

“Meh Uthumwu Dehaya”: The Necropolitical Aftermath of January 8th

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It is on the basis of a distinction between reason and unreason (passion, fantasy) that late-modern criticism has been able to articulate a certain idea of the political, the community, the subject—or, more fundamentally, of what the good life is all about, how to achieve it, and, in the process, to become a fully moral agent. Within this paradigm, reason is the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere... (Mbembe 2003, p.13)

[C]ontemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity.... Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death. (Mbembe 2003, p.14).

The implicit relationship that is thought to exist between democracy and sovereignty² was repeatedly indexed in conversations that took place almost immediately after the final results of the election were announced on the 8th of January. For example, Nira Wickramasinghe’s analysis of the election makes two related observations. Firstly, she explains the surprising electoral loss of former President Rajapaksa on the grounds that “when a state is seen as transgressing moral norms, it forfeits its claim to the loyalty of its citizens” (2016, p.154). Secondly, she reads the interest citizens have shown in keeping the new government accountable as an indication that there is now “a sign of a renewed democratic pulse” in the country (2016, p.155). Like Wickramasinghe, Neil Devotta also implicitly emphasizes the link between democracy and sovereignty when speaking of the result. He asserts that “[t]his outcome should also give worried friends of democracy everywhere a boost, for it suggests that authoritarian armor can be punctured by citizens exercising a right as basic as suffrage” (2016, p.153). Similarly, in his LMD Person of the Year interview, Mahinda Deshapriya, the Elections Com-

missioner made the link between democracy, sovereignty, and the events of 2015 clear when he noted that “[s]overeignty belongs to the people, and it is an inalienable right; political franchise and administrative powers are part of sovereignty. So to safeguard the sovereignty of the nation, it is imperative that citizens cast their vote – i.e. to elect our political representatives, we must vote” (Deshapriya 2015). These assertions reflect a dominant theme that appears to animate popular and scholarly opinion about what took place on the 8th of January – the argument that the election marked a shift away from a state of soft authoritarianism (De Votta 2010) towards a re-assertion of the sovereignty of the average citizen through the exercise of franchise.

The Treasury Bond issue controversy, the slow progress of investigations into allegations of corruptions and nepotism as well as the glacial pace of moves to abolish the Executive Presidency and introduce meaningful Transitional Justice mechanisms have caused many to question the gains of January 8th. How are we to reconcile this apparent lack of progress with the radical promise of what many hoped would crystalize after January 8th? Are we to take solace like Welikala does in the hope that “[e]ven though the final content of the reforms has not lived up to the radical promise of President Sirisena’s 100-day programme, the reforms do effect some incremental reforms that could, if implemented well, portend fairly significant improvements to the culture of governance” (2015, p.353)? Or can we perhaps use what has taken place since January 8th as an invitation to re-examine our fundamental assumptions about the function of sovereignty in Sri Lanka and its relationship to democracy? In other words, instead of decrying the lack of progress towards abstract ideals such as “good governance” and “anti-corruption,” can we re-visit, re-examine, and re-critique the aftermath of Presidential election on a fundamentally more tactile terrain such as life and death?

These questions are crucial to this attempt to explore the politicization of death in the immediate aftermath of the 2015 Presidential election. The interest in the politics of death does not stem from a morbid fascination with the

abject or horrific. Instead, this paper seeks to explore the engagement with death that has animated the vision and project of *Yahapalana*. The centrality of necropolitics to a regime is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Through assassinations, mob violence, riots, uprisings, and civil war, necropolitics has been central to numerous previous governments in Sri Lanka's history. However, the discourse around death that has emerged since January 8th provides a useful vehicle for exploring the unique necropolitical features of the *Yahapalana* government. Towards this end, I critically examine the political conversations that have surrounded the deaths of Wasim Thajudeen, five-year-old Seya Sadewmi, and the Venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera. These conversations help to raise a significantly different set of questions than those raised by the debate over the success or failure of the *Yahapalana* movement after the 2015 Presidential election. In short therefore, this essay aims to critically examine how questions of life and death have marked the problem of governance after the 8th of January.

