

The Struggle for Democracy in Sri Lanka – A spirit of resistance

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In the push and pull between authoritarianism and democracy in Sri Lanka, the former has won out more often than not. But the fact that the country is not a full-blown dictatorship today is a testament to a spirit of resistance that can't be snuffed out.

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The terms “bourgeois democracy” and “bourgeois-democratic revolution” have often been confused by socialists, because they seem to imply that democracy is a gift from the bourgeoisie, is inseparable from capitalism, and has nothing to do with socialism. It is true that in many revolutions against feudalism, absolutism, and imperialism, the mass of working people rise up and inscribe their agenda of freedom, equality, and solidarity on the struggle. But once the bourgeoisie is in power, it sooner or later seeks to roll back these gains, sometimes in extremely brutal ways.

And capitalism can survive for long periods without democracy: there is no intrinsic link between the two. Solidarity in particular is a threat to an insecure bourgeoisie, which therefore encourages divisions; relationships of domination and subordination; and discrimination, exclusion, and persecution targeting particular communities.

In stark contrast with the view that democracy has nothing to do with socialism, Marx and Engels declared in [The Communist Manifesto](#) that “the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy”; and Engels later [confirmed](#), “*The Communist Manifesto* had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage, of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat.” Since they believed that the emancipation of the working class would be carried out by the class as a whole, it made sense to affirm that freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly; equality before the law and equal protection of the law; and the right to elect representatives of your choice in free and fair elections were needed to prepare workers to take over government and production.

Given this hostility to democracy by the bourgeoisie, it would be more useful to see bourgeois and democratic revolutions as two *separate* revolutions, with the bourgeois revolution being accomplished fairly quickly while the democratic revolution may drag on for decades. Indeed, even when a democratic republic has been established, it can be demolished and replaced by a fascist state.

This ongoing struggle between authoritarianism and democracy is evident in Sri Lanka, with the presidential election of November 16, 2019 being the latest episode.

From Independence to Civil War

Sri Lankan independence from Britain was won on February 4, 1948 in a bourgeois revolution in Ceylon (as it was then), with the local ruling class taking over a substantial degree of political power from the British Raj. The hope that it would also be a fully-fledged democratic revolution was rapidly disappointed.

Almost immediately after independence, the United National Party (UNP) government disenfranchised and rendered stateless the Hill Country Tamils, most of whom were plantation laborers, who had voted against them. In 1951, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike split from the UNP to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and came to power in 1956 on the plank of making Sinhala the only official language, a measure that discriminated against the large Tamil-speaking minority. The bill was followed by rioting, and when Bandaranaike was seen to backtrack, he was assassinated by a Sinhala-supremacist, Buddhist-monk organization.

In 1977, J. R. Jayewardene of the UNP came to power with a two-thirds majority that he used to push through the 1978 Constitution and make himself executive president with almost unlimited power. He orchestrated anti-Tamil pogroms; enacted legislation enabling the government to detain, torture, and kill Tamil youth at will; and carried out a rigged referendum in which Sri Lankans supposedly voted to cancel elections. The pogroms of 1983 led to a civil war in which the totalitarian [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam \(LTTE\)](#) were pitted against the government.

In 1987, when there was an armed uprising by an allegedly Marxist-Sinhalese militant group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People's Liberation Front, also extremely authoritarian), the government used the same ruthless methods not just against its militants but also against unarmed critics and rural youth. These policies continued when Ranasinghe Premadasa of the UNP replaced Jayawardene in 1989.

While the North and East of the country continued to be subjected to the totalitarian rule of the LTTE, the rest of the country got a breather when [Chandrika Kumaratunga](#), on the left wing of the SLFP which was part of the People's Alliance (PA), was elected to power in 1994, and restored democratic rights and freedoms. Despite promising to negotiate a peace deal with the LTTE, she won a landslide victory with a majority of two million votes over her UNP rival in the November presidential election, showing that what the majority of Sinhalese wanted was peace, not the annihilation of Tamils.

In 2004 the JVP, which had abandoned armed struggle, joined the PA to form the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), but broke away the following year. Kumaratunga's efforts at constitutional change to devolve power to the Tamil majority in the North and East were sabotaged by the LTTE, who [assassinated](#) Neelan Tiruchelvam and Lakshman Kadirgamar, the two Tamil politicians associated with it, and attempted to assassinate her. They were also opposed by Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of the UNP, who became prime minister in 2001. The war restarted and was still continuing when she was replaced as president by Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2005.

