

Sri Lanka: Nightmare's End?

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I am not in Sri Lanka, and I feel torn about what is happening there. Acute anxiety about how millions will survive the shortages of food, fuel and medicine jostles against a glimmer of hope that this crisis could be the beginning of the end of a decades-long nightmare. Since the country gained its Independence in 1948, various sections of the population have been targeted by its ruling bloc: threatened with losing their homes, livelihoods and often their lives. They have fought back, but each section has been isolated and crushed by an increasingly centralized and ruthless state. Now, for the first time, the vast majority of the population has risen in revolt. Criticism of the dictatorship is widespread, and divisions between working people may finally be healing.

It is not easy to disentangle the different strands of Sri Lanka's long-standing political crisis, but let me try. Equality before the law – a key component of any democratic republic – was never supported by the ruling class that took power in independent Ceylon. The two main parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), both endorsed 'Sinhala-Buddhist' supremacism. This meant persistent discrimination against ethno-religious minorities, which began right after Independence, when the UNP passed legislation disenfranchising around a million Tamils of recent Indian origin and stripping them of their citizenship. Most of those affected were plantation workers in the central hill country, who were already isolated from other sections of the working class by their confinement to the plantations.

The next major assault on equality occurred when the SLFP, led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, came to power in 1956 and passed the Official Language Act, or 'Sinhala Only Bill'. The Act discriminated against all Tamil-speakers, especially in public sector employment. It sparked major protests followed by the anti-Tamil riots of 1958, in which far-right Buddhist monks played a major part, assassinating Bandaranaike the following year for not going far enough in persecuting Tamils. The leadership of the SLFP was taken over by his widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Tamil was downgraded and English ceased to act as a link language, in a deliberate attempt to obstruct dialogue between communities.

Such measures were opposed by the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Ceylon (later the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, CPSL). Yet, once they failed to prevent the ratification of the anti-Tamil laws, the left parties did not continue the struggle against discrimination by building solidarity among working people from different linguistic and religious groups. Instead, they formed an alliance with the SLFP in 1964, and the parties jointly established the United Front (UF), which swept to power in 1970. At that point, principled members of the left parties split off, and Tamil socialists were left demoralized by the capitulation of their leaders. The only force that could have carried through the democratic revolution had splintered.

Once in power, the UF's Land Reform Laws of 1972 and 1975 nationalized the plantations. Yet rather than distributing the land to Tamil workers – who were driven out and left to starve – it was handed to Sinhalese government supporters. In response, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) called for the creation of an independent Tamil Eelam. Militant groups, most notably the Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), were established to fight for this goal. The LTTE initially attracted some Tamil socialists who believed it was waging a justified struggle for self-determination; but, in reality, the group was always committed to creating a Tamil-supremacist state by ethnically cleansing and killing Sinhalese. It even targeted Tamil-speaking Muslims in the Northern and Eastern Provinces which it claimed as its territory.

Despite all the privileges given to the Sinhalese majority by the UF, dissatisfaction with the regime remained widespread. Significant gains in healthcare and education were cancelled out in the public mind by inflation and food shortages. In 1971, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP or People's Liberation Front), led by Rohana Wijeweera, launched an armed uprising to overthrow the government - backed overwhelmingly by Sinhalese young men for whom the problems of unemployment and poverty had not been solved by Sinhala Only.

Notwithstanding his self-description as a 'modern Bolshevik', Wijeweera's revolutionary horizons were narrowed by a Sinhala-supremacist outlook which characterized Tamil plantation workers as mere tools of Indian expansionism. His uprising was powerless to reach across ethnic lines, and ultimately crushed by the UF government after a state of emergency was declared. Nonetheless, antipathy towards the ruling party lingered. When parliamentary elections were held in 1977, the UNP led by J.R. Jayawardene returned to power with 140 seats out of 168. He used this super-majority to enact a new constitution and anoint himself Executive President - with almost unlimited powers.

Sinhala dominance was entrenched under Jayawardene, with anti-Tamil pogroms sweeping the country just a month after his election. The 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act precipitated the torture, disappearance and extrajudicial killing of thousands of Tamils. In 1981, an orgy of state-sponsored arson, rape and looting in Jaffna included the burning of the public library, with around 95,000 books and ancient manuscripts inside. The violence then shifted to the east, south and hill-country, with thousands of Tamils evicted from their homes and robbed of their possessions. The even more gruesome massacres of 1983 initiated a civil war between the LTTE and government, which lasted some 26 years.