Sovereignty, Life, and Death

The classical notion of sovereignty in Europe is often traced to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia which recognized the right of leaders to exercise their authority and power within their national borders (Goodman 1993, p.27). Following significant uprisings such as the French Revolution in 1789, the locus of sovereignty was thought to have shifted away from a monarch to the people. Hinsley articulates this particular conception of sovereignty as being predicated on the idea of a "political community" that has "final and absolute political authority" over its own affairs (1986, p.26). The liberal academic and politician Michael Ignatieff defines sovereignty quite simply as "the idea that the people should be masters of their own house" (Ignatieff 2014). However, as Achille Mbembe points out this understanding of sovereignty is premised on abstract assumptions about the exercise of reason among the political community (2003, p.13). Therefore, the question that Mbembe's thoughts provoke is as to whether there is an alternative framework on which to base our understanding of sovereignty.

Michel Foucault offers us a fundamentally different conceptualization of sovereignty. In his *Society Must Be Defended* lecture series, Foucault points out that what the French Revolution initiated was not simply a shift in the locus of sovereignty away from the monarch to the people. Instead, Foucault takes as his focus what he describes as "one of sovereignty's basic attributes – the right of life and death" (2003, p.240).³ Foucault points out that prior to the nineteenth century what this meant in practice was that the sovereign had the power to either put a subject to death or allow him/ her to live (2003, p.240). However, according to Foucault what took place in the nineteenth century was that the old right of the sovereign to "take life or let live" was not replaced but rather came to be complimented by a new right to "make' live and 'let' die" (2003, p.241). Foucault notes that this new right was "decreasingly the power of the right to take life,

and increasingly the right to intervene to make live, or once power begins to intervene mainly at this level in order to improve life by eliminating accidents, the random element, and deficiencies, death becomes, insofar as it is the end of life, the term, the limit, or the end of power too" (2003, p.248). In other words, what Foucault is suggesting here is the possibility of genealogizing sovereignty by studying how life becomes a critical focus of governance.

Foucault may help us to think through the relationship between life and sovereignty. However, he offers us very little insights into the role of death in this relationship because for him "[d]eath is outside the power relationship. Death is beyond the reach of power, and power has a grip on it only in general, overall, or statistical terms" (2003, p.248). It is Mbembe who adapts and extends Foucault's thought to suggest the need for examining the relationship between death and sovereignty. Through the experience of the Nazi camp, the slave on the plantation, and the colony, Mbembe traces how terror and death are in fact central to the *nomos* of the political theory of sovereignty. In other words, what Mbembe does is re-formulate Foucault's thoughts to demonstrate that Foucault's conception of biopower is "insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (2003, pp.39-40). Instead, Mbembe argues that "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror" (2003, p.39). Therefore, Mbembe's work suggests the radical possibilities of focusing our attention on the question of terror and death and its role in structuring the function of sovereignty in the aftermath of the 2015 Presidential election.

Although Mbembe's work on necropolitics is important, this paper is marked by a departure from the direction that Mbembe's work suggests.⁴ To understand my departure from Mbembe's work it is necessary to turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben, another major theorist Mbembe draws on in order to advance his formulation of the relationship between death and the politics.⁵ Agamben points out that classical thought about political life is founded on a fundamental differentiation between *zoe*, ("the simple fact of living common to all living beings" [Agamben 1998, p.1]) and *bios* ("the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group" [Agamben 1998, p.1]). Agamben argues that whereas classical thought understood politics as relating to *bios* or the good life, the "decisive event of modernity" and the "radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought" is the entry of *zoe* (which he defines as bare life) into the field of politics (1998, p.4). For Agamben, this entry does not constitute a replacement but rather a coincidence between both *bios* and *zoe* which leads them to enter into "a zone of irreducible indistinction" (1998, p.9). Agamben notes that in spite of this coincidence, Western politics continues to treat *zoe* as a zone of exception. Calling for the need to develop a "completely new politics" (1998, p.11), Agamben attempts to develop his theorization of the politics of bare life or *zoe*.

