

Rise of Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP): Causes, Consequences and Challenges

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Abstract

The history of party politics in Sri Lanka can be traced from the era of British colonial rule to the post-independence era. In the political context of Sri Lanka, few political parties have dominated the political landscape, viz. the United National Party (UNP), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP/ People's Liberation Front), the Ilankai Thamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK), and many other registered and unregistered parties. Nevertheless, the exceptional rise of the recently established party known as Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) in the country's political landscape within a short span of time has been highly remarkable. Although the existing literature contains much information about the party politics of UNP, SLFP and other minor political parties in the country, there are hardly any studies on the spectacular rise of SLPP in the political landscape of Sri Lanka. Thus, this paper attempts to examine the causes behind the rise of the SLPP, its possible consequences, and the challenges confronting the present SLPP government in the context of the current political/ economic situation prevailing in Sri Lanka. This paper is of a descriptive and interpretative nature and mainly relies on secondary data. The findings of this paper suggest that the following factors could be attributed to the rise of SLPP: i) Bond scam and collapse of economy, ii) Easter Sunday bombings and national security issues, iii) Covid-19 pandemic, iv) Split in the UNP, v) Broad coalition of SLPP and allied parties, vi) Failure of good governance government, vii) Need for a strong and visionary leader, and viii) A reaction against minority political parties and ethnic polarization. The paper further shows that the rise of the SLPP government helped to form a strong government, strengthened national security, enabled enactment of the 20th amendment to the constitution and prepare the draft of a new constitution, dismantled the formation of underworld gangs and drug mafia, helped recruitment of 60,000 graduates and 100,000 non-skilled workers to the state sectors, adopted a new approach to people-centric economy and technology based society and developed health policy on Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, there are still many challenges confronting the SLPP government at present in terms of rebuilding the economy, containing the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic, enacting a new constitution acceptable to all communities in Sri Lanka, establishing a proper system in place, eradicating corruption, and accommodating the minorities to help build a country with a pluralistic outlook.

Keywords: 20thAmendment, Bond violation, Covid-19, Easter Sunday attacks, Rebuild economy

1. Introduction

Establishing stable and durable political institutions is among the most significant challenges faced by developing nations in the contemporary world. In Sri Lanka, growth of a stable political party system has been a core achievement of the nation in the post-independence era (Kearney, 1983). Nevertheless, the history of party politics in Sri Lanka can be traced from the era of British colonial rule to the post-independence period. In the party politics of Sri Lanka, few political parties have dominated the political landscape, namely The United National Party (UNP), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP/ People's Liberation Front), and the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK). In addition, there are 70 registered political parties like Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC), National Congress (NC), etc. and a significant number of unregistered parties operating in the political landscape of Sri Lanka (Sunday Times, 25/10/2020).

Sri Lanka is home to a number of multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural communities. While Sinhalese account for 75% of Sri Lanka's 20.3 million population, Tamils and Muslims account for 11% and 9%, respectively (Department of Census and Statistics - Sri Lanka, 2012). However, the country was fighting a brutal war for three decades with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), resulting in the death of over 100,000 people representing all ethnic groups of the country, along with the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people both internally and externally (Imthiyas & Iqbal, 2011). The country also witnessed other natural disasters like floods, a tsunami, cyclones and so forth that caused enormous damage and destruction. All of these have contributed to cripple not only the economy of the country, but also its social fabric. As such, both natural as well as man-made disasters like war have been in the popular discourse and debate by scholars. Nevertheless, the country overcame all these challenges posed by disasters effectively, and most importantly the war against the LTTE with the successful defeat of the terror outfit in May 2009.

Sri Lanka is a democracy with a mixed parliamentary and presidential form of governance in the post-independent period of the country. The country was ruled by the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) alternately (along with coalition parties) until 2019. In short, the two major political parties and their coalition allies have ruled the country for almost seven decades in the post-independence era. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was the most powerful SLFP member who held various positions in the party until he ascended to the position of Prime Minister in the Chandrika Bandaranaike government. After Mahinda Rajapaksa became the president of Sri Lanka he ruled the country from 2005 to 2015, during which period the SLFP remained unified. Maithripala Sirisena, who was serving as General Secretary of the SLFP, defected from that party just ahead of the Presidential Election in 2015. Then he contested as the presidential candidate of a group of coalition parties led by the United National Party against Mahinda Rajapaksa who represented the SLFP. This election saw Maithripala Sirisena become the 6th Executive President of Sri Lanka in 2015, having contested against his own former party leader. The subsequent ascendancy of Maithripala Sirisena as the Chairman of SLFP created a lot of friction within the party (BBC News, 2020). As a result of the intra-party disputes within the SLFP, a group of members of parliament and some political parties led by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa formed and launched a new political party known as the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna in 2016 (Dharmasena, 2016). While former President Mahinda Rajapaksa holds the position as leader of SLPP, Prof. G.L. Peiris and attorney-at-law Sagara Kariyawasam hold the position of chairman and secretary of the party, respectively (Ada Derana, 2019). This move by former president Mahinda Rajapakse upended the Sri Lankan political landscape and is considered as a political milestone.

Maithripala Sirisena was elected as the President by the people of Sri Lanka in 2015 after he contested under a broad coalition led by the United National Party. The new government was constituted in 2015 by the Maithri and Ranil duo, who held the positions of president and prime minister respectively, in the new government. They were determined to prevent a Rajapaksa political resurgence in the future. With that in mind, they amended the constitution by bringing forth the 19th amendment, which among other things, re-imposed a two-term limit on the presidency, and barred dual citizens from contesting the general elections. These moves were aimed at preventing the two prominent Rajapaksa brothers from contesting in future elections. The amendment also pruned down the presidential powers while increasing the powers of the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, these objectives were never achieved and the Rajapaksa brothers returned to power in the 2019 elections (DeVotta, 2020).

Two years after the establishment of Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the party won a spate of local government elections throughout the island by wide margins. In November 2019, SLPP candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected by the people as the 7th Executive President of Sri Lanka after he secured 52.25% of the votes, equivalent to 6.9 million of the people (Hashim, 2019). On August 5 2020, the SLPP won comprehensively by securing a near two-thirds majority in the Parliament. It is notable that Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna registered a remarkable landslide victory in the local government elections, the presidential election and followed by parliamentary elections with nearly a two-thirds majority in the parliament and that too within a short span of time since it was founded in 2016.

