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## Elite Politics and Dissent in Sri Lanka

*The year 2015 has been dramatic for politics in Sri Lanka. A Presidential, as well as a General, Election within the first eight months of the year saw the country having a new President and a new government come into power. The new political order was brought into power on a wave of mobilisation from a range of civil society groups and actors reminiscent of the political transformation that took place in 1994. Then too, a government that had been in power for 17 years, which had overseen the violent suppression of an insurrection in the South, was defeated by a relative newcomer in politics. This paper attempts to examine the changes that have taken place in 2015, in relation to certain established facts about Sri Lanka's political system, particularly the dominance and endurance of the elite. It argues that the focus on elite politics, as well as the violent resistance against the state by groups such as the LTTE and the JVP, has resulted in the lack of attention paid to the endurance of certain democratic impulses in Sri Lankan society. This is examined in relation to the dissent and resistance displayed by smaller groups that played a crucial role in the political transformations, both in 1994 and in 2015.*

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## Introduction

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2015, the unthinkable happened in Sri Lanka: President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had called for the Presidential elections two years ahead of time, and who seemed set to be in power for a considerable period (he had earlier removed the two term limit on the President) was narrowly defeated by a relative outsider, Maithripala Sirisena who emerged as the Opposition's common candidate. Ironically, Maithripala Sirisena was the General Secretary of Rajapakse's own party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Minister of Health, when he announced his intentions to campaign against Mahinda Rajapaksa. In what was regarded as a major coup, opposition groups had managed to secretly negotiate with Sirisena and persuade him to stand as the common candidate. Campaigning on a platform of 'change', 'good governance' and reforms to the Presidential system, Maithripala Sirisena managed to hold the campaign together and emerge triumphant against an extremely formidable opponent.

Then, if this was not enough for a year, President Sirisena dissolved parliament on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, just about 6 months after being elected and called for General Elections on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2015. President Sirisena had appointed former Leader of the Opposition and United National Party (UNP) leader, Ranil Wickramasinghe as Prime Minister soon after he won the Presidential Elections. But Prime Minister Wickramasinghe was leading a minority government and it became increasingly clear that the promised changes of the 'new order' were going to be blocked by a largely hostile parliament. In a further mind boggling turn of events, the former President, Mahinda Rajapakse, contested the General Elections for a parliamentary position from the district of Kurunegla<sup>2</sup>. The general election by default became almost another contest between the old and new order, except that this time the coalition that had brought Sirisena to power was more or less contesting separately along party lines at the General Election. The Ranil Wickramasinghe led alliance, the somewhat grandiloquently named United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG), won the General Election on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)

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National University of Singapore, is responsible for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper. The paper was first presented at ISAS Annual Conference in Singapore in November 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The traditional constituency of the Rajapakse family is Beliatta in the Hambantota District in the Southern Province. However, since Mahinda Rajapakse's elder brother, Chamal as well as his son Namal were contesting from the Hambantota District, the former President opted to field his candidacy from a different district.

led United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), of which President Sirisena was the Leader, emerged with the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest number of parliamentary seats. Although Sirisena had declared that he would stay out of the election campaign, a few days before the election, he delivered a scathing attack on Mahinda Rajapakse in an address to the nation. In his speech, he more or less appealed to the electorate to support the forces that had brought him to power, which the UNFGG gleefully interpreted as a show of support for their campaign. In an attempt to gain control of the SLFP and the UPFA (of which the SLFP was the main party and had been in power since 1994), which had by now split along Sirisena and Rajapakse factions, the President also sacked the General Secretaries of both the SLFP and the UPFA who were largely perceived to be sympathetic to the former President and appointed his loyalists to those positions. The new General Secretary of the SLFP, Duminda Dissanayake, who was a strong supporter of President Sirisena, entered into an agreement with the UNP to form a national government for two years. Consequently, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which had won 16 seats in parliament was declared as the largest opposition party by the Speaker, and its leader, R.Sampanthan was declared the Leader of the Opposition much to the consternation of the Rajapakse faction in the SLFP and the UNFPA who had declared their own intentions of forming the main opposition group in parliament. Mahinda Rajapakse won his parliamentary seat from Kurunegela, but the defeat of the UPFA at the General Elections, was seen as more or less as an affirmation by the electorate of the changes that were effected on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January.

The events of the first 8 months of 2015 in Sri Lanka took almost everyone by surprise. The Mahinda Rajapakse regime had seemed invincible. The motley crew of unlikely allies that came together to field Maithripala Sirisena as a common candidate seemed too unwieldy and ideologically diverse to be able to hold themselves together against such a formidable opponent who had little compunctions about using every resource the powerful Presidency afforded him to fight his enemies. The message of 'good governance' and 'change' that framed the rhetoric of the common candidate, and subsequently the UNFGG, at the General Election were seen as too esoteric and removed from the everyday concerns of the electorate. Ranil Wickramasinghe had not won an election in years: how was he going to hold this group together and win an election? Sceptics declared that such campaign slogans would be hard pressed to capture the imagination of the public against the Sinhala nationalist agenda whipped up by the Rajapakse regime or to

withstand the powerful aura of Mahinda Rajapakse who skilfully presented himself as the saviour of the nation who had brought unity to the country by ending the war against the LTTE. It was conjectured that Kurunegela was strategically chosen for Rajapakse's comeback because of its high percentage of military personnel and their families who formed the backbone of Rajapakse's Sinhala Buddhist constituency. Yet the sceptics were proved wrong. The good governance and anti-corruption campaign emerged victorious not once, but twice. True, minority communities deserted the Rajapakse camp almost completely and this proved to be a crucial factor in his election defeats. Yet, the swing away from the Rajapakse regime was evident in the Sinhala dominated areas of the country as well.<sup>3</sup>