The departure from both Agamben and by extension, Mbembe, hinges on the differentiation between *zoe* and *bios*. The work of both Agamben and Mbembe take as its focus the politicization of bare life and its exclusion from the zone of politics. This paper however, is concerned with the re-examination of the zone of inclusion, i.e. what Agamben marks out as the question of *bios* or the good life. My intention therefore, is to explore the role that death plays in the understanding of *bios* since the election of the *Yahapalana* regime. Whereas both Agamben and Mbembe focus their theorization on the deaths that exist in spaces that are outside of the political, this paper focuses its attention on deaths that exist at the center of the zone of the political. In other words, rather than simply appropriating the work of Mbembe and Agamben, their work functions as a springboard for examining the emergence of the question of the good death after the 8th of January.

The Ghost of Terror Past: The Exhumation of Wasim Thajudeen

In the early hours of May 17th, 2012 news broke of the discovery of a charred body in the wreckage of a car in Narahenpita. The body was soon identified as that of Wasim Thajudeen, a national rugby player and former captain of the Havelocks rugby team. Initial reports of the incident identified the cause of death as being due to his car catching fire after crashing into a concrete wall down Park Road (*Daily News* 2012). However, following the victory of Maithripala Sirisena in 2015, the Police announced that investigations into Thajudeen's death would be handed over to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).⁶

The pace of the investigation into Thajudeen's death gathered significant momentum following this announcement.⁷ Towards the end of July, a few weeks prior to the August 17th General Elections, the CID informed the Colombo Additional Magistrate that their investigations revealed that Thajudeen had been tortured and murdered. On the 6th of August, the Magistrate issued an order to exhume Thajudeen's body. The Dehiwela police announced that they would provide security to the cemetery till the exhumation took place in order to ensure the grave was not tampered with.⁸ Thajudeen's body was finally exhumed on the 10th of August (a week prior to the General Election) following an order from the Magistrate.⁹ Subsequently, the JMO informed court that the fact that key parts of Thajudeen's body had gone missing after being handed over to the former JMO was delaying their final report (*Daily News* 2015). Furthermore, a heated situation broke out between Government and Opposition Parliamentarians in December when Thajudeen's death was referenced in response to a speech by Hon. Namal Rajapaksa MP querying about the Government sponsoring a UNHRC Resolution that mandated investigation into "systematic crimes" that took place during the last stages of the war.¹⁰

Beneath the political posturing and spectacle however it is possible to notice how death emerges as a problem of gov-

ernance for the *Yahapalana* government and its detractors. On the one hand, Thajudeen's death and the spectacle that the investigation became after January 8th was an important political symbol for the new *Yahapalana* government. The heated debate about Thajudeen's death was due in part to rumors that individuals closely connected to the former President's family were involved in the killing.¹¹ For those critical of the Rajapaksa regime, the killing of Thajudeen served as an example to many of the impunity of the state and the extent to which the Police and the judicial bureaucracy had become politicized under the previous regime.¹² To reframe this critique in the terminology of Foucault and Mbembe, Thajudeen's death was used symbolically by the *Yahapalana* government as an allegory of the extent to which the Rajapaksa regime had exceeded the right of the sovereign to take life. In other words, these commentators sought to frame Thajudeen's killing as a symbol of the necropolitical excess of the Rajapaksa regime.

On the other hand, however, the Rajapaksa camp actively sought to distance itself from involvement in the killing of Thajudeen. Both President Rajapaksa as well as his son, Namal, strongly opined that there should be an independent investigation into the death of the ruggerite and that his death should not be 'politicized'. In fact, in an interview with the BBC, Namal Rajapaksa specifically framed his response in terms of justice and injustice. He stated that if there had been any form of injustice that had happened (during the former President's tenure) it should be investigated and justice should be served. However, he went on to note that the politicization of Thajudeen's death (by the current regime) was an injustice to both the soul of the ruggerite as well as to his (Thajudeen's) family.¹³ Similarly, at the press conference organized by the former President and his allies, MP Udaya Gammanpila pointedly asked as to why the investigation into Thajudeen's death had gathered so much pace just prior to the election.¹⁴ Furthermore, Parliamentarian Wimal Weerawansa even called for an independent investigation into the crimes that took place at Batalanda.¹⁵ The desire to distance the Rajapaksas from Thajudeen's killing stood in stark contrast to the responsibility that was claimed for the elimination of Prabhakaran and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by the former President (more on this contradiction later). Therefore, in contrast to the *Yahapalana* regime, the supporters of Mahinda Rajapaksa and his family sought to frame the furor as a politicization of Thajudeen's death for the electoral gain of the *Yahapalana* regime.

