

Sri Lanka will decide its President today

Gotabaya, Premadasa to square off in an election fought on national security and economic concerns

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Nearly 16 million voters will have a say in Sri Lanka's biggest election on Saturday, that is being closely fought by presidential hopefuls Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sajith Premadasa, though a total of 35 candidates are in the race.

National security and economic concerns dominate this presidential poll, coming seven months after the deadly Easter Day suicide bombings that killed over 250 people. Apart from gripping the country in fear — after a decade's relative peace since the civil war ended — the terror attacks delivered a huge blow to Sri Lanka's tourism sector and economy that heavily relies on it.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa, candidate of the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP or People's Party), was a powerful war-time defence secretary, who has now made an entry into politics. The younger brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Mr. Gotabaya, 70, is pitching himself as a "strong leader", promising a safe country in the wake of prevalent anxiety over national security since the terror attacks. He has promised technocratic fixes to the economy that, he has said, will be knowledge-based under his possible leadership.

On the other hand, Sajith Premadasa, 52, of the ruling United National Party (UNP) was named candidate after an insurgent campaign within. Drawing huge support from grassroots organisers, he has since been trying to

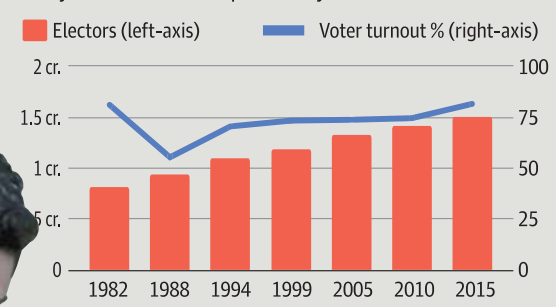


An election official carries ballot papers ahead of Sri Lanka's presidential election in Colombo on Friday. ■ REUTERS

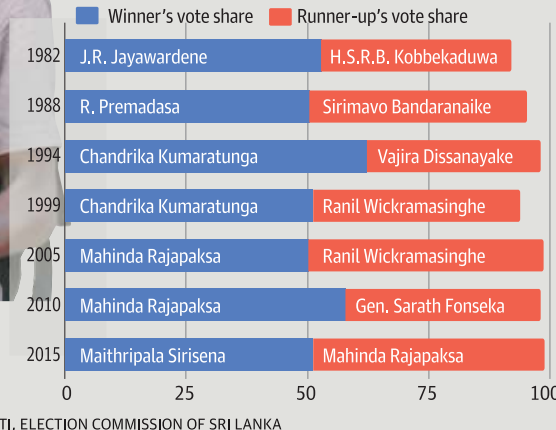
COMPILED BY T. RAMAKRISHNAN | SOURCE: PTI, ELECTION COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA

Decision day
The island nation will go to the polls on Saturday to choose a new President. There are 15.9 million eligible voters who will choose a successor to President Maithripala Sirisena from a record 35 candidates.

Peak turnouts Only on two occasions — 1982 and 2015 — in the last 37 years did the voter turnout exceed the 80% mark. The 1982 poll was the first after the country adopted the system of executive presidency



Top two In the past, apart from J.R. Jayawardene, only Chandrika Kumaratunga and Mahinda Rajapaksa have managed to retain their post. Graph shows vote shares of winners and runner-ups in past elections:



rejuvenate the party's diminishing rural vote base, much like his late father President Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was known for his rural connect. His campaign has been broadly on a plank of welfare, including shelter for all and universal education and health.

High stakes
For many Sri Lankans, this presidential poll is one of

high stakes and difficult choices. Many among the island's Sinhala-Buddhist majority associate the Rajapaksa clan with "ending the war [against LTTE] and restoring peace". They underscore the Mahinda Rajapaksa administration's contribution to upgrading basic infrastructure across the country. Mr. Gotabaya draws huge support from this base, while other

voters are averse to the "family rule" — four brothers and at least two of their sons are at the forefront — and "large-scale corruption" associated with their past administration. Further, critics and dissidents are wary of a reversal to the Rajapaksa era that brings back memories of an authoritarian tilt and state repression, more severely felt in the war-hit north and

east inhabited by Tamils. Mr. Gotabaya also faces accusations of rights abuse — he has denied them — and has been linked to hard-line groups notorious for inciting anti-Muslim violence.

But that does not make Mr. Premadasa an easy choice because his candidacy comes with the baggage of incumbency of a government whose stocks plummeted in the last five years. Those who backed the ruling coalition in 2015 are frustrated, after a major corruption scandal at the Central Bank, the constitutional crisis last October and the lapses in security and intelligence-sharing ahead of the ghastly serial blasts in April.