The Rajapaksa Regime

Human rights violations against Tamils declined significantly during Kumaratunga's presidency. This was reversed under her successor. As the Eastern Province was won from the LTTE with the help of the Karuna faction that had broken away from it, multiple atrocities were perpetrated against civilians, and the local inhabitants found that instead of having their land returned to them, it was occupied by the military in the name of high security zones, [reviving fears](#) of demographic manipulation to "Sinhalise" the area.

Freedom of expression came under severe attack, and death squads targeting critics of the government resurfaced. Of the many victims, perhaps the most famous is Lasantha Wickrematunge, who in a [letter](#) predicting his own assassination, which was published posthumously, had a message for Mahinda Rajapaksa: "In the name of patriotism you have trampled on human rights, nurtured unbridled corruption, and squandered public money like no other president before you."

This letter highlights two features that distinguish the Rajapaksa regime from previous authoritarian ones. One was the astonishing degree of centralization of power and wealth in the Rajapaksa family, far outstripping the "family bandyism" and corruption of earlier regimes.

For example, Mahinda Rajapaksa's brother Gotabaya not only controlled the armed forces and multiple intelligence agencies, but also [intervened in higher education](#), compelling university students to spend time "training" in military camps, and urban development (which was absorbed into the Ministry of Defence). "Divi Neguma" (Life-Upliftment) development activities under the Ministry of Economic Development were handed over to another brother, Basil, though they were supposed to be handled by provincial councils. Yet another brother, Chamal, was the speaker.

The other feature was the ultra-nationalist emphasis on the Sinhala-Buddhist identity of Sri Lanka and the alien character of other communities. Previous regimes had not hesitated to whip up anti-Tamil sentiment when it suited them, and the special place of the Sinhala language and Buddhism was already part of the Constitution. But the fascist characterization of the "Sinhala race" as the owner of Sri Lanka, and of minorities as aliens to be eliminated, although not new, gained a fresh prominence.

Mahinda Rajapaksa won his second term as president in the election of January 2010, shortly after his government defeated the LTTE in a final battle in which the UN estimates that around forty thousand civilians were killed, partly because they were used as human shields by the LTTE, and partly because the government forces, directed by Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, [bombed and shelled civilian targets](#) including hospitals and safe zones.

The 2010 election, in which Rajapaksa was opposed by former army general and war hero Sarath Fonseka, the common candidate of the Democratic National Alliance, was marked by [massive irregularities](#). The incumbent used state resources to support his own campaign and vilify his opponent, assault and kill journalists who failed to fall in line, attack opposition rallies, and rig the vote so blatantly that the election commissioner admitted that he was unable to guarantee the safety of even a single ballot box.

The UPFA, now headed by Rajapaksa, won the subsequent parliamentary elections in April. Although the government fell short of a two-thirds majority required to carry out constitutional change, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was rushed through as an urgent bill with hardly any discussion. It might have been defeated if the UNP led by Ranil Wickremesinghe had mounted a vigorous opposition, but they were absent from the debate and vote, leaving it to the JVP and Tamil National Alliance (TNA), whose MP M. A. Sumanthiran [opposed the amendment](#), to do the main work of

opposing it in parliament.

One of its most important features was that it abolished the independent Constitutional Council, which had been introduced under the 17th Amendment passed during Kumaratunga's presidency. The 17th Amendment specified that without the recommendation of the council, no person could be appointed to or removed from the Election Commission, Public Service Commission, National Police Commission, Human Rights Commission, Finance Commission, Delimitation Commission, and Permanent Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption; nor could the chief justice and judges of the Supreme Court, president and judges of the Court of Appeal, and members of the Judicial Service Commission be appointed without the recommendation of the Constitutional Council.

Thus, abolition of this body allowed the president to intervene directly in all these appointments. He took full advantage of this ability.

Most outrageously, he used it to impeach Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake on false charges and install Mohan Peiris, a loyalist who was not even a judge, in her place. The second important feature of the 18th Amendment was that it abolished the two-term limit on the presidency. In combination with the ability to appoint family and friends to all the commissions and posts mentioned above, Rajapaksa clearly felt this would enable him to be president for life and to pass on the post to his son Namal.

Mahinda Rajapaksa might have won the 2010 presidential election even without the campaign of fraud and intimidation against Sarath Fonseka, but it would be a mistake to attribute this to ethnic supremacy on the part of the majority of Sinhalese Buddhists. They were grateful to him for ending the war, which had been killing and disabling their sons for decades, and ending terrorist attacks on civilians. But they were not the ones driving policies like the continued military occupation of Tamil-majority areas and constant drumming up of a continuing LTTE threat.

