

2024 and Beyond: Electoral Politics and the Left

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Amid a suffocating consensus on austerity, any opportunity to expand on the current stakes of Left strategy in Sri Lanka must be seen as a small victory. The debate provoked by my original piece, including Ramindu Perera’s response in *Polity*, ought to continue to widen to include a diverse set of voices. But I must briefly clarify several misconceptions in Perera’s piece specifically. I wrote my initial article with the intention of pushing progressives to think about the *blind spot of an easy analogy between the upcoming 2024 elections and the presidential election of 2015*, in which Mahinda Rajapaksa was ejected from power.

My point was that unlike in 2015, even the very holding of elections in 2024 cannot be taken for granted. To generate the resistance to force the hand of the current government led by Ranil Wickremesinghe and backed by the disgraced Rajapaksa party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), requires a far more explicit framing of growing popular opposition to austerity. That includes pointing out the harmful effects of the laws and measures being passed by an illegitimate Parliament, including approval of Domestic Debt Restructuring.

My argument, as Perera himself notes, was to demonstrate that given the much higher stakes of today’s crisis, any real opportunity for progressive forces must come not only from elite divisions from above, *but also from popular pressure from below*. While not a particularly novel lesson, my goal was to apply it in a concrete way to Sri Lanka. Such a takeaway has been obscured in much of the mainstream narrative of 2015. It has too often neglected the critical role of the breadth and diversity of working people’s protest in the run up to the election.

Building on this point, I wanted to push back against a common-sense belief that the current Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government can be defeated with the same soft neoliberal arguments about governance and corruption that were woven into the mainstream opposition to Mahinda Rajapaksa.

In general, I use the term opposition in a discursive sense, covering not only political parties but civil society as well. The all-embracing character of such an opposition was apparent even in 2015. The *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) was not part of the “good governance” coalition. Yet it took up a common refrain against the potential consolidation of a Rajapaksa dictatorship if Mahinda were to win a third term. In this regard, highlighting bigger issues at stake, such as the dangers of authoritarian consolidation, should not be reduced to a question of favouring one party over another.

The Stakes for the Left

Accordingly, whatever ‘advice’ I offer today as well is not for a specific electoral formation—whether the National People’s Power (NPP) front led by the JVP or, as Perera claims, the *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* (SJB)—so much as a way of providing a mental map for the Left to highlight contradictions in the predominant way of thinking about politics. In this context, rather than engage Perera on his imaginative claims about the alleged subtext of my piece—supposedly to persuade the SJB to move away from neoliberalism no less—I prefer to move deeper into the substantive argument involving Left strategy.

The way Perera sees it, the NPP is the future. Anyone who does not acknowledge this apparent certainty is playing with abstractions. But since Perera invokes the “dominance without hegemony” of the current Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government, it is critical to take the other part of Antonio Gramsci’s formula: the enduring possibility of what he called a *reactionary Caesarist* solution to crisis. Despite growing expectations of an NPP victory at the polls in 2024, the path forward remains far less certain, even with the tremendous changes that have occurred since 2022, such as the people’s movement (*aragalaya*).

What Gramsci (1971) defined as an organic crisis indeed represents the passing of masses from a “state of political passivity to a certain activity,” visible in

the detachment of people from the traditional parties (210). This factor is especially apparent in the voting intentions of Sri Lankans today, and which is cited as the justification for a potentially unprecedented shift towards the NPP. But as Gramsci demonstrated using multiple levels of analysis—not only one focused on political parties—crisis also contains many potential tendencies. It reveals the fact that the balance of forces cannot be reduced to the vote alone. Scenarios include those in which, over an uncertain period, progressive forces do not necessarily triumph for various reasons, not only because of electoral defeat.

In Sri Lanka's case, we must consider the broad possibility of a blocked path to social transformation regardless of whether the NPP wins elections scheduled for 2024. Given that so much emphasis is being placed on the supposed rupture that the NPP represents—whether framed in elitist terms as a new “red menace”; or the more hopeful aspirations of the NPP's own supporters—it is imperative that the wider Left take far more seriously the potential pitfalls and dangers. Those include potential deceptive manoeuvres by the current government to delay elections or otherwise hold onto power. But, *pace* debate about elite attempts to blunt the momentum of the NPP as well, they also imply the very real limitations that would be encountered even by an NPP-led government.