One way of reading the terms of this debate is to see it as a conversation over who had the right to invest symbolic life in Thajudeen's tortured, exhumed corpse. The debate surrounding the political use of Thajudeen's exhumed body, particularly in the run up to the election, serves to open up a renewed conversation about the relationship between a corpse and the sovereign's right to extend life. Thajudeen's corpse began its new life in front of news video cameras and a protest against the former president, while Muslim men sought to shield the exhumed body from public view.¹⁶

The coincidence of media coverage and political protest is arguably the most explicit marking of the symbolic political and public character of the new life of Thajudeen's corpse. Furthermore, this symbolic investment takes place at the very moment in which his tortured corpse is exhumed from below the ground. In other words, it is Thajudeen's exhumed body that functions as a linchpin for a much broader conversation about the conditions under which it is possible to extend death into life. Therefore, what is remarkably necropolitical is the way in which the spectacle surrounding the Thajudeen exhumation brought to the fore the question of who has the right to extend death into a form of political afterlife.

The exhumation of Thajudeen's body can be read as the opening gambit in a significant necropolitical conversation that has animated the *Yahapalana* government. For the observer of the necropolitical, it is amazing that at the heart of this conversation is the debate over a form of sovereignty that differs from Foucault's understanding. Within this form of sovereignty, it is no longer adequate to ask who has the right to extend life. We must also pay attention to the question of who has the right to extend death into a new form of life.

We can therefore start to understand the demand for and resistance to an independent international investigation into allegations of war crimes as returning us to the questions of how we are to negotiate between competing demands over the right to resurrect the corpses of those who were killed during the last stages of the war. We can also begin to notice the ways in which Batalanda and the excess of 87-89 still continue to resonate in the political sphere. We can wonder about how critical the Matale mass grave is to the critique of key officials of the previous regime. In other words, what emerges as remarkable about the conversation surrounding the *Yahapalana* movement is its unusual focus on the question of who has the right to bring the dead back to life.

To Kill or Not to Kill: Seya Sadewmi and the Problem of Capital Punishment

On the 12th of September, 2015 Seya Sadewmi, a five-year-old girl residing in Kotadeniyawa went missing while asleep. The Police K-9 unit which was called into support the investigation eventually discovered the naked body of the young girl near a canal. The post-mortem into Seya's murder revealed that she had been sexually assaulted and then strangled to death.¹⁷ The Police announced that they had arrested a seventeen-year-old youth and another thirty-three-year-old individual as suspects in the killing of Seya. However, the Police were forced to release these two individuals since they were unable to match the DNA found on Seya's body with the DNA of these two suspects.¹⁸ Following their release the two individuals were admitted to hospital due to the torture they underwent at the Kotadeniyawa Police Station.¹⁹ In the meantime the Police informed the media that a third suspect, Dinesh Priyashantha alias 'kondaya', had been arrested in connection with Seya's murder.²⁰ The Police soon announced that Priyashantha had confessed to the sexual assault and

killing of Seya.²¹ A few days later however, the Minuwangoda magistrate was informed that the DNA on Seya's body did not match that of Priyashantha, thereby putting the Police in an extremely embarrassing situation. To add to this developing spectacle, the Police arrested Priyashantha's brother who also went on to confess to the killing of Seya.²² Finally, it was announced that the DNA of Saman Jayalath, Priyashantha's brother, matched the DNA found on Seya's body.²³ As a result, the Minuwangoda magistrate placed Saman Jayalath in further custody for the sexual assault and murder of Seya Sadewmi.

