

Sri Lanka: Can we expect democratic governance after January 8th?

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The future of democracy all over the world appears to be bleak. British political commentator, Tariq Ali, once informed us that democracy would perish before capitalism reaches its end. Does it imply a new phase of capitalism with the absence of democracy? In a way it is not a novel phenomenon since in its short history, not going beyond 300 years, capitalism and democracy have not always co-existed. Modern democracy was invented under capitalism, but it has not been an outcome of capitalism. It has been an outcome of multiple struggles waged by different social layers of society invariably against capitalism. Sri Lanka has witnessed a strong tendency towards authoritarianism since the advent of a constitution with executive presidential system as its constitutional architecture and neoliberalism as its economic framework. While the presidential system facilitated the introduction of neoliberalism the latter in its turn reinforced the executive presidential system. This has made it easier for us to imagine a life without democracy but not a life without capitalism.

The forces that have been mobilized against the incumbent president have rightly raised the issue of democracy as a central issue facing the country today. Democracy means different things for different people, for different social groups. However, almost all the oppositional forces, except Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) had reached a consensus that in order to reestablish democracy in Sri Lanka one of the crucial prerequisite is the abolition of the executive presidential system. It was explicitly stated what is needed is to abolish it and replace it with a different system. There was a debate on the alternative system but the majority of the opposition wanted to go back to the Parliamentary system. Will the democratic aspirations of the people fulfil after the presidential election? Let us review the election manifestos of the candidates. At the moment, I have three manifestos with me. I will focus first on the Manifestos of Candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa (MR) and candidate Maithreepala Sirisena (MS).

It is interesting to note there is no basic difference between two candidates as far as the constitutional change/amendment is concerned. While MR leaves the changes for the proposed constituent assembly only submitting his ideas on certain issues, MS has given detailed list of changes he is planning to make within 100 days thus leaving present constitutional architecture intact.

Hence, my conclusion is that with regard to the issues that have been raised by various democratic fora in order to improve democratic governance in the country were either marginalized or neglected in the two manifestos. Since its inception, especially since the late 1980s, people in this country have voted for the abolition of the executive presidential system. Constitutional drafts and proposals submitted by citizens' initiatives reflected this aspiration of the people. However, the individuals who began to savour power of the EP refused to change it. Ironically, Candidate MS has refused to change it after making a promise to that effect even before securing it. In such a situation, can we expect democratic governance after January 8th?

The current democracy discourse in Sri Lanka is marred by a very narrow definition of democracy. This definition that was advanced for the specific needs of neo-liberalism following in the context of developing countries the Augmented Washington Consensus focuses principally on issues like

governance, rule of law, non-interventionist state. Freedom of established media and so on. In other words, the basic objective of democracy is reduced to the operational needs of neo-liberalist phase of capitalism.

It would be interesting to compare the definition of democracy adopted today with that of pre-1994 period. Before 1994 election, democracy included as an inseparable element the power-sharing arrangement although what it meant was not explicitly stated. At least it meant going beyond the 13th Amendment. It also included offering a 'human face' to capitalism. Above all, the abolition of the executive presidential system as an intimate element of comprehensive constitutional redesign was included as a prerequisite of the reestablishment of democracy. This clearly shows the degradation of democratic discourse in the last 20 years. What does it imply? Jairus Banaji, an Indian Marxist, once informed us about three meanings of democracy.

1. Democracy in the sense of the formal framework of a constitutional democracy with the rights to freedom and equality, the right to life and personal liberty, to freedom of religion etc that it guarantees.

2. Democracy as a culture of resistance grounded in the constitutional rights given under my first meaning.

3. Democracy as an aspiration for control. One can see the Communist Manifesto as a generalization of democracy in this third sense (of the mass of workers aspiring to control their own lives, economically, politically and culturally) and as a culmination of democracy in both the previous senses. Thus for communists (in Marx's sense) the mass element in democracy is crucial, it is what defines democracy in its most complete sense and historical form.

During the last twenty years we have witnessed two types of democratic struggles. Democratic struggles initiated and led by various 'citizen' democratic groups operated within economico-legal structure of neoliberalism with the main objective of achieving those formal democratic rights. These struggles fell under the rubric of first meaning cited above. And many of these movements are basically urban and elitist. In a limited sense, some of them went beyond the first meaning falling at the boundary of the second meaning.

The second type of democratic struggles were not even depicted democratic struggles as they questioned the basic economico-legal structure of neoliberalism. Here, I include, the Tamil struggle for autonomy, the Free Trade Zone struggles against proposed pension bill to integrate EPF into accumulation process, the struggles against forcible eviction of urban people, protests by rural masses on various issues related to their day-to-day living and the student struggles against commodification of education. In these struggles, even in limited sense, peoples' aspiration for control was expressed. It is also interesting to note that these struggles were led by subaltern layers of the Sri Lankan society.

Two main candidates have failed in their manifestos to address even key issues raised by elitist citizen groups. Both have refused to touch the unitary character of the Constitution. While MR has said that he will set up a constituent assembly to keep the unitary character of the state, MS has informed us that he will not *touch* the unitary and non-secular nature of the present constitution. Hence, ensuring majoritarian rule over numerically small nations would remain unchanged.

It was against this back drop, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has also refused to present an alternative. It has taken an opportunistic position to show that it has not yet broken from its coalition politics that began in 2004. Similarly, the Tamil National Alliance has been silent on the principal democratic demands of autonomy. The same can be mentioned on the Sri Lanka Muslim

Congress. All three parties have clearly capitulated to parliamentarism claiming that only two alternatives are open. The only light at the end of the tunnel is the manifesto of the Left Front [presidential campaign of FSP leader Duminda Nagamuwa — editor's note] that comprehensively addresses the issues of democracy in its all three meanings. A strong and vibrant social movement dealing with all three meanings of democracy cited above is imperative if the Sri Lankans need democracy after January 9th whatever the outcome of the election may be.

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*http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=116905

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