

State Power, State Patronage and Elections in Sri Lanka

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The call for early presidential elections, the Rajapaksa regime's decisions vis-a-vis the post-war situation and the announcement of ex-army chief Sarath Fonseka's candidacy have opened up some avenues for political dissent in Sri Lanka. But given a weak bourgeoisie, uneven development and the lack of a progressive third force, the elections, which are bound to witness the use of state patronage, would not mean much for the minorities or for the economically marginalised sections of Sri Lankan society. It is in this context that issues such as the devolution of power, the representation of minorities and demilitarisation need to be raised by progressive sections in the run-up to the elections.

This article benefited from discussions with Thushara Hewage and B Skanthakumar.

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Elections in Sri Lanka have always been moments of dynamism. Incumbent regimes are shaken if not thrown out and new, unlikely political coalitions emerge; politicians cash in on their patronage networks and the people voice their opposition and dissent. Despite the limitations of electoral democracy, national elections in Sri Lanka – a country which has never had a successful military coup – provide a moment for the political expression of the masses. The upcoming presidential elections are no different, as the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime's fear of the candidacy of general Sarath Fonseka indicates. But it is also important to note that the election dynamic more than any other form of pressure, international or local, has led to major changes over the last month. The 3,00,000 interned internally displaced persons (IDP) have finally been given freedom of movement, curfew in Jaffna has been lifted after years, the A9 road to Jaffna has been opened for civilian traffic and the press is writing critically about the government. The opening of political space which would have been welcome soon after the end of the war has now arrived as a consequence of the election dynamic and the current political conjuncture.

Poverty of Analyses

Before addressing the implications of the upcoming elections and the current political moment, one must first address why so many local and international political analyses have failed to grasp the current

conjuncture as an iteration of the more general theme of post-war political possibility. Some went so far as to claim that the Sinhala people had accepted president Rajapaksa as king and his heirs as a new family dynasty. Such analyses typically exhibit a contempt for subaltern classes and, with their fixation on the personal duel between the president and the general, fall some way short of even attempting to understand the current conjuncture. This, in turn, reflects the qualitative deterioration of journalism, political analysis and research, a trend that has paralleled the period of the war and its long cycles of authoritarianism and militarisation as well as the decades of donor-funded western-oriented research and scholarship. Intellectual work on state and society has lost the political edge of the 1970s and 1980s, and superficial election analyses and debates instance this incapacity, in their failure to foresee the opening of political space and analyse its implications. Contemporary liberal political commentaries lack a sense of historical context and rarely extend beyond a rudimentary theorisation of state and crisis, and are geared instead towards the immediate end of mobilising the “international community” with repeated and ahistorical invocations of human rights crises requiring intervention.

To take a cue from historical scholarship, Newton Gunasinghe, one of Sri Lanka's finest social scientists, wrote in the 1980s about the legacy of Prime Minister S W R D Bandaranaike's emergence on the platform of “Sinhala only”. That essay titled “A Sociological Comment on the Political Transformations in Sri Lanka in 1956 and the Resultant Socio-Political Processes” continues to be of relevance today:

In a social structure which generates an ideology that religion does not relate to one's personal beliefs but to one's family antecedents,

SWRD's move to become a Buddhist and what is more, his vocal advocacy of Sinhala-Buddhist interests, testifies to his ability of political manoeuvre. SWRD, through these able political tactics, was able to establish his personal hegemony, distancing himself away from his extended family group, while going against the old-established bourgeois strata, simultaneously cultivating solid political relations with newly emergent bourgeois and petty bourgeois strata emanating from diverse social backgrounds. But his ideology of populist Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, while creating the social base for his assumption of power, also alienated the Tamils in the northern, eastern and central provinces. ...this laid the political foundations for the terrible ethnic conflict, destabilisation and violence which we are obliged to undergo today.

Gunasinghe through such writings was central to the revival of Marxist scholarship, that debated such matters as the distinction between state and regime, as well as theories of intermediate regimes – that is regimes that capture state power with the support of intermediate classes where a bourgeoisie is weak. With the end of the war, the Rajapaksa regime, 50 years after Bandaranaike, is attempting to further consolidate itself around Sinhala Buddhist nationalism but with complete reliance on the Rajapaksa family and its local affiliates. One is reminded of Marx's opening in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." While neither Sri Lanka's leaders nor its events can be put in the realm of "great" or "world-historic", the historical repetition of tragedy and farce seem equally applicable to the mediocre and the parochial. Indeed the analysis of Bonapartism that Marx initiated might also be of relevance at the current conjuncture, dealing as it does with the possibilities for a military role in governance with class rule on shaky ground.