Although the existing literature contains much information on the party politics of the UNP and SLFP as well as other minor political parties in the country, hardly any studies have been done on the spectacular rise of SLPP in the history of politics in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this paper examines the causes behind the rise of the SLPP, the consequences and the challenges confronting the present SLPP government in the current context of Sri Lanka.

2. Methodology

This paper is mainly descriptive and interpretative in nature and relies on secondary data drawn from academic journals, newspapers, research reports and online resources. These sources have recorded the discourses dealing with the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), causes behind the sudden rise of SLPP, its consequences on the people of Sri Lanka and the challenges confronting the new SLPP government in the current context. The first part of the paper deals with the origin of SLPP and its electoral victories in the presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2019 and 2020, respectively. The second part of the paper explores the factors that contributed to the sudden rise of SLPP in the electorates and its consequences upon the masses of Sri Lanka. The final part of the paper deals with the challenges confronting the present SLPP government in the current context of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the data were reviewed and analyzed from the political and sociological perspectives.

3. Results and discussion

This section of the paper fundamentally sheds light on the formation of the SLPP in the context of two strong political parties competing for power. This will be followed by the final section dealing with the causes and challenges confronting the present SLPP government in the current context of Sri Lanka.

3.1. Origin of SLPP and its electoral victories

Former president Mahinda lost the 2015 presidential election when his former cabinet colleague Maithripala Sirisena joined hands with rival Ranil Wickremesinghe in an unprecedented move of coalition. However, undeterred by the loss in the election, Mahinda Rajapaksa formed a new party, planning to

come back to power as prime minister in another five years. Mahinda Rajapaksa earlier belonged to one of the main political parties in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that along with the United National Party (UNP) dominated the island's political landscape for seven decades in the post-independence era. Undeniably, the resilient nature of the Rajapaksa brothers who were firmly entrenched as the country's leaders for 10 years and a weakening SLFP led by the ineffectual President Sirisena could be attributed to the rise of the SLPP.

The intra party issues within the SLFP led to the formation of the SLPP in 2016. A group of members of parliament and a few political parties led by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa rechristened a minor political party and launched the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna in 2016 (Dharmasena, 2016). While former President Mahinda Rajapaksa holds the position as leader of the SLPP, Prof. G.L. Peiris and attorney-at-law Sagara Kariyawasam have been holding the positions of chairman and secretary of the party, respectively. However, it is reported that Basil Rajapaksa, former Minister of Economic Development, is the main architect behind the birth and success of the SLPP-led Sri Lanka Podujana Nidahas Sandanaya (Sunday Times, 20/09/2020). He is believed to be the brain behind the formation of the SLPP and the one who did the spadework to establish the Rajapaksa brand in the wake of their defeat in the 2015 election (Srinivasan, 2020).

Two years after the establishment of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) as a political party, it won a spate of local government elections throughout the island by winning 40% of the votes and securing the highest number of seats in the local authorities. The United National Front (UNF) led by former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Ranil Wickremesinghe came second with 29% of the votes while the United People's Freedom Alliance led by former President Maithripala Sirisena came third with 12% of the votes in the same election (Thilanka, 2018).

The SLPP emerged as the single strongest political party during the presidential as well as parliamentary elections with a broad coalition of multiple parties including minority political parties like the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), Thamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) and National Congress (Writer, 2019). After several discussions and negotiations, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), headed by former President Maithripala Sirisena, also signed a memorandum of understanding with the SLPP and became part of a broad coalition under the SLPP (DailyFT, 2019). With the backing of all these political parties, SLPP decided to field Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the former Defence Secretary and Chairman of the Urban Development Authority (UDA), as their presidential candidate during the presidential election held in 2019. Former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa had proved his efficiency, credibility, and leadership by having worked closely with his brother, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, to bring the highly intractable civil war with the LTTE to an end in 2009. He was acclaimed for the significant role he had played in achieving the war victory (Chandraprema, 2012). Moreover, the service he rendered in leading urban development projects such as the beautification of Colombo and revitalization of public centers and parks while holding the position of Chairman of UDA between 2005 and 2015 established his image as a skilful and visionary leader. During his tenure, Colombo was ranked as the fastest developing city in the world (Attanayaka & Kapur, 2018). Despite his minimal political involvement, his service in the military and other administrative positions had earned him a reputation as an assertive and reliable leader who could deliver the goods at a time when the country was yearning for a person with vision to drive the country's economic recovery and to ensure national security as a priority in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks that occurred on 21st of April 2018. Overall, the popularity of former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa as a war-hero and icon of national security prompted the SLPP to choose him as their Presidential candidate at that time.

During the Presidential Election in 2019, thirty five (35) candidates representing various political parties contested (Srinivasan, 2019). Of which, the two leading candidates namely, Sajith Premadasa, the former Minister for Housing in the United National Party (UNP) government representing the National Democratic Front and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former Secretary of Defence and younger brother of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa of the SLPP, were considered the front runners in the fray. Subsequently, in November 2019, SLPP candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected by the people of Sri Lanka as the 7th Executive President by securing 52.25% of the votes, equivalent to 6.9 million votes of the people (Attanayake, 2019). The results of the presidential election are given in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Presidential Election 2019 (All Island Results)

S.No	Name of the candidates	Parties	Votes received	%
01	Gotabaya Rajapaksa	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)	6,924,255	52.25
02	Sajith Premadasa	National Democratic Front (NDF)	5,564,239	41.99
03	Anura Kumara Dissanayaka	National Movement of People's Power (NMPP)	418,553	3.16
04	Mahesh Senanayake	National People's Party (NPP)	49,655	0.37

Source: https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidentialelections/PRE_2019_All_Island_Result.pdf

Although assumptions were made before the election that both candidates, Sajith Premadasa and Gotabaya Rajapaksa stood a good chance to win the election, some sections of the people were certain that Gotabaya Rajapaksa representing SLPP would emerge victorious at the end of the day given his popular support in the South (Keethaponcalan, 2019). Moreover, the victory of the SLPP candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the presidential election by a margin of 1.4 million votes over NDF candidate was phenomenal and the popular mandate given by the people to Gotabaya Rajapaksa underlined a significant expectation of transformation in the entire affairs of the country.

