

In 2024's Elections, Lessons from 2015

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Ahead of the 2015 Presidential Elections that were held on 8 January, Mahinda Rajapaksa seemed unlikely to be defeated. Although Maithripala Sirisena had split from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Rajapaksas had tremendous control over the State and media. Any struggle to prevent a third term and the likely consolidation of a quasi-dictatorship appeared to be an uphill battle at best. Yet in retrospect, the path was not as shut off as it had initially appeared.

Unlike the previous presidential and parliamentary elections of 2010, enough popular antipathy had built over the preceding years. The trends included protest over major issues: from pension reform to fuel price hikes, measly budget allocations for education, to attacks on natural resources. In addition, there was implicit, if not explicit, resistance against militarisation in the North and East. In general, as much as the Rajapaksas crowed about the gains of infrastructure-led development, the reality was that most people were already experiencing the creeping effects of austerity under the post-war regime.

The lessons from 2015 are relevant to understanding the possible trajectories next year, when a momentous electoral juncture in Sri Lanka's history will once again occur. It is unclear what exactly the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government plans to do. But much will depend on its own confidence in its ability to break parties apart and construct a coalition of notables within Parliament; one capable of ensuring that Ranil Wickremesinghe himself earns a plurality of votes in any potential presidential election.

In the absence of this condition, there is a strong possibility that the government could try and delay presidential and/or parliamentary elections using procedural loopholes, masquerading as a state of exception. In this context, it is clear why a growing chorus of voices across society, such as the Civil Society Collective for Democracy^[i], is raising the alarm about

any potential delay. This is especially true considering the local government elections that have already been indefinitely postponed.

Elite Tactics

The challenge in avoiding this outcome, however, will be in getting the framing right. While the defeat of the Rajapaksa government in 2015 depended on splits within the elite, it also included the crucial dimension of working people's protest, especially overwhelming Muslim and Tamil mobilisation (Gunawardena and Kadirgamar 2023). In this regard, 2024 is unlikely to be different. In fact, more than in 2015, the stakes are even higher in the current period of severe economic and political crisis. This crucial factor alters the political coordinates of what is required for a coherent response to the regime. It makes a soft version of neoliberalism untenable as a broad framework for the opposition.

For example, in 2015, the mainstream opposition could coalesce on the vague platform of 'good governance', because it appeared to be the opposite of corruption, itself a proxy term for the Rajapaksa regime's tendency towards absolutist dictatorship. In contrast, in today's context, relying on the language of eliminating corruption plays directly into the hands of the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government. It is far more adept at using such discourse to demand regressive reforms. For example, by guaranteeing the 'independence' of the Central Bank^[ii] to impose unprecedented interest rate hikes. Moreover, the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government is already exposing contradictions within the ideologically diverse opposition by playing both ends of the national question.

Accordingly, if disgruntled sections of the elite and middle class rely on soft neoliberalism to try and counter the current regime, it will be far more counterproductive than in 2015. The ideological confusion it engenders will disrupt political polarisation along class lines

necessary to confront the regime. Namely, the need to point out the *effects* of austerity on working people and the lower middle class especially, regardless of how these challenges are refracted through existing ideological prisms to justify the government's reform programme.

Of course, different quarters, including a marginal faction within the elite, have found fault with the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government for their own reasons. Their focus tends towards ideologically salient issues such as formal liberties, which are often distinct from the everyday concerns of people struggling to survive. But it could be fatal to democracy itself if a selective framing overdetermines the question of elections by turning it into a battle to implement neoliberal ideas in a kinder, more palatable way.

In other words, the language of attracting direct foreign investment, providing stability for investors, eliminating corruption through 'independent' institutions, implementing allegedly overdue neoliberal reforms, and so on, is extremely unlikely to drum up the public support necessary to overcome the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa regime. In fact, the regime could very well be an even stronger adversary than Mahinda Rajapaksa's government.

The Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government knows its advantages, and it is expert at leveraging neoliberal discourse to impose anti-democratic solutions. How else can we explain the fact that the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government stole the thunder from the people's movement last year to implement an IMF solution?

In that crucial moment, we saw how crafty the regime was at turning the vague tendency towards a progressive constitutionalism within the people's movement on its head. It managed to reorient the debate toward the need to ensure 'stability'^[iii], especially for IMF-driven reforms. This solution has since provided the cover for a series of repressive actions that have undermined, if not dismantled, the remaining resistance.

Accordingly, from the shock policies last year to the coming wave of Public Private Partnerships or outright fire sale of public assets, we can now see that the current regime understands the political context extremely well. That includes its sources of foreign and domestic backing. Any attempt to try and reframe neoliberal discourse in terms of a defence of democracy will be met with tepid approval from the movers and shakers behind the scenes. Worse, it could even undermine attempts to galvanise growing public anger with austerity.

