

The background of the image is a dark blue and purple night sky filled with numerous white stars of varying sizes. In the foreground, there is a silhouette of a forest of evergreen trees. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

NOV'18 (15 to 21)

Crisis in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is in the midst of a political turmoil following the sudden dismissal of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe by President Maithripala Sirisena.

President Maithripala Sirisena announced that Ranil Wickremesinghe, with whom he had governed in a fragile coalition since 2015, had been dismissed and in his place, he had decided to appoint former president Mahinda Rajapaksa.

The decision has created a wedge in the country's politics with parliamentarians showing favour towards Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has termed the sacking as illegal and is standing his ground despite attempts to replace him with Rajapaksa.

Background:

- The president's move to consolidate power and invite Rajapaksa back into government starkly counters the promises he made to investigate the former government's actions during the country's long civil war.

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- During his 10 years in power, Rajapaksa and his government were accused of authoritarianism, corruption and human rights abuses, especially against the country's Tamil minority.
- Rajapaksa oversaw the end of the 27-year Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 through a series of brutal military offensives in which the UN estimates up to 40,000 Tamil civilians died.
- His tenure was also marred by accusations his security forces were forcibly disappearing, torturing and murdering opposition politicians, aid workers, activists, journalists and dissidents.
- Tamil groups fear that an uneasy reconciliation process that began after the end of the 2009 civil war could be imperiled with the reinstating of Rajapaksa's regime.

Key Highlights:

- Rajapaksa and Sirisena were former political allies and Sirisena was Rajapaksa's minister of health until 2015 when Sirisena broke away from Rajapaksa's party and plotted to defeat him.

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- On the other hand, Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe were political opponents, who united their parties in 2015 to unseat Rajapaksa, who had been ruling for more than 10 years, fearing that he was becoming too powerful.
- The sacking left the country with two people claiming to run the government, and Mr Wickremesinghe refused to leave his residence, Temple Trees.
- In Sri Lanka, the President is the most dominant political force. The Prime Minister's role is limited to a deputy to the President, besides being the leader of Cabinet.

- However, in the latest development, the final call to decide whether the President has the power to straightway dismiss or replace a Prime Minister lies with the Sri Lankan Supreme Court.
- In 2015, Sri Lanka had amended its constitution to prevent the president from sacking any prime minister unless they had died, resigned or lost the confidence of parliament.
- Significantly, the Supreme Court suspended the dissolution of Parliament until December 7. While the

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power struggle will continue, Sri Lanka's governing institutions have resisted the authoritarian power inherent in the executive presidency.

International Pressures:

The country's decade-long contentious engagement, on war-time abuses, at the UN Human Rights Council is a case in point. While the U.S. mobilised resolutions to rein in Mr. Rajapaksa, who was tilting towards China and Iran, he politically gained from the condemnation in Geneva, projecting himself as a defender of war heroes from international bullies.

Sri Lanka's deteriorating balance of payments and external debt problems are also pertinent. While there is much talk of the debt trap by China, in reality, only 10% of Sri Lanka's foreign loans are from China.

Close to 40% of external debt is from the international markets, including sovereign bonds, of which an unprecedented \$4.2 billion in debt payments are due next year. Here the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) vocal position in relation to its agreement with Sri Lanka from June 2016, and the rating agencies' projections on Sri Lanka are crucial to roll over loans. Ultimately, the flows

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of such capital have little do with diplomatic relations, but depend on national stability and strength, including the political will to ensure budget cuts and debt repayment.

Conclusion:

During his stint in the presidency, Rajapaksa had a sour relationship with the west. However, under him, Sri Lanka had grown closer to China with the nation pumping billions into huge infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe's party had come with the promise of lessening financial ties with China, in order to reduce the debt created due to such projects, which had pinched the country's economy. Hence, China's potential gains with the change in the government of Sri Lanka could possibly impact the broader rivalry between India and China across the Indian Ocean.

Suggested Reading:

- <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/see-sri-lankas-national-crisis-for-what-it-is/article25487961.ece>

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➤ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46196979>