Moreover, On August 5, 2020 in the Parliamentary General Elections, the SLPP won comprehensively by securing an almost two-thirds majority in the Parliament. Table 3.2 presents the results of the Parliamentary General Elections held in August, 2020 in a nutshell.

Table 3.2: Allocation of seats for each party in the parliamentary elections

S. No	Name of political party	District basis seats	National basis seats	Total	Percentage (%) of total seats
1	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna	128	17	145	65.4
2	Samagi Jana Balawegaya	47	7	54	24.0
3	Ilankai Thamil Arasu Kadchi	9	1	10	4.4
4	Jathika Jana Balawegaya	2	1	3	1.3
5	Eelam People's Democratic Party	2	0	2	0.8
6	Ahila Ilankai Thamil Congress	1	1	2	0.8
7	Thamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal	1	0	1	0.4
8	Sri Lanka Freedom Party	1	0	1	0.4

9	Muslim National Alliance	1	0	1	0.4
10	Thamil Makkal Thesiya Koottani	1	0	1	0.4
11	All Ceylon Makkal Congress	1	0	1	0.4
12	National Congress	1	0	1	0.4
13	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress	1	0	1	0.4
14	United National Party	0	1	1	0.4
15	Our Power of People Party	0	1	1	0.4
Total		196	29	225	100.0

Source: <https://www.parliament.lk/en/election-2020/>

It can be seen from the table that although SLPP secured 145 seats with national lists, which is equivalent of 65.4%, the number of seats obtained by its coalition parties like EPDP, SLFP, TMVP, and NC helped consolidate SLPP with a two-thirds majority in the parliament. By and large, the SLPP registered a significant record of victories in the local government elections of 2018, the presidential elections of 2019, followed by the parliamentary elections in 2020. The rise of SLPP in the political landscape of Sri Lanka is unprecedented and thus it warrants further exploration of the factors that contributed to the resounding victory of SLPP in the consecutive elections. The following sections deal with those dimensions in detail.

3.2. Factors that contributed to the rise of SLPP

Landslide victories for the SLPP, within a short span of time since the party was founded in 2016, in all the elections beginning with local government to parliamentary elections are a monumental and significant achievement. Therefore, it is important to analyze the factors behind the overwhelming rise of SLPP in the political landscape and its significant record of winning consecutive elections. The factors responsible for the rise of the SLPP are extensively analyzed in the following sections.

3.2.1 Bond scam and collapse of economy

A massive financial impropriety occurred by way of a scam that involved Rupees 10 Billion worth of Treasury Bonds in an auction was held by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka on the 27th of February 2015, shortly after the so-called *yahapalana* government took office. This caused a massive crack in the good governance concept and brought much disrepute to the government (Wijewardena, 2017). The alleged involvement in the bond scam by Arjuna Mahendran, a Singapore citizen who was appointed by the government as the Governor of the Central Bank, caused the loss of millions of rupees to the country at that time. It badly damaged the credibility of the so-called *yahapalana* government. Many parties were alleged to have been involved in the scam including Arjun Aloysius, beneficial owner of Perpetual Treasures Limited, incumbent Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and Ex-Ministers and MPs (Farzan, 2020). Moreover, this has been considered as the biggest ever single loss to the economy of Sri Lanka. Thus, this was one of the fundamental reasons for the collapse and fall of the *yahapalana* government. This was constantly highlighted during the local government, presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively. Thus, the rise of SLPP could be attributed to a considerable extent on the Central Bank bond scam under the watch of the so-called *yahapalana* government.

3.2.2 Easter Sunday attacks and national security issues

As a peaceful environment is considered a fundamental feature of a stable nation, it is absolutely important for the government to ensure national security as a basic priority. National security is ensured

by a broad political and military apparatus that is expected to create the right environment for peace and development. The primary objective of national security is to ensure the freedom of the living and safeguard the fundamental rights of citizens. The security of a nation has several dimensions including economic security, energy security, physical security, environmental security, food security and cyber security, to mention a few. These dimensions are correlated with each and every sector to ensure the security of citizens of a nation. Against such a backdrop, on the 21st of April 2019, which was Easter Sunday, suicide bombers killed 269 people and injured at least 500 others at several churches and luxury hotels in different parts of the country (BBC News, 2020). Most of the victims were Sri Lankans, with at least 38 foreigners among the dead. The government subsequently declared a state of emergency beginning from midnight on 22nd April. The Sri Lankan Parliament passed emergency regulations giving the police and armed forces powers to search, arrest and detain persons up to 24 hours without a warrant. On 25th of August 2019, the government ended the state of emergency (Shanmugathas, 2019). The Easter Sunday attacks on selected hotels and churches by terrorists contributed to a climate of insecurity and fear, and showed the weakness in national security. The Sri Lankan people heaved a sigh of relief after the eradication of terrorism in 2009, but the Easter Sunday attacks not only jeopardized and compromised the national security of the country, but contributed to a significant downfall of the economy of the country with tourism and foreign direct investment (FDI) suffering huge setbacks, as the attacks had targeted hotels and churches visited by civilians (Lee, 2019). The attacks also contributed to misunderstandings and ill-feelings among ethnic groups, triggering sectarian violence and tension in certain parts of the country (Gunasingham, 2019). As a result, the Easter attacks have been considered as a textbook example of the failure of the former government headed by President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (Lee, 2019). It is reported that although prior warnings and crucial information about the impending bomb attacks were given to some sections of the security apparatus of Sri Lanka by foreign intelligence sources, which were duly passed on to the people in power, this information was ignored and taken lightly by the concerned authorities (Wipulasena, 2020). It was also alleged that the same government had turned the country into a failed state by jeopardizing national security. The Easter Sunday terrorist attack has been considered as one of the main factors that led to the collapse of the Maithri-Ranil government. Disappointed by the failures of this government, the people of Sri Lanka saw the former Defence Secretary and current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa as an icon of hope in the context of national security as he had an excellent track record in eliminating terrorism in 2009, having worked in coordination with his brother, the former President and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. The issue of national security and the popular image of Gotabaya Rajapaksa as a capable person among Sri Lankans obviously contributed to the spectacular rise of the SLPP in the electorates in 2019 and 2020.

