

STABILITY SOUGHT AMIDST SHIFTING POLITICAL DYNAMICS



Hindsight

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The task of restoring political stability so that the Government could proceed with measures to address economic challenges continued last week with the appointment of several other Cabinet Ministers, with some of them being recruited from the Opposition political parties.

The previous Cabinet, sworn-in a few weeks ago stood dissolved with the resignation of then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. In what is now seen as a major political initiative, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was able to persuade former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to return to this role for the sixth time.

There has been much criticism about Wickremesinghe being reappointed Prime Minister. One argument is that he was Premier five times before and that it was he who presided over the political demise of what was once the most dominant political party, the United National Party (UNP).

WICKREMESINGHE'S APPOINTMENT

Another criticism levelled against Wickremesinghe's appointment is that he is the solitary Parliamentarian from the UNP in Parliament and that his appointment was from the National List. As such, it has been said that neither he nor his party has a mandate to claim the coveted Prime Ministerial role.

These very criticisms could paradoxically be to Wickremesinghe's advantage. Being Premier five times has given him the much-needed experience to navigate this challenging situation. Having no party to report back to in Parliament means he is immune from party political pressures in Parliament. Wickremesinghe has now been appointed as the Finance Minister too.

In any event, the Premiership was first offered to Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa in his capacity as the Leader of the Party with the second highest number of Seats in Parliament. Premadasa declined saying he needed a timeline by which the Executive Presidency will be abolished, to accept the offer.

As a first step to restore normality, four Ministers were sworn-in after the Premier's appointment. They were Dinesh Gunewardena (Public Administration), Prof. G.L. Peiris (Foreign Affairs), Prasanna Ranatunga (Urban Development and Housing) and Kanchana Wijesekara (Power and Energy).

However, in what was a major strategic move for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his Government, nine more Ministers were sworn-in shortly afterwards. Most significantly, they included two leading and controversial MPs from the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), Harin Fernando and Manusha Nanayakkara.

The other ministers also included Nimal Siripala De Silva (Ports, Naval and Aviation Services). De Silva is arguably the most senior leader in the

Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), a party which has officially maintained the position that it would not join an 'interim' or 'all party' Government at this stage.

Also sworn-in were Susil Premajayantha (Education), Dr. Keheliya Rambukwella (Health), Dr. Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe (Justice, Prisons Affairs, Constitutional Reforms), Ramesh Pathirana (Plantation Industries), Nalin Fernando (Trade, Commerce, and Food Security) and Tiran Alles (Public Security).

FERNANDO, NANAYAKKARA DUO

From among these appointments, it was the elevation of Fernando and Nanayakkara that aroused the greatest interest. The duo were the most strident critics of President Rajapaksa within the SJB and in Parliament. Also, the SJB had decided that it would not participate in an 'Interim' Government.

A few days prior to his appointment, Fernando had hinted that he may become an 'independent' MP if the SJB did not heed his call to join the Cabinet in the Nation's hour of need. It is understood that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe played a significant role in persuading Fernando and Nanayakkara.

Fernando is known to be very close to Opposition Leader Premadasa. As a one of the younger leaders of the SJB he had great potential and he is effectively risking his political future by taking the gamble of joining a Cabinet headed by President Rajapaksa which includes Premier Wickremesinghe.

Nanayakkara's inclusion is less significant. He was not as influential as Fernando in the SJB. He also had a previous history of entering Parliament in 2010 on the UNP ticket and then crossing over to join the Government, then headed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, to vote for the 18th Amendment.

Both Fernando and Nanayakkara came in for a lot of flak following the appointment. Opposition parties, including their own, questioned their motives and integrity. Chief Opposition Whip Lakshman Kiriella announced that the SJB will commence disciplinary proceedings against the two Ministers.

After being sworn-in as Ministers and joining the Cabinet, both Fernando and Nanayakkara held a joint media briefing to explain the rationale for their decisions. Their argument was that this was an unprecedented crisis which required an unprecedented solution. Hence their decision, they said.