But signs of opposition and dissent to the Rajapakse regime had been evident for some time and had been increasing in his 2<sup>nd</sup> term as President. The growing dissent against the Rajapakse regime was organised around a range of seemingly unconnected issues: protests against reforms to employer benefit schemes in the Free Trade Zones, fisher community protests against rising fuel prices, farmer protests against regulations regarding packaging, university academics on funding cuts to education (see Witharana, this issue), university students protesting the privatisation of education, community protests against the lack of clean drinking water, resistance to evictions to make way for 'development projects' in the Colombo district, lawyers protesting the impeachment of the Chief Justice. Notably, these protests were not organised or led by political parties. Opposition political parties of course cashed in on these protests, but this was usually after the event. The leadership to these protests came from civil society individuals and groups. Gradually, the exposure of massive levels of corruption, excess, abuse of power and family nepotism drew these diverse protests within the common themes of 'good governance', abolition of the Presidential system and of course 'change'.

As soon as there were indications that President Rajapaksa was going to call for an early Presidential election in January 2015 (his term of office was due to expire in January 2016), it gave rise to furious debates in Sri Lanka. A former Chief Justice, Sarath Silva dropped a bombshell, stating that the incumbent President cannot go for a 3<sup>rd</sup> term, despite the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, saying that according to the amendment, the term limit is still effective and has only been removed for

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.slections.lk](http://www.slections.lk) for the election results

future Presidents<sup>4</sup>. The Bar Association of Sri Lanka conducted a seminar in October 2014 on this issue where constitutional experts debated whether the current President could seek a 3<sup>rd</sup> term and also on the adverse impact of the Executive Presidency on democracy in Sri Lanka<sup>5</sup>. One of the opposition parties, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), declared that any efforts by the incumbent President to seek a third term would be unconstitutional and that they would do their utmost to prevent President Rajapakse from seeking a 3<sup>rd</sup> term<sup>6</sup>.

Calls to abolish the Presidential system had been intensifying for over a year when rumours of a snap Presidential election started circulating, particularly, after a well-known and charismatic Buddhist monk, the Rev Maduluwawe Sobitha, formed a group, the National Movement for Social Justice (NMSJ), which proposed constitutional amendments to abolish the Presidential system. The NMSJ also mooted the idea of a common candidate who would campaign primarily on the issue of abolishing the Presidential system. Various names had been proposed as the common candidate, including that of Rev Maduluwawe Sobitha, but until November 2014, when Maithripala Sirisena announced his candidacy, it was not clear whether the idea of a common candidate would come to fruition<sup>7</sup>. Several other loosely formed civil society groups also organised themselves in support of the common candidate and actively campaigned during the elections. The most prominent among these included the *Purawesi Balaya* (a collective of artists and civil society activists), the University Teachers for Social Justice (UTSJ) the *Aluth Parapura* (a collective of young artists) and, of course, the National Movement for Social Justice led by Rev Sobitha. These groups played a crucial role in the Presidential campaign organising rallies, press conferences and being very active on social media in support of the common candidate. During the General Election, their role was more muted since support was organised along party lines, yet, their core anti-Rajapakse regime message proved to be important.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://asianmirror.lk/news/item/3005-sarath-n-silva-says-mr-cannot-contest-for-a-third-term/3005-sarath-n-silva-says-mr-cannot-contest-for-a-third-term>

<sup>5</sup> <http://groundviews.org/2014/10/21/do-we-need-an-alternative-approach-to-the-third-term-question-beyond-text-and-intention/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.island.lk/index.php?page\\_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code\\_title=110948](http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=110948)

<sup>7</sup> General Sarath Fonseka, who was one of the key architects of the government's military campaign that defeated the LTTE in 2009, had stood as the Opposition common candidate in the 2010 Presidential Elections. After he was defeated he was arrested and jailed on charges of treason and corruption.

In this paper, I reflect on these events of 2015 in relation to certain standard narratives about Sri Lanka's post-independence polity. These include the idea of a model colony descending into chaos post-independence, lurching from one crisis to another, the idea of the elite dominance of politics in Sri Lanka, the endurance of this elite and the impact of this elite on the political system of Sri Lanka. I begin with a review of the literature that has contributed to the establishment of this narrative of Sri Lanka's post-independence, especially in relation to elite formation. I next examine the nature of the state and how certain ideas of the state established a particular relationship with the citizenry. Finally, I will analyse the significance of dissent and resistance in how a highly politicised society responded to the state even in moments of extreme state authoritarianism and violence. As I argue in this paper, the preoccupation with examining dissent and violence through the lens of ethnicity and nationalism in Sri Lanka, has meant that the importance of dissent and resistance as a means through which certain democratic impulses in Sri Lankan society have been maintained through some very difficult times has gone almost un-noticed. Dissent and resistance in Sri Lanka has almost always been examined in relation to the actions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and thus primarily through the lenses of ethnicity, nationalism, youth unrest and violence. This has meant that other less spectacular forms of dissent and political resistance have gone relatively unremarked upon. Yet, these forms of dissent and acts of political resistance – those of trade unions, human rights activists, and similar groups, have played crucial roles especially in critical moments - the elections in 1994 and 2015 are two such moments. I suggest in this paper, that examining these 'other' forms of dissent and resistance would also help resituate the idea of the role of the elite in Sri Lanka and also to better understand the changes that have taken place within the elite in recent times.

