

Triple Crises and the Parliamentary Election in Sri Lanka 2020

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Two times postponed Parliamentary election 2020 in Sri Lanka was finally held on August 5, 2020. The election took place in the midst of three crises, namely, the epidemiological crisis, the economic crisis and the resultant multi-faceted political crisis, all are closely associated with the neoliberal economic policies introduced in 1977 and implemented with some modifications in the last forty-three years. Nonetheless, the reducing the crisis to the crisis of neoliberalism is unwarranted as it neglects the magnitude of the unresolved national question of the island nation. The political crisis had been overdetermined until 2009 by the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that had come to an end with the decimation of the LTTE by the security forces of the Sri Lankan state in May 2009.

The end of the armed conflict although has not yet resolved the national question has given rise two seemingly opposite trends. The first trend is the emergence and the gradual dominance of economic/class factor in national politics. Since 2009, Sri Lanka has witnessed student uprisings, peasant campaigns, worker strikes and many other forms of class struggles. Trade unions has begun to make demands related to their working conditions and against divestiture of public properties. The second trend has been the strengthening of Sinhala nationalism vis-s-vis Tamil and Muslim nationalisms. This was marked by attacks on Muslim mosques and Christian churches. Riots against Muslims were erupted in many parts of the country instigated by ultra-Sinhala Buddhist politicians and some Buddhist monks. This has in turn led to the strengthening of extreme nationalist feeling among Muslims while some have developed links with ISIS that reached a culmination point at the allegedly ISIS attacks on three Christian churches in April 2018 killing around 300 people and making equal number of people disabled. Hence, even economic issues were given ethnic readings in turn weakening class-based actions.

Thirty years of mixed- economic policies (1947- 1977) and forty-three years of neoliberal policies (1977-2020) have miserably failed in resolving the issues of economic underdevelopment, unemployment, inequality and poverty. The country's domestic and foreign debt have increased to unmanageable level. The destruction of forests and habitats of animals has resulted in the country putting in an ecological imbalance creating the so-called human-elephant conflict. The country that was known to the world as the only country that preserved democracy and social welfare had in the last forty-three years become a quasi-authoritarian regime implementing austerity policies destroying the previous gains in education, health and social welfare. In the last twenty years, inequality in wealth and income has substantially increased. Hence this is nothing other than a crisis of capitalism that calls for systemic transformation.

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, a former army officer and brother of Mahinda Rajapaksa, former president (2005- 2015) who was defeated at the 2015 presidential election, won with 6.9 million votes at the presidential election defeating Sajith Premadasa, the son of the former president R Premadasa

(1988- 1993). After winning the election, the president and his new cabinet announced a three-pronged economic policy framework. It includes (1) inward-looking economic policies; (2) granting substantial concession to domestic bourgeoisie and tax concession to high income earners; and (3) proposal to give employment to 50,000 unemployed graduates and 100,000 multi-purpose jobs to people with low educational qualifications. However, the government had to face a challenge of paying around \$ 6 billion loan and interest payment in 2020. Since the government had no intention to go for debt default, only way to face this crisis was debt rescheduling and/ or getting more loans from the international capital market and international financial agencies. Epidemiological crisis caused by Covid-19 virus hits two months after presidential election that first generate a supply shock in variety of ways and eventually a demand shock and financial shock.

At the same time a political crisis occurred since the new government had no majority in the Parliament. The constitution allows the president to dissolve Parliament after four and a half years of its election. Parliament was dissolved and the issues of finance and the re-convening of the Parliament were raised by the opposition and the civil society actors. Hence, the election was two times postponed. Meanwhile, the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP) experienced a major split and the two groups decided to contest separately.