All this perpetuated the trend set by Jayawardene's predecessors. But what distinguished his regime was its disastrous neoliberalization programme and unabashed authoritarianism. Production of consumer goods, both agricultural and industrial, was hit by cheaper imports in the 1980s, while the import of luxuries previously unavailable in Sri Lanka added to the drain on foreign exchange. Remittances from migrant workers, tea exports, tourism and new foreign investments failed to fill the gap, due to generous tax holidays and tariff-free imports of inputs. This led to increasing reliance on foreign debt, laying the basis for the current economic crisis.

Meanwhile, Jayawardene attempted to crush all dissent and extinguish democracy. His newly established Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS) was deployed in anti-Tamil pogroms, as well as killing opposition supporters, judges, trade unionists and striking workers, all with the collusion of the police. The second JVP insurrection, starting in mid-1987 and ending in late 1989, when Wijeweera was captured and executed, left an estimated 40,000-60,000 Sinhalese slaughtered in that period alone. Death squads targeted opponents of Jayawardene and his successor Ranasinghe Premadasa, frequently abducting and torturing them to death. Ranil Wickremesinghe, the current Sri Lankan Prime Minister, was a government minister throughout this period. The current president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was an army commander. Both were implicated in the mass murder of Tamils and Sinhalese alike.

Since that period, the Executive Presidency has been subjected to an ongoing tug-of-war. Abolishing it has so far proved elusive, because the courts have ruled that this would require a two-thirds

majority in parliament plus an absolute majority in a referendum. Yet more modest reforms have occasionally been passed to restrict the presidency's power. Under the presidency of Chandrika Kumaratunga, from 1994 to 2005, attacks on democracy declined and the 17th Amendment was instituted, removing the president's ability to unilaterally appoint people to institutions like the Election Commission and Supreme Court. This tentative progress was then reversed under Mahinda Rajapaksa, as state-backed death squads were revived to target dissidents. In 2009, the LTTE was finally defeated in the civil war's horrific climax, in which an estimated 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed. In tandem, an 18th constitutional amendment reversed Kumaratunga's reforms and abolished the presidency's two-term limit.

Rajapaksa rejected the UN's demand for an independent investigation into reports of war crimes, framing this as an 'anti-imperialist' position. But though his rhetoric played well with some of the electorate, he lost credibility by contributing to the country's mountain of foreign debt - with new creditors including the Chinese government and private buyers of sovereign bonds. With their popularity in decline, the president and his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa - who, as Defence Secretary, controlled the intelligence agencies - tried to salvage their careers by scapegoating the Muslim population. They funded far-right groups of Buddhist monks, using them to violently attack Muslims while mounting an Islamophobic propaganda campaign through state-controlled media. Under the radar, the Rajapaksas also funded Islamist militants to fight against the LTTE - who remained on the government payroll as informants despite credible intelligence that they had been radicalized.

Mahinda Rajapaksa was voted out of office in 2015, having alienated a large section of the Sinhalese population with the scandalous nepotism and corruption of his regime. In his place, ethnic minorities voted for a fragile Good Governance (Yahapalanaya) coalition between SLFP rebel Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe. The new coalition once again curtailed the powers of the president and reinstated the two-term limit with the 19th Amendment. But it, too, fell apart. The final blow to its credibility was the Easter Sunday terrorist attack in 2019, which killed 269 people in locations across the country. As it turned out, the bombings were perpetrated by the very same Islamists that the Rajapaksas had been bankrolling. Subsequent investigations revealed that during the Yahapalanaya regime, members of the terror group, including mastermind Zahran Hashim, continued to be paid and protected from prosecution by officials who remained loyal to Gotabaya. This was despite Hashim's proclamation of allegiance to ISIS and ample evidence that his followers were accumulating arms and explosives.

