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By Col. R. Hariharan

After President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his surprise challenger Maithripala Sirisena, General Secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), who quit his office as Minister, filed their nominations for the Presidential election on January 8, 2015 the contest has become exciting.

Maithripala's move came as a boon to the opposition parties who were struggling to find a common strategy to stop the Rajapaksa juggernaut rolling for a third term in office. The opposition United National Party (UNP) and a few other SLFP leaders and Bandaranaike family loyalists led by former President Mrs Chandrika Kumaratunga quickly got together to name Sirisena (full name: Palle Watta Gamaralalage Maithreepala Yapa Sirisena) as the common opposition candidate of the National Democratic Front.

Undoubtedly, Sirisena's "betrayal" has queered Rajapaksa's calculated strategy to get elected for a third term as President. Ever since he got reelected as President in 2009 he made his move with an eye on a third term. First he gained two thirds majority the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition in Parliament in the 2010 election. He managed to get the constitution amended to lift the restriction on holding the office of the president for more than two terms. He also managed to enlarge the Executive President's powers to appoint the head of judiciary and the election commissioner by getting the constitution amended.

While this was as planned, his popularity rapidly declined after the Rajapaksa family firmly ensconced itself in positions of power to control finances and dispense favours. The Party took a backseat, leading to widespread corruption, lawlessness and cronyism. Opposition and critical media were hounded and xenophobia nurtured. To cut down his losses the President advanced the presidential election by two years.

All of sudden Rajapaksa finds Sirisena, the long-term party loyalist turned “renegade,” is threatening to derail the Rajapaksa gravy train. He has gathered not only the support within the Party but also managed to get the support of the UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and the Democratic Party (DP) Leader Sarath Fonseka, subsuming their personal ambitions.

With “defeat Rajapaksa” becoming the political flavour of the day, the right wing Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) parted company with the UPFA, its long term ally and signed a MoU with Sirisena to affirm its solidarity.

Sirisena’s allies are no models of clean political conduct. Sirisena’s agenda evolved with them for his campaign include the abolition of executive presidency “within 100 days of his election as President and Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister”, reintroduction of the 17th amendment and abolition of the 18th amendment to the Constitution that has enabled Rajapaksa to seek more than two terms, cleaning up government corruption and full implementation of LLRC recommendations as suggested by the UN Human Rights Commission.

Caught off guard, the President in his initial reaction held a veiled threat to the defectors. He thundered “I have their files and documents which will be very detrimental to their well being. I will not use them against those who had left betraying the party, but I warn them not to throw stones from inside glass houses.” Though later he toned down his remark, it seemed to have worked with many potential defectors of the SLFP lying low for the time being.

The President, after deliberating with his cabinet and advisors, seems to have evolved his tactics to handle Sirisena. Talking to media editors at a breakfast meeting Rajapaksa identified former President Chandrika Kumaratunga as “the main contender in the race” and she was “using Maithripala Sirisena.” This was to trivialize Sirisena’s challenge by attributing it to Mrs Kumaratunga’s machinations and not to the shortcomings of his rule.

More devious was Rajapaksa’s tongue in cheek remark at the editor’s meeting that Ranil Wickremesinghe was “the best candidate out of the three because only he has a party machinery.” This was probably made to sow doubts among some of the UNP leaders locked in internal squabble to dissipate the UNP support to Sirisena.

‘Foreign conspiracy’ to destabilise Sri Lanka is a perennial ploy in Rajapaksa’s political strategy to whip up nationalist sentiments. This time also the UNP has become the target of such allegations by UPFA leaders. Resettlement Minister Gunaratne Weerakoon alleged the outgoing US ambassador Michael Cison offered him a green card and a house in the US to induce him to defect from the government.

Another well worn Sri Lanka political strategy is to induce defection of leaders on the eve of elections. Both sides have adopted it. Rajapaksa has the money and muscle power and the instrument of government to do a better job of it. In spite of this, not only Sirisena but a few other ministers have quit their office to join the opposition ranks. One of them, Minister Navin Dissanayake, son of the late popular UNP leader

Gamini Dissanayake, who crossed over to the opposition said he was offered Rs 10 million to stay in the SLFP.

