Delaying Constitutional Reform in Sri Lanka

What is the issue?

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- An interim report of the Sri Lankan Assembly's Standing Committee on constitutional reform was released recently.
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- It is neither a final report nor a constitutional draft, but a statement of the various positions of groups in Parliament on reform topics.
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- It reflects the rising opposition within the government for taking forward the constitutional reforms proposed earlier.
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What were the key reform proposals?

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- The constitutional reform process envisages an undivided and indivisible country, with the province as the unit for devolution of power.
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- It introduces the concept of 'subsidiarity'.
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- Under this, functions that can be performed by the lowest tier of government should be vested in it.
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- The report also provides for the creation of a second parliamentary chamber representing the provinces.
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- The report commits that the controversial terms 'unitary' and 'federal' be avoided.
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- Instead, Sinhala and Tamil terms that suggest an undivided country be used to describe the republic.
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- Besides, the electoral system solely based on proportional representation is proposed to be changed.

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- A mixed method under which 60% of parliamentary members to be elected under the first-past-the-post system is to be introduced.
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- Complying with earlier demands, the reforms aim at abolishing the executive presidency.
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- The government has promised that the pre-eminent status given to Buddhism will remain as such; an assurance that may help overcome opposition from the majority.
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What are the roadblocks?

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- **Government** - The various factions within the government are divided on the nature and scope of the reforms.
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- The Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and his team want a new Constitution and the abolition of the presidential system.
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- On the other hand, the President Maithripala Sirisena and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) insist only on electoral reforms.
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- **Buddhists** - The most ardent opponents of the reform initiatives now are Sinhalese nationalist forces, led by Buddhist monks.
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- They are concerned that any further devolution would amount to giving in to the demands of the Tamil and Muslim minorities.
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- It would also be appeasing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam diaspora and foreign powers.
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- Also, they worry that abolition of the presidential system would weaken the Sri Lankan state.
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- The Buddhist Sangha leaders are concerned that the new Constitution might relax on the “foremost place” position accorded to Buddhism in the current Constitution.
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How does the future look?

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- The Prime Minister will certainly find it difficult to manage the politics of constitutional reform.
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- Besides, the government of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe is no longer as politically strong as it was a year ago.
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- Corruption scandals, slowing down of investigations against individuals of the previous government, and economic stagnation have all seriously undermined the political credibility.
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- Unless the two leaders repair their relationship, any significant progress in the constitutional reform process is far from reality.
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Source: The Hindu

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