Parliamentary election 2020 gave Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and its allies a two-third majority in the parliament. This had been considered as an impossible task under the proportional representation system. Final result of the election was:

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| Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna | 145 |
| Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB-breakaway of UNP) | 54 |
| Illankai Thamil Arasu Kachchi | 10 |
| National Peoples' Power (JVP) | 03 |
| Eelam Peoples Democratic Party | 02 |
| Akila Ilankai Tamil Congress | 02 |
| Tamil Makkal Vidudalei Pulikal | 01 |
| Sri Lanka Freedom Party | 01 |
| Muslim National Alliance | 01 |
| Tamil Makkal Thesiya Kuttani | 01 |
| All Ceylon Muslim Congress | 01 |
| National Congress | 01 |
| Sri Lanka Muslim Congress | 01 |
| United National Party | 01 |
| Ape Jana Bala Party (extreme Sinhala) | 01 |
| Total | 225 |

As the breakaway group of the UNP gained 54 seats in the parliament, the UNP had recorded its worst election results failing to win at least one electoral seat. It got one seat from the national list. The Illankai Thamil Arasu Kachchi (TNA) failed to maintain its 16 seats in the last parliament and it won only 10 seats. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) contested the election forming a center-left formation called National Peoples Power obtained 3 seats. It had 6 seats in the last Parliament. Vickramabahu Karunaratna, the leader of the NSSP who contested from the UNP to Kalutara district failed to get into the parliament. Vasudeva Nanayakkara (Democratic Peoples Front) and

Veerasumana (Sri Lanka Communist Party) who contested under SLPP were able to enter the parliament. None of the left parties that includes Frontline Socialist Party (FLSP), United Socialist Party and Socialist Party of Sri Lanka failed to win a seat.

Massive victory of the SLPP has been interpreted in many ways. Commentators associated with left parties saw it as an outcome of action of the people who were gradually but consistently mesmerized by Sinhala Buddhist ideology. Vickramabahu Karunaratna (NSSP- UNP) informed after the election people were hypnotized so that it is not correct to say that the election result signified a rational human action. Jayatilaka Kammellaweera, a national list candidate of the NPP saw election result as a reflection of a bankrupt cultural tradition. Some have mistakenly reiterated Bertolt Brecht's statement that what was necessary is to elect 'new people'. *Left Voice* posits that this kind of theorization is subjectivist and neglects the socio-economic crisis that has been operating underneath, the dominance of Sinhala- Buddhist majoritarianism notwithstanding. We firmly believe what Bensaid said in the following remark. "Political representation is not *the simple manifestation of a social nature*. Political class struggle is not the superficial mirroring of an essence. .. it operates by displacements and condensations of social contradictions. It has its dreams, its nightmares and its lapses. In the specific field of the political, class relations acquire a degree of complexity irreducible to the bipolar antagonism that *nevertheless determines them*" (emphasis added). Hence, *Left Voice* proposes that our analysis should transcend those dreams, nightmares and lapses.

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's victory at presidential election in November 2019 as well as SLPP's massive electoral victory in August 2020 signifies peoples' total disappointment and discontent of the *yahapalana* regime led by UNP that ruled the country between 2015- 2020. During the *yahapalana* rule, economic growth was sluggish, foreign and local debt increased significantly, country's resources were given to foreign countries, unfavorable trade agreements were signed with foreign countries, and corruption became rampant. Inner conflict within the regime had undermined it. April 2018 terror attacks gave an idea that the regime was not in a position to provide basic security to its people. The JVP and the TNA without joining the government supported it. The UNP and part of the SLFP ran the show. By 2017, it was clear that the government was so unpopular among the people of all walks of life as shown in the local government election. Hence, the massive election victory of the SLPP was written on the walls even prior to the parliamentary election. The poor results of the SJB, UNP, NPP, and TNA the parties that directly or indirectly associated with the *yahapalana* regime signify not an action of hypnotized masses but an open protest and opposition to the fundamentalist neoliberal policies of the regime.

