



SRI LANKA IS POISED FOR A WILD AND ROCKY YEAR

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Sri Lanka looks to have averted a [political disaster](#). On Oct. 26, President Maithripala Sirisena illegally appointed [Mahinda Rajapaksa](#) as prime minister and fired Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had served as prime minister since 2015. The nation's awkward and ineffective coalition government – led by Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Wickremesinghe's United National Party – fell apart.

Wickremesinghe was [reinstated as prime minister](#) on Dec. 16 as the coup attempt failed. The relationship between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe remains in terrible shape, however; the [causes underlying the crisis](#) (mostly pertaining to domestic politics) remain unresolved. Consequently, Sri Lanka is likely in for a bumpy ride in 2019.

The coalition government that formed in 2015 became increasingly unpopular as the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe relationship fell apart, although an unconstitutional power grab was impossible to predict. During the crisis, Rajapaksa and other members of the purported Cabinet took over government ministries and supporters of the attempted coup took control of state media.

Sirisena moved to dissolve Parliament in November and wanted to hold a parliamentary election in January. Meanwhile, Rajapaksa lost two no confidence motions in Parliament and Wickremesinghe won a confidence vote. Throughout the crisis, Wickremesinghe maintained that he was the legitimate prime minister.

On Dec. 13, [the Supreme Court](#) ruled that Sirisena's decision to dissolve Parliament early was unconstitutional. This was a historic moment that led to Rajapaksa backing away from his claim to being prime minister; he "[resigned](#)" from the post on Dec. 15.

Prior to the crisis, Rajapaksa and his allies were favored to win the next round of national elections; that might still happen. Under Rajapaksa's leadership, the Sri Lankan military crushed the [Tamil Tigers](#), a separatist movement fighting for a Tamil state in the northern and eastern parts of the country. For many ethnic Sinhalese, Rajapaksa is a courageous war hero who oversaw the defeat of the ruthless Tigers.

Yet the war, which raged from 1983 to 2009, resulted in massive civilian casualties and [credible allegations](#) of war crimes and crimes against humanity have plagued Sri Lanka ever since. After the war, Rajapaksa ruled in an increasingly corrupt, nepotistic, and authoritarian fashion. Sirisena served as a Cabinet member in Rajapaksa's administration, which ruled from 2005 to 2015. But he [unexpectedly unseated Rajapaksa](#) in a January 2015 presidential contest.

During more than seven weeks of chaos and uncertainty, Sri Lanka's institutions – including the Supreme Court, the [Court of Appeal](#), Parliament, and civil society – were tested and they've held up well, consistently pushing back against Sirisena's lawless escalations.

The crisis has had significant consequences. The nation has [taken a huge hit economically](#). [Tourism](#), foreign investment, and [foreign aid](#) have been affected. Ratings agencies have [downgraded Sri Lanka's credit](#). More worrying, the attempted coup has damaged the island nation's messy democracy.

Sirisena has been irreparably tarnished and has no real hope of winning a second term as president unless something changes. Ironically, Sirisena's unconstitutional appointment of Rajapaksa as prime minister was largely because the president saw no other way to garner a second term. From anticorruption to improved governance to economic reform and more, the coalition government was unable to implement key parts of its agenda. Sirisena

doesn't have a political base and needed Rajapaksa's support to have any chance of winning a forthcoming presidential contest.

Rajapaksa has been hurt as well, though he remains a political force to be reckoned with. Wickremesinghe has emerged stronger. The same could be said for his United National Party. However, if Wickremesinghe and his party don't immediately start to display more competence than they have over the past four years, don't expect them to fare well in upcoming elections.

A new United National Party-dominated Cabinet has been [sworn in](#) and Rajapaksa now leads the opposition in Parliament. The 225-member body will probably struggle to get much done; meaningful democratic or political reform before the next round of national elections looks unlikely. There's been no reconciliation between the president and the prime minister. Rajapaksa and his associates remain eager to return to power; they'll do whatever they can to foment chaos, promulgate misinformation, and thwart the government's agenda.

Had the coup succeeded, the country would have descended into a more authoritarian phase; Tamils and Muslims – oppressed minorities in a country that is overwhelmingly Sinhala-Buddhist – would have suffered disproportionately.

A longstanding democracy has flirted with full-scale authoritarianism. After Wickremesinghe returned to a position that was his to begin with, the situation appears to have stabilized – for now. Unfortunately, the [underpinnings](#) of the imbroglio – from power-sharing and policy failures to personality differences and political calculations – haven't been resolved. Volatility, uncertainty, and friction should be expected in the months ahead.

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