Yet, counterintuitively, it was the Rajapaksas who benefited from the Easter Sunday massacre. In the resulting panic, the government was weakened and Gotabaya was able to mount an effective presidential campaign, running as the 'national security' candidate. Later that year, he topped the poll with 52% of the vote. An alliance led by the Rajapaksas' new party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, also won the parliamentary elections with a large enough majority to pass the 20th Amendment, reversing the 19th. Gotabaya proceeded to pack the cabinet with family members including Mahinda, who was appointed prime minister.

By this time the economy was already sinking under \$51 billion of foreign debt, much of it incurred by the family's vanity projects and endless siphoning of money out of the country. The Gotabaya regime's tax cuts made the debt unsustainable, and an overnight ban on imports of chemical fertiliser - implemented in the face of farmer protests - led to a colossal decline in crop yields. As foreign reserves ran out, domestic production of food and exports plummeted, leading to escalating unemployment, sky-rocketing inflation, power cuts and long queues to buy basic goods.

All but the very rich have been affected by this meltdown. Workers have lost jobs, farmers are in crisis and fishermen have no fuel to power their boats. Galloping inflation has eroded wages, and

parents have gone hungry in order to feed their children. So, in early March 2022, people of all ages, from all ethnic communities, came out spontaneously with home-made placards bearing slogans such as 'Go Home Rajapaksas'. They called for democratic reform, the immediate resignation of the president and his government, and an end to economic mismanagement.

The government ignored these initial protests, but at the end of March a more militant demonstration near Gotabaya Rajapaksa's residence in Colombo was met with water cannons, tear gas and dozens of arrests. There followed a state of emergency, plus a nationwide curfew and social media ban. This heavy-handed response was expected to stamp out the unrest, but it only enabled it to spread. The president subsequently changed tack, trying to appease the demonstrators by reversing his authoritarian measures and forcing the entire cabinet (apart from Mahinda) to resign. But the protests kept up their momentum, and on 9 April activists occupied Galle Face Green: a park in Colombo facing the Presidential Secretariat. This now iconic site has been renamed 'GotaGoGama'. The crowds were joined by a delegation from 1,000 different trade unions, who staged a general strike - the first in four decades - calling for the government to step down.

A month later, pro-government thugs began to carry out violent attacks on the protests. Yet their resistance was so powerful that Mahinda was ultimately compelled to step down. He was evacuated from his home by security forces while the military was deployed with shoot-on-sight orders. With international criticism of the government growing, Gotabaya installed Ranil Wickremesinghe - the leader of the United National Party - as Prime Minister on 12 May. But although Wickremesinghe may be popular with the IMF, he is deeply disliked by the masses. His proposed 21st Amendment has been widely seen as a betrayal of the protesters' demands, and his invitation to youth groups to sit on parliamentary committees has been met with the silence it deserves.

The numbers in favour of abolishing the Executive Presidency are currently smaller than those calling for Gotabaya's resignation, but the demand is gaining traction. This creates an opening for activists, who can now push for a broader process of political restructuring which would devolve power to provincial and local governments. It also provides a space for progressive solutions to the country's economic crisis. Socialist economists have long advocated a public audit that would repudiate Sri Lanka's illegitimate debt, in defiance of the IMF. They have argued for importing only essential items like food and medicine and putting in place a public distribution system, while encouraging cooperative producers and defending public ownership of utilities, healthcare and education.

At GotaGoGama, Sinhalese and Tamils have reportedly celebrated New Year together, and various religious groups have shared in the breaking of the fast during Ramadan. Meanwhile, in the south, people have turned out for the very first time to mourn the Tamils killed in the civil war. Such developments suggest an easing of ethnic and religious tensions, despite the Rajapaksas attempts to stoke them. When I was conducting interviews for my 1993 book, *Journey Without a Destination*, the vast majority of Tamil and Muslim refugees and displaced people were admirably free of ethnic hatred, despite all they had suffered. I heard numerous stories of Sinhalese friends, neighbours, colleagues and even total strangers saving the lives of Tamils. I also encountered prejudice, especially among the Sinhalese, yet this flowed from the profound ignorance engendered by the Sinhala Only policy, as well as the suppression of dissident voices and relentless disinformation in the media. When experience contradicted propaganda, though, people were often willing to think anew. And this is precisely what is happening at present. Perhaps, if Sri Lanka's fractured left can harness this sense of solidarity, the economic catastrophe may create the conditions for a democratic breakthrough.

Rohini Hensman

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