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PAPER CHIFFIN

පිටිපිටි පුවත් : DEPARTMENT / SUBJECT: International

පුවත් පත : NAME OF THE NEWS PAPER: Times of India පිටුව : (DATE : 13/11) 2019

By 2020, Lanka's prez, PM and speaker could all be Rajapaksas

Colombo: One brother is considered a shoo-in for the job of Sri Lanka's president in elections this weekend and another is eyeing the PM's post when that election becomes due early next year.

Two other brothers are political strategists for their Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party and one of them is considering a shot at becoming the speaker in parliament. Three men of the family's next generation are also in politics. The Rajapaksas, best known for the brutal defeat of separatist Tamil rebels and then drawing Sri Lanka into China's orbit when the West and India shunned the Indian Ocean island, are back at the centre of the nation's deeply divisive politics and it is stoking fear.

While there are no formal opinion polls, ex-defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa is the favourite to win the presidential poll this Saturday. His chief opponent Sajith Prema-



PARTNERS IN POWER: Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa

dasa, a minister, is seen trailing. Gotabaya led the operations against the Tamil Tigers when his elder brother Mahinda Rajapaksa was president. He has faced lawsuits in Sri Lanka and in the US over allegations of staged killings of Tamil separatists, critics and journalists during the war.

Both brothers deny the allegations as a Western conspiracy to interfere in the nation

of 22 million that sits astride vital shipping lanes and has long been a tinderbox of tensions between the dominant Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamils. In recent months, Sinhalese hardliners have also targeted the tiny Muslim community.

Mahinda lost the 2015 presidential poll to a cabinet colleague who turned against him — Maithripala Sirisena. After his ouster, the family's

fortunes fell into decline. But the Easter Sunday bombings on hotels and churches, in which more than 250 were killed, derailed Sirisena's presidency, and he has announced he will not contest this year.

Mahinda is barred from running for president again, and is on the stump for Gotabaya, bringing an affable touch to the campaign against the rather gruff manner of his brother, more known for his military machismo. Another brother, Basil, handles the party finances while a fourth brother and ex-speaker, Chamal, campaigns in the family borough in the south of the island.

Mahinda is the obvious choice for PM, said Keheliya Rambukwella, Gotabaya campaign's spokesman. Chamal would be the choice for speaker, experts say. In all, seven members of the family are involved in politics, and some of the others could also end up in parliament. REUTERS