Competing Strands

Here, one must be aware of the complexity of the political articulation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, which cannot be reduced to a monolith, but has had competing strands and competing bases. The protracted mobilisation by nationalist forces – both Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and

Tamil nationalism – have exposed their hollowness, evident from the unerring ability to perform volte-faces when challenged by power and patronage. This is evident from Fonseka's embrace of the United National Party (UNP) whom he abhorred during the years of war, while on the Tamil side, Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan aka "Colonel Karuna", previously the battled hardened hero of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), is now the eastern henchman for the Rajapaksa regime.

The Rajapaksa regime's great strength was the war coalition it assembled soon after the last presidential election, constituted on a political basis of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism of the most virulent kind and massive scale of militarisation. In fact, both general Fonseka and defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa went the extra mile, spewing out anti-minority statements during the war, politicising the military in an unprecedented manner. In the post-war months, the Rajapaksa regime attempted to perpetuate its politics of war to entrench its oligarchic ambitions. The nakedness of the oligarchic farce fragmented and split the war coalition, culminating in the alienation of Fonseka. However, the unravelling of the war coalition in the context of the upcoming election is pregnant with dangers; different configurations of consolidation for Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the military may work to further extend militarisation and authoritarian populism. The race between different groupings of Sinhala chauvinists could be a race to the bottom from the point of view of minorities and democratisation.

With the war coalition split and the war victory becoming less important in the elections, the two major issues addressing the public in the election campaigns have

become "corruption" and "cost of living". Corruption here has become a catch word for a broader disaffection with politicians and a euphemism for the nepotism and oligarchic aspirations of the Rajapaksas who are promoting their extended family even to the detriment of the party interests of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The increasing cost of living is synonymous with mounting economic pressures, lack of economic opportunities and rising inequalities attendant on decades of war and neoliberal policies and further aggravated by the ongoing global economic crisis. The Fonseka candidacy then could be analysed as an expression of the disenchantment of the populace that was waiting to find a figure that could challenge the Rajapaksa regime particularly given the political bankruptcy of the opposition UNP and its leadership.

The significance of this national election is that war is no longer an issue and even the war victory to some extent has been neutralised. During the month of December accusations, denials and counter-denials became the game following an interview with Fonseka, where the alleged massacre of surrendering LTTE leaders came to the fore. The issue of contention in Colombo was not whether war crimes were committed but rather that war crimes charges might be used against the military leadership. For the constituencies that supported the war, their position seems to be war crimes or not the LTTE leaders deserved to die, and as such Fonseka took a hit in support following the media fray around the war crimes issue. For the Tamil community inside Sri Lanka, war crimes related to surrendering LTTE leaders, is an issue most do not wish to discuss, partly because of the resentment



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towards the LTTE leadership and partly out of fear of any identification with the LTTE. As such, the war crimes debate at the moment revolves around the concerns of international actors and not in relation to domestic processes; it has implications for the top military brass who may face travel restrictions, including general Fonseka, a permanent resident in the US and defence secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, a US citizen. Any serious consideration of past human rights abuses including war crimes may have to wait for a change in the political climate in the country with a national process of reconciliation and justice to address not just the last months of the war but the decades of war and abuses by all actors.

Besides opposing the Rajapaksas the only significant election issue that Fonseka has projected is abolishing the powerful executive presidency. However, most past presidential candidates including Rajapaksa have claimed the same only to later betray their promise. Many who support Fonseka are quietly sceptical about his pledge, but they support him on the assumption that any change of regime at this point is good.

Need for a Third Force

Despite the two major candidates providing limited choices on a range of political and economic issues; the upcoming elections have provided some room for the different social classes and the minority communities to express their disenchantment and dissent. The current political landscape begs the need for a third force representing the minorities and progressive forces in the Sinhala community, but that has not coalesced given the fragmentation and opportunism prevalent among the political parties including the traditional left. However, the presidential elections will become the testing ground for the political concerns and alignments that will be important in the parliamentary elections to follow by April 2010. Parliamentary elections are important for the representational politics of the minorities. Furthermore, the political constitution of the parliament has some impact on the relative strength of the president.

