

Sri Lanka: A struggle for democratic space

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Sri Lanka is facing a crucial election, possibly its most important since 1956 when the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) came to power. For the first time since S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike split from the United National Party (UNP), the two-party system may be reconfigured as members of the two elite parties come together in an attempt to overthrow the Rajapaksa regime, which has gone too far down the path of authoritarianism.

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With the election campaign, Colombo has been abuzz with rumours and crossovers of politicians from the ruling and opposition coalitions. Once again, the Rajapaksa regime is framing this election as a vote on its war victory and push for development. Meanwhile, the Opposition led by former Health Minister and SLFP stalwart Maithripala Sirisena has set up a campaign against rising authoritarianism and corruption, centred on abolishing the highly centralised and undemocratic Executive Presidency.

With no discussion of a political settlement and demilitarisation, the Tamils in the North and East remain distant from the election. Given the strong majoritarian stand of the regime, including severe militarisation in the North and East and attacks on Muslims throughout the country, the minorities would welcome a change. However, the economic concerns facing the Sinhala rural population, constituting the largest constituency, are likely to be decisive in this election.

Unravelling hegemony

The genius of the regime has been the opportunistic coalition roped together during the last decade, comprising actors ranging from the Sinhala Buddhist right to the Old Left. The regime mastered the art of breaking almost every party, and brought dissident sections under its wings. Declaring to its social base that it was opposed to the West and to neoliberalism, the regime moved swiftly to facilitate the flow of finances from the West and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In a great game of deceit, it claimed to champion rural concerns through its national propaganda machine even as it accelerated the implementation of neoliberal policies.

The first major crack in this electoral juggernaut was the Uva Provincial Council elections. Despite a massive campaign undertaken with the full force of state power and patronage, the ruling coalition could only scrape through to victory. Uneven development and economic marginalisation affecting the peripheral districts had come back to bite. Faced with an eroding support base, President Mahinda Rajapaksa hurriedly called for presidential elections two years in advance. The regime's image of invincibility had taken a blow.

The announcement of the elections, however, coincided with an unprecedented political manoeuvre. Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, humiliated by the regime since her retirement, joined forces with UNP leader Ranil Wickramasinghe to capitalise on a disillusioned SLFP old guard, which had been sidelined by the regime. Mr. Sirisena, who had risen from the ranks of the peasantry in the historic Sinhala heartland of Rajarata, and with considerable appeal to the rural Sinhalese voters, stepped forward to lead the Opposition. The regime's support for Bodu Bala Sena, a fascist movement of virulent monks that led the attacks against Muslims, has ensured a wholesale Muslim vote against the regime.

Substance of campaign

In an unexpected move, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), the prominent Sinhala Buddhist nationalist party, walked out of the government in support of the Opposition. With the regime's hegemony unravelling, a new coalition of strange bedfellows is projecting a formidable Opposition.

The Rajapaksa regime, while attacking the personalities that created this Opposition, has a very simple message to the electorate: Mr. Rajapaksa's nearly 10-year-long tenure saved the country from the clutches of the LTTE and ensured national security while his robust post-war agenda has placed the country on the path of economic development.

The Opposition is finding it hard to respond to the President's campaign, which is, of course, backed by state resources, massive funds and a major media campaign. The Opposition is reluctant to take on the issue of national security and militarisation, in part because the war victory continues to be important to the Sinhala electorate, even if its currency has waned since the end of the war. Given the grip that the regime has over the military, the Opposition probably realises that its call on the military to remain neutral may suffer if it challenges the regime's claims on national security.

Development is the other holy cow that the Opposition finds hard to critique. The neoliberal development package that the regime has implemented is not very different from the vision that the UNP had a decade ago. In any event, there does not seem to be an alternative economic vision coming from the Opposition apart from its calls to end corruption and reduce the cost of living. The only serious challenge to the regime's neoliberal project is coming from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a party with a militant trade union and rural social base in the South.

The other side to the regime's thrust on national security and development is repression and dispossession. There has been a significant rise in incidents of militarised repression affecting the lower classes of the Sinhala population. A series of prominent protests, including those involving free trade zone workers opposing a problematic pension bill, fisherfolk challenging massive increases in fuel prices and villagers obstructing a factory contaminating local water, were brutally attacked by the security forces, leading to a number of deaths in recent years. Slums are being demolished and the urban poor are being evicted to beautify Colombo.

Indebtedness of households is on the rise, and is particularly crippling in the war-torn North and East. Economic discontent with increasing cost of living is also reflected in the mounting trade union strikes taking place almost on a weekly basis. With inequalities rising, the rural and urban masses face economic exclusion, even as visible accumulation of wealth and a real estate boom benefits the upper classes in Colombo.

In the event that Mr. Rajapaksa wins his third term, any resistance to neoliberal policies may be labelled treason using the Prevention of Terrorism Act and crushed by the national security state. With a looming economic crisis linked to the bursting of the debt-ridden bubble economy, the future

of financialised accumulation will increasingly depend on dispossession. Indeed, the regime that claims to protect sovereignty from the West has sold billions of dollars in sovereign bonds to the West, which will have to be paid for by the economic sacrifice of the citizenry. The spectre of dispossession may be the most compelling reason for the people to defeat this regime.

Impact on political space

Reflecting the long democratic tradition in the country with universal suffrage beginning in 1931, emboldened voices are breaking the climate of fear in the run-up to the elections. The Opposition has an uphill battle, but in the event of a victory, a major reconfiguration of politics will be inevitable. The parliamentary elections that follow will shape party formation and engender new national debates on economic issues and the concerns of minorities.

On the other hand, a Rajapaksa presidency will lead to more repression and a closing up of political space. Indeed, if Mr. Rajapaksa wins this election, power is likely to consolidate even more tightly around the family and its supporters.

The Opposition has not put forward any credible solutions to the problems facing the economically deprived and the minorities. Yet, a broad set of actors are rallying around the Opposition to arrest authoritarianism, confront the deteriorating political culture and open democratic space. While these elections are the most significant moment in Sri Lanka's troubled post-war years, its citizens who desire a democratic and just future should ready themselves for a long struggle ahead.

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*<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/comment-on-sri-lanka-presidential-election/article6732968.ece>

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