When Progress is Blocked

What is a key reason for the potential failure of progressive forces, whether inside or outside the NPP? A major detour, in which a Caesarist actor assumes power, derives from a “conflict with catastrophic prospects” between reactionary and progressive elements in society (Gramsci 1971: 221). Following Gramsci, such a disastrous stalemate reflects both the immaturity of progressive forces and the subordination of a country such as Sri Lanka within the international system. Perera is right to attack the legitimacy of the current Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government. But given the scale of the current crisis, including the vast pressure facing Sri Lanka through institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), I am much more sceptical about the NPP as a be-all, end-all solution. This is where Gramsci, writing from a fascist prison cell and recognising that the path to revolution is not straightforward, remains incredibly relevant.

The first part of Gramsci's equation covers the difficulty of balancing contradictions within a multi-class bloc and the urgent need for serious thinking regarding an economic alternative. What does the immaturity of progressive forces mean in the Sri Lankan

context? And how can it be overcome? In today's case, an alternative solution includes the fundamental need to parry the constant refrain that government spending is out of control, requiring deep and painful cuts for most people. In other words, austerity. What is the nature of the break with the dominant economic paradigm^[i] that is required to facilitate a real recovery for working people amid the current depression in Sri Lanka?

Rather than reading into ambiguous statements put out by leaders such as Anura Kumara Dissanayake, for example, real analysis would require pushing the limits of thinking by engaging the immediate challenges facing working people. That includes developing an anti-austerity programme with which any future government would be pressured to comply. Much as neoliberalism has remained the hegemonic ideology despite changes in government, a true alternative cannot be reduced to thin pronouncements geared towards elections, regardless of whether they are in Sinhala, Tamil, or English.

Meanwhile, the second part of Gramsci's equation reveals the role of countries such as the US, China, and India, in the context of Sri Lanka. Any domestic progressive force capable of leveraging sufficient popular support to push back against renewed attempts at international subordination would need to be committed to an anti-austerity programme. That includes resisting the fire sale of public assets, irrespective of the geopolitical actor involved. Moreover, resistance further demands the political will to implement a redistributive agenda, including a comprehensive wealth tax. It is unclear if any party currently has not only the vision but the strength to carry through this programme. In the meantime, it is incumbent on progressives to keep pushing the boundaries of the debate. Whichever party or coalition does in fact come to power must feel growing popular pressure to pursue a real break with austerity.

The Dangers of an Unprepared Left

In contrast, putting on rose-coloured glasses when viewing an electoral force or coalition, even the NPP, is an especially dangerous proposition. While the NPP may very well win the next elections, the point of serious Left thinking should be to clarify the bigger stakes, and thus to avoid reducing its objectives to elections alone. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Left has been eviscerated over a period of decades, since the late 1970s. It lacks the extra-parliamentary strength through a social movement, such as organised labour, capable of holding political parties accountable. In this context especially, an excessive emphasis on electoral politics is more likely to lead to a

scenario like that of Syriza in Greece. Despite holding a referendum in 2015—in which a popular majority overwhelmingly rejected austerity through a proposed bailout package—the government led by Alexis Tsipras promptly went back to the European troika on its hands and knees.

The real danger, then, is not a Left that fails to seize the advantage through a full-throated endorsement of an electoral alternative to the legacy bourgeois opposition. Rather, it is a situation in which the Left has not considered the very likely dangers if such an electoral force wins and forms a government but nevertheless fails to deliver the goods. And it is in such a situation of dejection and growing resentment—when a social democratic or otherwise quasi-progressive government lacks the strength to break with economic orthodoxy—that far-right forces and other right-wing populist contenders seize the advantage. We have witnessed this trend with the recent victory of Javier Milei in Argentina. Again, like Greece, Argentina had a far more vibrant anti-austerity movement than Sri Lanka. And yet there too the Left found it extraordinarily difficult to push through an alternative agenda. The task must not be taken lightly.