Instead, those elites who wish to triangulate between the regime and the working people must come up with an alternative capitalist project if they truly want to defend democratic space. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for example, used the 'New Deal' to shore up support for a system that began tanking because of its own contradictions during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The lesson is that only the force of popular protest that compels the elite to produce its own '(counter-)visionaries', as the late Mike Davis (2022) put it, will be sufficient. In contrast, relying on well-worn tropes about transparency, eliminating corruption, and attracting direct foreign investment are losing arguments in a game that is rigged to benefit the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government.

Already, for example, cabinet officials have cited attracting investment as a justification for cracking down on protestors to avoid disruptions to economic activity^[iv]. At the same time, there are opportunities for the mainstream liberal representatives of civil society especially to return to 2015 and draw a different conclusion: one that prioritises taking seriously the working people who are protesting the government's austerity policies. In this regard, democracy is not merely a set of formal rules and procedures. Instead, we must understand how it emerges and is consolidated through struggles to defend the basic entitlements people need to survive.

Democratic Space and Pluralism

This approach hinges on redefining the relationship between democratic space and pluralism. During the global crisis of the 1970s, innovative theorists from the democratic socialist tradition such as Nicos Poulantzas and Göran Therborn tried to grapple with the implications of new social movements, from the feminist and environmental to the anti-racist. As Therborn put it, the Left required an alternative approach to democracy to try and defend it against looming attacks from the Right. The latter became visible in what Stuart Hall (1980) called the "authoritarian populism" of figures such as Margaret Thatcher. As Therborn (1978) noted in his major work, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*:

In part, these problems will be solved by the unfolding of mass struggles for social transformation, in which normally atomised people, who feel they are 'no good', will be drawn into the life of society and regain their human

value and dignity. But a solution also presupposes that the democratic-socialist coalition will consciously go beyond existing bourgeois conceptions and practices of 'pluralism' to organise social collectivities and in all parts of society. (280)

The flip side of Therborn's argument was Poulantzas' (1978) point that the rise of authoritarian statism/populism also involved a direct attack on formal liberties. He argued that socialists would be compelled to defend representative institutions against a new kind of exceptional capitalist State. Not necessarily fascist, but incorporating tendencies and trends that could facilitate such a turn under the wrong circumstances (Poulantzas 1978: 210).

In the context of a resurgent wave of global authoritarianism triggered by the multiplying crises of neoliberalism, these arguments remain relevant today. In the aftermath of Sri Lanka's own popular uprising last year, the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government aims to dismantle liberties such as the right to dissent. But it also claims to entertain the concerns of marginalised groups such as women and the Tamil and Muslim communities. The government's ideological conceit involves parrying concerns about the narrowing of democratic space by rendering the broader grievances of marginalised groups instrumental to the regime's own goal of consolidating power.

To confront this strategy head on requires folding conventional concerns with civil and political liberties into a new definition of political community. That means reformulating collective experiments to cope with the burden of the economic crisis, along with older traditions of working people's protest^[v], as a direct challenge to the regime's attempts to reaffirm hyper-competitive individualism. This was evident in Wickremesinghe's own preamble to his budget speech^[vi] last year, in which he criticised the tendency of Sri Lankans to get "lazy day by day".

In this context, to ensure that at the very least elections are held next year, and that there is a genuine chance for the people to eject an increasingly authoritarian government once again, it is crucial to frame these issues in terms of the resurgence of a broad social opposition. That means articulating working people's economic demands for survival with the diverse social contexts in which they appear.

Meanwhile, ahead of crucial, upcoming battles, it is possible that an alternative project could still be born from within the elite, which is represented by different fractions of the political class. But that requires implicit, if not explicit, acknowledgment of the traditions of

protest that would facilitate this reconfiguration. We must draw the appropriate lessons from 2015, which demands an emphasis on the role of working people's protest. In view of Therborn's argument, the point could be extended further to encompass the new cooperative ethos, including the self-provisioning that households are undertaking to sustain themselves under extreme economic conditions.

The autonomy of the working people's movement must be clearly acknowledged and supported. If other sections of society—including disgruntled members of the elite and middle class—are serious about pushing back against a parliamentary quasi-dictatorship, then doing so will require engaging these social and class impulses. It is imperative to adopt this attitude regardless of whether such sections themselves remain committed to capitalist policies. In contrast, engaging in self-mystification about the need for a clean, efficient State while ignoring the substantive implications of concrete struggles—or divorcing policy from protest—will be disastrous.

In the spirit of Ellen Meiksins Wood (1981), to avoid such a turn requires bringing into view the enduring battle to overcome the separation of the economic and the political. Now more than ever in these times of crisis, civil society, especially in its hegemonic liberal form, cannot afford to retain uncritical neoliberal assumptions. The latter have included the pervasive assumption of the need to insulate economic decision-making from popular demands for relief and stimulus.

Instead, adopting a more critical posture requires producing an alternative agenda that attempts to overcome the depression through measures far more favourable to working people. Meanwhile, and in the most immediate sense, it means engaging protests by trade unions and other representative actors of the working people that are on the frontlines in defending democratic space.

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Notes

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