

# Why 2024 Will Not Be 2015 Redux

Ramindu Perera

Amidst the woes of a deepening economic crisis and the disastrous effect of International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures, Sri Lanka is passing through a tremendous political crisis. On the one hand, the government — an unstable coalition between the *Sri Lanka Podujana Pakshaya* (SLPP—People’s Party) and Ranil Wickremesinghe has become increasingly desperate due to lack of popular support. The authoritarian turn Ranil Wickremesinghe took once he became President is becoming more intense by the day, as reflected in the recent attempts to introduce a new anti-terrorism law to crush dissent and to control social media activities.

On the other hand, there is also a crisis in the opposition — the two-party system that dominated the country during most of its post-independence history seems to be in crisis with two actors in the opposition now competing to fill the vacuum created by the decline of the SLPP. Throughout history, what we have seen is while one major party is in crisis, the other leads the opposition aiming for a comfortable takeover. But 2023 seems to be different — and any analyst without prejudice would acknowledge that this difference flows from the rise of the *Jathika Jana Balawegaya* (National People’s Power – NPP) that has altered the equilibrium Sri Lankan politics has experienced so far.

This is why making parallels between the 2015 elections and the 2024 elections is misleading. Devaka Gunawardena makes this mistake by attempting to draw lessons from the 2015 presidential elections for the 2024 election year.<sup>[i]</sup>

Gunawardena’s argument can be summed up in the following terms: (a) the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa bloc will attempt to fracture opposition parties and form a coalition that can ensure its victory at a presidential election; or failing that, try to delay elections; (b) but, there is an opportunity for an “alternative project”, and as in 2015, the challenge to the regime would likely come from splits within the elite, combined with popular mobilisation. However, (c) the “soft neoliberal framework” associated with slogans of political democracy that the main opposition and liberal civil

society currently rely on, do not sufficiently capture the frustration prevailing among the working poor and lower-middle-class masses.

Warning against the irrationality of only defending civil and political liberties, Gunawardena wants the oppositional movement and liberal civil society to do what they did not do in 2015 — to break away from soft neo-liberalism; and to prioritise concerns of the working masses.

## Changed Political Landscape

Gunawardena writes his piece at a moment when we see a movement led by some oppositional figures and liberal civil society representatives to form a 2015-type common opposition coalition with the main opposition *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* (SJB—United People’s Power) as the leading force. These figures want the JJB-NPP too, to join this movement to defeat the ‘common enemy’.

Gunawardena does not name this or that party in his piece, nor is he explicit about whom he treats as the main agent in the opposition movement he envisages (there is always a key force in any coalition. To talk about coalitions without any reference to composition is mere abstraction). Nevertheless, Gunawardena’s appeal to abandon soft neo-liberalism and to take workers’ concerns seriously makes it clear that his target audience is the SJB faction of the opposition, and liberal representatives of civil society that tend to back the SJB. Thus, in this context, Gunawardena’s formula for a repetition of 2015 minus neo-liberalism appears as a left-wing argument for an SJB-led united opposition.

The main problem in Gunawardena’s perspective lies in the refusal to acknowledge changes that have taken place in the balance of forces in the aftermath of the 2022 mass protests. One of the significant outcomes of the 2022 March-July protest movement was the dismantling of the Rajapaksa-led hegemonic bloc that dominated politics in Sinhala constituencies. Thus, we can say that 2022 signifies a rupture in Sri Lankan politics.

In 2015, Rajapaksa's political project was still dominant in the South. Even during the election that defeated former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, the vast majority of the Sinhala people voted for him against the common opposition candidate. This explains the short life span of the 2015-2019 *Yahapalana* ('good governance') government. Though the Wickremesinghe-Sirisenra coalition was formally in power at the time, they had to govern without the active support of Southern constituencies whose sympathies lay with the Rajapaksa bloc.

This hegemony does not exist anymore. The fall of the Rajapaksas during the 2022 protests has seriously damaged the SLPP mass base and it is unlikely they will recover in the foreseeable future. The current government is deeply unpopular among the masses, and what we see can be confidently called a scenario of dominance without hegemony.

The crucial question is: who would be capable of capturing the vacuum created by the decline of the SLPP? It appears that more than the SJB, it is the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*-led NPP that has captured the moment, and is expanding its reach on a substantial scale.