## **Elite Formation**

The role of the elite in Sri Lankan politics has been widely discussed within the country. Scholars such as Michael Roberts (1979, 1982) and Kumari Jayawardene (2000) have detailed the process of elite formation in Sri Lanka, particularly during the colonial period. The dominance of the elites in Sri Lanka's national politics is also fairly well established. As pointed out by Mick Moore (1985), this is one of the 'facts' about Sri Lanka's political system, on which there is little

disagreement. Unfortunately, since the 1980s, very little empirical work has been done on this subject (Spencer 2002). Consequently, the literature is heavily weighted towards the comparatively 'older' elites with little information on the more contemporary changes within this group.

There is also consensus on certain features of the elites, whom Moore defined as a "relatively homogenous group which is dominant in political, economic, social and cultural spheres" (1985:206). Jayawardene (2000) in particular describes how the 'old' elites, consisting of a few powerful, high caste families who were able to maintain their dominant position through close collaboration with colonial administrators were challenged by the members of the emerging capitalist class, particularly from the coastal belt during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The rivalry between the 'old' elite and this emerging capitalist class was a significant factor in drawing the political landscape in Sri Lanka. Intra-group rivalry and competition suggests that the 'elite' cannot be considered a singular entity, but rather a group with certain common characteristics. Electoral maps and voting patterns were usually drawn around networks of elite rivalry and patronage (Roberts 1982; Moore 1985; Jayanththa 1992; Jayawardene 2000). Despite the rivalry, family ties as well as common educational and professional links meant that the elites had many common features which cut across the political divide. These included features such as being mainly English speaking, familiarity and comfort with a lifestyle that the non-elites associate with the 'West' and urbanisation (Fernando 1973).

Moore (1992) takes the discussion of elite formation to the time of President Premadasa and suggests that during this time there was an expansion of the elites to accommodate power holders within the expanding middle class. But as pointed out by Spencer (2002), Premadasa was succeeded by Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, whose 'old' elite credentials are impeachable. Not only is she the daughter of two prime ministers, she belongs to a family that had almost a monopoly over the supply of 'native officials' during the colonial period and whose members watched with considerable alarm and distaste, the emergence of a capitalist class which threatened and ultimately challenged that monopoly (Jayawardene 2000). Certainly, Mahinda Rajapakse, though not in the league of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and deliberately projecting his family and himself as 'non-elite', rural, and folksy, also comes from a family that

has been in politics now for three generations. President Premadasa qualified as a ‘true’ outsider, followed by President Sirisena at present. But what is evident is that especially since President Premadasa’s time, the nature of the elites, and those who hold power, has changed. Those who are able to get close to the circles of power, especially to the President’s inner circle, quite quickly emerge as the new elites. It is this capacity of the elites to expand to accommodate new entrants that has partly led to its endurance.

Tissa Fernando (1973) makes a distinction between ‘governing elites’ (those who wield direct political power) and ‘non-governing elites’ (those who do not wield direct political power but who are closely linked to and influence the governing elites). Fernando also makes the point that the resilience and vitality of the elites in Sri Lanka can be attributed to the fairly open avenues for achieving social mobility and entry into elite circles through good education and ‘respectable’ employment. But increasingly, obtaining a good education and ‘respectable’ employment has become harder. What has expanded instead since 1977, especially with the introduction of provincial governments, are the opportunities for entering politics. Politics has proved to be an entry point for accessing economic power and also for establishing links to the elites. If not becoming part of the elites, then at least having good connections and links to the elites can also be useful as we will discuss later.

The election of Maithripala Sirisena, who is not from an established political family or from among the elite has certainly provided a new twist to the story of elite formation and dominance. Neither Ranil Wickramasinghe nor Chandrika Kumaratunga, who certainly have the elite credentials and whose names were floated as possible contenders for nomination as the common candidate, were able to generate enough consensus and support to clinch the nomination. It was the outsider, Maithripala Sirisena, who was able to unite the opposition against Mahinda Rajapakse. A close confidant of President Sirisena during the elections revealed in a recent book that the success of his campaign lay in its surprise element: the Rajapakse campaign had been preparing for Ranil Wickramasinghe’s candidacy and were completely shocked when Maithripala Sirisena announced his candidacy (Abeygoonawrdena 2015)<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, the return of Ranil Wickramasinghe

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<sup>8</sup> <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/35379> “How Maithripala Sirisena became Common Candidate without Mahinda Rajapakse Knowing”



as Prime Minister has also meant that the old elite continue to be in positions of power. While it is now evident that President Sirisena has his own circle of advisors and confidants, during his election campaign and early days in office, former President Kumaratunga was considered to be his main advisor. So despite the relative outsider status of President Sirisena, his ascendancy to power was very much with the approval and support of the elite.

At the same time, an analysis of the kinship relations within the new parliament provides further evidence of the endurance of Sri Lanka's elites or even more importantly of the role of kinship in maintaining the elites: there are 4 sons of former Presidents and Prime Ministers as well as the great grand-son of Sri Lanka's first Prime Minister in parliament today. There are two father and son combinations, siblings, uncles and nephews, sons, daughters and widows of prominent politicians<sup>9</sup>. Another indication that the elite network continues to be alive and well is the fact that a majority of new Cabinet members are from Royal College, an elite Sri Lankan state school that has produced numerous politicians, professionals and other notables<sup>10</sup>.

