

'We needed a Modi after the Easter attacks'

The Rajapaksa family is back in power in Sri Lanka.

Kapil Komireddi

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA Sri Lanka was among the first democracies to defy the tide of populism. In January 2015, when India was seven months into Narendra Modi's sectarian reign and the United States was two years from falling to Donald Trump, voters in this South Asian island nation defeated their strongman president Mahinda Rajapaksa.

The rehabilitation of severely bruised institutions inaugurated by that unexpected result is now threatened with reversal after Sri Lankans last week elected Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a younger brother of Mahinda Rajapaksa, as president. Equally imperiled by the re-emergence of the Rajapaksas is the brittle process of reconciliation in a land seeking to recover from a long civil war.

In 2009, four years into his first term as president, Mr. Rajapaksa led the Sri Lankan military to a brutal victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the outfit that waged a three-decades-long insurgency for a separate state for the country's Tamil minority. After the war, he cast himself as the guardian of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, found immense support among that community's hard-liners and easily secured a second term in 2010.

Mr. Rajapaksa scrapped a law prohibiting him from seeking more than two terms as president, slapped his face on currency bills and dismantled constitutional constraints on executive authority.

His brazen seizure of power was hallowed by hyper-nationalism and lubricated with lavish spending on vanity projects financed by heavy

borrowing from China. Colombo became a gaudy reliquary of the Rajapaksas' wastefulness.

To many Sri Lankans, Mr. Rajapaksa's defeat felt like deliverance from repression, ethnonationalist chauvinism and the trauma of the conflict.

Those hopes are diminishing now. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the new president, supervised the Sri Lankan offensive against the Tamils. Appointed defense secretary by his brother, he was unsparing in his assertion of Sinhalese might. At least 40,000 Tamil civilians, according to a United Nations tally, were killed in the final days of the war. "We should all fall on our knees and beg for forgiveness for what we did there," a retired soldier who served on the front lines told me recently. "These people were defeated, at our mercy, but we were encouraged to be merciless. We went mad."

Gotabaya Rajapaksa was accused by the commander of Sri Lanka's armed forces of ordering the execution of Tamil insurgents who had offered to surrender peacefully. His refusal to express contrition or cooperate with the United Nations investigation of war crimes earned Mr. Rajapaksa rebukes in the West — but it led also to his deification at home as the defender of the Sinhalese majority. His family affectionately called him "The Terminator."

After 2010, Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa presided over Sri Lanka's conversion into a rancid ethnocracy, where the most extreme Buddhist clergy were granted a license effectively to gratify themselves by tormenting defenseless minorities.

With the Tamils vanquished, Buddhist extremists trained their rage at Muslims, accounting for two million of the country's 20 million people. Bodu Bala Sena, or the Buddhist Power



ERANGA JAYAWARDENA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Sri Lankan president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, in short-sleeves, with his cabinet. His brother Mahinda, former president and current prime minister, is fourth from right.

Force, a group of tonsured monks, proclaimed itself the defender of Buddhism, pledged allegiance to the Rajapaksas and amplified every trope about the treachery of Muslims circulating in India and the West and took to terrorizing them. As public disquiet spiked, Gotabaya Rajapaksa praised the Buddhist Power Force as a protector of "our country, religion and race."

In the background, many critics of the regime, abducted by anonymous men in white vans, vanished from sight. The editor of the liberal weekly Sunday Leader, Lasantha Wickrematunge, who had antagonized the government with his unrelenting coverage of its excesses, was shot dead on his way to work by masked gunmen on motorbikes in early 2009.

The Rajapaksas lost power in the 2015

elections after lawmakers within their party abruptly jumped ship and joined a broad coalition against the government. But the unity of purpose that endeared the rebels to voters collapsed under the weight of internal squabbles once they were elected to government.

The tyranny of the Rajapaksas was replaced by squalid spectacles of quarreling between the new president, Maithrapala Sirisena, and his prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Their feud grew into a constitutional crisis in 2018 when President Sirisena fired the prime minister and realigned himself with the Rajapaksas to shore up his precarious political power. He offered the prime minister's position to Mahinda Rajapaksa but the courts declared the move unconstitutional.

The Rajapaksas, discredited, ap-

peared poised for obsolescence. What rescued them were the coordinated suicide bombings at churches and luxury hotels on April 21, Easter Sunday — 259 were killed and more than 500 injured — by self-radicalized local Muslims who claimed to be affiliated to the Islamic State. Riots erupted in multiple parts of the country as it became apparent that the incompetent government, consumed by infighting, had neglected warnings by India and the United States of an imminent terror attack. Muslim businesses were vandalized and ordinary Muslims were attacked.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced his candidacy four months after the explosions and mounted his comeback on the fear and rage that pervaded Sri Lanka. For Sri Lanka's minorities, the scale of Mr. Rajapaksa's victory — winning nearly seven million votes — was terrifying because it revealed the full capacity of a campaign premised on chauvinism to mobilize the majority.

Colombo, lashed by thunderstorms, was dark and damp on the day Mr. Rajapaksa was sworn in as president. He chose to hold his inauguration in Anuradhapura, an ancient Buddhist town where a Sinhalese king had defeated a Tamil invader more than 2,000 years ago.

The location was a declaration of the Rajapaksas' majoritarian leanings. Blessed by Buddhist monks, Mr. Rajapaksa affirmed his support for their dream of a Buddhist-first Sri Lanka and chided minorities who failed his "expectations" by voting against him. His first act as president was to appoint the prime minister of Sri Lanka: His brother Mahinda Rajapaksa.

"We needed a Modi after the Easter attacks," one of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's **KOMIREDDI, PAGE 16**

'We needed a Modi after the Easter attacks'

KOMIREDDI, FROM PAGE 14

supporters had told me. "Gota is our Modi. He doesn't think too much. He acts." The reverence for Mr. Modi, the polarizing Hindu nationalist politician, among Sinhalese reactionaries, was at first puzzling. But their affection, anchored in a shared hostility for Muslims,

had a logic to it.

I walked to Colombo's historic Red Mosque a few hours after Mr. Rajapaksa took the oath as president. Worshipers were spilling out into the rain after saying their evening prayers. Some of them had heard rumors — confirmed later that night — that Tamils suspected

of not voting for Gotabaya Rajapaksa were being attacked by Sinhalese men in a nearby province. "They'll come for us next," one of them said.

KAPIL KOMIREDDI is the author of "Malevolent Republic: A Short History of the New India."