On the contrary, it appears that the Rajapaksa regime kept flogging the supposed threat of an LTTE resurgence precisely because it saw support among Sinhalese Buddhists flagging, and needed an "enemy" against whom they could pose as defenders. When that strategy flopped, a new enemy was found: Muslims.

During Rajapaksa's second term, a number of Buddhist extremist groups appeared, the most prominent being the [Bodu Bala Sena](#) (BBS, Buddhist Power Force), led by Buddhist monk Gnanasara Thero. His ultra-nationalist rhetoric projected Sri Lanka as a Sinhala-Buddhist country invaded by aliens, above all Muslims; he threatened them with annihilation and incited mob violence against them in a series of attacks in which arson and murder were used to drive Muslims from their homes and businesses.

Appearances of Gotabaya Rajapaksa with Gnanasara and the failure of law enforcement agencies to take action against him led to the widespread belief that the BBS was a state-sponsored group, a belief confirmed more recently. Most revealing is the way in which the Buddhist monk Vijitha Thero, who condemned the attacks on Muslims and stood up for the rights of non-Buddhists, was treated by the police and judiciary. Despite death threats against Vijitha and [violent attacks](#) on him and his followers, it was *his* rallies that were stopped by the police and courts. And after he was slashed, bound in his own robes, and left unconscious on the road by BBS goons, *he* was the one who was [arrested and remanded in custody](#) after recovering from his injuries in a hospital. This is the background against which the 2015 presidential election took place.

The 2015 Elections and After

Another Buddhist monk, Maduluwawe Sobitha Thero, a leader of the National Movement for a Just Society, is credited with taking the initiative to form a United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG, Yahapalanaya) to oppose the Rajapaksas in the 2015 elections; numerous civil society organizations and Chandrika Kumaratunga, who persuaded members of the SLFP to break away from the UPFA and join the UNFGG, also played important roles.

Maithripala Sirisena of the SLFP was put forward as the common candidate against Mahinda Rajapaksa in the January 2015 presidential election and won. He appointed Ranil Wickremesinghe as temporary prime minister until the parliamentary elections in August, when the UNFGG, contesting as a united front, again defeated Rajapaksa, and Wickremesinghe became prime minister in the new government.

Some improvements were made. The executive presidency was not abolished as planned, but the [19th Amendment](#) severely curtailed the powers of the president. Shirani Bandaranayake was [reinstated](#) as chief justice and the independence of the Supreme Court restored. The revival of freedom of expression allowed long-suppressed grievances to be voiced in public without fear of reprisal, and the Right to Information Act introduced transparency in governance. Some of the land occupied by the army was returned to its Tamil owners, and there was an attempt to protect Muslims from mob violence, with Gnanasara being given a six-year jail sentence for contempt of court. Investigations into some of the crimes of the previous regime also began. But even before Sobitha died in November of the same year, there had been major backtracking on the promise of [fighting corruption](#).

Allegations of corruption against the new regime took two forms. One was its failure to pursue those in the old regime who were guilty of large-scale corruption like the [Avant Garde scam](#), in which Gotabaya Rajapaksa was one of those implicated in causing a loss of 11.4 billion rupees to the government. The other was the appearance of brand-new scams, most prominently the bond scam in which [Arjuna Mahendran](#), the governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka handpicked by Ranil Wickremesinghe, was accused of causing a loss of 11,145 million rupees to the government by engaging in insider trading in sovereign bonds with his son-in-law's firm [Perpetual Treasuries Limited](#).

Underlying these allegations of corruption were deeper problems. On one side were Wickremesinghe's neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatization. One result was the proliferation of microfinance companies lending mainly to women at [predatory interest rates](#), resulting in mounting debt, the loss of their meager assets, and even suicide. Coupled with the failure to provide employment to young people, the immense hardship caused to the less wealthy sections of society resulted in huge resentment against a government seen as caring nothing about them.

On the other side, Sirisena began switching back to the Rajapaksa camp as early as 2016, and on October 26, 2018 did so openly by dismissing Wickremesinghe as prime minister and installing Mahinda Rajapaksa, who proceeded to appoint his own cabinet. The reaction was swift and overwhelming. Defying violent intimidation and attempts to bribe MPs, parliament carried out repeated votes of confidence in the ousted government, upon which Sirisena first prorogued and then dissolved parliament.