All the same, Mr. Premadasa himself comes with a relatively untainted political record and appears to speak to the concerns of the poor. Further, he has drawn the main parties representing Tamil (in the north-east, and hill country) and Muslim minorities this election and is seen to be projecting a more inclusive approach to national politics, which has reassured his supporters.

Counting of the votes will begin on Saturday, soon after polling ends. Early trends are expected on Sunday, though the Election Commission will declare the final, official results on Monday. Sri Lanka follows a preferential voting system where voters can mark up to three preferences on the ballot. Preference votes will come into play if neither of the top two candidates secures over 50%.

Trump attacks diplomat as she testifies in impeachment probe

Schiff says 'witness intimidation is taken very, very seriously'

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN
WASHINGTON

As the second day of public hearings in the U.S. House of Representatives impeachment inquiry unfolded, U.S. President Donald Trump took to Twitter, attacking former Ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, as she sat in the witness chair.

As a hearing that brought to light threats and disparagement Ms Yovanovitch had faced, was underway, Mr. Trump tweeted, "Everywhere Marie Yovanovitch went turned bad. She started off in Somalia, how did that go? Then fast forward to Ukraine, where the new Ukrainian President spoke unfavourably about her in my second phone call with him..."

"It's very intimidating," Ms. Yovanovitch said, when asked how Mr. Trump's tweets would impact those who were coming forward to testify. "I can't speak to what the President is trying to do, but I think the effect is to be intimidated."



Marie Yovanovitch

"I want you to know that some of us here take witness intimidation very, very seriously," Intelligence panel chairman Adam Schiff said.

Smear campaign
Ms Yovanovitch, who was abruptly removed from her post as Ambassador to Ukraine in May, testified that a smear campaign was run by the U.S. President Donald Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and his son, Donald Trump Jr., and other Trump allies that led to her removal. She also denied giving former Ukrainian prosecutor Sergiy Lutsenko a "Do Not Prosecute" list, to protect Americans. Ms. Yovanovitch said she

was "absolutely shocked" and "devastated" when she learned of Mr. Trump's comments about her during his July 25 call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. "A person who saw me actually reading the transcript said that the colour drained from my face," Ms. Yovanovitch said.

Mr. Trump had described the Ambassador as "bad news" on the July 25 call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that is at the centre of the whistleblower complaint. "She's going to go through some things," Mr. Trump had said on the call.

During Friday's hearing, Ms Yovanovitch said the State Department was being "hollowed out" from within and that Foreign Service professionals were being "denigrated and undermined" and the institution as being "degraded". She said she was disappointed Department "leadership" did not call out attacks against her and others.

Roger Stone guilty on all charges

REUTERS
WASHINGTON

A jury convicted U.S. President Donald Trump's long-time adviser Roger Stone on Friday on all charges, finding the Republican operative and self-proclaimed "dirty trickster" guilty on seven criminal counts of lying to

Congress, obstruction and witness tampering.

The verdict, in a trial arising from former Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation that detailed Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election, is not only a blow to Mr. Stone but renews scrutiny on Mr.

Trump's actions as a candidate at a time when he faces an impeachment inquiry that could derail his presidency. Mr. Trump denounced the verdict. Mr. Stone, 67, was one of several former Trump aides to have been charged in Mueller's investigation.

ELSEWHERE



Venice hit by another ferocious high tide

Venice was inundated by exceptionally high water levels on Friday, just days after the lagoon city suffered the worst flood in more than 50 years. The central St. Mark's Square was submerged and closed to tourists, while shops and hotels were invaded by rising waters. ■ REUTERS

Chile to hold referendum on new Constitution

SANTIAGO
Chile announced on Friday it will stage a referendum to replace the country's Constitution. The current charter, in force since 1980 and enacted by the military dictatorship, does not establish the State's responsibility to provide education and healthcare — two demands made by millions of Chileans who have taken to the streets. ■ AFP

Lithuania and Norway swap spies with Russia

Two Russians were sentenced in 2017

ASSOCIATED PRESS
COPENHAGEN

Two Lithuanians and a Norwegian convicted of espionage in Russia were freed on Friday in exchange for two Russians who had been in prison in Lithuania.

Yevgeny Mataitis and Aristidas Tamosaitis, who were convicted in 2016, have been reunited with their families, Lithuanian spy chief Darius Jauniskis said.

Frode Berg, a Norwegian sentenced in Russia to 14 years in prison for espionage, was handed over to Norway's embassy in Vilnius after he crossed into Lithuania.

Earlier in the day, Russians Nikolai Filipchenko and Sergey Moiseyenko were pardoned by Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda.

The Baltic News Service said the spy swap took place at noon at a border check-

point with the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. No further details were available.

We are happy that Frode Berg is now coming home to Norway as a free man, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg said.