The Tamil community in particular has been traumatised by the decades of war. For the 3,00,000 displaced interned in

camp following the war, they continued to suffer from their physical and emotional wounds. They suffered for years under the brutality of the LTTE. During the final months of war; they were taken hostage and mercilessly shot by the LTTE when attempting to flee, and indiscriminately shelled by the security forces. Nevertheless, the end of the war was a significant opportunity for the state to win them over. The arrogance of power and the cynical politics of regime consolidation extended the suffering of these hapless people through many more months of repression. The bitterness the Vanni civilians felt for the LTTE's brutal rule has been transforming over the post-war months into a bitterness against the state.

The most important issue for the Tamil communities in the North continues to be resettlement of the displaced in their original villages. Access to lands, including those large swathes taken over by the state as High Security Zones, and access to all waters for fishing continue to be priority issues.

The Tamil political parties, despite attempts to bring them together are fragmented, and for the most part lack popular bases among the people. The LTTE's fascist political culture did the work of either creating proxies or isolating those parties that opposed it, and much of the second rung leadership of all the political parties were decimated. Tamil political leadership now consists of token individual representatives with marginal political bases for mobilisation. Thus prior to the emergence of any serious Tamil democratic politics, social institutions and social movements have to go through the painful work of rebuilding and producing a democratically minded younger generation. And here the lack of self-criticism and reflection within the Tamil community is going to make this social and political transformation difficult; the Tamil media for years was shaped by the LTTE's politics, narrow nationalist opinion-makers continue to dominate public space in Jaffna and the hegemonic caste dimension of Jaffna Tamil Vellalas continues. The war mentality, climate of fear and the absence of a serious message of political reconciliation with constitutional reform on the part of the Rajapaksa regime is the other

factor extending the melancholic state of the Tamils. Given this debilitated state of Tamil politics and the problematic majoritarian character of both the Rajapaksa and Fonseka candidacies, the Tamil community is unlikely to go to the polls in large numbers. However, those who vote are likely to tilt towards Fonseka.

The mobilised sections of the Tamil diaspora which had in the past been the LTTE's base continue their politics in isolation with little connection to the political concerns of the Tamil community inside the country. While former LTTE fund-raisers and propagandists in the diaspora are continuing various gimmicks such as referendums in the diaspora to ensure their own positions, the destructive role and impact of the Tamil diaspora is likely to decrease over the next few years and there are already signs of infighting and fragmentation.

Sri Lanka's minorities as a whole, constituting the Lankan Tamils, Muslims and up-country Tamils make up about 25% of the population. In presidential elections, the minorities become a significant electoral factor with the Sinhala vote distributed between the two historically major parties, the UNP and the SLFP, and more recently, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP). The Rajapaksa regime has relied more on patronage than other regimes in distributing ministries to Muslim and up-country Tamil politicians. However, the anti-minority and overtly Sinhala Buddhist nationalist stance of the Rajapaksa regime - including the centre stage given to chauvinist actors like Champika Ranawaka of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and JVP break away leader Wimal Weerawansa - could swing Muslim and up-country Tamil politicians to support the opposition, particularly if the risk of losing their constituencies or a Fonseka victory becomes a possibility.

State Patronage

The urban voters among the Sinhala population are likely to be mobilised by the party machines. However, the party apparatuses have also been weakened due to the fragmentation and frequent crossovers of politicians, a factor which has worked to the advantage and consolidation of the Rajapaksa regime. Those employed in the

state sector – where patronage is prevalent – are likely to vote for the incumbent. Again, an exception here could be with the security forces, which may tilt towards Fonseka. The rural constituencies depend heavily on state patronage; given risks of disruption to patronage with regime change, they may support the incumbent regime. As with many other moments of change and consolidation in past elections, the Sinhala rural constituencies are likely to be the determining factor in this election.

