

Citizenship Reborn in Sri Lanka

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The end of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009 could have heralded a period of unparalleled openness and experimentation in society and politics. Instead, the postwar state revealed its true nature—that of a corrupt, dynastic, violent, and vulgar entity. The leadership appeared determined to maintain this regime of oppressive stability for the foreseeable future. But then the unthinkable happened. In January 2015, peaceful and democratic change led to the collapse of a seemingly invulnerable edifice. The “uncountable time of eternity had come to an end,” to quote Gabriel García Márquez.

Had President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s gamble for a third term succeeded, eroding democratic institutions would have further withered away in a country that has enjoyed universal suffrage since 1931. But this astute politician, his coterie, and his astrologer (who is now in hiding) failed to predict dissent in the ruling party ranks and many disparate forces of the opposition uniting for the single purpose of political change. Leftists, rightists, Buddhist nationalists, and minority parties cobbled together a coalition and put forward a 100-day transition and reform plan that promised to restore institutions of governance and revise the constitution. In the January 8 election, Rajapaksa—in office since 2005—went down in defeat to Maithripala Sirisena, a former health minister and general secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party, who won with 51.3 percent of the vote; Rajapaksa took 47.6 percent.

More striking than Sirisena’s victory, which in many ways resembles a revolt rather than a revolution, is what it may augur in terms of participatory governance. The run-up to the presidential election witnessed newly active forms of citizenship energized by a fresh moral imagination. Not only did over 80 percent of the voting population cast

a vote on that day; people from all walks of life, from each ethnicity, religion, and gender, showed by their acts and speech that they wanted to voice their views on the shape of the nation’s future.

This determination followed from the realization that Rajapaksa’s government was acting according to its own unaccountable whims and fancies. The unconstitutional 18th amendment to the constitution, which eliminated a presidential term limit; the procedurally flawed impeachment of the chief justice; the state’s complicity in violence committed against Muslims by the extremist Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force) at Aluthgama in 2014; the refusal to acknowledge the need for an investigation into alleged war crimes at the end of the civil war: These were all instances of the rampant and pervasive abuse of power by the Rajapaksa family and coterie. Gradually these abuses came into the open. Internet tabloids and newspapers, *kelepathara* (mud-slinging pamphlets), cartoons, jokes, puns, and gossip circulated among citizens, offering a picture of the regime very different from the docile and compliant state media’s portrayal of a developmental utopia led by a benevolent ruler.

SIMMERING OUTRAGE

The feeling that citizens had a duty to be disloyal had begun to simmer in many circles at least two years before the election. What distinguished these individuals, associations, and communities was a common sense of outrage regarding acts of corruption, violence, theft, dereliction, and general contempt for the public committed during the past decade—acts that were initiated or absolved by a regime that had allowed law and order to collapse amid a complete loss of decency. The burgeoning opposition instinctively emulated the poet Rabindranath Tagore, who once said that when a state is seen as transgressing moral norms, it forfeits its claim to the loyalty of its citizens.

Cracks in the edifice became visible. In 2012, the Federation of University Teachers (FUTA)

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launched a powerful struggle against the regime, advocating an increase in the budget allocation for education to 6 percent from the pitiful existing rate of 1.8 percent. This demand struck a chord deep in the psyche of Sri Lankan parents who see education as the main ladder to social improvement. For three months, supported by other trade unions, professional organizations, and opposition political parties, the FUTA succeeded in demoralizing the regime and drawing attention to the paradox of a country at peace that still devoted a huge share of its budget to the armed forces. This led people to begin discussing the missing peace dividends and to question why, despite an economic growth rate of over 7 percent and paved roads spreading all over the countryside, their own lives had not significantly improved since the end of the war.

A year later, in 2013, the first female chief justice—Shirani Bandaranayake, a former ally of the regime—was summarily impeached on charges of misconduct.

