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I always respect the family culture of the Tamils. That is very important but it has been ruined by the LTTE: Mahinda Rajapaksa. PRESIDENT RAJAPAKSA: 'I always treat India as a friend; a relation, I would say.' In this concluding part of an extended interview to The Hindu at Temple Trees in Colombo on June 30, President Mahinda Rajapaksa answers N. Ram's questions on concerns over what is perceived as triumphalism, the power of Sri Lanka's executive presidency, assaults and pressures on the news media, personal friendships, and relations with India. The first and second parts of the interview were published on July 6 and 7.

N. Ram [NR]: Are you not worried by what is seen outside Sri Lanka as triumphalism following the military victory? That has to be checked, does it not, in the South? President: No. The Tamils are happy, the Muslims are happy. They had that fear for two days. I must admit that. When my friends informed me, 'Sir, we have a problem like this' — they had this fear — I spoke to them in Tamil and said: 'Don't worry, I will look after you.' People were enjoying themselves for two weeks. One day I took a vehicle and went all over just to find out what was going on. I placed the Army and the police near the Tamil houses. Nothing happened. Not a single Tamil house was attacked, not a single Tamil was humiliated. Not a single Muslim. Do you know that recently there was a fight. Two were killed. I thought, 'Another problem.' Only to find out that a gang had applied for visas saying, 'The Army is bombing us and fighting us' and that they wanted to escape all this. They somehow got two visas and [to celebrate that] had a party. After drinking, two fellows were killed. We caught all of them and questioned them. They are not LTTEers, they don't belong to any political party. They are gangsters. Gang fighting is going on. These are the underworld; we have to tackle them. They want to go to some western countries. I don't mind; if those governments want them, let them take them! Is the President too powerful? NR: There is a perception that the presidency has become too powerful. If so, what is the safeguard? What would be your answer to this criticism? President: My answer is that it is not too powerful. That is my three years' experience. I can't take any decision on money matters. My money is controlled by Parliament. My powers have been taken over by Commissions. I can't dismiss any Provincial Council — unlike your central government, which has the constitutional power to dismiss a State government and dissolve a State Assembly. So how can I say I am powerful? I can't transfer a provincial teacher. I can't make a school a national school. So what is this power? To decide on the security, yes. The power is there. To keep the country in one piece. Otherwise I have no powers. The Cabinet has all the power. I can request. NR: You are a man of Parliament, are you not? President: I always say I am a man of Parliament. I like to debate. I like to fight, not physically of course. If you are inside Parliament, you're in touch. I'm in a prison now. A glorified prisoner, I would say, with all these security personnel. I'm one who walked from Colombo to Kathargama, 180 miles in 18 days. I'm a person who went and met people. I am a person who went to their houses. I was very free: 40 years of politics was with the people. So suddenly you put me here. I also have been in remand for three months. But I can't see a difference now. Of course I'm getting all these comforts. But what is comfort? This is not comfort. I can't get out, I can't drop in on my friends, I can't bring them here. I can't enjoy anything. Friendship NR: They say you value friendships a lot. You have friends in India. President: I will do anything for a friend — not for any bad work, of course. But when a friend in difficulty approaches me, I will do whatever is possible to comfort them. Even when a country needs a friend, I always trust that country as a friend. Personal friendship has become important even in international relations. That is why I always treat India as a friend. A little more than that: a relation, I would say. Because of that, I will not get angry with others also. NR: You are happy overall with India's response to the recent developments? President: Yes, India was very helpful, first by understanding what was happening. We had a list and we knew what was possible and what was not. We bought the weapons we wanted from China. It was a commercial deal. China helped us and when somebody helps you, you appreciate it, don't you? But we paid them on international terms. We were very clear about this. That is also why I stood by Pakistan. When they were isolated, I got up and defended them. Then I canvassed for India during the process of choosing a Secretary-General for the Commonwealth [Kamalesh Sharma, a senior Indian diplomat, was chosen for this post by the Commonwealth Heads of Government in November 2007 and took up his post in April 2008]. I think no other country's leader would have been doing that openly. There were people in Sri Lanka who were interested in the job. But I said I wanted an Indian candidate. 'In this region, we must have a leader. Here's the SAARC leader, at that time. So make them also powerful internationally and then we have a friend to defend us in international forums.' That was my reasoning. Media issues NR: There has been international concern over the assaults and pressures on journalists in Sri Lanka. Some of these journalists were your personal friends, especially Lasantha Wickrematunge [Editor of The Sunday Leader] who was gunned down in January 2009. Then, in June, a Tamil woman journalist [Krishni Ifhan née Kandasamy of Internews] was abducted in Colombo by unidentified persons [who questioned her for several hours before releasing her in Kandy]. President: Most of these cases were created, I would say. If you fight someone in the street and that man comes and hits you, can the government take responsibility? But we have not done anything against journalists even when they attack us. For example, even though we had evidence that a Tamil newspaper owner and editor supported the LTTE, we treated them as journalists. I invited them here and they even entered into arguments with our senior officials. Some of our journalists want complete freedom. They can attack anybody, they cannot be charged. Under the Constitution, only the President has immunity from prosecution. But the journalists also think they have the right to do whatever they want and get away with it — because they are journalists. Some of them said they would get together and do something about this. But what are some of the newspapers doing? They use media power to blackmail innocent citizens and collect money. I am a politician, I can take it. But public servants, what recourse do they have? The journalist writes something and then

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publishes a correction &mdash; it is useless. If they write falsely that this person is a bribe-taker or a rapist &mdash; there are such instances &mdash; what does he do? He can't go home; he can't face his children. How many people can afford to go to court with a civil [defamation] case? Newspapers must take responsibility. If they won't do this, then you will have laws to make them do this. Lasantha was my friend; he used to come and meet me, told me of various things that were happening, even in my party. He would drop in at two o'clock in the morning and I used to send him back in my vehicle. NR: His last call was to you? President: Yes, but unfortunately I was in the shrine room. It was a bad time. If I was out, they would have given me the phone. I was very angry with my security people. Cultural values President: I always respect the family culture of the Tamils. That is very important but it has been ruined by the LTTE. There is this 19-year-old girl in one of the IDP camps; she has had seven children! Every year she got pregnant because then the LTTE would not take her away to fight. And they don't even know the father. NR: And the parents also supported this? President: Yes, to keep the child. This is in a traditional family. This is the society we are living in. We don't want to publicise all this, although I did mention it in one of my speeches. The point is you can't ruin the culture of a country, the future of the young generation. The drug dealers are doing that. We must do everything to stop them. Courtesy: hindu.com