The year 1956, when S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was elected as Prime Minister after forming the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is considered by some as a moment when the 'rural' Sinhala-speaking intelligentsia triumphed against the traditional, English educated elites. This new group was even considered the 'new elite' (Geertz 1973; Singer 1964). However, as argued by others, the old elites have displayed remarkable endurance and did not quite disappear as expected (Jiggins 1979; Moore 1985; Spencer 2002). The Sinhala speaking intelligentsia that were the major force behind the 1956 election victory for S.W.R.D Bandaranaike, did not replace the existing elites because the power holders after 1956 continued to be members of the old elites. The 1956 elections were important for other reasons – the rhetoric and ideology of Sinhala nationalism became far more important in maintaining state power. Thus, it became important for the elites, in order to maintain their positions, to espouse and advocate certain sentiments in public that were in keeping with these changes, whatever their private opinions may have been. There is also no doubt that

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/150823/news/family-jewels-on-parade-in-new-parliament-161647.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-royal-cabinet/>

the Sinhala speaking intelligentsia influenced the state and politics in important ways, yet, what is significant is how the old elites continued to survive.

What is also interesting about the elites in Sri Lanka is not simply their resilience, but how they survived in a situation where electoral politics were the primary means of choosing national leaders. That means that elites, in order to remain in power, had to be elected by the masses. How they managed to do this provides many insights into the state-society relations in Sri Lanka.

### **Role of Elites in Mobilising Ethno-Religious and Linguistic Communities**

Understanding the endurance and dominance of Sri Lanka's elites within a democratic political system is important. Sri Lanka's (or Ceylon as it was called then) reputation as a 'model colony' and standard bearer for democracy, is closely linked to how it gained independence from the British. The smooth transfer of power and the non-violent transition from colony to independent state, attracted warm approval from the British colonial administrators, who oversaw the process, as well as British diplomats serving in post-independent Sri Lanka. What underscored this chorus of approval was how much of Britain's political traditions and culture were retained and nurtured by the new leadership (Moore 1992; Kumarasingham 2014). The eagerness to reproduce Britain's political traditions and culture meant that Sri Lanka's national leadership was extremely cautious and conservative about reform. This caution was reflected initially within the colonial leadership as well. As representative institutions and forms of government matured, logically, members should have been elected to these positions. However, calls for reform of the Legislative Council were resisted for many reasons. The colonial administration was afraid that it would dilute their power. Furthermore, in their view, political concessions should be preceded by improvement in the education and literacy of the population. A significant point in the favour of the colonial administration was that there was no mass agitation for political reform. Also, efforts to elect members were resisted for the longest time by the elites who feared that elections would result in their displacement. The elites did not only avoid agitating for political reform, they actively resisted it on many occasions (de Silva 2008; de Alwis and Jayawardena 2001). The elites were quite satisfied with a limited franchise: among an educated, particularly English-educated, elite.

When the introduction of universal franchise was broached in the 1920s, the elites, particularly the males, were quite horrified at the thought of women receiving the franchise. However, universal franchise was granted in 1931 despite resistance from the elites (de Alwis and Jayawardena 2001)<sup>11</sup>. Eventually, the Executive and Legislative Councils were replaced by the State Council to which members had to be elected.

One of the consequences of this was that political mobilisation in Sri Lanka during the colonial period was quite passive, unlike what was happening in India, for instance. The elites in Sri Lanka, especially the Sinhala elites, were more interested in agitating for access to the bureaucracy and administration, hitherto dominated by the British, rather than political reform. This did not require a mass movement, which would have required the national leadership to appeal to the masses for support. However, mass mobilisation did take place around other issues that were often linked to ethno-religious issues. An early example of such mobilisation was the Temperance Movement<sup>12</sup>. Also, mobilisation also took place around various religious revival movements, especially the Buddhist revival movement. These movements had within them a component of anti-colonialism. But the primarily ethno-religious nature of these movements meant that the core demands were for recognition and the restoration of rights along ethno-religious identities, rather than for broader legislative reforms. As representative government became a reality for Sri Lanka, political leaders were quick to apprehend the power of mobilisation around identity. SWRD Bandaranaike in particular was adept at mobilising the feelings of marginalisation and exclusion based on ethnic and religious identity, which were festering particularly among the majority Sinhala Buddhist community who felt that the minorities had been given special consideration by the colonial powers (Manor 1979). Independence was expected to restore the Sinhalese Buddhists to their 'rightful' position in the country. So, from the early days of enfranchisement, political mobilisation around ethno-religious and linguistic lines was established.

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<sup>11</sup> There was however a strong women's franchise movement among educated and wealthy women including support from an emerging Labour Movement (See de Alwis and Jayawardena 2001)

<sup>12</sup> The Temperance Movement was launched in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century initially by Christian missionaries and organizations. It was eventually taken over by Buddhist activists giving the movement a distinct Buddhist identity. The movement was not without political overtones since many involved used the movement to articulate anti-colonial opinions (de Silva 2008).

But how do we explain the enduring dominance of elites in Sri Lanka? Why would the non-elites continue to tolerate their dominance, especially with the introduction of democratic institutions and processes with the experience of decades of universal suffrage? The efficacy of ethno-religious and linguistic mobilisation alone does not explain elite dominance in Sri Lanka.

### **‘Ideal’ State Mediated by Patronage**

Despite the reluctance and hesitation of the ruling elites, representative governance and universal franchise was introduced to Sri Lanka by the time independence fully established. As pointed out by Venugopal (2011), electoral reforms in Sri Lanka paralleled the construction of a large, social democratic state. The legitimacy of this state centred around the provision of free health, free education, rural development, protection of Buddhism, primacy of place to the Sinhala language and, importantly, employment in the public sector, which was a primary source of social mobility for many (Venugopal 2011; Amarasuriya 2011). The strength of this notion is such that even in the face of economic liberalisation, privatisation and market reforms since 1977, successive governments have dared not openly distance themselves from any of the responsibilities of a social democratic welfare state. This has meant that the state plays a huge role in ensuring many resources for its citizens. Equally importantly perhaps, as actually providing resources is to be *seen* to be doing so. This is something ruling elites in Sri Lanka have understood very well.