3.2.3 Containment of Covid-19 Pandemic

Sri Lanka is one of the South Asian countries affected by the novel Covid-19 pandemic. This happened after a Chinese tourist was detected on the 27th of January 2020 as the first Covid-19 infected person in the country. An infected local citizen was also identified on 11th of March 2020 (Erandi et al., 2020). This prompted the government of Sri Lanka to tactically enforce public health surveillance measures with a view to controlling the spread of the disease. Nevertheless, the number of Covid-19 cases has increased alarmingly with 10424, of which, 4282 victims have recovered while 19 persons passed away, as of 31st October 2020 (Worldometers, 2020). Importantly, most of the cases were identified as being passed on by infected Sri Lankan migrants. The pandemic then spread to Minuwangoda with the clusters being associated with Brandix Textile Factory, while the Peliyagoda cluster was centered on the wholesale fish market (Health Promotion Bureau, 2020).

The government of Sri Lanka immediately took concrete steps to contain the Covid-19 pandemic compared to other countries in South Asia by imposing curfews or lockdowns as necessary across the country to isolate the Covid-19 affected areas. President Gotabaya Rajapakse formed a National Operations Center to curb the spread of Covid-19 (Presidential Task force on Covid-19) and appointed Sri Lanka's Army Commander Major General Shavendra Silva as the chairman. The task force was comprised of health experts, military personnel, key stakeholders, doctors, health workers and government officials (Yamei, 2020). The National Operations Center implemented various measures, including the setting up of quarantine centers in various parts of the country, assisted by the tri-forces. People diagnosed with Covid-19 infection were sent to quarantine centers to ensure the infection was not transmitted to others and thus the Covid-19 infected patients were duly treated (Ceylon Today, 2020). Along with health workers, the task force mobilized the military and intelligence service personnel to trace the contacts of Covid-19 victims. Meanwhile, the government kept the people across the country informed about the importance of strictly adopting health protocols and sought their support. The public were required to wear face masks, wash hands before entering and after leaving shops, banks, government offices, etc. and maintain social distancing in public places and gatherings. Apart from that, several other measures were taken to prevent the spread of the virus. Tourists who entered Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan migrants who returned to the country were subjected to Covid-19 testing, plus 14 days of compulsory isolation in quarantine centers. Subsequent to that, they had to undergo self-isolation of 14 days at their homes under the supervision of the area Public Health Inspectors (US Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2020). The stringent measures taken by the Government of Sri Lanka headed by the current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to deal with Covid-19 were appreciated not only by Sri Lankan citizens but also by many foreign countries and international organizations (TRT World, 2020). The leadership he provided and the preventive measures he deployed at a time of national health crisis were lauded by many including the opposition political parties in the country (Sunday Times, 11/10/2020). Thus, Sri Lanka has been recognized as the second most successful country in the world at combating the Covid-19 pandemic with low mortality and morbidity rates (MENAFN, 2020). The resounding victory and the rise of the SLPP in the constituencies is attributed to the successful handling of the Covid-19 pandemic by the Government of Sri Lanka. This enhanced the reputation of the president and his brother, contributing towards the victory of the party at the Parliamentary elections in 2020 (Ratnayaka, 2020).

3.2.4 Split in the UNP

The United National Front (UNF) alliance formed the *Yahapalana* government in 2015 in which Ranil Wickremesinghe served as the Prime Minister and Maithripala Sirisena served as the President of Sri Lanka. This alliance had to face formidable problems as it was constituted of a number of political parties, many of them representing the minorities. At the same time, there was simmering discontent within the United National Party, which was the major constituent partner of the UNF, over the leadership of Ranil Wickremesinghe because he had been stubbornly clinging onto the position of party leader for over two decades despite losing regularly at elections (Srinivasan, 2019). The tussle for the party leadership became exacerbated ahead of the presidential election in 2019, but it subsided with the nomination of Sajith Premadasa as the presidential candidate. Following the defeat of Sajith Premadasa in the presidential election, the problem of party leadership simmered down for some time. Nevertheless, the issue of the UNP party leadership arose again ahead of the parliamentary elections, with a substantial number of party stalwarts raising objections against the leadership of Ranil as they wanted Sajith to take over that position. As their demands were not met, they defected from the UNP and formed a new political party known as the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) headed by Sajith Premadasa (Writer, 2020). The resultant mass defection of UNP members led to both the UNP and the SJB contesting separately in the Parliamentary

Elections of 2020. This splitting up of the votes more or less ensured the resounding victory of SLPP in the elections. As expected, the SLPP coalition secured almost a two-thirds majority in parliament, while the SJB and UNP secured 54 seats and 1 seat respectively (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2020).

3.2.5 A broad coalition led by SLPP

Following the sweeping victory of SLPP in the February 2018 local government elections, the party became a politically powerful alliance with many political parties extending their support openly. Several MPs belonging to President Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) decided to switch their allegiance to Mahinda Rajapaksa and Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Daily FT, 2019). It is reported that many smaller political parties rallied behind the SLPP during the Presidential Election in support of former Secretary of Defence, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was contesting the presidential election as a candidate (Daily FT, 2019). Although several court cases were filed against his dual citizenship status, the court ruled that there were no issues involved in the citizenship of Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Al Jazeera, 2019). His eligibility to contest the Presidential Election eventually turned out to have a profound impact on the country's political environment.