Following the discovery of Seya's body, a significant and unusual conversation about the relationship between death and sovereignty emerged due to a number of violent murders of children in the country. On the one hand, there were a number of vociferous protests around the country demanding that the government implement the death penalty for perpetrators of sexual abuse and murder of children.²⁴ At the core of the argument made by these protestors was that the death penalty was the only punishment suitable for those who perpetrate such heinous crimes against children. With the support of prominent government MPs such as Ranjan Ramanayake and Hirunika Premachandra, Parliament debated the necessity of introducing the death penalty to punish those who sexually assault and murder children.²⁵ Some went even further and called for the reintroduction of the kinds of punishments that were metered out during the time of the kings to combat the crime wave in the country.²⁶ On the other hand, other prominent government ministers including the Minister of Justice, Wijedasa Rajapaksa, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mangala Samaraweera, came out strongly against moves to reintroduce the death penalty. One of the arguments made by those in this camp was that the death penalty was a relic of a pre-modern form of justice which privileged retribution over reformation. They therefore argued that the death penalty was no longer suitable for a modern, democratic country like Sri Lanka.²⁷ In fact, in the midst of the debate over the death penalty, the Minister of Justice announced that Sri Lanka would vote in favor of a UN resolution on a moratorium on the death penalty in member states.²⁸

What is unusual about this debate is that by pitting the popular, public demand for justice against normative ideals about justice and modernity it highlights the link between death and sovereignty. The popular demand for the death penalty forced the *Yahapalana* regime to negotiate the limits of the sovereign to declare death in a modern, democratic society. Furthermore, the fulcrum of this debate is the question of how the sovereign's right to take away life will ensure that the Rule of Law is properly enforced in order to combat the rising crime wave in the country. As a result, it is hardly surprising that many of the protestors around the country called for President Sirisena to carry out the death penalty. In fact, this link between death and sovereignty was underscored when President Sirisena, the most powerful executive office, affirmed that he would be willing to issue orders to carry out

the death penalty if Parliament approved the motion. Within this framing, the demand for the return of *raja kale danduwam* (punishments from the time of the kings) is arguably the ultimate indication of the extent to which sovereignty and death came to be imbricated in each other during this debate.

Ironically, the function of death is critical to the extension of the promise of life within this conversation. For example, the posters and laments of the protestors frequently refer to Seya as a *mal kekula* (budding flower) suggesting both the promise of life and its fragility.²⁹ In perhaps one of the most emphatic statements about the need for the death penalty to punish perpetrators of murder and sexual assault of children, children (particularly young girls) on their way to *dabam pasal* (Sunday school) carried placards saying “do not destroy *mal kekulu* (budding flowers) like us” as part of a protest outside Temple Trees.³⁰ This incident is significant because in rather ironic fashion it highlights the need to declare death in order to prolong their life.³¹ In other words, what seems remarkable to me about the death penalty debate after January 8th is the way in which it raised serious questions about the use of death in order to prolong life.

The debate over the introduction of the death penalty for the sexual assault and murder of children is a moment of significant necropolitical importance. Within this reading Seya’s corpse becomes symbolic of the popular demand for the better functioning of the Rule of Law. This demand is further complicated by the comical manner in which the Police kept ‘producing’ suitable bodies for punishment. Significantly, Seya’s corpse becomes a site through which conflicting understandings of justice and modernity worked out their contradictions. Furthermore, the question of the right of the sovereign to declare death in a modern, democratic state emerged as central to the efforts to produce new corpses that would extend the life of the people. Therefore, if Thajudeen’s body marks a moment in which the subterranean gives birth to a living corpse, the exposed body of young Seya Sadewmi is marked by its desire to create new corpses in order to prolong life.

“*Meh Uthumwu Dehaya*”: The Necropolitical Premise of *Yahapalanaya*

The news of the passing of Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera, the chief incumbent of the Kotte Naga Vihara and the convener of the National Movement for a Just Society, broke on the 8th of November, 2015. The government declared a day of mourning for the monk who had played a critical role in building the coalition that brought the *Yahapalana* government to power. It also declared that Ven. Sobitha Thera would be afforded full state honors at his funeral. A number of dignitaries spoke at the Venerable monk’s funeral. President Maithripala Sirisena, who was a direct beneficiary of the Venerable monk’s efforts to challenge corruption and nepotism, made an extremely important speech that evening. The comments made by him at this funeral had implications far beyond the role the late monk had played in the country. As

