics and its implications on Muslim minorities in the country.

In the presidential elections held on September 21, 2024, AKD convincingly won the race by securing 42.31% of the votes, while his competitor Sajid Premadasa only obtained 32.76 % of the total votes. This victory is not seen as a simple shift in power within Sri Lankan local politics, but rather as a victory of the public over political elites and a rise of a third force in Sri Lankan politics. This article mainly aims to understand the rise of AKD and his party as the alternative political force in Sri Lankan politics. To further understand the significance of the new political change, let me put AKD 's victory into a larger context of the country's political history.

Sri Lankan Post- Colonial Political Culture

Sri Lanka has historically been dominated by a two-party system, with the traditional Sri Lanka Freedom Party representing socialist and nationalist tendencies, and the United National Party known for being liberal. The political decision-making process of these parties has been shaped by a dynastic political culture, with the internal affairs of the parties largely controlled by elite political families.

Since gaining independence in 1948, these parties have shared state power among themselves. In 2015, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party split into two factions, with a new faction named as the Sri Lanka People's Front emerging under the leadership of Mahinda Rajapakse, the former president of Sri Lanka. This new faction was seen as the establishment of another dynastic political culture.

However, the two-party system came under public scrutiny aftermath of the 2022 economic crisis. There has been extensive public debate and focus on the post-colonial political culture and governance as the main root cause of the economic crisis, although economic policies and mismanagement of the incumbent government were also cited as contributing factors. As a result, public protests against the then-president, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, and the collapse of his regime in 2022 were largely seen as an outcome of anger against the political culture of the country rather than just a reaction to economic mismanagement.

Over the course of the last two years, the country was led by former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, the leader of the pro-liberal United National Party. He managed to secure support from the IMF and stabilize the Sri Lankan economy for the time being. However, many Sri Lankan voters saw him as a part and protector of the old political elite and held him responsible for the crisis.

Political Dynamics Aftermath of 2022-Economic Crisis

Against the backdrop of these developments, Anura Kumara Dissanayake projected himself as a potential candidate to lead the country and establish a new political culture. Over the past five to ten years, his speeches have highlighted the corrupt nature of successive governments. He emphasized that the country's primary issues are corruption and political elitism. He also stated that neither he nor his party members have faced corruption charges and that they do not come from elite political families, but rather from underprivileged areas of the country. These political messages significantly boosted his popular support by attracting millions of votes from the new generation, who often engage with politics through social media.

AKD is not a political newcomer. He has been a member of parliament since 2000 and leads the leftist party called People's Liberation Front. His party has a history of involvement in armed struggle against the state in the late 1980s and tended to support the Sinhala Buddhist Nationalist project. However, in 2019, he rebranded his party under the new name 'National People's Power' (NPP), adopting a more moderate social democracy and inclusiveness. The party also incorporated non-leftists, including liberal professionals, academics, and minority communities in their new initiative. National People's Power under the leadership of AKD, contested the 2019 Presidential elections but only obtained 3% of the votes. Despite this, his parliamentary and public speeches, where he periodically unpacked corruption cases involving government officers, have gained a large following.

Breaking Up of Established Political Parties: 2024 Presidential Elections

The turning point came with the 2022 economic crisis and public protests, which led to the fall of the Gotabhaya Rajapakse's regime. These events shifted the political landscape of the country and fuelled a growing demand for a new political party capable of reforming the entire political system. Amidst these changes, AKD emerged as a potential leader who could address the country's entrenched political elitism, corruption, and economic mismanagement. He had prepared for this moment by rebranding the party and its internal structure to reflect meritocracy, moderate social democracy, and inclusivity, setting it apart from other minor political parties.

The 2024 Presidential elections served as the first test of public support for the party following the economic crisis. As anticipated, the party won the election by a significant margin, although it did not secure 50% of the votes. The election results highlighted public dissatisfaction with established political parties and signalled a potential shift away from the dominant two-party system. For the first time in post-colonial Sri Lanka, an outsider to the political and economic establishment was elected to the country's top post.



Implications on Muslim Minorities

Over the last ten to fifteen years, successive Sri Lankan governments, in collaboration with majoritarian nationalist movements, have sought to portray Muslim minorities as ‘the new other,’ suggesting they threaten the purity of the Buddhist homeland. As a result, since 2013, Muslims have faced continuous ethnic riots that have resulted in the destruction of their businesses and posed serious threats to their socio-economic and religious lives. Anti-Muslim sentiment peaked when Gotabhaya Rajapaksa assumed power in 2019, as he attempted to marginalize Muslims under the guise of combating radical Islam. His election victory was interpreted as a mandate to regulate the religious space of Muslim minorities, leading his regime to institutionalize the securitization of Islam through various socio-legal policies.

For instance, he appointed a radical, Islamophobic monk to lead a legal reform team aimed at restricting the religious freedoms of Muslim communities. Consequently, Sri Lankan Muslims increasingly felt isolated from the country’s mainstream political leadership. In contrast, the new president, AKD, ran on a platform of non-racial politics, challenging the ethnic majoritarianism prevalent in the country. And also, he gained substantial support from the Muslim community as well. There is hope among Sri Lankan Muslims that the new president will help cleanse the politics of majoritarianism and respect the rights and aspirations of all minorities, treating them as equal citizens. However, it remains to be seen how his promises will translate into reality in the coming months.