3.2.6 Failure of so-called good governance government

Soon after the government was formed by Maithri and Ranil in 2015 January, cracks began to appear in the governance, with president and prime minister representing SLFP and UNP respectively, acting in line with their party policies. In addition, there were enough ideological as well as cultural differences between the President and Prime Minister, both of them representing two major, and in fact, rival political parties in the country. A number of issues popped up including the bond scam within the government, which hobbled the good governance process and caused a breakdown in the relationship between president and prime minister. Therefore, it appeared that a tug of war was going on between the President and the Prime Minister. The sudden demise of Venerable Sobitha Thero, who was considered as the architect of the coalition *Yahapalana* government, was also attributed to the on-going tug of war between the President and Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. By and large, this eroded the faith that people had reposed in the *Yahapalana* government headed by Sirisena and Ranil (Vishwamithra, 2018). The hostility between President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe came to a head when President Sirisena dismissed Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and his entire Cabinet on 26th October 2018, triggering a constitutional crisis that lasted for seven weeks in the country (The Straits Times, 2018). This had a negative effect not only on the socio-economic affairs of the country but also on national security, the failure of which contributed heavily to the Easter Sunday attacks (Wipulasena, 2020). All of these created an unstable and dangerous situation in the country that caused people to conclude that the government was incapable and could not be relied on to rule the country. In fact, the country did suffer a serious setback in terms of politics, economy and national security. Naturally, these issues created a negative mind-set among the people of Sri Lanka, which is reflected in the results of the elections held in 2019 and 2020 respectively, in which the SLPP received the popular mandate through resounding victories. The victory of the SLPP was an indicator of the people's frustration with the UNP-SLFP unity government, due to its failure to deliver what it promised in the election manifesto (Shastri, 2018).

3.2.7 Need for a strong and visionary leader

A strong visionary leadership is an essential component to drive a country towards socio-economic prosperity. This has happened in the case of Singapore, Malaysia, and some other countries. At a time when the socio-economic affairs and national security of Sri Lanka were in peril, the country desperately needed a strong visionary leader to develop the country, to rebuild the sinking economy, to ensure

national security, and to eradicate the drug mafia and other anti-social elements like under-world gangs. People perceived Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Mahinda Rajapaksa as strong leaders who would rid the country of all these ills.

The crucial role that former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa played with his brother, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in bringing the war with the LTTE to an end in 2009 clearly demonstrated his efficiency, credibility and leadership (Chandraprema, 2012). Moreover, the projects he undertook while being Chairman of the UDA from 2005 to 2015, such as the beautification of Colombo, and revitalization of public centers and parks, confirmed his visionary and leadership skills. During his tenure as Chairman of UDA, Colombo was ranked as the fastest developing city in the world (Attanayaka & Kapur, 2018). Despite his minimal involvement in politics, his service in the military and other administrative positions conferred on him a reputation as an assertive and visionary leader who can deliver the goods at a time the country was yearning for a leader with a major vision. Most people were convinced that he could lead the country towards economic prosperity and ensure national security as a priority in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks that occurred on 21st of April 2018. These are the main reasons that people voted en masse for Gotabaya Rajapaksa during the presidential election of 2019. This gave a massive boost to the SLPP, leading the party to a resounding victory in the parliamentary elections held a year later.

3.2.8 Reaction against minority political parties and ethnic polarization

Sri Lanka has a majority Sinhalese community and minority communities like Tamils, Muslims and others. However, as a result of the proportional representation system introduced in the 1978 Constitution of the country, it proved difficult for mainstream political parties to form a government without the support of minority political parties. Therefore, both the UNP and SLFP were dependent on the minority political parties like Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) to form a government after every parliamentary election. This constraint faced by the winning party had created an impression among the minority political parties that they were an indispensable adjunct for the formation of a government and therefore they were a force to be reckoned with. The gloating of minority parties about their role in propping up each new government had largely aroused the wrath of the majority community against minority parties. It became clear that the minority political parties' perception of themselves as 'kingmaker' in the respective governments had also played a significant role in changing the mind-set of the majority community in Sri Lanka (Ramachandran, 2020). To be precise, this resentment of the majority community at being dependent on the support of minority parties manifested itself in the election victory of the SLPP, which secured almost a two-thirds majority in the parliament and was able to form a government after the parliamentary election in 2020 even without the support of the minority parties. This is also considered one of the key factors that contributed to the landslide victory of the SLPP.

More importantly, the two organizations that the current president Gotabaya Rajapakse has founded such as '*Vijayath Maga*' and '*Eliya*', both of which espoused the participation of more professionals in politics, have tirelessly worked for the victory of SLPP and its candidate Gotabaya Rajapakse in the presidential election in 2019. In addition, the leadership given by the Rajapaksa brothers to end the war in 2009 had ensured that they had a massive support base among the people of Sri Lanka, leading to the rise of SLPP in the series of elections running from 2018 to 2020, though the party was founded as recently as in 2016.

3.3. Consequences of SLPP government

The previous sections discussed the factors that contributed to the spectacular rise of SLPP in the constituencies. It is equally important to follow up on this matter and examine the ramifications for the

country and the people after the SLPP established a strong government upon winning the presidential and parliamentary elections. This can be briefly analyzed under various sub-topics as below, although only a few months have elapsed since the new government was formally constituted.

3.3.1 Formation of strong government

Unlike in the previous years, Sri Lanka witnessed a massive victory by the SLPP in the 2020 parliamentary elections, by securing almost a two-thirds majority by contesting together with their coalition parties. The request made by the SLPP during the election rallies ahead of parliamentary elections explained the need for a two-thirds majority in parliament by citing several reasons. One reason was to change the 19th amendment to the constitution and enact a new constitution, second reason was to revive the economy and the third reason given was to restore national security as a priority. These entreaties were taken positively by the people of Sri Lanka who then gave the party a massive mandate to proceed with the policy formulation of the government. This not only enabled the SLPP to build a strong government but also ensured that it did not have to depend on the minority political parties. The 19th amendment to the constitution enacted by the so-called *Yabapalana* government was at the center of controversy as it created a rift between the president and prime minister, resulting in a power struggle. This kind of situation caused a lot of problems to the previous government and to the present SLPP government, making it difficult to govern the country effectively. Due to this issue, the SLPP government commenced the process of repealing the 19th amendment to the constitution and enacting the 20th amendment in its place, which they have done successfully by passing it with 156 votes, which is more than a two-thirds majority in the parliament. The enactment of the 20th amendment to the constitution was possible for the SLPP government simply because they commanded almost a two-thirds majority in the parliament. Moreover, a strong government in the center made it easy to devise a comprehensive containment strategy in respect of the Covid-19 pandemic, which invaded the country in March 2020. The government was also able to formulate a locally driven economic policy appropriate for the country. These are considered as positive features of the SLPP government.