Welikala (2015) and others have pointed out,³² the *Yahapalana* regime which had formed a national government after its victory at the August 17th General Election, was finding it increasingly difficult to live up to its radical promise. Therefore, President Sirisena’s speech aimed to address the increasingly negative public perception of the *Yahapalana* regime.³³

In his eulogy President Maithripala Sirisena took pains to address the deferral of his regime’s radical promise. His speech particularly emphasized two key perspectives. Firstly, he affirmed the pivotal role that the Ven. Sobitha Thera had played in building the coalition for Good Governance that had brought about the unexpected end of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s regime. Secondly, President Sirisena swore a number of oaths on the cortege of the late monk to do all that was in his power to achieve what he saw as the life work of the Ven. Sobitha Thera—the abolishment of the Executive Presidency and the establishment of a just social system through the principles of Good Governance. These two strands are mutually constitutive and a key aspect of President Sirisena’s attempt to give a flagging movement a shot in the arm.

President Sirisena attempts to return to the radical premise of *Yahapalanaya* in order to reinvigorate the *Yahapalana* project. He takes a great deal of trouble to underscore the importance and value of Ven. Sobitha Thera’s self-sacrifice in the face of illness and hardship in his pursuit of the goal of creating “a system of good governance, build[ing] a wider democratic space, and creat[ing] a just social system in this country.” The affirmation of the Ven. Sobitha Thera’s self-sacrifice arguably mirrors the self-sacrifice that Sirisena emphasized when he sought to challenge former President Rajapaksa. For example, in the introduction to his manifesto, Sirisena asserts that he had ignored the threat to his life and the lives of his family members in order to “free my cherished motherland and all its people from the tragic fate that has befallen them” (New Democratic Front 2015, p.5). In contrast, the introduction of President Rajapaksa’s manifesto notes that the *raison d’être* of his presidency was his concern with the untimely deaths of those who were affected by the closure of the Maavil Aru anicut (*Mahinda Chinthana* 2015, p.9). In other words, although the freedom of the country and its people is the end goal of both candidates, the emphasis of President Rajapaksa is on the death of people in the country, while the emphasis of President Sirisena is on the sacrifice of his own life. Therefore, by affirming the importance of self-sacrifice in his eulogy for Ven. Sobitha, President Sirisena appears to be attempting to return, not to the radical promise, but rather to the radical premise of the *Yahapalana* movement.

What makes the premise of *Yahapalanaya* so radical is that the idea of self-sacrifice that in some ways initiates the *Yahapalana* movement is rooted in the concern with the necropolitical. This is not to suggest that necropolitics has been peripheral to previous regimes. As noted previously, the politics of death has increasingly played a varied yet significant role in every regime since Independence. However,

prior to President Sirisena's affirmation, the only President who may have come close to claiming this radical sense of self-sacrifice was President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga after the attempt on her life by the LTTE during the 1999 Presidential election campaign. However, even here the threat to her life is external (the LTTE), rather than internal to the logic of the nation.³⁴ President Sirisena's affirmation of sacrifice is unusual since it seems to me that no President or Head of State prior to him had invoked the complete sacrifice of the individual self to the collective self as a foundation for their campaign.³⁵ In other (necropolitical) words, the premise of *Yahapalanaya* is radical because it emphasizes the right of the sovereign to give up his/ her life in order to extend the life of the people. Therefore, what is so unique to me about the *Yahapalana* movement is that it sought to extend the right of the sovereign beyond the right to take and prolong life. Within this new dispensation, the sovereign seeks to claim the right to also give up his/ her own life in order to assure the liberty of the people.