Many commentators, including the NPP's opponents, agree that the local government elections which were due to be held in March 2023 were postponed because the government feared a strong performance by the NPP. Opinion polls continue to give the NPP leader Anura Dissanayaka a lead over the SJB leader,<sup>[ii]</sup> and most of the cooperative society elections that are taking place in the South see NPP-nominated candidates securing significant victories. Apart from the large crowds the NPP leader draws to his rallies, these are indicators of the growing popularity of the movement.

### Beyond 'Anti-Corruption'

One common mistake many commentators make is to depict the NPP project as a mere anti-corruption movement. This misconception flows either from the lack of knowledge of the NPP platform; or the deliberate refusal to acknowledge any progressive content of the NPP for reasons that require further analysis. It is a surprise that despite the NPP's recent growth, no left-wing analyst in Sri Lanka has so far attempted to do a serious analysis of the political nature and the class composition of this emerging movement.

The NPP appears to be a clear outsider to the political establishment. It does not have intimate ties with the big bourgeoisie that the two major parties enjoy. The NPP's main constituent party, the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP—People's Liberation Front), draws its

support mainly from the rural poor and the urban and rural lower middle classes. The movement claims that it aims to dismantle the elite political establishment and win power over the masses.

Corruption is raised as a slogan, not in an NGO 'good governance' style, but as a condemnation of the political establishment. In comparative terms, the present writer would characterise the NPP as something akin to the Latin American pink tide — a left-reformist movement with a largely plebian mass base.

The populist message of the NPP (elite vs people) is articulated along with socio-economic demands framed in left-leaning terms. Of all the parties in Parliament, it is only the NPP that attempted to build a campaign around issues arising from the IMF austerity deal such as the privatisation of State enterprises; the adverse impact of domestic debt restructuring; the deterioration of the public health system; and so forth.

These campaigns might have their strengths and weaknesses, but the point to be noted is the willingness of the movement to critique the IMF deal and give expression to the concerns of the downtrodden masses, unlike the main opposition party. In 2015, JVP was a small opposition party with a limited mass base, but what we now see is a formidable force that cannot be relegated to the second rank as a fringe left-wing party.

Surprisingly, Gunawardena's piece fails to take note of this important development. There is not even a single reference to the NPP factor. Envisaging an elite-led oppositional movement in 2015 is one thing when Rajapaksa was formidable, and no left-leaning party had any succeeding prospects. But to imagine the repetition of the same in 2024 under totally different circumstances is quite another.

Thus, it is an utter misrepresentation to talk about an 'opposition' in singular terms. There is no single opposition in today's Sri Lankan political scene. What we see is a right-wing opposition (SJB) endorsing the neo-liberal restructuring programme undertaken by the present government, but critical of the attacks on democratic liberties on the one hand; and a left-wing opposition critical of the IMF-dictated austerity measures and attempting to link the demands to defend political liberties with questions of economic policy on the other. Both these forces are competing for influence. Disregarding all these circumstances, Gunawardena chooses to ignore the resurgent left-wing opposition, but sees the right-wing SJB and its civil society sympathisers as the agent of change; and advises them about the need for departing from neo-liberalism and taking working-class concerns seriously!

### An SJB Break from Neo-Liberalism?

This brings us to the other problem with Gunawardena's analysis. It seems that he is optimistic about the possibility of the SJB and liberals in civil society moving away from neo-liberalism. Similar thinking can be seen in SJB sympathisers such as Dayan Jayatilleka who argue that to capture the current political moment, the SJB has to denounce its neo-liberal wing represented by figures like Harsha De Silva and embrace a different economic direction.<sup>[iii]</sup> From this perspective flows the plea that the SJB should take a more critical stance on the IMF-dictated economic reform programme.

But events so far have proved that this is mere wishful thinking. The official economic programme of the SJB which was revised and published earlier this year (*Blueprint 2.0*) confirms unambiguously that the SJB is thoroughly committed to the neo-liberal ideological framework that Wickremesinghe pursues. They may have technical questions about this or that policy, but they endorse the ideological premise without any reluctance. Reasons for this endorsement should not be sought in the ideological preferences of individuals, but rather the material base of the SJB as a political formation. Party positions do not flow from nowhere that can be changed through 'advice', but are conditioned by material circumstances within which a particular political formation functions.