3.3.2 Strengthened national security

As a result of constant friction between the president and prime minister during the so-called *Yabapalana* government, national security was put in jeopardy, leading to the Easter Sunday attacks that claimed a significant number of lives of citizens and caused millions of rupees worth of losses to the economy. More importantly, it was highlighted that the national security was undermined due to some loopholes in the security apparatus of the country. Thus, it was essential for the SLPP government to put national security on the center stage in its policy formulation agenda. As Rajapaksa brothers had the experience of defeating one of the most ruthless terror outfits in the world in 2009, they had no problem in ensuring the national security of the country, which they did by giving it the topmost priority. After beefing up the intelligence and armed forces across the country, the government took various other measures too to strengthen national security in order to prevent a repetition of terrorist attacks like the Easter Sunday mayhem that occurred (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2020). These pre-emptive and defensive measures taken by the SLPP government vis-à-vis Covid-19 and national security can be attributed to the dynamic leadership of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. This is deemed as a positive outcome of voting into office a strong SLPP led government.

3.3.3 Enactment of 20th amendment to the constitution and initiative for new constitution

The constitution of a country is the basic law that provides a political and legal framework for a society while it also serves as the institutional architecture for the governance of the country. It protects

the freedom and autonomy of the individual and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. It enshrines the values and principles by which society should be governed. The Constitution of Sri Lanka has many amendments made to it, in fact 19 times since it was promulgated in 1978. The 19th amendment to the constitution was made by the Maithri-Ranil government with the aim of pruning down the excessive presidential powers by transferring some of those powers to the prime minister, re-imposing a two-term limit on the presidency, and barring dual citizens from contesting general elections. The last provision was aimed at preventing two prominent Rajapaksa siblings from contesting in any future elections (DeVotta, 2020). Although there were merits to the amendment like the Right to Information act (RTI) and two-term limits on the presidency, there were some bad features in it too. Ever since the Sirisena and Ranil government was formed in 2015, disagreements and misunderstandings developed between them not just because they represented two different mainstream political parties, but because of certain deficiencies in the 19th amendment. Former president Sirisena could not dissolve the parliament at his will as there was a clause in the 19th amendment to the constitution that decreed the parliament cannot be dissolved until the lapse of four and a half years. Ex-president Sirisena complained a number of times that he was not able to govern the country due to deficiencies in 19th amendment to the constitution (Sunday Times, 2020). There were arguments put forward by a section of people that the Easter Sunday bombing was the result of governmental dysfunction and intelligence failure, mostly as a result of the constant disagreements between the president and prime minister that arose after a long drawn out political crisis could not be brought to an end (First Post, 2019). This prompted the SLPP government to seek a mandate with a two-thirds majority in the parliamentary election held in 2020, mainly because of their intention to bring in the 20th amendment to the constitution and an all new constitution more suitable for the country. After the SLPP government came to power by obtaining a two-thirds majority in the elections, they brought forth the 20th amendment to the constitution. That would be a temporary measure though, as an expert committee has been constituted to draft an all new constitution better suited to the country than the present one (Srinivasan, 2020). Thus, this can be considered as one of the outcomes of the strong SLPP government in the wake of their victory in both the presidential and parliamentary election.

3.3.4 Dismantling the structure of underworld gangs and drug mafia

As the president has received a massive mandate from the people in both the presidential and parliamentary elections, he is now determined to uproot the underworld gangs and drug mafia that are a big menace to a developing country like Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a country predominantly inhabited by a young population, which is highly susceptible to drug abuse. There is also a drug mafia associated with narcotics trafficking in all major cities. As underworld gangs and the drug mafia operate in similar environments, both groups reinforce each other and they tend to commit a lot of crimes like murder, burglary, theft, etc. They set a bad example to the upcoming generation of the country. Although the country was able to successfully end terrorism in 2009, it has still not been able to bring to an end the criminal acts of underworld gangs and the drug mafia that are posing an incredible threat to the future of the younger generation of Sri Lanka. With this mind, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has firmly determined to dismantle the entire structure of the drug mafia and underworld gangs. Therefore, he has enlisted the services of the military and intelligence forces to accomplish this (Ceylon Today, 2020). According to the Ministry of Justice, 553,000 people, or one in every twenty Sri Lankans, are addicted to drugs and the minister has stated that measures are being taken to eradicate the drug problem for good (Ceylon Today, 2020). Prospects for the country would be brighter if the country gets rid of the menace of the drug mafia and underworld gangs that commit serious crimes. This is one of the positive impacts felt by the country because of the strong SLPP government headed by Gotabaya Rajapaksa. This will no doubt benefit the people of Sri Lanka immensely.

3.3.5 Recruitment of 60,000 graduates and 100,000 non-skilled workers by the state sectors

In line with the election pledge made on the 2nd of September last year, the new SLPP government headed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has decided to provide employment opportunities for 60,000 unemployed graduates and 100,000 non-skilled workers in the state sectors. These persons will be selected from families that fall into the lowest income category (LBO, 2020). This new recruitment of graduates and non-skilled workers has been launched under the special order made by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, under which gradual changes will be made to the entire employment system. These well-planned activities are designed to reduce the poverty level and lift up the economic status of the poorest families (Alwis, 2020). The plan to recruit 100,000 unskilled youths to build up a multi-task human resource force was also planned after the rise of SLPP. This is being done under the “Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour,” a policy program outlined in the election manifesto of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Accordingly, the youth belonging to the poorest families are eligible to apply under this program and most of them will be selected. The purpose of this initiative is to provide a steady source of income to the poorest families and thereby help to raise the living standards of those families. Furthermore, they are likely to be provided with skills training and sent to an appropriate public sector institution for employment after training (Pothmulla, 2020). These initiatives are considered as positive consequences of having a strong SLPP government.