In spite of President Sirisena's eulogy for the late Ven. Sobitha Thera, the *Yahapalana* movement still appears to be struggling to deliver on its radical promise. In this moment of attempted renewal and reinvigoration is it possible to discern the necropolitical reasons for the current crisis of legitimacy for the *Yahapalana* movement? It is striking that rather than merely affirming his commitment to the principles of the Good Governance movement, Sirisena goes further to swear an oath on the exalted corpse (*meh uthumwu dehaya*) of the late monk. This invocation of the venerable monk's corpse arguably serves to invest the monk's dead body with the meaning of a symbolic altar. The problem, however, is that President Sirisena's attempt to return to the radical premise of *Yahapalanaya* is now significantly different from the premise with which he opens his manifesto. It is immediately apparent that at Ven. Sobitha's funeral, President Sirisena's emphasis is on the sacrifice of his political office – the Executive Presidency – rather than on the sacrifice of himself. To frame this necropolitically, it is no longer a physical body/ bodies – the body of Sirisena and his family – that is offered, but rather the political body – the body of the Executive President – that is placed on the altar as a sacrifice. As a result, it could be argued that the physical body of Ven. Sobitha becomes a conduit that enables the symbolic splitting of the physical and political body of the Executive Presidency. Therefore, even as he re-affirms his commitment to the radical premise of the *Yahapalana* movement, President Sirisena also emphatically splits the political from the physical sacrifice that was arguably crucial to the radical promise of *Yahapalanaya*.

Conclusion: *Yahapalanaya's* Corpse(s)

Throughout this paper I have attempted to demonstrate how the relationship between death and sovereignty is crucial to understanding the post-January 8th trajectory of the *Yahapalana* government. The conversations surrounding the corpses of Wasim Thajudeen, Seya Sadewmi, and Ven.

Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera have been used to highlight how questions of life and death are deeply embedded in the politics of the *Yahapalana* movement. These debates over death are arguably an often overlooked aspect of the emergence and eventual triumph of the *Yahapalana* regime at the elections of 2015. Therefore, by analyzing the centrality of death to the trajectory of the regime since January 8th, this paper has sought to demonstrate the necropolitical complexities that have marked the *Yahapalana* government at this particular juncture.

The interlocking verticality of death is a crucial characteristic of the necropolitics that has taken shape under the *Yahapalana* regime. As this paper has demonstrated there are a number of significant vertical, necropolitical shifts that have taken place since January 8th. Firstly, the exhumation of the subterranean corpse of Wasim Thajudeen marks the emergence of a conversation about who has the right to extend death into life. Secondly, the body of young Seya Sadewmi which is found lying exposed on the ground initiates a conversation about the right to declare death in order to extend life. Finally, the elevated corpse of the Ven. Sobitha is indexed by President Sirisena (who, it might be added, recognizes the late monk as his progenitor) as a conduit for a conversation about the right of the sovereign to give up their own life in order to protect the freedom of the people. What ties these vertical shifts together is the problem of the purpose of death. This is because at each step of verticality the focus of the conversation is aimed at improving accountability (Thajudeen), Rule of Law (Seya Sadewmi), and Good Governance (Ven. Sobitha Thera) through a better deployment of death. Therefore, what is significant to me about the interlocking verticality of death under the *Yahapalana* regime is the way in which it forces us to confront the question not of the good life but rather of the good death.

These conversations about the purpose of death have helped to frame a serious debate about the relationship between liberal political concepts such as sovereignty, democracy, and liberty and the function of death in Sri Lanka. For the Rajapaksa campaign the focus of the necropolitical conversation was his claim to responsibility for Prabhakaran's death in 2009. For example, in the opening paragraph of his manifesto, Rajapaksa gestures to Prabhakaran's death when he says "I knew that I had to eradicate the menace of terrorism when you confidently entrusted that onerous responsibility to me in 2005" (p.9). As his manifesto demonstrates, for Rajapaksa the most significant threat to "our people" was the "scourge of terrorism" (ibid). Interestingly, within this framing Rajapaksa appears to be arguing that the death of Prabhakaran eliminated the last major hurdle to the unfettered enjoyment of the sovereignty of the people. This is evident when he marks that with the "close support" of the people, he was able to "liberat[e] our beloved mother-land and... to usher [in] peace once again" (p.10). He then states that "[i]n 2010, you decided that it was time to develop our country at a rapid pace, and once again, as you did in 2005, you provided me with a mandate to lead our country towards prosperity

and development” (p.10). In these lines, the former President appears to be affirming the relationship between the death of Prabhakaran, democracy, freedom, and sovereignty.³⁶