Thus, we should approach the question by inquiring about the class base of political formations. The immediate class base of the SJB which is the political heir of the United National Party (UNP) is the big bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka comprising merchant and financial capitalist factions is a product of neo-liberal economic policies introduced in 1977. They have benefited from neo-liberal capitalism, and their interests are inseparably intertwined with the neo-liberal economic regime. At the moment, it seems that this class wholeheartedly backs the economic reform process initiated by Wickremesinghe, which *inter alia* has allowed them to make profits by privatising public assets.

Therefore, we see statements from institutions like the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce urging people to refrain from protesting as these might jeopardise ongoing economic reforms.<sup>[iv]</sup> This class wants the SJB to pursue the same policy as the UNP leader; and might even prefer to see an alliance between Wickremesinghe and the SJB in upcoming elections.

Sajith Premadasa cannot defy the intimate link between his party and the economic elite. The maximum one can expect from Premadasa's 'social democracy' is

pseudo-populist gestures like paying the electricity bill of this or that *viharaya*, and doing some charity for a rural school, while not deviating from the neo-liberal framework the economic elite embraces. The SJB has not shown active opposition to any of the processes that attack the rights of the working poor.

The other material restraint is the link with external forces. Western countries encourage the IMF programme as well as Wickremesinghe's presidency, since the country has moved out from China's sphere of influence in the aftermath of his election. Where does the SJB stand in this scenario? The SJB – like its parent, the UNP – explicitly demonstrates its pro-Western leanings. The SJB MPs boast about their ability to secure Western backing if they come into power and mock the NPP for not having such leverage. Above all, the SJB proudly proclaims that it was they who wanted the IMF to come in, when then Central Bank Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal was resisting declaring that Sri Lanka was bankrupt. Having hopes for such a movement to initiate an "alternative" project is not only illusory but also reveals lack of understanding of the concrete dynamics of Sri Lankan politics.

### Defunct Analysis

Sri Lankan politics after the 2022 mass protests is not the same. There is mass resentment towards established political parties. Though it is the SLPP that has suffered most from this resentment, it has not benefited the SJB either, as indicated by its failure to emerge as a dominant force. The anti-establishment discourse the JVP/NPP has been focusing on for a long time – condemning both mainstream parties as belonging to the same establishment ("*unuth ekai—munuth ekai*") – has never appealed to popular sentiment as much as it does today. If political analysis is about analysing concrete conditions, no analyst could miss this profound shift that has occurred in popular sentiment.

What is quite apparent is the fact that Sri Lankan politics is at a juncture that is unprecedented in its post-colonial history. Traditional allegiances are falling apart, and new configurations are emerging. Where we are in 2023 is not the state-of-play that prevailed in 2014; and 2024 is not going to be like 2015. In a context where there is a substantial resurgent Left-leaning force with a considerable mass following, envisioning an elite-led alternative similar to 2015 is a misleading perspective that disregards what has happened in Sri Lanka since the 2022 mass uprising.

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Notes

[i] Gunawardena, Devaka. (2023). "In 2024's elections, lessons from 2015". *Polity* (25 September). Available at <https://ssalanka.org/in-2024s-elections-lessons-from-2015-devaka-gunawardena/ssalanka/>

[ii] Institute for Health Policy. (2023). "Support for AK Dissanayake amongst likely voters increases to 46% in September", *IHP Presidential Election Voting Intentions Update September 2023* (25 October). Available at [https://ihp.lk/news/pres\\_doc/IHPPressRelease20231025.pdf](https://ihp.lk/news/pres_doc/IHPPressRelease20231025.pdf)

[iii] Jayatileka, Dayan. (2023). "SJB story: Why realignment with Ranil is irrational". *Daily FT* (12 April). Available at <https://www.ft.lk/columns/SJB-story-Why-realignment-with-Ranil-is-irrational/4-747318>

[iv] *Ceylon Chamber of Commerce*. (2022). "Business Chambers Request all Parties to Call off Protests Planned for 2nd of November" (1 November). Available at <https://www.chamber.lk/index.php/news/9-media-releases/1238-business-chambers-request-all-parties-to-call-off-protests-planned-for-2nd-of-november>

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