3.3.6 New approach to people-centric economy and technology based society

The victory of SLPP meant that it had to take on the enormous task of rebuilding the country and its economy, which was in tatters due to mismanagement, corruption, failure of the system and so forth in the country. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the economy of the country further deteriorated and the government is faced with the massive challenge of resuscitating the economy. Therefore, the government has adopted several measures to revive the economy, such as placing an import ban on luxury items, giving priority on people-centric economy (self-sufficient economy), focusing on local production and creating a technology based society (IANS: 2020). Therefore, the government has created a number of cabinet portfolios in line with this objective. Cabinet portfolios were created for local products like batik clothes, cinnamon, cardamom and so on. The fisheries sector, dairy products, tourism industry and construction industry have been given priority to boost the local economy. As a parallel policy, the government has placed restrictions on the imports of luxury items from international markets (Farzan, 2020). This has been done to prevent them from competing with local products and to maintain stable foreign exchange reserves. Since a nation cannot progress without adapting to the rapid technological changes that are taking place, policies are being formulated to develop the competencies in information technology and language skills of future generations to enable them to interact with global markets. Thus, these developments are considered as positive outcomes due to the SLPP government's plans to rebuild the country and revive its weakened economy.

3.3.7 Health policy on Covid-19 pandemic

Following the victory of SLPP in the presidential election in November 2019, the biggest challenge the SLPP government confronted in the early part of 2020 was the Covid-19 pandemic that was bringing the entire world to a standstill. It proved to be a health emergency that required a calculated effort to defeat or contain as it had the potential to spread rapidly across the population, through community transmission. However, the SLPP government under the strong leadership of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa got into action. The president formed a National Operations Center under Sri Lanka's Army Chief Shavendra Silva as the Chairman, assisted by health experts, the military, key stakeholders, doctors and health workers and government officials (Yamei, 2020). A nationwide lockdown or curfew was

declared by the government, which lasted until June 2020. Quarantine centers were established in various places of the country, where people detected with Covid-19 were sent to be kept in isolation for 14 days. The military intelligence personnel were tasked with tracing the recent contacts of Covid-19 victims. The contribution of health officials was significant and all the recent contacts of Covid-19 victims were sent to quarantine centers and kept under observation while those infected were sent to specially equipped hospitals. Early detection of potential clusters of Covid-19 in various parts of the country enabled the government to impose lockdown in those places and test both symptomatic and asymptomatic persons by subjecting them to PCR testing. These proactive measures taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 by the SLPP government have been commended by many in and outside of the country. Quarantine law in Sri Lanka is enforced under the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance No. 03 of 1897 (QPDO). Its original purpose was to prevent the introduction of the plague and all contagious and infectious diseases into the country. This ancient law proved useful to the government and military to control/ restrict the movement of people and goods during the curfews/ lockdowns that were enforced as needed across the country from March to June, 2020 (Witharana, 2020). Moreover, an extraordinary gazette notice on Covid-19 preventive measures (regulations) released by the government on 15th October, 2020 has been considered as a strict deterrent to violators of curfews in the Covid-19 pandemic affected areas. This regulation did much by helping the government to establish a strong health system in the country (Farzan, 2020). Thus, development of a strong health policy during this period has also been considered as one of the great achievements of the SLPP government in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.4. Challenges confronting the SLPP government

Although many positive gains of the SLPP government are highlighted in the previous sections, it is important to delve into the most pressing challenges confronting the SLPP government in the present situation in Sri Lanka. Some of these challenges are discussed in the following sections.

3.4.1 Rebuilding the Economy

The Easter Sunday attacks have brought the economy of Sri Lanka to a standstill with the tourism sector as well as foreign direct investment being seriously dented. To add misery to an already bad situation, the Covid-19 pandemic that caused severe disruption to the whole world and the global economy has caused enormous problems to this country too by dealing an additional blow to its already deteriorating economy. The lockdown enforced during the first wave of Covid-19 in May and June this year affected nearly all the demand and supply chains in the country. Restrictions on people's movements and working hours of businesses, along with disruption to the all-important supply chains have caused a significant market shock. Lack of income for daily wage earners and limited income for private sector employees have also had major implications on demand, resulting in reduced consumer and business spending. Available data suggests that the projected GDP growth for 2020 is 2.4%, while unemployment in the first quarter of 2020 could be as high as 5.7% in Sri Lanka. These indicators do not portend well for the economy of the country (De Mel & Kapilan, 2020).

As Sri Lanka is highly dependent on export items like textiles and garments, tea, rubber and coconut, foreign direct investment, tourism industry, and remittances from foreign workers, especially those in the Middle East, it is vital that the country should recover from the economic impact of Covid-19 as speedily as possible. Rebuilding the economy would be the most pressing challenge facing the SLPP government in the backdrop of the mounting external debt that increased to US\$ 50,814.10 Million in the second quarter of 2020 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020)

3.4.2 Enactment of new constitution

The 20th amendment to the constitution made by the SLPP government was passed with a two-thirds majority in the parliament a few days ago. This underlines the fact that the government is in a strong position to deliver on the promises it made during the election rallies and move towards developing the nation. Moreover, the government has also promised to bring in a new constitution within a year that would be suitable to all citizens of the country (Daily News, 2020). As such, a committee of nine president's counsels under the leadership of Romesh de Silva PC has now been formed to draft a new constitution and the work is in progress. Views of the public are now expected to be scrutinized by the committee for inclusion in the new draft constitution. Minister of Justice, Mr. Ali Sabry PC is of the view that the new constitution will represent a Sri Lankan identity and such a constitution will be a milestone in country's progress (Daily News, 2020). Nevertheless, it would be a challenging task for the SLPP government to bring in a new constitution that would be acceptable to all communities in Sri Lanka, given the reality that the country has had a dark history of civil war, a major cause for which was the failure of policy formulation suitable to all communities in the country.

3.4.3 Containing the latest outbreak of Covid-19

People of Sri Lanka heaved a sigh of relief with just a small number of Covid-19 victims in June when the country had almost returned to normalcy. However, this status-quo did not persist for too long. A spike in Covid-19 cases was reported in Minuwangoda, which cluster was associated with the Brandix Garment Factory while another cluster in Peliyagoda was associated with the fish market. Of the total number of cases, 6,115 cases were reported from the Peliyagoda-Minuwangoda cluster (Fernandopulle, 2020). Moreover, there were a total of 19 mortalities and more than 10,420 cases of Covid-19 in the country as of 31st October, 2020 (Worldometer, 2020). Tough measures taken by President Rajapaksa, such as a nearly three-month lockdown from March 20 to May 11, kept the number of Covid-19 affected persons at less than 3,500, after which life of the people returned almost to normal. Unfortunately, the current second wave of Covid-19 is rapidly rising day by day and the original sources of the Covid-19 in these two clusters are still unknown. However, it is pertinent to note that the way in which the government has so far contained the transmission of the second wave of Covid-19 without it being spread further should be appreciated. The success could be attributed to proper contact tracing of Covid-19 victims, PCR testing and quarantining of both victims and their contacts at the appropriate time. Nevertheless, the high number of Covid-19 cases reported daily at present does not portend well for the government as it has to face a lot of challenges to contain the Covid-19 from being transmitted to more and more people.