Finally, even if the NPP were to embrace a real programme of social transformation, there is still the looming danger of outright intervention to try and block it. I do not have a proprietary sense over an agenda of economic redistribution that is both democratic and pluralistic in character. If whichever party or coalition is sincere in implementing it, then so much the better. But in this context as well, the most serious Left thinkers of the 1970s such as Ralph Miliband (1977: 188) and Nicos Poulantzas raised the need for extra-parliamentary movements capable of not only holding accountable but also defending governments with a transformative agenda from attack by imperialist forces abroad and reactionary forces at home.^[iii] They saw, for example, what happened to the government led by Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.

Contradictions within the Class Bloc

The need to push through a transformative agenda precisely undermines, however, those other elements within the class bloc that would initially be required to win an electoral majority (see, for example, Therborn 2008: 278-279). This paradox reveals the contradiction involved in not only capturing State power but trying to transform it. What would the NPP do, for example, if in opposition to a shift towards self-sufficiency, much of the middle class vote that it is now courting resists a break with the aspirational horizon of consumption

through luxury imports? Furthermore, from where would it derive the strength to pressure the business class that it now engages to accept a wealth tax?

No amount of theorising about the people/elite cleavage by putting a different spin on the rhetoric of corruption can deflect such thorny questions, as even the most successful Latin American left-wing populist movements have recently discovered. How else do we explain the fact that an ‘anti-corruption’ movement in Brazil^[iii], for example, ostensibly had its origins in mass protests opposing bus fare hikes in 2013 but ended with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018? These are real problems that cannot be hand-waved away by pointing to a potential electoral majority alone.

And in the case of Sri Lanka, especially given both the cunning nature of the current government and the depth of the crisis, it is a matter of existential importance to the Left to avoid reducing its identity to a given electoral formation without defining its red lines. This is true even despite the tremendous force of the people’s movement in 2022, which has nevertheless found itself on the defensive. In fact, the signal failure of much of Left thinking in Sri Lanka up to this point has been its stubborn refusal to deal with the question of movement-building outside the ever-present question of electoral coalitions.

While it is true that my injunction may appear ‘abstract’ on the surface, it is only because we have yet to move deeper into an analysis of the concrete demands required to strengthen popular opposition to austerity. That task cannot be delegated to an electoral formation alone. The sooner we acknowledge this, the faster we can move onto the real work of analysis that justifies an “initiative of will” (Gramsci 1971: 185).^[iv] In other words, the question goes beyond parties. It entails asking what is required to generate a coherent bloc that can implement a broad redistributive agenda. Regardless of whether the NPP wins the next elections, that perspective must continue to be singled out and strengthened within the Left movement in Sri Lanka.

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References

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Notes

[i] See, for a detailed description, my previous intervention in this forum at <https://ssalanka.org/left-strategy-in-the-time-of-the-imf-counter-revolution-devaka-gunawardena/ssalanka/>

[ii] As Poulantzas (2014) put it: “It is possible to confront this danger through active reliance on a broad, popular movement. Let us be quite frank. As the decisive means to the realisation of its goals and to the articulation of the two preventives against statism and the social-democratic impasse, the democratic road to socialism, unlike the ‘vanguardist’ dual-power strategy, presupposes the continuous support of a mass movement founded on broad popular alliances.

If such a movement (what Gramsci called the active, as opposed to the passive, revolution) is not deployed and active, if the Left does not succeed in arousing one, then nothing will prevent social-democratisation of the experience: however radical they may be, the various programmes will change little of relevance. A broad popular movement constitutes a guarantee against the reaction of the enemy, even though it is not sufficient and must always be linked to sweeping transformations of the State. That is the dual lesson we can draw from Chile...” (263).

[iii] Fogel, Benjamin. (2018). “Against “Anti-Corruption””. *Jacobin* (10 May). Available at <https://jacobin.com/2018/10/corruption-bolsonaro-pt-populism-democracy-development>

[iv] Or as Gramsci (1971) elaborated, effective analyses: “... reveal the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political agitation may best be launched, what language will best be understood by the masses, etc.” (185)

