

Editorial:

The Promise of January 8th in Perspective

The political conversation in Sri Lanka in the lead up to and aftermath of the 2015 Presidential Election has increasingly tended to focus on questions of governance and accountability. As Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda has pointed out elsewhere, the surprising victory of Mr. Maithripala Sirisena in the Presidential Election succeeded in inserting a liberal perspective on governance into vernacular discussions over political priorities. However, this renewed interest in accountable governance has appeared to wane in the months since the January 8th Presidential Election.

The new coalition government that came to power after the August General Elections has appeared to struggle to reconcile the radical promise of the *Yahapalana* movement with the practicalities of governing the country. On the economic front, the government has been hard-pressed to attract significant international investment, develop key infrastructure projects, manage an ever widening budget deficit, while at the same time navigate the choppy waters of international lending. On the political front, there appears to be a deepening rift between the two main coalition partners. Furthermore, in the absence of a serious voice in the Opposition from either the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Joint Opposition consisting of MPs favorable to the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa have continued to challenge the government's fiscal and transitional justice priorities. This has made President Sirisena's struggle to assert control over the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) more difficult, even though he has made a number of questionable overtures such as the nomination of defeated candidates through the National List and the offer of cabinet positions to secure the loyalty of party stalwarts. These difficulties also appear to have played a part in the constant deferral of Local Government elections. In terms of its international commitments too the government has appeared to oscillate between either moving too fast (like the introduction of the Office of the Missing Persons Bills without extensive consultations) or too slowly (like the proposal to set up a domestic mechanism to investigate allegations of war crimes). Even many of the civil society groups that were instrumental in bolstering popular support for the *Yahapalana* election campaign appear to be fracturing with the recent public split between key civil society coalition members. Analyzed in this way, it may be easy to claim that the post-January 8th government has failed to live up to expectations.

As the papers in this issue of *Polity* demonstrate however, such a view would fail to take into account the complex

and contingent changes that have started to take place in Sri Lanka since the 2015 Presidential election. Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda's article, for example, traces some of the contentious issues that have emerged since 2015 to point out the danger of the new government's tendency to ignore multiple crises of credibility and legitimacy. As MeeNilanko Theiventhran's essay on Tamil nationalist politics makes clear, this crisis of legitimacy and credibility after the January 8th election is not a factor that is limited to politics in the South. As Theiventhran argues, the victory of the *Yahapalana* coalition has unexpectedly exacerbated the gap between the priorities of the major Tamil political parties and the needs of the Tamil people in the North. Oshadie Lecamwasam's article draws our attention to the critical question of how a transitional justice agenda is to progress in the context of competing visions for the reconciliation process. Lecamwasam thereby directs our attention to the difficulties of developing a Transitional Justice agenda that could satisfy the aspirations of the Tamils while mitigating the concerns of the Sinhalese majority. Complementing Lecamwasam's analysis is Dr. Pradeep Peiris' essay on why the optimism about the progress towards meaningful reconciliation should be tempered with critical political analysis. Dr. Peiris' reflections highlight the challenge of reconciling the promise of the new regime's reconciliation agenda with the stark political realities that have taken shape after the August general elections. In a different vein of analysis, Andi Schubert examines the relationship between death and the radical promises of accountability, Rule of Law, and good governance that undergirded the *Yahapalana* movement. By mapping political conversations about corpses, his paper asks us to consider how the question of life and death has become central to the attempt to consolidate power after the January 8th Presidential election. The final essay in this section is by Dr. Kumari Jayawardena who discusses the role that women played in the January 8th election. Dr. Jayawardena emphasizes the need for the newly elected President to make good on his promises to women, particularly with a view to transforming the function of gendered stereotypes in Sri Lanka's public sphere.

These critical reflections are complemented by two important interviews about specific dynamics that have emerged since January 8th. In our first interview, Chulani Kodikara, an academic and activist who has spent many years advocating and working towards a quota for women in local governance, reflects on why the recently introduced quota was necessary and timely. She also shares with us her thoughts on what she believes the introduction of a quota would mean in practice

for women in Sri Lanka. The second interview in this issue is with Dr. Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, the former President of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) and a key voice in the civil society coalition that contributed to the January 8th election victory of President Maithripala Sirisena. In what has become his characteristically critical and reflexive fashion, Dr. Dewasiri shares his thoughts on the relationship between civil society and governance as well as the challenges of building and maintaining coalitions, particularly after the success of a political movement.