But Rajapaksa is a past-master in the defection game. So it was not surprising to see some prominent political personalities - UNP General Secretary Tissa Attanayake cutting his two decades of association with UNP and the JHU Deputy General Secretary Udaya Gammanpila - to cross over to Rajapaksa's ranks.

Sirisena would need the whole hearted support of traditional UNP voters if he has to put up a strong fight which is not going to be an easy exercise if we go by the experience of Sarath Fonseka, the common opposition candidate in the last presidential election. The UNP leaders would need to work hard to ensure its loyal votes go in favour of Sirisena.

In addition, Sirisena needs to charm the fence-sitting opposition parties like the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the reluctant Tamil National Alliance (TNA).

Though the JVP is keen on defeating Rajapaksa and abolishing executive presidency abolished, it has not shown keenness in supporting Sirisena. So Sirisena may not be to get most of the JVP votes.

The TNA have a track record of getting most of the Tamil votes. Their support is important in any close contest. TNA still retains the strength to persuade Tamils to vote for Sirisena. But the TNA is still undecided on its stand. In a Daily Mirror report TNA leader Suresh Premachandran has articulated the dilemma saying: "There is no solution offered to the problems of the Tamil people. There is no plan to resettle displaced Tamils. It seems that the common candidate is endorsing the views of Sinhala extremist forces backing him. Let alone a political solution, there is no approach even to address day to day problems." But Sirisena probably offers a better option as has promised to clip the wings of executive president to make him more accountable and the TNA may veer round to support him.

Muslim parties as usual are split in their support to Rajapaksa. The decision of Minister Bathiuddin's Muslim Congress to support Rajapaksa was not unexpected. The SLMC, which commands more Muslim votes, had been peeved with Rajapaksa over his inaction to curb the Bodhu Bala Sena (BBS)'s violent hate-Muslim campaign that resulted in loss of lives and property. The SLMC parted with the UPFA on the same issue. This would make the SLMC uncomfortable to go with Sirisena particularly after he signed the MoU with JHU as it had been providing political support to the BBS's anti-Muslim campaign.

With such a line up of support, can Sirisena defeat President Rajapaksa? If we go by the upbeat mood in the opposition ranks it would seem so. Sirisena, with his comparatively clean image (unlike Rajapaksa) and established party credentials, does have chance to win if he can swing at least 15 percent of SLFP loyalist votes in his favour. And that might not be enough unless Sirisena can make a dent in the strong South Sinhala support for Rajapaksa.

Despite all the complaints of misrule and corruption against Rajapaksa, can Sirisena a comparatively less known figure, compete with Rajapaksa hailed as a national hero for defeating the LTTE and eliminating Prabhakaran? That is the moot question.

The bottom line is the opposition cannot afford to underestimate Rajapaksa's strengths.

Moreover, the politically savvier Rajapaksa has been preparing for the election well in advance. In the Budget for 2015 a hefty hike for all government servants and freebies including heavily subsidised offer of motorcycles to government field staff have been announced. Similarly interest rates for senior citizens' deposits have been hiked to 12 percent.

The government's allocation of Rs 450 million to each of the select parliamentarians (including to those who cross over from the opposition) as development fund to fund over 150 special development projects is yet another instance of how government funds are 'used' to garner support for Rajapaksa.

Rajapaksa dirty tricks department is already in action. There are reports of misuse of government machinery to support the President. A number of complaints against the ruling coalition for attacking opposition candidates and leaders have been reported.

For instance Western Provincial Council SLFP member Hirunika Premachandra fled the country with her mother after she received threats to her life after she decided to back Sirisena. Of course, she is back now to campaign for him.

One redeeming feature is India, the favourite whipping boy always accused of meddling in Sri Lankan elections, seems to have taken a backseat. Probably China will replace it soon as scams involving the Chinese are surfacing now. But the Chinese are clever, they never dirty their hands in politics; they prefer to use money.

There is yet another important factor in Sri Lanka politics – astrology. President can probably relax as his astrologer seems to have predicted that he would be re-elected for the third time and a fourth time as well! We don't know what Sirisena's birth chart says; I suppose January 8 will decide his future regardless of his astral predictions.

(Col R Hariharan, a retired Military Intelligence specialist on South Asia, served with the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka as Head of Intelligence. He is associated with the Chennai Centre for China Studies and the South Asia Analysis Group. E-Mail: colhari@yahoo.com[1] Blog: <http://col.hariharan.info>)

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