

"Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's new President, is best known for defeating the LTTE in a final, bloody war in 2009. His brother Mahinda had a strong pro-China tilt, and India will be watching his policies closely."

Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who took oath as Sri Lanka's President on Monday, will be closely watched by the international community, including India. He has the reputation of being the man who crushed the Tamil Tigers when he was Defence Secretary during his brother Mahinda Rajapakasa's presidency (2005-15), a period that also saw reports about brutalities on surrendered militants and civilians. India, in particular, will be watching Gotabaya for the way he shapes Sri Lanka's relations with China.

The brothers Rajapaksa

Gotabaya, 70, is one of the four Rajapaksa brothers in active politics in Sri Lanka, hailing from the south of the country. Besides Mahinda and Gotabaya, the other brothers are Basil Rajapaksa, who served as an adviser to President Mahinda and was an MP between 2007 and 2015; and Chamal Rajapaksa, who was Parliament Speaker (2010-15) and is no longer in active politics. Basil told The Indian Express last week that politics was in Gotabaya's blood; their father too was a parliamentarian and a minister.

Gotabaya's legacy

A former lieutenant colonel who served two decades in the Sri Lankan Army, Gotabaya later worked as a technocrat in the US from 1992 to 2005, before returning home to take charge as Defence Secretary.

In a country that had been in the grip of civil war and ethnic clashes for nearly three decades, Gotabaya's decisive moves with the help of Indian and US intelligence agencies helped Sri Lanka finish the war against the LTTE in 2009. In the final stages of the war, over 40,000 civilians and a number of Army personnel were killed, while several hundred civilians and LTTE cadres disappeared. This led to reports of "white flag incidents" in which surrendered LTTE men were allegedly killed by the Army, and "white van incidents" in which Tamils and those who opposed the war were allegedly abducted by government-backed private militia.

This reputation also won Gotabaya widespread support from the majority Sinhalese Buddhists as well as all as others who opposed the LTTE. Gotabaya is also credited with measures relating to urban development and beautification of Colombo, until his brother lost the presidency.

His reflections on his legacy

In a recent press conference in Colombo, Gotabaya was asked about his previous role and the punishment meted out to alleged war criminals. He replied that it was time to forget the past and move on.

In an interview with The Indian Express in 2018, he said he had done the right thing. “War is not a good thing; it is not a nice thing. But in Sri Lanka, I didn’t create the war, I ended the war... Our country is a better place without the LTTE,” he said.

Asked if he could sleep in peace during the days that witnessed hundreds of killings, he had said: “It is not only soldiers but innocent people too died due to terrorism. Bombs do not understand who is enemy and who is friend, or if it is a civilian or military van. So I do not regret. I used to sleep every day during the war too.”

His stated priorities

In his speech while being sworn in, Gotabaya said: “I consider the foremost responsibility of my government is to ensure the national security of my country. We will rebuild the state security machineries to secure the country from terrorism, underworld activities, robbers, extortionists.”

The victory came in the aftermath of terrorist attacks on hotels and churches in April, in which more than 250 people were killed. The Islamic State claimed responsibility.

What his victory means

Although he has been sworn in, Gotabaya will be a President without a government until the current government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is dissolved. It is unclear if Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP) is ready to dissolve Parliament. Sources said Gotabaya can have control over the Army and key portfolios while he has to either wait for the next Parliament election after March, or form a cabinet on his own to assume full powers.

Sources close to defeated presidential candidate Sajith Premadasa (UNP) said he would oppose any move to dissolve Parliament before it completes its term. Sources in the Wickremesinghe camp, however, said he was ready to step down.

What it means for India

After his victory, a source in Gotabaya’s camp told The Indian Express: “A strong President in Sri Lanka will make sure that India is the closest friend while protecting the independence and autonomy of his own country.” During the Mahinda regime (and Gotabaya’s tenure as Defence Secretary), Sri Lanka’s pro-China stance had caused concerns to India, particularly when Chinese submarines and warships made repeated undeclared visits to the port of Colombo. China had got huge concessions then, and extended loans worth billions of dollars, which, while helping build ports and highways in Sri Lanka, put the country deep in debt.

In his 2018 interview with The Indian Express, Gotabaya said the Mahinda government had never allowed Sri Lankan soil to be used by any foreign country against India. Now, an adviser in his camp said Gotabaya will have a special interest in strengthening a healthy relationship with India while exploring more trade partnerships with China and potential investors.

Critics see Gotabaya as being obliged to the United States, where he had citizenship before he relinquished it ahead of the elections. The Opposition has raised allegations about dual citizenship, which Gotabaya’s camp denies.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements and choose the correct Answer using the code given below.

1. Sri Lanka is a South Asian island nation located in the western part of the Indian Ocean.
2. The early name of Sri Lanka was Ceylon.
3. Gotabaya Rajapaksa is the newly elected President of Sri Lanka.

Code:-

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 1 and 3
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. What are the implications of result of Sri Lanka's election for India? Discuss (250 words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 19 Nov., is 1 (b).

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