We would like to thank the Lithuanian authorities for their cooperation and for their efforts to free Mr. Berg, Ms Solberg said. Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soeride said Norway had worked systematically to get Mr. Berg, a retired border inspector, freed since his arrest in Moscow in December 2017 on espionage charges for collecting information about Russian nuclear submarines.

Prosecutors asserted that he was caught with documents he had received from an employee of a military facility who was shadowed by Russian intelligence.

Hong Kong protesters defy Xi with pro-democracy rallies

Justice Secretary confronted by protesters in London

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
HONG KONG

Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters defied a warning by China's President Xi Jinping and again took to the city's streets on Friday, as the political turmoil seeped out to London where a Minister from the Southern Chinese city was confronted by masked demonstrators.

Hong Kong has seen relentless protests since June as many in the city of 7.5 million people have vented fury at eroding freedoms under Chinese rule.

Violence has escalated, and tensions have spilled overseas, sparking friction between China and Britain, which governed Hong Kong until 1997.

On Thursday night, Hong Kong Justice Secretary Teresa Cheng fell in London after being surrounded by pro-democracy protesters, in the



Firemen putting out a fire in a van, part of a barricade, after it was set alight near the Chinese University of Hong Kong. ■ AFP

most physical confrontation involving a member of cabinet since the unrest began.

'Appalling attack'

Earlier on Friday, thousands of mainly office workers took to the Chinese territory's streets, many chanting "Stand with Hong Kong" and raising an open hand with five fingers splayed. "Every person in Hong

Kong has a role to play," James, a 33-year-old banking employee told AFP, adding "sacrifice" was necessary to keep the wind behind the protest movement.

Their actions were in defiance of a warning by Chinese President Xi, who on Thursday backed Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam and the police force, while warning the protesters.

Israel to probe injuries to civilians in Gaza strike

Five children were among eight killed

REUTERS
GAZA

Israel's military said on Friday it was investigating "harm caused to civilians" from an air strike it carried out in Gaza that Palestinian medics said killed eight members of one family, including five children.

It was the single deadliest incident in two days of hostilities between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip this week during which 34 Palestinians were killed, almost half of them civilians, according to Palestinian officials.

Islamic Jihad and Israel declared a halt to fighting across Gaza on Thursday but a lasting ceasefire appeared tenuous as they differed on terms.

Israel triggered the exchange of fire by killing the Iranian-backed Islamic Jihad's top Gaza commander in an air strike, deeming

him an imminent threat. Militants responded with a barrage of hundreds of rockets into Israel, forcing entire communities to take shelter. Dozens of Israelis were injured but there were no reports of fatalities.

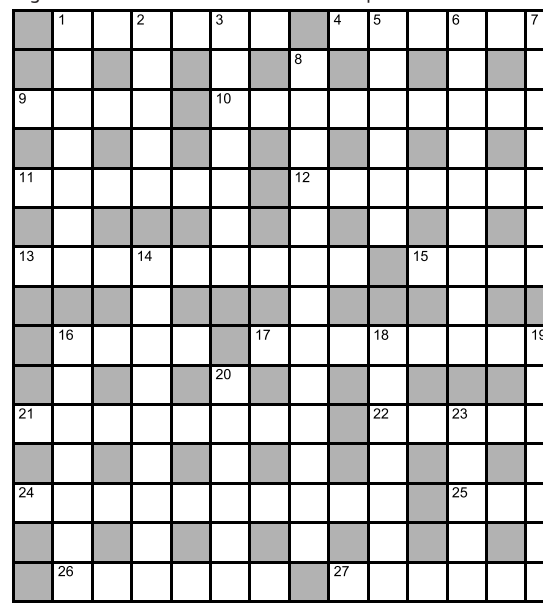
On Thursday, residents and medical workers said an Israeli missile struck and destroyed a house in Dir al-Balah, killing eight of the family members inside.

An Israeli military spokeswoman said on Friday that Israeli forces had hit what she described as an "Islamic Jihad military infrastructure" in the central Gaza town on Thursday morning. "According to the information available to the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] at the time of the strike, no civilians were expected to be harmed as a result of the strike," she said.

She added: "The IDF is investigating the harm caused to civilians by the strike."

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12782

Log on to crossword.thehindu.com for more puzzles



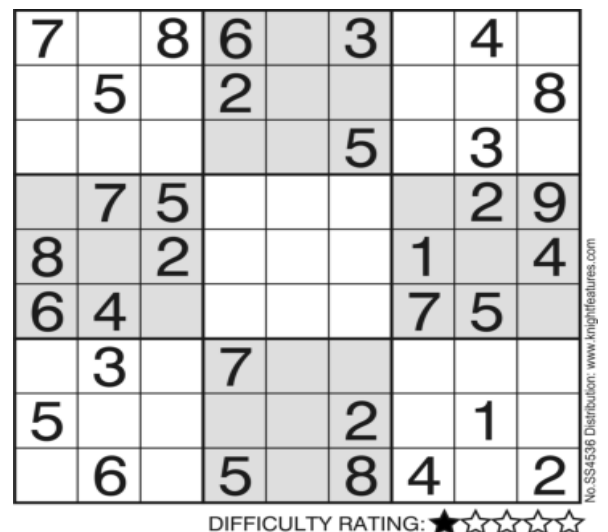
ACROSS
1 Parts of flower given to friends avoiding stranger (6)
4 Overdue in payments? Disheartened with signs (6)
9 Family procured large oven (4)
10 Anne has one spy agency; time to broadcast (10)
11 1 or 4 folds, anyway are folds (6)