3.4.4 Accommodation of minorities

Because vast numbers of people belonging to the minority ethnic groups did not vote for GR at the Presidential Election, the relationship between minority parties and the ruling SLPP government had soured to a certain extent. However, the trend of hostility that prevailed between majority and minority has declined to a certain extent after the parliamentary elections. More importantly, a group of minority party parliamentarians (MPs) has extended its support to pass the 20th amendment to the constitution brought by the ruling SLPP government (Kirinde, 2020). This appears to be a sign that there is still a prospect of amicable relations between the SLPP government and minority political parties. Meanwhile, there is a debate underway in the public domain as to whether or not minority political parties based on ethnicity or religion are required in the post-war scenario of the country. The key rationale behind the argument is that minority political parties still tend to capitalize/ exploit their ethnicity or religion to ensure their victory in the constituencies during the election, which is counter-productive for the long term peace and harmony among communities in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, there has been a growing

demand that minority politicians should coalesce with major political parties foregoing their ethnicity based politics in the best interests of minority communities in the country.

3.4.5 Establishment of a proper system and eradication of corruption

Establishing a proper system based on law and order for all citizens, and for almost all government and private institutions in the country would be an uphill task for the SLPP government. Lack of a proper policy and system that is applicable to all institutions in the country leaves room for widespread corruption and dysfunction of such institutions. Sri Lanka is ranked in the 93rd place out of 180 countries, in the Corruption Perception Index reported in 2019 by Transparency International (Trading Economics, 2020). Introducing a policy like ‘one country and one law, and meritocracy’ would be advantageous to a country like Sri Lanka, because such a ‘system change’ would help the government to develop the country in a manner that would lead to prosperity. Singapore is a South East Asian country whose economy greatly prospered as it was based on the policies and ideologies of its first prime minister, the late Lee Kuan Yew. Its success is attributed to three key elements: meritocracy, pragmatism and honesty (Mahbubani, 2013). Similarly, Sri Lanka can be a socially and economically developed nation in South Asia if we adopt such a system and implement such policies. However, the government may need the support of people from all walks of life, like citizens, administrators, politicians, capitalists and so on to implement such a policy and system in the country. Thus, this will be an uphill task and a serious challenge confronting the SLPP government headed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Nevertheless, his determination to enforce a policy of “one country and one law” and establish a proper system in place in all state and non-state sectors in the country gives strong hope to the citizens of this country.

3.4.6 Maintaining balance in the geo-political contest

The strategic location of Sri Lanka in South Asia has drawn a lot of interest in the geo-political contest between the US and China in recent times. Chinese investments have been made in various parts of the country in several infrastructure projects, such as the Port City Project, Hambantota Harbor, highways etc. as China is the biggest source of development funds to Sri Lanka. This has earned the ire of regional superpower India and global superpower US. A high powered Chinese delegation that recently visited the Island offered a loan of US\$ 500 Million on an unconditional basis. This was followed by the visit of Foreign Secretary of US, Mike Pompeo, to the Island. All of these manoeuvres by the geo-political powers suggest that the strategic position of Sri Lanka is remarkably significant for their future strategic plans. However, Sri Lanka has always maintained that its foreign policy will remain neutral, non-aligned and friendly as a sovereign, free and independent country (Bandara, 2020). Therefore, maintaining a neutral and non-aligned position in the context of a geo-political contest between US, India and China will always be a challenge to the SLPP government. It is a tightrope act for the SLPP government as it has to strike a balance in managing its foreign policy in relation to the superpowers like China, India and US.

4. Conclusions

With the resounding victory of the SLPP in both the Presidential election and Parliamentary election with a near two-thirds majority in Parliament, the SLPP government is in a strong position to develop the country. Since the people have given a huge mandate to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to drive the country towards prosperity and change the system of the country, it is incumbent upon him to focus on the socio-economic development of the country, regardless of criticism emanating from different political sectors. Having realized that the economy of the country is now in the doldrums due to the Easter Sunday attacks, the Covid-19 pandemic and inappropriate economic policies followed by previous governments, the SLPP government has now devised mechanisms to transform Sri Lanka into a

prosperous nation with a people-centric economy (based on self-reliance) and a knowledge based society. It is heartening to note that the government, while curbing the imports of luxury items into the country, is planning to build a strong economy based on self-sufficiency, by giving priority to local production and manufacturing. While focusing on empowering the indigenous economy, the government may have to give priority to enhancing the Gross Domestic Product, regaining the confidence of the international market, and reducing the gap between revenue and expenditure in the best interests of resuscitating the economy of the country.

More importantly, since the presidential election in November 2019, the country has witnessed only a small number of trade union strikes, demonstrations, and ethno-religious tensions in pockets. This suggests that minorities in particular and people of Sri Lanka in general can be optimistic about the prospects for unity and development in the country. Nevertheless, it is important for the government to accommodate the minority parties and ensure that their legitimate interests and the needs of their people are addressed so that a stronger unified nation could be built and developed in future. On the other hand, the minority political parties have to take cognizance of the fact that their ethnicity based politics is untenable in the present context of Sri Lanka when the government is in a strong position with a two-thirds majority in Parliament. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the minority political parties to abandon their ethnic-based politics and instead adopt a more accommodative political outlook with the major political parties like SLPP, UNP, SJB, etc. to legitimately fulfil the needs of their people. Divisive politics as practiced by various parties on the basis of their ethnicity will be counter-productive in the long run and will only serve to further polarize ethnic groups. This is unhealthy for a small country like Sri Lanka if it is to achieve sustainable peace and harmony among the people.

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