Twelve fundamental rights petitions were submitted to the Supreme Court to rule the coup illegal and unconstitutional, and people came out on the streets to [protest](#). In November, the Supreme

Court stayed the dissolution of parliament, and on December 13 ruled that the president's decisions to dissolve parliament and call snap elections were unconstitutional and illegal.

However, Sirisena continued to act as an agent of the Rajapaksas. He appointed [Shavendra Silva](#), who had been Gotabaya Rajapaksa's right-hand man when he was torturing and killing hundreds of Sinhalese and burying them in a mass grave in Matale, and when he was carrying out extrajudicial killings and indiscriminate military attacks on thousands of Tamil civilians in the North, as army commander. He granted a presidential pardon to [Gnanasara](#), setting him free to terrorize Muslims again.

Having taken the police under his control and excluded other cabinet members from intelligence briefings of the National Security Council, he transferred Inspector of Police [Nishantha Silva](#), who had made considerable progress investigating several murders and corrupt deals carried out by the Rajapaksa regime. Following a huge outcry, the transfer order had to be withdrawn. But his other interventions in the criminal justice system were not reversed, with fatal consequences.

On Easter Sunday 2019, a series of bomb blasts in churches and hotels killed over 250 people and injured hundreds more. It soon became known that the Indian intelligence agency had warned the government about these attacks beforehand, leaving many Sri Lankans wondering why preemptive action had not been taken.

Sri Lanka's Easter Tragedy: When the Deep State Gets Out of Its Depth by Rajan Hoole (Ravaya, 2019) sets out to answer this question. It reports that after Karuna's Eastern faction split from the LTTE in April 2004, army intelligence controlled by Gotabaya Rajapaksa used it to recruit and train Muslims to fight against the LTTE. In October 2004, around five hundred of these militants, who had been attracted to Wahhabism, set the Sufi Meditation Centre in Kattankudy ablaze, along with the homes and businesses of more than two hundred Sufi Muslim families. In December 2006, they started a riot in which the houses of 117 Sufis were leveled by fire and many were threatened and fled the district. Despite this large-scale violence, no arrests were made.

Among these militants was Mohamed Zahran, who in 2015 set up the National Tawheed Jamaat (NTJ) and proclaimed support for ISIS. In March 2017, he and his associates launched yet another violent attack on Sufis, after which local police chief Wedegedara arrested nine of them and eventually requested warrants to arrest Zahran and two others who had escaped, despite being under pressure not to do so. Magistrate M. Ganesharajah issued the warrants, and refused to grant bail to the detainees. But Wedegedara was transferred and replaced by Inspector Kasturiarachchi, who did not object to bail for the detainees; Ganesharajah was also transferred; and in October the High Court granted bail to the detainees.

Meanwhile, representatives of the Sufis met government officials and submitted a complaint against Zahran's extremist preaching and the violence they had suffered. One of the officials, Nalaka de Silva of the Terrorist Investigation Division, began monitoring Zahran and his family members, and obtained an arrest warrant against him. But in October 2018 de Silva was suspended from the police and arrested for his supposed involvement in an India-backed assassination attempt on President Sirisena and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a plot for which no evidence was ever produced.

A clear pattern emerges whereby any official who tried to take action against Zahran and his associates was punished, providing evidence for Hoole's allegation that the Islamists who later carried out the Easter suicide blasts were being protected by a state apparatus which, as the flagrantly biased conduct of some election officials [demonstrated](#), continued to be dominated by Rajapaksa loyalists. The allegation is supported by Minister Rajitha Senarathne's [claim](#) on May 2,

2019 that both Buddhist and Islamist extremist groups had been bankrolled by Mahinda Rajapaksa's government in an operation controlled by Gotabaya Rajapaksa. When Minister Lakshman Kiriella [announced](#) in June that thirty NTJ members including Zahran were being paid by the Rajapaksa regime, Mahinda Rajapaksa responded that such matters should not be disclosed in public, tacitly admitting it was true. It doesn't follow that Zahran and his associates had no agency or were not inspired by ISIS; rather, that the goals of the Islamists dovetailed neatly with those of the Rajapaksas.