Amidst the promises of increasing pay for state employees after the election and the pre-election reduction in the price of petrol and gas, economic concerns are increasingly gaining momentum. Indeed, one important reason for calling presidential elections two years ahead of schedule are fears of rising economic disenchantment in the post-war years. If one is to look at the major income earning sectors – migrant workers, garments, tea and tourism – none of them will provide the forms of capital accumulation for the emergence of a strong bourgeoisie or for that matter the forms of capital accumulation and investment that could reshape the economy. Migrant workers to west Asia are the largest foreign exchange earner for the country, but this sector is subject to the global economic pressures and the oil fortunes of the west Asian countries. The garment industry centred on the free trade zones is mainly important in providing cheap employment; the factories low in capital intensity in the free trade zones can be easily dismantled at short notice by the foreign investors. The imminent end of European Union trade concessions (called Generalised System of Preferences -GSP+) due to human rights concerns is likely to adversely impact employment in this exploited sector. Tea, while an important export product, is dependent on the cheap estate labour of the exploited up-country Tamil community. The estates which have been structurally embedded into Sri Lanka's political economy from colonial times are unlikely to strengthen capital, however, there is some potential for labour mobilisation given increasing labour shortages. These three sectors that are in great part dependent on women's labour are both highly exploitative and

do not lead to capital accumulation. Tourism, on the other hand, has not recovered from the decades of war and now again is impacted by the global economic crisis. Finally, successive regimes since 1977 have embraced neoliberalism and donor aid towards building out infrastructure, but here again such investment has been very much part of the politics of patronage.

Weak Bourgeoisie

The characteristic features of Sri Lanka's political economy – the absence of a strong bourgeoisie and uneven development – have two important implications. First, national problems facing the country such as the question of minorities will not be solved by the bourgeoisie in the long-term interest of capital. Indeed, the ethnic conflict had a devastating impact on both economic growth and capital accumulation. And now despite the end of the war, the bourgeoisie does not have the strength to rein in the political actors towards addressing governance much less the historical problems of the minorities and rural marginalised that trouble the country. Second, composite-class intermediate regimes are likely to continue provided state patronage can minimally incorporate the large rural population where economic opportunities are limited.

The upcoming elections then will become a test of the uses of state patronage in a naked contest for state power. If state patronage has reached its limits in these times of mounting economic woes, then it could create a crisis for any regime including its hold on state power. That is the disenchantment of the rural and urban lower classes could undermine the condensation of class forces posing a legitimisation crisis for rule by intermediate regimes. Such a crisis could provide room for a third force mobilising around the minorities and the economically marginalised, or in turn it could lead to a repressive Bonapartist regime. The Rajapaksa regime started a process of militarisation and the politicisation of the military, including the appointment of former military officers as governors and secretaries to ministries. After the elections such dangers of militarisation increase; while the Rajapaksa regime's repressive politics is a known

factor, the unlikely event of a Fonseka victory is pregnant with unknown dangers. If Fonseka decides to retain the immense powers of the executive presidency, he is likely to give the military an even larger role and fill important positions with his military colleagues. Fonseka's uncomfortable coalition with the UNP and JVP and the absence of his own party base points to the dangers of the military becoming his political base. However, the Sri Lankan military is not a solid bloc and has its own fissures along party, class and religious lines providing serious challenges to any Bonapartist project.

It is in this context that the important issues not being discussed in the election campaign so far are critical in the remaining weeks leading up to the presidential elections and the months that follow into the parliamentary elections. Progressive voices within Sri Lanka must take up this challenge. Demilitarisation is perhaps the most important immediate issue the country faces; the rising clout of the military and its increasing influence in national political life is a potential danger regardless of which candidate wins. The related repressive legal infrastructure of the state and the climate of impunity have to be addressed; the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the lifting of the state of Emergency should be priorities. While such measures can loosen the authoritarian hold and begin the process of democratisation, the ideological and political forces set in motion by the Rajapaksa regime's promotion of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism can only be checked by a vibrant dialogue and political process that addresses the political problem of minorities. That is, far-reaching constitutional reform including devolution of power to the regions and power-sharing at the centre with due representation for minorities. Such a political process should challenge and work towards ending the centralisation of state power in the executive presidency and the unitary structure of the Sri Lankan state. These will be steps towards preserving the political space that has opened with the upcoming elections; they will also be measures towards checking the emergence of a Bonapartistism centred on the capture of centralised state power.