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SRI LANKA | Election Raises Human Rights Concerns

The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), led by Mahinda Rajapaksa, secured a two-thirds majority in Sri Lanka's general election on Aug. 5, taking 145-of-225 seats in parliament. Human rights groups have raised concerns that the SLPP's victory means amendments to the Constitution may be on the way.

Since Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Presidential victory in November 2019 and the appointment of his brother and former president Mahinda as Prime Minister, Sri Lanka has begun to take an anti-democratic turn, reverting to authoritarian rule and military dominance of Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency. The Rajapaksa brothers face allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity for their role in the ending of the country's long civil war.

At the end of July 2020, Basil Rajapaksa reportedly said, "We have learnt from many political parties in the world. The best two are the BJP [India] and the CCP [China]." Human rights groups are concerned that with a large parliamentary majority, the Rajapaksa brothers could turn Sri Lanka into a majoritarian state, especially given their large supporter base of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists.

Measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic have included a greater military influence in government and shrinking space for freedom of speech and expression in society. On April 1, the Police Media Division issued a letter to all News Directors and Editors stating that legal action will be taken against those who criticize public officials, issue threats to public officials, and make malicious and false statements.

Meanwhile, under Gazette Extraordinary no.2178/18, a Presidential Task Force to build a Secure Country, Disciplined, Virtuous and Lawful Society was established, comprised solely of members of the armed forces and police. It is one of three taskforces created in response to COVID-19, all of which have broad, ambiguous mandates and were established during the period that parliament was suspended in

March, ahead of the parliamentary elections which were then postponed due to COVID-19. The taskforces lack any legislative oversight of their functions or powers.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are concerned by the increasing militarization and authoritarianism of the Sri Lankan government. With strong Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist support, increased powers and continued anti-Muslim rhetoric since the Easter Sunday Bombings, we are concerned that we may witness further deterioration of the rights and treatment of religious minorities within the country. We call on the government of Sri Lanka to ensure that the human rights of all Sri Lankans are fully respected, in accordance with the country's international legal obligations."