For example, since 1977, education has been, to all intents and purposes, subjected to privatisation despite the official policy of ‘free education’. Previously, the majority of schools were government financed and managed with very few private schools. These had been established by missionaries and were allowed to continue as privately-managed establishments. Today, the network of state schools is being overshadowed by ‘International Schools’ of all shapes and sizes, which offer English medium education and are registered under the Board of Investment as private companies. Furthermore, the deterioration of the quality of state schools, due to resource constraints and other problems, plus the increasingly competitive nature of education, has resulted in the establishment of a massive private tuition culture. Almost all school children from a very young age attend ‘tuition’ classes, which are basically structured to coach children to succeed at several key public

examinations. A recent National Youth Survey revealed that almost 34% of school children attend tuition classes even during school time suggesting that tuition has taken precedence over school attendance (NHDR 2014). Consequently, private spending on education has increased considerably. Yet, successive governments pledge their commitment to protecting and promoting ‘free education’. For example, the election manifesto of President Rajapaksa when he ran for his first term in 2005, states unequivocally: “I will not deprive our children of their right to free education” (2005:72). The election manifesto of Maithripala Sirisena, as well as that of the UNFGG and the JVP, at the general elections promised to allocate 6% of GDP for education in line with the demand made by the Federation of University Teachers’ Associations (FUTA) during their 2012 trade union action (Witharana, this volume).

An interesting exception where the government in power did not pay much attention to maintaining this rhetoric was when the UNP won the general elections in 2001 and came into power ushering in a period of uneasy ‘co-habitation’ with parliament under the control of one party and the President from a different party. During this time, all opposition groups united to resist the ‘neo-liberal’ reform agenda of the UNP. The UNP’s inability at that time to resist the accusation of bringing in aggressive neo-liberal reforms as well as the liberal peace process it was pursuing, which was as easily labelled as undermining the sovereignty of the country, led to its defeat in the 2004 general elections. The 2004 elections reinforced the currency of the rhetoric of the social democratic welfare model as well as Sinhala nationalism. To this day, Ranil Wickramasinghe, the leader of the UNP, struggles to shrug off the label of a ‘traitor’ who undermined the country’s sovereignty and whose economic policies are dictated by the World Bank and IMF. His inability to ‘read the pulse of the people’ is seen as the primary reason for his successive electoral defeats since 2004. His appointment as Prime Minister in the ‘National Government’ created after the victory of Maithripala Sirisena after the 2015 Presidential Elections, has revived these old labels. He has also continued to be the target of pro-Mahinda Rajapaksa groups in parliament and outside. Accusations that the country’s sovereignty is once again under threat and that Sri Lanka is sliding towards becoming a ‘puppet’ of the West, led by the US, feature prominently in the rhetoric used by these groups<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> However, Ranil Wickramasinghe seems to have finally learned the importance of being seen as pro-people. The UNFGG’s election campaign this time was filled with people-friendly, welfare oriented measures and a ‘rebranding’

That this ideal of a social democratic welfare state persists, despite its rapid and steady dismantling under successive governments during the past several decades, is an issue worthy of close examination. The period of market reform and economic liberalisation has seen economic inequality and disparities widen sharply in Sri Lanka despite economic growth (World Bank 2004; Gunatilaka and Chotikapanich 2006; NHDR 2012). There has been a steady cut back of state investment in health, education and social welfare (UNDP 2012; 2014). So it would seem that the old system used by the elites to keep the masses happy was under severe strain despite the rhetoric. Neither can we assume that the mass of people, the non-elites, are delusional and were simply hypnotised by the rhetoric of social security and state protection to blindly follow a system which fails to deliver.

Venugopal (2011) has shown how rising military employment, particularly among an important demographic of rural Sinhala males, created socio-political stability by cushioning the effects of widening disparities in the South. The North and East, which were of course badly affected by the conflict, were more or less left out of reckonings of national economic data and lag far behind the rest of the country. However, there are also regions in the South, such as the Uva Province, which continue to have high rates of poverty and deprivation (NHDR 2012; 2014). Venugopal argues that rising military expenditure “compensated for the contraction of the State due to market liberalisation, and thus made the reform agenda politically viable”, presenting a powerful analysis of the link between the conflict and market driven economic reform in the South of the country (Venugopal 2011: 68).

But there is also another factor which is equally important - the importance of patronage and links to the elites in being able to access resources. The fact that patron-client relationships are a key factor in Sri Lanka’s political system is also an accepted ‘fact’ about Sri Lanka (see for instance Dilesh Jayantha 1992). As social protection and welfare measures were steadily dismantled, links to the elites, in order to be able to access resources, became even more important. Accessing limited public sector jobs, getting a child into a prestigious school, jumping the queue in a state

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of its neoliberal economic policies as based on something called the ‘social market economy’ which is ostensibly a combination of economic competitiveness and social justice. See <http://www.dailymirror.lk/76735/next-5-years-economic-policy-in-the-making-harsha>

hospital, getting the necessary license or simply being allowed to bend the rules increasingly depends on having those important connections and links.

The absolute importance of such links is beautifully illustrated in the following story related to me by a colleague. While campaigning on behalf of the JVP in the district of Negombo during the general elections in 2015, he said that people had told him that although they were very impressed by the JVP and their integrity, lack of corruption and dedication, they would not vote for the JVP. When he had asked why, the reply had been that if the JVP came into power in their area, they would lose their livelihoods, since the JVP would not tolerate illegal sand-mining activities<sup>14</sup>! Though unsaid, what was implied was that this was not going to be a problem with the other political parties.

