

The NPP Factor: Rise Of Left-Wing Populism In Sri Lanka

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Even its adversaries would admit that the *Jathika Jana Balavegaya* (**NPP**) has emerged as the most successful force in the post-aragalaya political scene. A [recent opinion poll](#) conducted by the Institute for Health Policy (IHP) indicates that the NPP would have a significant lead over the main opposition party *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* (**SJB**) in terms of voter preference if elections are held. Having polled only 3 percent of votes in the last general election, and having been considered a fringe political party hitherto, the NPP has succeeded in making significant inroads into the mainstream. While the incumbent *Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna* (**SLPP**) government has fallen into disgrace due to the economic crisis and is currently implementing an International Monetary Fund (**IMF**) dictated unpopular austerity program, and whilst the center-right *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* has failed to capitalize on the mass discontent due to limitations of their political agenda, the rise of the anti-establishment NPP has created a far-reaching effect.

The NPP today has become the target of critics both from the right and the left. The right-wing accuses the NPP of its old-school socialist policies, and the reluctance to endorse the IMF-dictated economic restructuring process the country is going through at the moment. On the other hand, left-wing critics —mostly belonging to various ultra-left currents see the NPP as a renegade formation, lacking a serious alternative to dominant neo-liberalism. None of these characterizations sufficiently explain the nuanced character mass movements like the NPP represents.

Populist politics

The NPP can be seen as an example of a left-wing populist movement. Populism is a phenomenon that has been on the rise both in the global north and the south in recent times. Populism is a political strategy that juxtaposes the 'people' against the dominance of 'the elite'. Populist politics envisions establishing a political frontier between the ordinary people whose concerns have been disregarded by the establishment dominated by an elite minority. Populism is a discursive strategy —an 'art' of doing politics.

Depending on the nature of the values a populist project identifies with, the character of populism might assume different shades. For instance, the dominant form of populism that has swept the western world in recent times is known as right-wing populism due to its allegiance towards right-wing values such as xenophobia, racism, opposition towards marginalized communities, etc. Populist projects of Donald Trump in the United States or Marie La Pen in France that pit immigrants or religious minorities against the idea of 'people' — mainly referring to the white population of those countries are examples of right-wing populism. They reflect a certain anti-establishment quality due to their antipathy towards the liberal establishment which endorses values such as multiculturalism or flexible immigration policies. However, this anti-establishment sentiment is regressive due to its right-wing framing.

Populism can also associate with left-wing and progressive values. Political history shows that the discontent of the masses against the status quo can be organized along a progressive line, defining the 'people' and their 'enemy' in different terms. The Latin American pink tide which brought a number of left-wing leaders into power in South America in the 2000s on an anti-imperialist and left-leaning platform is an example of how populism can take a leftist orientation. In the context of the developed world, the Occupy Wall Street movement that strived to establish a political antagonism between the 1 percent (the super-rich) and the 99 percent (the commoners) —and the Bernie Sanders movement that emerged from the protests, the left-wing SYRIZA movement in Greece or the PODEMOS in Spain are considered as manifestations of left-wing populism. These movements are different from traditional mass-left-wing parties based on the working class because the category of 'people' denotes a multi-class formation. The populist message these movements advance entails a transverse character, cutting across class lines that help in molding an alliance between the working and middle classes.

The NPP discourse

The main constituent party of the NPP —the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* ([JVP](#)) is well known for the use of a dualist strategy in organizing masses. Whilst maintaining a Marxist discourse within internal ranks of the party, the JVP time to time has used different other 'languages' to address broader masses in popular politics. The language of nationalism was the most successful in this regard, which was invoked by the JVP both in the late 1980s and 2000s onwards. However, the JVP abandoned the nationalist rhetoric aftermath of the end of the civil war in 2009. The nationalist message was replaced by a 'democratic' one — questioning the failure of mainstream parties to represent the aspirations of the people. NPP was formed in 2018 as a broader platform during this transformation.