They maintained that they have not

changed their stance about reducing the powers of the Executive Presidency. They said their acceptance of portfolios was conditional upon the President initiating measures to introduce a 21st Amendment to the Constitution to achieve this objective.

If the 21st Amendment is not introduced within a reasonable period of time, they will resign from their Cabinet portfolios, Fernando and Nanayakkara said. They argued that they will be in a better position to agitate for an abolition of the Presidency as Cabinet Ministers rather than as Opposition MPs.

They also noted that the portfolios allocated to them, Tourism and Lands for Fernando and Labour and Foreign Employment for Nanayakkara, are both Ministries that are result-oriented and generated foreign exchange which is a dire need due to the ongoing decline in foreign reserves in the country.

Also significant are the appointments of Ministers Nimal Siripala de Silva and Susil Premajayantha. Silva's appointment indicates that the President has been successful in wooing at least a section of the SLFP, when the party had declined to accept positions in a Gotabaya Rajapaksa-led Government.

It will also be recalled that Premajayantha was recently sacked as State Minister of Education Reform by President Rajapaksa following the former making some public comments at the Sunday Fair at Delkanda in Nugegoda that were highly critical of the President. That was in January this year.

Following his sacking, Premajayantha has been quite severe in his criticisms of the Government and its leadership. His reappointment to the Cabinet therefore signifies a mellowing both on his part and also by the President with the Minister rising to the occasion to accept the President's offer of basically the same portfolio.

NEW MINISTERS

Following these appointments which brought the total number of Ministers to 13, a further six Ministers were sworn-in earlier this week. In addition, portfolios were added to Dr. Ramesh Pathirana (Industries) and Dr. Keheliya Rambukwella (Water Supply). At the time of writing, the Cabinet totalled 19 Ministers.

The six new Ministers include Douglas Devananda (Fisheries) from the Eelam Peoples' Democratic Party (EPDP) and Mahinda Amaraweera (Agriculture, Wildlife and Forest Conservation) from the SLFP. High-profile Amaraweera will join Nimal Siripala de Silva as the second SLFP Minister in the Cabinet.

Also appointed are Dr. Bandula Gunawardena (Media, Transport and Highways), Vidura Wickremesinghe (Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs), Ahamed Naseer Zainulabdeen (Environment) and Roshan Ranasinghe (Irrigations Sports and Youth Affairs).

There has been speculation that a few more Ministers could be appointed in due course. Of particular interest is the crucial Finance portfolio which is yet to be allocated.

The new Cabinet held its first meeting on Monday. At this meeting, the draft 21st Amendment prepared by Minister Dr. Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe was taken up for discussion. Ministers then agreed to forward copies of the Amendment to all political party leaders for their observations and comments.

The Cabinet has requested that these observations be forwarded as soon as possible by the Party Leaders. This is because a discussion has been scheduled for tomorrow (Friday) to review any issues arising from the Amendment. Thereafter it will be returned to the Cabinet for final approval.

Making a special statement about the progress of the draft 21st Amendment through these processes, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe explained that it was the aim of the Government to proceed with the Amendment as soon as possible, facilitating its quick passage through the Parliamentary processes.

From these developments it appears that the Government is keen to both initiate economic relief measures while at the same time appeasing public sentiment for change, both in the personalities involved in Government as well as in the Executive Presidential System of governance.

The appointment of a new Prime Minister, the selection of Ministers from a variety of political parties which now include the SJB, the SLFP and the EPDP signals the intent of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to be inclusive and accommodating, despite still enjoying a clear Parliamentary majority.

Politicians such as Nimal Siripala de Silva, Susil Premajayantha, Harin Fernando and Manusha Nanayakkara appear to have acknowledged this by accepting Cabinet portfolios when their respective political parties are opposed to the concept. They are therefore putting their political careers at risk.

The political environment will remain in a state of flux in the coming weeks as the Government aims to consolidate the gains it has made in the past two weeks into more tangible outcomes. This could come in the form of the passage of the 21st Amendment to the Constitution in the very near future.