This story also helps to explain the JVP's inability to capture more parliamentary power through the election process. In recent times, and especially in the last two elections in Sri Lanka, the JVP's strong campaigns, their performances in the media, their reputations for fearlessly exposing corruption and abuse of power, and the integrity and 'clean' image of their members, had lifted their image with the public. The JVP was no longer simply brushed aside as a group of angry, militant youth. Their campaign rallies attracted vast crowds and in a context where other opposition parties, especially the UNP, struggled to find the kind of charismatic speakers - so important for holding successful election rallies in Sri Lanka - the JVP's campaigns were critical for taking the message of the opposition campaigns to the public. Even though the JVP did not officially join the common candidate's campaign, as they did not appear on stage with other opposition groups, they campaigned independently to defeat the Rajapakse regime. At the general elections too, they contested alone as there were high expectations of a substantial increase in their parliamentary share. In fact, the JVP campaigned specifically for the role of the opposition party. Yet, the results fell way short of expectation – while the JVP had managed to increase their voter share at the election, they only ended up with 6 seats.

It is perhaps conceivable that one of the reasons why people do not vote for the JVP is precisely the explanation provided to my colleague by the community in Negombo, explained above. The

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<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, university academic

JVP's structure and *modus operandi* is at odds with the kind of patronage politics that people have come to expect from politicians. The JVP would not (or are seen as not being willing to) operate on the terms that people have come to expect from politicians.

## **Humane and Benevolent Elites**

What does all of this mean? So while we maintain superficially the ideas of representative government, a social democratic state where the citizen or the beneficiary of development determines all, the rituals and practices of politics serve to maintain a different story: that of a benevolent leader (or many leaders, positioned within a strict hierarchy) who has the power to access and distribute all manner of resources among a grateful populace. There is a blurring between individual and the state: for example, when the President or a Minister distributes drought relief or even letters of appointment for jobs, it is done so in an elaborate ritual, which often includes the recipient falling down on his or her knees to respectfully acknowledge the 'gift'. The fact that such 'gifts' are given through public money raised through taxes or loans does not get mentioned. It is enacted and accepted as a benevolent gesture of an individual political figure who has access to and controls the distribution of resources. This engenders a very personal link between the citizen and ruler. This also means that those with the right connections will have better access to resources than those who do not. Patronage rather than political ideology or policies becomes the source of power (Kumarasingham 2014).

The private sector, which was expected to be the 'engine of growth' post-1977 is not any less immune from the practices of patronage. One of the features of elites in Sri Lanka is the way in which their social and political networks cut across sectors and categories. Political power and private capital are closely aligned through family and social networks. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that economic growth, and especially private sector expansion, has been limited very much to the prosperous Western Province, and specifically the Colombo district. This means that the Sri Lankan private sector is mostly an urban-based, middle-class, cosmopolitan phenomenon. Employment, in the private sector for example, is determined largely by the right social connections and background. In the National Youth Survey of 2013, youth had identified



‘family background’ as one of the key criterion for employment in the private sector (NHDR 2014). The coming together of private capital and political power was one of the key features of the Rajapakse regime and which allowed many members of the elite to comfortably co-exist with the regime despite its increasingly authoritarian nature: the elites through their links to the regime were spared its authoritarianism as long as they remained loyal to the regime.

## **Dissent and Resistance**

So far, my story has not veered far from the established narrative on Sri Lanka’s polity. It reconfirms that one of the greatest paradoxes about Sri Lankan polity has been its ideological commitment to a social democratic welfare state, while actual state-society relations have been mediated through an intricate arrangement of social and political connections and elite patronage. The quality of a citizen’s experience of the state depends largely on the degree to which he or she is networked with those in power. In a colloquial sense, who you know, in Sri Lanka, is absolutely critical at many levels: your security, your access to resources, and your very survival can depend on those connections and the extent to which these can be mobilised on your behalf.

This has of course been resisted or challenged. The JVP led youth insurrections in 1971, and subsequently in the period 1987 to 1990, centred on ideas of exclusion and injustice perpetrated by the state. Youth in the South took up arms against the state on both occasions, primarily because they were fighting to establish a *better* state - one that was more responsive to their needs. Jayadeva Uyangoda (2003) has argued that youth insurrections in Sri Lanka have not so much been anti-state as counter-state: youth were fighting to establish an alternative state. This is not very unlike what Tamil groups in the North and East were seeking to do as well. The Presidential Youth Commission, which was established in 1991 to examine the causes of youth unrest, argued strongly for ‘de-politicisation’ of the public sector, especially with regard to obtaining employment in the public sector as one of its key recommendations (Presidential Commission on Youth 1991). In 2013, more than two decades after the Presidential Youth Commission, youth continue to identify ‘political connections’ as the main means of obtaining employment in the public sector (NHDR 2014). However, as pointed out by Spencer (2002), the role of “perceived distributive

injustice” and the “distribution of power and resources” within the polity have not received much academic attention in understanding the Sri Lankan polity (2002:93).

Yet in many ways, the ethnic conflict as well as the JVP youth insurrections in Sri Lanka could be viewed as moments when the frustrations with the non-fulfilment of the expectations and aspirations from a social democratic welfare state were expressed by different demographic groups. One group, articulated it in terms of ethnic exclusion, while the other, more in terms of socio-economic exclusion. It is worth remembering also that in the early stages of the rise of the JVP as well as of the Tamil militant movements, there was quite a lot of interaction between the two groups as well as a more explicit Marxist orientation within both movements. Eventually, the LTTE’s dominance of the Tamil militant movement took it in a more Tamil nationalist direction, whilst the JVP also became more stridently Sinhala nationalist.

