Ahead of August 17 Parliamentary elections, all Sri Lankans are talking about is whether the former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa would win enough votes to get back in power, this time as Prime Minister. Add to it a laconic statement, ‘yes, it is better since Rajapaksa lost the January presidential elections, but, not that much better’ and this is, more or less, where any similarity between the Sinhalese majority (mainly Buddhist) and Tamils, the largest minority (mainly Hindu), stops.

Thirty years of bloody civil war ended in 2009, only for Rajapaksa to use all his power – which was enormous – to silence any criticism of his regime, turn Sri Lanka into one of the world’s most dangerous countries for any journalists who dare to question his deeds, and make post-war media continue their patriotic discourse. Hate speech continued to be used by both politicians and the media when referring to the ‘other side’. The island remained heavily divided and according to many analysts and experts, Rajapaksa used his popularity to further alienate the Tamils.

National Radio and TV were the beacon of the patriotic discourse, helped by nationalistic Buddhist parties run by monks, some of them publically admitting to being racist. During the war, all through post-war Rajapaksa’s reign and, even after last January’s presidential elections, newsrooms across the country remained deeply ethnically and religiously divided. According to
the most prominent journalists union of the country, the Working Journalists Association (WJA), except from the English language media, no other newsrooms have Sinhalese and Tamil journalists working together. As Lasantha Ruhunage, WJA President puts it: “Two different ethnic and religious narratives continue to exist, though with lower levels of hate speech.”

And the lack of diversity in the newsrooms does not stop there. “Today, despite the war being over, the impact of militarization of the country, the impact of war, is also visible in the media industry which reflects a strong north-south divide, in terms of resources, opportunities, representation and portrayal of women” says Dilrukshi Handunnetti, Senior Editor at Sunday Observer, who recently contributed to a regional Gender and Media study, supported by the International Federation of Journalists.

Though the number of women journalists in Sri Lanka has increased and several women, particularly in the English language media, hold senior positions, even the most prominent independent press, such as Ravaya, have no women in their newsrooms. “Women still continue to struggle in environments that are either unsafe or not conducive for women media professionals. In addition: problematic working conditions; lack of opportunities for upward mobility; and the strong male bias in newsrooms makes the media industry a challenging workplace for women” said Ms Handunnetti when MDI visited her office, continuing: “The portrayal of women using sexist stereotypes continues with the media still treating women as sexual objects and victims.”
An NGO which fights for the LGBT community, has drawn a caricature of the new President and the Prime Minister, presenting them as babies and thanking to the votes of minorities too. In a way he introduced inclusion as principle. "I am seeing what has been happening since January with a bit more scepticism. "A 17 year old boy from the other side's points of view, and, also, will help them see what they've got in common. "The time has come to search for common ground. At the end of the day, Sirisena became president and it might happen again during the parliamentary elections. The leaders of National Relations at National Radio. As proof of this change, he proudly states that for the first time in the National Radio's history, they opened a 24h election channel with a call in option. "It was unthinkable only till a couple of months ago!" He sees potential cooperation with MDI as one way to get National Radio to become more inclusive of all voices in Sri Lankan society. "Don’t blame journalists for their partisan approach; it’s the media owners. After the new president was elected, they just switched sides. But, we do expect fairer election coverage than before.”

Further proof that state media are changing is a Human Rights TV show where one of the most prominent Sri Lankan Human Rights activists, Sudharshana Gunawaradhana, Director of Human Rights Watch, is giving space to different points of view thanks to the changes at the top political levels. "We want to change this image”, says Thilina Samarasoosiya, Director of Training and Foreign Relations at National Radio. As proof of this change, he proudly states that for the first time in the National Radio’s history, they opened a 24h election channel with a call in option. "It was unthinkable only till a couple of months ago!" He sees potential cooperation with MDI as one way to get National Radio to become more inclusive of all voices in Sri Lankan society. "Don’t blame journalists for their partisan approach; it’s the media owners. After the new president was elected, they just switched sides. But, we do expect fairer election coverage than before.”

The good news is that everyone who talked to the MDI team during their July needs assessment mission, expressed self-criticism, understanding of the importance of inclusion and a willingness to change for better. The praise of Freedom of Expression allowed by the new President is encouraging, so, is the Access to Information Act. As Kumar Lopez, CEO of the Sri Lanka Press Institute and Transparency International’s local office which monitored the media during the presidential elections, state media were heavily abused by the previous president and it might happen again during the parliamentary elections. The leaders of National Relations at National Radio. As proof of this change, he proudly states that for the first time in the National Radio’s history, they opened a 24h election channel with a call in option. "It was unthinkable only till a couple of months ago!" He sees potential cooperation with MDI as one way to get National Radio to become more inclusive of all voices in Sri Lankan society. "Don’t blame journalists for their partisan approach; it’s the media owners. After the new president was elected, they just switched sides. But, we do expect fairer election coverage than before.”
Media in Sri Lanka: from Division to Inclusion?

Director of the Center for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (CPBR), one of the most prominent NGOs in the country, Dishani Jayaweera, who has mediated numerous interfaith dialogues after the war ended, is hopeful that transition will help the media improve the way they see civil society and organisations representing it.

"For a long time NGOs have been seen as 'foreign implants'. CPBR have learned a lot while working with grass-root communities who have been sharing their stories with us. We can now share those stories with the media." Mrs Jayaweera is aware that one of the reasons for the poor relationship with the media lays with the NGOs: "Our communication with the media is still amateurish, it needs improvement." CPBR recently engaged Chathurika Subhashini, a graduate from Diversity & the Media, an MA Course jointly developed and run by MDI and the University of Westminster, to help them "see the world from the perspective of the media."

Apart from the media and NGOs, Sri Lankan journalism educators too are aware of the need for future journalists to improve their practical skills in Inclusive Journalism. Dr Chandrasiri Rajapakshe, Journalism Professor at the University of Kelaniya, is a strong believer in democratic change. "Our students are Sinhala, Tamils and Muslims. The university already has Intercultural studies and at the Journalism Department, diversity and the media are elements in their syllabi. But, we need more. We want our students to learn practical skills in reporting on the rich Sri Lankan diversity. Then, they would not need to go abroad to do it." His colleague, Prof Rohana Lakshman Piyadasa, couldn't agree more.

Asked what they expect from the August 17 parliamentary elections, the two professors said they "could only hope for the best, but, what would happen is totally unpredictable." And this is, again, what literally everyone met by the MDI team said. As much as the January presidential elections were a shock, the parliamentary ones could be too. Whether voters just voted against the former president or they really wanted Sirisena as the new one, will be clear very soon.