The next reflection in this issue is in the form of an extract from the field diary of Mark Schubert who closely observed the electoral campaign of Mr. Eran Wickramaratne in the lead up to the August 2015 General Election. His fascinating account of a day on the campaign trail offers a unique insight into the mundane interactions and rationalities that intersect at the level of political practice. This reflexive piece points to the important role that the mundane plays in simultaneously, yet without contradiction, producing and subverting the function of democracy in Sri Lanka. The final word in our sections on "The Promise of January 8th" celebrates the enthusiasm and optimism of the Sri Lankan voter who used their ballots to express their desire for change. Therefore, this issue also includes the key findings of the "Political Weather Analysis" survey that SSA conducted in June 2015, two months prior to the General Election. The findings capture the views and hopes of average Sri Lankans about the possibilities that had opened up because of democratic change taking place in the country.

What binds all these commentaries together is their common desire to move beyond a simplistic assessment of the *Yahapalana* regime as being either positive or negative. All the voices in this issue see the post-January 8th trajectory as a serious invitation to take stock of the dilemmas that are shaping Sri Lanka's transition from a decade of soft authoritarianism. They demonstrate that whereas the path itself maybe rocky, complex, and contingent, such a trajectory is an inevitable characteristic of building a truly democratic and accountable political system in the country. Taken together these papers indicate the importance of critical reflection and constant review in ensuring that the radical promise of the *Yahapalana* movement is not sacrificed on the altar of political expediency. In short, all these writers in different ways demonstrate a belief in the urgent need to revitalize the radical political project that gave birth to the *Yahapalana* regime.

This commitment to the radical promise of democratization is perhaps a fitting way to mark the entry of *Polity* as an open-access, peer-reviewed online journal. Since its inception in 1991, *Pravada* as it was then known, has been a clear voice of faith and belief in the need for a more democratic and accountable form of government in the country. To celebrate this vision and contribute to the discussions on the formulation of a new constitution for the country, we have chosen to re-publish the first editorial of *Pravada* which is eerily relevant to the conversations taking place around governance today. It demonstrates the initial spirit of critical reflection coupled with unshaking, principled belief in the value of

democratization that has become characteristic of *Polity* over the years.

In addition, this issue also includes four reviews that emerge from a serious engagement with the texts that they evaluate. In Vangeesa Sumanasekara's heterodox reading of Prof. Uyangoda's latest publication, *Social Research: Philosophical and Methodological Foundations*, there is a serious attempt to locate the text within larger philosophical debates taking place in Sri Lanka about the status of knowledge and the role of the intellectual within the university. Similarly, Dr. Kalana Senaratne's review of Roshan de Silva Wijeyeratne's *Nation, Constitutionalism and Buddhism in Sri Lanka* critically contextualizes the text in the wider debates over Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. It also highlights both the strengths and the limits of de Silva Wijeyeratne's contribution to understanding the function of cosmology in Sri Lankan politics. This issue of *Polity* also includes a review of Asoka Handagama's new film *Ege Esa Aga (Let Her Cry)* by Dr. Prabha Manuratne. Dr. Manuratne uses the lens of psychoanalysis to draw attention to how the critical debate on male fantasies and female sexuality has not been able to account for the film's engagement with the sexuality of the ageing body. Finally, Andi Schubert's review of *Silgath Billo* focuses on the play's discussion of the role of complicity in shaping responses to hardline nationalist movements such as *Sinha Le* that have gained ground recently. By doing so, Schubert locates the play within broader discussions on how to combat the spread of hardline hate-speech in the country. In the spirit of the provocative and stimulating reviews published in these pages over the years, this section offers the reader a useful, critical and contextual view of some of the literary and cultural developments that have taken shape more recently.

Polity shifts into an online space nearly 25 years after its inception in an era in which the internet has made a veritable explosion of platforms and avenues for sharing opinions possible. In a world of shiny new gadgets like iPhones, wearable technology, and new media, a journal like *Polity* may appear to be an anachronism. However, over the past 25 years and through the vision and commitment of its previous editors, *Polity* has served as a critical and unique intellectual space. It has been a space for scholars to sketch new ideas, to engage broadly with their peers, and to keep abreast of new developments both in Sri Lanka and around the world. As a result, the previous issues of both *Pravada* and *Polity* function as a critical archive for mapping the important debates that were shaping Sri Lanka's social, economic, cultural, and political priorities over the past 25 years. While numerous forums have mushroomed in Sri Lankan cyberspace over the years, it is our belief that there is a persistent need for a platform that values and encourages critical reflection as a means of engaging with the deeply political and intellectual dilemmas shaping Sri Lanka's priorities at any given point of time. It is our hope that this iteration of *Polity* will continue to be animated by, and faithful to, that founding spirit of critical reflection and political engagement.