To play an interactive version of this crossword online, scan the QR code

(set by Afterdark)

- 12 One can imagine closing early at noon to be free (8)
- 13 Crush Ann has on freshman, nearly is obsessive at the end (9)
- 15 In front of counter, never-ending queue at closing (4)
- 16 Big fight at temples (4)
- 17 Being hot and cold on a man? Use something to soothe (4,5)
- 21 Dirty or pure, somehow to accommodate reading one takes no time (8)
- 22 Lightest, original pilsner, beer's spritzzy, tasty for starters (6)
- 24 Keep Going. Have fresh tea after each exercise, situps essentially (10)
- 25 Russian author wastes cocktail — one part of Bloody Mary (4)
- 26 Main road at Andhra Pradesh has bottleneck in the middle (6)
- 27 Sketch is completed, to collect some money overcoming middlemen (6)
- DOWN**
1 Very little money to get large yard of a textile pattern (7)
- 2 Country dance in which one's swapping out (5)
- 3 Working together to essentially solve a first-class issue (7)
- 5 Attractive new replacement for Victor is reclusive (6)
- 6 Ancient art's revolutionary, nearly high class writing in Indian standard perhaps (9)
- 7 Expressing defiance, drunkard's in this place (2,5)
- 8 Replacement in a moment? One's a learner, it's tenuous (13)
- 14 Hesitatingly approach youth leader to give religious books (9)
- 16 Perhaps an English MP hiding in Hamburg/Essen (7)
- 18 Look through Times on order of insects (7)
- 19 Segment of holocaust rally is coming from the South (7)
- 20 Placed Pakistani leader in a jail finally, relating to partition perhaps (6)
- 23 Brilliance of leader vanishes on touch down (5)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★☆☆☆☆

Solution to puzzle 12781
C B H W A L A A
M Y H O W O B E Y E D
M R L S U M O
H E R E W I T H S U P E R B
T R E A D Y R E F U L G E S
U D T U L L
T E A R O N E S E L F A W A Y
M E N O W A R N A D I R
E L L O F O R E G O N E
T R I L L O F O R E G O N E
I I M T N A G
T I N K E R T I P T O E
S E R A E D

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku
5 3 6 7 4 8 9 2 1
4 2 9 1 5 6 7 8 3
7 8 1 2 9 3 6 5 4
6 9 7 4 3 5 8 1 2
3 1 2 8 6 7 5 4 9
8 4 5 9 1 2 3 7 6
2 5 3 6 8 4 1 9 7
1 6 4 5 7 9 2 3 8
9 7 8 3 2 1 4 6 5

FAITH

Prahlada's world view

The Bhagavata Purana captures all the nuances of Prahlada's exemplary devotion through the words of Narada, who is himself a great devotee and is also the child's preceptor. An equally moving account of this story has been sung by the poet Kamban in the Ramayana through the words of Vibhishana when he tries to offer Hitopadesa to Ravana on the eve of war, pointed out Kalyanapuram Sri Aravamudha-chariar in a discourse.

It is held that when Prahlada is in his mother's womb, he gets the chance to listen to the spiritual discourses that Narada gives to his mother. So devotion to the Lord becomes deep-seated in his nature and it only gets strengthened as he grows up in an atmosphere that is strongly antagonistic to his belief since the inborn tendency in his father Hiranyakasipu is enmity to Vishnu. Naturally tensions arise when all the autocratic methods of indoctrination spearheaded by Hiranyakasipu to bring a change in his son fall flat.

The child would fearlessly utter the Narayana Nama that the Vedas hail as the only force that can protect him, his father and the entire world as well. Seen from the asura perspective, the Bhagavata says that "Prahlada is a sinner who utters Narayana Nama and is a thorny tree in the sandal wood forest of the asura race." But Prahlada is unfazed and would explain the greatness of Hari to the asura children. He is grateful to Sage Narada for instilling devotion in him. His words of advice would point to the fleeting nature of human existence and hence the need to make the best use of human birth to seek salvation. The Lord is the eternal ruler over the entire creation from Brahma to the lowest and immobile aspects in the world. Bhakti alone is sure to relieve people from samsara.