The Easter blasts were followed by renewed attacks on Muslims, accompanied by grotesque charges that Dr Segu Shihabdeen Mohamed Shafi, a gynecologist, had secretly sterilized four thousand Sinhalese women — a charge subsequently [disproved](#) by the Criminal Investigation Department — and Muslim restaurants were putting a powder in the meals they served to sterilize Sinhalese men. Hoole suggests that deep state support for Islamists was aimed at justifying violence that would deter Muslims from voting, and this is entirely plausible. But his evidence also supports the hypothesis that it was aimed at convincing Sinhalese Buddhists that they faced an existential threat from Muslims, and only a national security regime that dispensed with "human rights," "ethnic reconciliation," and "individual freedoms," [as Gotabaya Rajapaksa put it](#), could save them.

This is the platform on which he stood as the presidential candidate of the recently formed [Rajapaksa party](#), the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP, Sri Lanka People's Front), in the November 2019 presidential election. On the other side, there was an unusual emphasis on women's rights and welfare, as the campaign of Sajith Premadasa of the UNP, who was contesting on behalf of the New Democratic Front, promised free sanitary napkins to poor women and highlighted their opponents' appalling record of misogyny, rape, and murder of women. Rajapaksa's win with 52.25 percent of the vote showed that anti-incumbency (always a potent factor in Sri Lankan elections), reinforced by the failure of the government to prevent the Easter attacks, weighed heavily with Sinhalese voters, even as minorities voted overwhelmingly for Premadasa.

The Role of Socialists

The left parties, the biggest of which was the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP, Lanka Equal Society Party), played a leading role in the struggle for independence, and in trade union organizing, women's liberation struggles, and campaigns for social security and welfare. They vehemently opposed the Citizenship Acts disenfranchising and rendering stateless the Hill Country Tamils, as well as the Sinhala Only Bill. But in 1964 the LSSP and Communist Party formed an alliance with the SLFP, which came to power in 1970 and presided over the Republican Constitution of 1972 that deprived minorities of their rights and consolidated power in the hands of the state, leading to [breakaways from these parties](#).

The politics of the JVP, which launched insurrections in 1971 and 1987, was also a combination of socialism and Sinhala nationalism. On the other side, some socialists supported Tamil nationalist groups, and continued to do so even after their authoritarian character became evident.

The alliance of left parties with the SLFP might have made sense during the left-of-center presidency of Kumaratunga, but their adherence to the Rajapaksa regime as it attempted to install a patrimonial fascist state led to splits from the LSSP, CP, and Democratic Left Front to form the [United Left Front](#) (ULF). In the current circumstances, left support for a presidential candidate who effectively pledged to persecute minorities and bring back death squads is an example of the red-brown (socialist-fascist) alliances that many have warned of in the twenty-first century.

In the November 2019 elections, the breakaway left parties and nonparty socialists had no option

but to vote for Sajith Premadasa, the only presidential candidate with a chance of defeating Gotabaya. But in the parliamentary elections of 2020, it would not be an acceptable option simply to support the UNP led by Wickremesinghe, who is not only unpopular due to his neoliberal policies, but also carries the baggage of having been a senior cabinet member during the authoritarian J. R. Jayewardene and Ranasinghe Premadasa regimes. A great deal of work would need to be done to create a platform bringing together the ULF, JVP, and a plethora of smaller left parties to form a viable democratic-socialist alternative.

Hope for Democracy

The story of Ceylon/Sri Lanka has been one of repeated assaults on freedom, equality, and solidarity by the ruling class and sections of the petty bourgeoisie. But there is a parallel story of dogged resistance to these assaults, without which the country would be a dictatorship by now.

The betrayals and fragmentation of the left parties have to a significant extent been offset by nonparty entities that can be broadly described as left-wing, including human rights defenders like the Civil Rights Movement and the [University Teachers for Human Rights](#) (Jaffna), anti-communal groups like the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality, campaigners for democracy like the Organisation of Professional Associations of Sri Lanka and Friday Forum, trade unionists and labor activists who have fought for workers' rights at the risk of losing their jobs and even their lives, and women who have braved ostracism and trolling to fight against patriarchy and misogyny.

At key junctures, people who are not part of any organization have taken action against the worst atrocities, like the Sinhalese who sheltered Tamils during pogroms and the Tamil women who came out to stop an LTTE massacre of unarmed militants of a rival group. The mothers of the disappeared have persisted in the quest to discover the fate of their loved ones in the face of discouragement and threats.

The list is endless, and it's one reason that there is still hope for democracy — and for socialism — in Sri Lanka.

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P.S.

• Jacobin, 11.24.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/11/sri-lanka-mahinda-rajapaksa-regime>

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