She had had the audacity to declare unconstitutional a bill that would have handed the reconstruction of the country's north and east to the president's brother, who was then minister

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of economic development. Although her supporters ultimately failed to overturn the parliament's decision, a lawyers' movement against the impeachment emerged, rallying large crowds in the capital. A year later, the Bar Association questioned the legality of the constitutional amendment that revoked the presidential term limit. The association endorsed the opinion of Suri Ratnapala, a legal scholar in Australia, who argued that the amendment could not apply retroactively: Rajapaksa therefore should have been disqualified from running for a third term.

While some observers depict Sri Lanka as a "failed state," the nation's institutions displayed resiliency during the election and the handover of power. Despite pressure and attempts at intimidation, the election commissioner's office carried out its task in an exemplary manner. If allegations of a coup plot organized by Rajapaksa after his defeat are verified, it will be clear that the attorney general and chief of police played crucial roles in averting such a power seizure and protecting the sanctity of the democratic state.

DEMOCRATIC PULSE

Citizens are now scrutinizing the moves of the new government, which includes members of the former regime. Some actions have met with approval, such as the appointment of a civilian governor in the Tamil-majority north, replacing a general, and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's promise to fully implement the 13th amendment to the constitution, balancing the power of provincial councils against that of the central government. Justice K. Sripavan, an ethnic Tamil, has been appointed as the new chief justice. Bandaranayake was, according to her wishes, reinstated for a day to demonstrate that her impeachment had been illegitimate. Heads are rolling; Rajapaksa's political appointees to foreign missions, public institutions, and state-owned corporations are being removed. But other moves have been criticized, such as the nomination of Sirisena's brother as the chairman of Sri Lanka Telecom.

The fact that people are openly challenging the positions and statements of the present government is a sign of a renewed democratic pulse, and perhaps of a retreat from firmly entrenched patronage

systems and clientelism. Nongovernmental organizations are subject to the same standards. In Sri Lanka, civil society has until now been equated with the NGO sector, dominated by a few Colombo-based organizations that are popularly perceived as elite and lacking accountability. Recently, the financial irregularities of one of these flagship organizations were exposed in the press.

Citizens remain vigilant. The FUTA continues to press its demands for increased funding for education and an end to interference in the management of universities. Ordinary people contribute to blogs and websites, expressing hope or exasperation. The Marxist-nationalist party Janata Vimukti Peramuna (People's Liberation Front), which called on voters to oust Rajapaksa rather than endorsing his opponent, and hence remains outside the government, is acting as a watchdog, relentlessly lodging complaints with the Bribery and Corruption Commission.

After the first hundred days of the new government, many issues are sure to remain in contention. Will economic policy be shaped by the

advisers of Wickremesinghe, known for his advocacy of privatizing state assets and complying with International Monetary Fund directives, or will it be refashioned to express different views? Will there be a chance for people to debate what kind of country they want to live in, and to propose alternatives to the Singaporean hyper-urbanized path advocated by the mainstream political parties as the only possible option?

Citizenship is an act, a performance, a right that is enacted in many possible ways. It is a “space of appearance”—I borrow this formulation from the philosopher Hannah Arendt—where action and speech meet at particular moments to form an organization of people. This space is ephemeral and differentiated, and no man or woman lives in it all the time. It is there “only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.” Citizenship is less a

status or a relation between state and people than a form of identification: You are a citizen through a particular practice, yet you are at the same or at different moments a consumer, a worker, or a worshipper.

In Sri Lanka, citizens reborn with the aspiration for a change of regime yearn in an implicit and sometimes inchoate manner for a fairer, cleaner, more ethical, gentler society, and by extension for a more just and efficient form of governance. What seems to be emerging, in an incipient form, is a different kind of citizen activism from that of the 1980s, which was the heyday of NGOs. In the future, citizens’ movements may provide a more radical, representative, and grassroots alternative to the staid parties and NGOs that have dominated the political landscape until now. Citizens have reclaimed the right to be disloyal. ■