What the NPP proposes to the masses is quite straightforward — a *Dushitha walalla* (corrupt circle) comprising politicians of both mainstream parties, leading public officials and corrupt businessmen is dominating the life of the nation and has robbed the common masses. The NPP introduces an antagonism between the 'people' who are deprived and an elite that has undermined the aspirations of the people. This narrative can be easily contrasted with the ethno-nationalist narrative of the *Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna* which happened to be extremely dominant in our public imagination in the recent past. As a movement with a right-wing populist tilt, the SLPP claimed to represent the majority Sinhala 'people' neglected by the liberal *Yahapalana* government which 'favored' the minorities. In the SLPP discourse, the political frontier was established between 'the people' and the minority appeasing establishment.

Instead of the 'them' vs 'us' antagonism based on ethnicity, the NPP is suggesting a different narrative highlighting the crisis of popular representation Sri Lanka has been facing. The deterioration of the political culture — the way politics is done in Sri Lanka for decades has molded a certain type of antipathy in public consciousness towards politicians of mainstream parties. There is a crisis of political representation, a loss of legitimacy where people do not feel the political establishment represents them anymore. The NPP attempts to radically address this mass sentiment, and transform it into a political force. The underlying message is that the masses are suffering due to the misdeeds of the political establishment. Regardless of their party affiliation, politicians in the mainstream parties are a part of this corrupt establishment. This message appears to have appealed to the senses of a broad section of masses —from rural masses to urban middle-class intelligentsia, cutting across class lines. The NPP is building a multi-class political formation around populist messaging.

The character of populism

The anti-establishment, populist narrative of the NPP is associated with two other elements which are decisive in shaping the nature of its populist message.

First is the left-leaning character of the socio-economic policies the NPP pursues. As also evident from the speech delivered by the NPP leader [Anura Kumara Dissanayake](#) in the recent Economic Forum held in Colombo, the NPP advances an economic framework that combines characteristics of economic nationalism and developmentalism with a social democratic programme. The NPP argues for a larger role for the state in the economy in terms of national planning and deciding the overall trajectory of the economy. This stands in contrast with the standard neo-liberal orthodoxy believing in the virtue of the free market in driving economic development. While standing for a state-directed economic development path, the NPP also argues for the de-commodification of public services such as education, healthcare, transportation etc., and the need for a fair redistribution of the national income.

Secondly, in the field of ethnic relations, the NPP has proclaimed that they strive for 'national unity' based on equality among national communities. Given the record of the JVP having a history of flirting with Sinhala majoritarianism, the NPP's attitude towards the national question is something that has created caution among ethnic minorities. The NPP claims that it stands against discrimination against minorities and refers to various examples such as how it stood to defend Muslim communities against persecution in the recent past as proof for its record. Furthermore, the NPP programme calls for devolving 'political and administrative power', and pledges to introduce reforms based on that line through a future constitutional arrangement.

The NPP is a predominantly Sinhala formation. Claiming otherwise would be an exaggeration. Reaching out to minority communities is a challenge the NPP would face in the future. To that extent, they might have to reflect on their strategies, and think about new ways of establishing links with minorities. For instance, the claim that the NPP stood against discrimination against the Muslim communities is not false per se, there indeed were several interventions at the time — but whether these interventions were sufficient is a fair question someone can raise.

However, none of the above concerns preclude the fact that the NPP position on ethnic relations stands in contradiction to the toxic, ethno-nationalist message of the SLPP which was highly popular among Sinhala masses until very recently. NPP is the only party in the South that is vocal about the vices of communalism. Given the extent the ethnic supremacist idea of the SLPP was hegemonic in the popular imagination, the NPP's emphasis on equality and solidarity strikes a progressive note in the South.

Shifting discourses

The NPP project entails a number of contradictions and inner tensions which are natural to any populist movement. This short piece does not allow us to discuss these contradictions in detail. Suffice to note that maintaining the balance of the multi-class formation amidst a deepening economic crisis would be the most serious challenge the NPP would face in its future trajectory.

Whatever the contradictions and limitations the NPP project might entail, the emergence of a left-wing populist alternative in our politics denotes a progressive turn. The ongoing election campaign indicates that the NPP is largely gaining from the collapse of the SLPP voter base at the rural level. Formerly SLPP voters tend to defect to the NPP instead of the SJB. The landslide victory of the SLPP in the 2019 elections led to the consolidation of right-wing populism in Sri Lanka. The emergence of the NPP as a main actor in rural and semi-urban electorates signifies the displacement of this regressive discourse — an indication that the common people have started looking at politics through a different lens.

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