

## **Sri Lanka goes to polls with tight security in place**

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**Colombo:** Sri Lanka is all set to vote in a crucial general election on Monday after a tense poll campaign with Mahinda Rajapaksa eyeing a political comeback as Prime Minister months after being toppled as President.

The election promises a close battle between the United National Party (UNP) of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) of President Maithripala Sirisena.

The duo's rivalry is limited to party positions they hold as Wickremesinghe's support helped Sirisena become President in January.

However the real challenge to the UNP comes from former president and Sinhala strongman Rajapaksa.

Rajapaksa (69), forced himself into the UPFA reckoning to contest the parliamentary poll, an action unprecedented for a former president of the country.

Sirisena was not in favour of granting Mr. Rajapaksa a party ticket but his party allies have defied his wishes.

"Not only you held two terms you deprived the party seniors opportunities by trying to stay on forever," Sirisena alleged in a letter to Rajapaksa last week.

Sirisena said he had to consent to allowing Rajapaksa to contest the August 17 election as there was a threat that the party would be split if he was not given a party ticket.

Accusing Rajapaksa of alienating Tamil and Muslim minorities from the SLFP, Sirisena asked his predecessor not to create divisions in the party.

Sirisena was Rajapaksa's Health Minister until he came forward as the opposition unity candidate to challenge the then president last year.

He faced immediate sacking from the party only to be handed the party leadership when he defeated Rajapaksa in the January presidential election.

"I will start from where I left off in January," said Rajapaksa who runs from the Sinhala Buddhist-majority rural Kurunegala district in the northwest having shifted from his home base in the deep south.

The ex-president charged the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government of stalling many infrastructure projects which he undertook with Chinese assistance.

A hero to many Sinhalese for ending the LTTE's over three-decade separatist civil war on behalf of the Tamil minority, Rajapaksa has expressed fears that the new government's soft policy on the Tamil diaspora in the West may lead to revival of the ethnic conflict.

He has appealed to the Sinhalese to restore him to power as the UPFA's prime ministerial candidate.

- PTI