But while the resistance of dissent and resistance from the LTTE and the JVP is well-documented, albeit primarily through the lenses of ethnicity, nationalism and youth unrest, the critical role played by other groups such as trade unions, independent political activists, artists, women’s groups and human rights activists in fighting the erosion of democratic values and social justice is less known. The role played by these groups has been particularly important on two occasions: in 1994 when President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunage came into power on a wave of resistance against the UNP, and then again in 2015, when President Maithripala Sirisena gained power. What is also unique about these groups is that they did not mobilise the public along ethno-religious or linguistic lines. Their political activism and campaigning were based on issues of human rights, democracy and social justice. Many, who provided leadership to civil society resistance, were those who were not perhaps directly affected by the strains on the social democratic structures of the state or sources of social and economic mobility. The recent elections saw a broad alliance of civil society groups ranging from trade unions, artists, academics, and professional groups such as lawyers, clergies and human rights defenders, campaigning strongly on behalf of the common candidate. Their demands were for constitutional reform, greater democracy and accountability from the state and a more progressive political culture. It is also significant that the resistance against the Rajapakse regime initially came from these groups – the resistance started at a time when the opposition was in a battered and bruised state. Post-war Sri

Lankan society is marked by a resurgence of resistance and protests from a range of actors making the field of protest complicated and in some ways even polarised (Amarasuriya 2015). Yet, there is no doubt that the resurgence of a culture of protest and dissent fed into the campaign for reform, social justice and good governance that eventually led to the downfall of the Rajapakse regime in 2015.

So what is the composition of these dissenting groups? Perhaps, one way to think about them is to use Tissa Fernando's terms of 'non-governing elites' (Fernando 1973). If we take the composition of the prominent groups that played a role in the two elections in 2015, the leading members of these groups were educated professionals and artists. This group was largely responsible for articulating the various protests by farmers, fishermen, Free Trade Zone workers, academics and lawyers as symptomatic of a problem of governance and an undemocratic state. They provided the ideological weight for the growing protests, drawing patterns and trends between the various groups, using the protests to critique the practices of the state. They were mostly (but not exclusively) from the Sinhala speaking or perhaps bi-lingual (Sinhala and English) intelligentsia, and more cosmopolitan and urbanised than the Sinhala speaking intelligentsia that was mobilised in 1956. In Fernando's analysis, one of the characteristics of 'non-governing elites' is that they are motivated to preserve elite dominance. Yet, both in 1994 and 2015, the 'non-governing elites' played a crucial role in bringing about political change. Of course, another term to be used for this group could be 'civil society' – and this is indeed how they are commonly identified or identify themselves. The overlaps between civil society in Sri Lanka and the 'non-governing elite' is perhaps another area worthy of investigation.

Perhaps what this also points to is that despite the endurance and resilience of the elites and their manipulation of the state to establish patronage networks in order to maintain their dominance, the impact of years of actual participation in democratic processes cannot be easily dismissed. As Spencer (2002) says, the democratic impulse and the nationalist sentiments that were released, exploited and manipulated since independence by the elites, do not always remain under the control of its supposed elite masters. Nor can the elites themselves fully escape from its consequences.

However, it is important when drawing parallels between 1994 and 2015 to keep one thing in mind: in 1994, when Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga came into power, President Premadasa had been assassinated by suspected LTTE suicide bombers. Yet, the regime after President Jayawardene is indelibly associated with President Premadasa and his excesses and abuse of power. But President Premadasa was always considered an ‘outsider’. The situation in 2015 was somewhat different in that President Rajapakse could not have been considered an ‘outsider’. He had been *succeeded* by an outsider. When comparing 1994 and 2015, rather than simply looking at the change in power at the top, what would be more useful is to look at the changes that took place within the ‘non-governing elites’.

But a word of caution before we conclude that the era of elite dominance and patronage is on its wane in Sri Lanka. When we examine closely the period immediately after 1994 and the current post election phase in 2015, there is yet another startling similarity - that is, many groups and individuals who led the protests and resistance that influenced the political changes, can be found in positions of power and authority in the new government. They are heading the think-tanks, the committees and the new commissions established by the government. Tissa Fernando in his somewhat acerbic piece that I have referred to earlier, states that the ‘non-governing elite’ share most of the fringe benefits of the governing elite, the benefits and privileges not available to the masses. He then goes on to analyse how elites manage mass resistance. According to Fernando, the stifling of radicalism in Sri Lanka is possible precisely because mass leaders can be ‘bought over’ or ‘bourgeoisified’: as Fernando puts it somewhat sarcastically “...no mass leader of Ceylon has so far resisted the lure of a chauffeur driven official limousine or an air-conditioned office” (1973:376). Fernando argues that this process of co-opting of potential trouble makers into the ranks of the elite is a tactic used by Sri Lanka’s elite to manage resistance to their dominance.