Until this election, electoral politics in Tamil area was not affected by the changes in southern politics. On the basis of the results, Tamil National Alliance (ITAK) is entitled to get 10 seats including one on the national list. It lost its traditional position as D B S Jeyraj noted "the accredited premier political configuration of the Northern and Eastern province Tamils". TNA and its conciliatory policies were strongly questioned by C.V.Wigneswaran, the ex- Chief Minister of the Tamil Makkal Thesiya Kottani (YMTK) and Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC). These two parties represented in the election as a radical Tamil alternative to the TNA that has failed miserably to either win constitutional reforms on a federal framework or obtain from the Colombo government an adequate package of welfare and social development to Tamil people. The disappointment and discontent with the TNA seem to have generated in the parliamentary sphere two new trends in Tamil politics breaking the TNA's almost monopoly position in Tamil politics after the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The first trend that is represented by C V Wigneswaran and Gajendran Ponnambalam appears to stand for a separate state and eventually they will seek an internationally supervised referendum among the Tamils to decide if Tamils decide to stay in Sri Lanka or to leave it. They may also strive to drag the Sri Lankan government to the International Criminal Court (ICC). In this respect they would closely work with

the Tamil diaspora in Western countries. Moreover, they would try to pressurize the Indian Union government by linking with radical groups in Tamil Nadu.

Most interesting developments in Tamil politics that was reflected in the election results has been the emergence of a significant trend that is supposed to work with the Sri Lankan government seeking economic development, employment and increased social welfare. This pro-government section is represented by Douglas Devananda and Kulasingham Dileepan (Eelam Peoples' Democratic Party); Angajan Ramanathan (Sri Lanka Freedom Party); Sivanesanathurai Chandrakanthan alias Pillayan (Tamil Makkal Viduthalaai Puligal) and Sadasivam Vyalendran (Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna). Initially, we have this kind of Tamil politics had been very much isolated from the Tamil people.

It may be presumptuous even to outline the trajectory the new regime would take in the near future. It has already announced its policies would be different from the policies of the previous government. The situation created by Covid-19 forced the government to take some measures that are different from strict neoliberal prescriptions. The serious trade balance deficit and debt crisis have to kept at a manageable level so that import restrictions are imperative. Similarly, the proposed 150,000 government jobs cannot be curtailed. At the same time the government has to offer series of concessions to the bourgeoisie in the form of tax concessions and quantitative easing. Hence, the government development model may be closer to Asian developmentalist state model. In this respect, President Gotabaya may place much faith on retired military personal, bureaucrats and technocrats. For the first time in Sri Lankan history the state mechanism, District Secretariats and Divisional Secretariats have taken under the Ministry of Defence.

Although the President and the SLPP came to power over essentially Sinhala votes, in appointing the cabinet and non-cabinet ministers and district coordinators, President give some representation to Tamil and Muslim communities. The Prime Minister, giving an interview to *Frontline* magazine has once again reiterated that the new government would pay more attention to the social and economic development to northern province that was neglected so far.

Main challenges to the new regime come mainly from three fronts, namely, socio-economic development maintaining human-nature balance, solving national question in diverse framework and maintaining Sri Lanka's valued non-aligned foreign policy. In all three fronts the opportunities opened for any government are narrow and the constraints it has to face are strong and intense. All three issues in the twenty first century needs systemic transformation, from capitalism to socialism. Socialism entails *inter alia* debt default instead of debt repayment, workers management instead of factory closure, public control of national property instead of divestiture of public property, cancellation of debt imposed on rural poor instead of giving a space to blood-sucking usurer elements, a decentralized and devolved peoples' power structure at the all level of government instead of centralized authority, non-aligned and independent foreign policy instead of subordination to imperialist powers.

Can the new government go for those drastic and far-reaching reforms? If the government seeks new credit facilities from the IMF- WB, it has to adopt the polices attached to their conditionalities. That means austerity, increased indirect tax, reduction of public expenditure on health and education, privatization, and concession to the bourgeoisie, foreign and local. Government's capitulation to global capital in addressing these three main issues is clear and it would cause an eruption of protests from all sectors of the population as peoples' expectation are high because the government cannot say it does not have the mandate. From 1977 onwards, Sri Lanka has witnessed a gradual tendency towards authoritarianism. The growing global crisis and the domestic crises in Sri Lanka would strengthen this tendency in the future as the new government may not be able to find far-reaching measures that are imperative in order to come out of the current impasse.

Left Voice (Wame Handa) Sri Lanaka

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P.S.

This is a statement unanimously adopted by the steering committee of the Left Voice (Wame Handa) at its meeting held on August 16.

Wame Handa

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