I would like to use this idea of co-option to argue that it is not so much a co-opting of mass leaders into elite ranks, but rather the co-opting of potential trouble makers among the ‘non-governing elite’ through their integration into the ranks of government that has been the most formidable means of preserving the dominance of the ruling elite. As we saw in how the state dealt with the JVP or the LTTE, mass leadership can be eliminated through the use of violence. In many ways it can be argued that the ruling elites pretty much remain in power in various guises: it is the non-

governing elite whose dominance is less assured. For instance, Mahinda Rajapakse and his son and brother remain in parliament. In fact, the MOU between the SLFP and the UNP actually means, that they are part of the 'national' government. The changes that take place after an event of significant political transformation (as in 1994 and 2015) are actually in the ranks of the 'non-governing elite'. The various university academics, businessmen and professionals who headed state departments, commissions and committees during the Rajapakse regime are no more. These have all been replaced by a new set of people, drawn largely from those who gave leadership in the build up to the events of 2015. For example, the new Chairman of the Board of Investment is the former President of the BASL who led the protest campaign against the impeachment of the Chief Justice in 2013. The public are well aware of this. Rev Maduluwawe Sobitha complained that ever since the change of government in 2015 he has been plagued by requests for interceding on behalf of transfers, school admissions, jobs and medical attention, among other appeals. On my first day back at the university after the elections in January, I was stunned into silence when a university casual worker, asked me if it was possible for me to put in a word with the necessary authorities to make her position permanent!

Yet, we cannot simply dismiss the significance of the changes that took place in 1994 and 2015 as just moments of shifts in the ranks of the elite or in the composition of the elite. The changes in 1994 as well as in 2015, even for a brief few years, considerably opened up the democratic space in Sri Lanka, provided opportunities for strengthening democratic processes and institutions. In 2015 for instance, even though the Presidential system has not been abolished, its powers have been considerably reduced. Independent commissions overseeing human rights, public services and the police have been set up. The Bribery Commission has been reconstituted so that it is able to function more independently.

## **Conclusion**

Although the LTTE and the JVP are seen as the main forces of mass resistance to the state and reflective of attempts to transform the Sri Lankan political system to a more just system, both in 1994 and 2015, change and transformation were brought about electorally at a time when the

leaders of violent resistance had been crushed. In 1994, when Chandrika Bandaranike Kumartunga came into power, the JVP leadership, which had been wiped out during President Premadasa's time, was just beginning to come together again. They had just begun to re-establish themselves and managed to win one solitary seat in parliament from the Hambantota district at the 1994 general elections. Since then, the JVP has eschewed violence and has transformed itself into a parliamentary political party and has been campaigning at each election with varying results. In 2015, the LTTE, which had up to 2010 played a critical role in influencing the Tamil electorate and indeed the trajectory of politics in general, was no more. During both periods, the state had ostensibly eliminated any resistance it had to face.

Yet, leading up to 1994 and 2015, there was a strong public sense of severe crisis in the very survival of the state and the future of democracy in Sri Lanka. Despite the state having emerged victorious over its armed opponents, it looked a bit ragged at the edges. Both in 1994 and 2015, the state seemed incapable of controlling and managing the violence it had unleashed against its opponents of coming back to haunt its very existence and survival. Nevertheless, in both instances, it was possible for Sri Lanka to pull back from the edge of the precipice and reinvent itself on a message of transformation and hope. Could this have been possible if the large mass of people in Sri Lanka were totally indifferent to democratic values and institutions?

The notion that Sri Lankan society is highly politicised is another 'fact' about which there is little disagreement (Moore 1982). Elections are held regularly and voter turn outs are generally over 70% and often higher at national elections. Voter turnout at the Presidential elections in 2015 was around 80% and at the parliamentary elections 8 months later, around 77%<sup>15</sup>. Political leaders are household names. Media content emphasises political news. During election times, electronic media features political debates that go on till late at night and are watched avidly. Newspaper commentaries on politics and political news are eagerly read. Intense discussions and debates on politics take place in offices, public transport, wayside tea-shops and homes. In the 2015 election, social media proved to be another source of political commentary, especially among younger

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<sup>15</sup> [www.slelections.lk](http://www.slelections.lk)

people<sup>16</sup>. Surely, these are not characteristics of either a passive or docile populace that has been lulled into compliance by a manipulative elite.

It is important that the political maturity of Sri Lankan society and the long tradition of democracy in Sri Lanka are not underestimated. The focus on the many crises since independence and the notion of the ‘model’ colony and democracy lurching into disaster has in some ways missed perhaps an equally salient point - Sri Lanka has also displayed a remarkable ability to pull itself out from the precipice on more than one occasion. While not in any way underestimating the seriousness of the difficulties facing Sri Lankan polity and society, it is equally important to pay attention to its resilience and also its capacity to pull the proverbial rabbit out of the hat to at least survive until the next crisis hits. It is in this regard, the role of small forms of dissent and resistance deserves far more attention.

Also, the narrative of elite dominance and endurance needs to be re-examined in the light of the substantial changes that have taken place in Sri Lanka in the last several decades. While patronage politics and elite dominance certainly have not been eliminated, the relationship between the elites and the masses is perhaps far more complex than the existing scholarship acknowledges. The role of ‘non-governing elites’, the expanding middle class and the emergence of a ‘civil society’, all need to be taken into account in understanding Sri Lanka’s polity and its fraught relationship with democracy and democratic institutions.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/82315/tracking-the-mr-effect-through-social-media>; <http://www.dailymirror.lk/85811/social-media-and-general-elections-2015>

<sup>17</sup> At the time of finalizing this paper, Sri Lanka is recovering from the sudden death of Rev Maduluwawe Sobitha Thero, that charismatic and powerful Buddhist monk who led the National Movement for Social Justice. He was provided with a state funeral with full honours and thousands of people paid their last respects to him in a turn out not seen recently. Delivering a speech at his funeral, President Sirisena pledged to carry forward the monk’s vision for good governance by eliminating the Executive Presidency, bringing about electoral reforms and addressing corruption.

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