In contrast, Maithripala Sirisena’s manifesto offers a starkly different meditation on the relationship between death, democracy, freedom, and sovereignty. Within the Sirisena manifesto, Rajapaksa’s excess constitutes a real threat to the liberty of the people in the country. Echoing Mbembe’s commentary on the colony and the plantation in America as necropolitical spaces, Sirisena claims for example that “[i]f this trend [of corruption] continues for another six years our country would become a colony and we would become slaves” (p.8). Unlike the Rajapaksa manifesto, Sirisena clearly attempts to emphasize that the continued rule of the Rajapaksa regime constituted a real threat to the freedom of the people. He also underscores the link between sovereignty, liberty, and democracy when he makes clear how he believes this trend should be arrested. He states, “[w]hether the country would turn towards becoming a haven for peace, prosperity and reconciliation or whether it would fall into the abyss of degeneration, instability and anarchy depends on the way you act today as citizens that love the Motherland” (p.9). In other words, whereas Rajapaksa’s campaign framed the country as being finally free from the antimonies of death, the Sirisena campaign emphasized that the country was heading towards the permanent normalization of the necropolitical state of exception that Mbembe and Agamben argue characterized death camps and colonies. Therefore, analyzing the necropolitical characteristics of the *Yahapalana* regime also lays bare a significant conversation about the relationship between sovereignty, democracy, liberty, and death.

Finally, what insights do these preliminary thoughts towards understanding the necropolitical aftermath of January 8th hold for the attempt to reclaim and reinvigorate the spirit of the *Yahapalana* movement? What remains unaddressed in the public debate about the deferred promise of *Yahapalana* is the question of how to reclaim its fundamental premise of self-sacrifice. In other words, I would argue that without returning to the necropolitical premise of *Yahapalana*, in particular the sacrifice of the self in order to extend the freedom of the people, it would be almost impossible to reclaim the promise of January 8th. In the absence of its necropolitical premise, the promise of the *Yahapalana* movement will unfortunately continue to exist in deferral.

Notes

1 This paper has been percolating in my head for a few months now and the final form that it has taken is the result of critical engagement with a number of extremely smart people. Dr. Cameron Leader-Picone of the Department of English at the Kansas State University (KSU) was the first person to introduce me to Mbembe’s work. He also kindly agreed to supervise my independent study of the work of Michel Foucault in spite of his already busy schedule. The conversations with him about Foucault, Mbembe, and necropolitics animate each line of this essay. I am eternally grateful to him for questions and conversations. Having discussed these issues with Dr. Leader-Picone, I was then fortunate enough to be part of a mini-seminar on biopolitics organized by the Cultural Studies Track of the KSU English Department. Serendipitously, the three mini-seminar discus-

sions coincided with the conversations about the death penalty that were taking place in Sri Lanka, and helped to calibrate the terms of my argument. This argument itself has evolved significantly from the initial draft that I put together a couple of months ago. I am thankful to Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda, Dr. Prabha Manuratne, Vijay Nagaraj, and Hasini Lecamwasam for their fabulous comments on the various drafts of this paper. Finally, I want to also say thank you to Thiagi Piyadasa, Dr. Dinesha Samararatne, Dr. Pradeep Peiris, Shashik Dhanushka, Hasini Lecamwasam, and Mark Schubert for critical conversations that pushed drafts further along at critical points along the way. Any errors however, remain my own.

2 Scholars point out that there appears to be “a widespread but tacit assumption that sovereign statehood is a necessary condition for democracy” (Tansey, 2011, p.1517).

3 Foucault reflects on this further to note that that “in terms of his relationship with the sovereign, the subject is, by rights, neither dead nor alive. From the point of view of life and death, the subject is neutral, and it is thanks to the sovereign that the subject has the right to be alive or, possibly, the right to be dead” (2003, p.240).

4 Mbembe’s primary interest in his essay is to trace “how weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (2003, p.40).

5 In the very first footnote of his article Mbembe invokes two theorists by way of explaining why he begins with the assumption that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (2003, p.11). The two theorists he identifies are Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben.

6 The other investigations handed over to the CID were the murder of *Sunday Leader* Editor Lasanatha Wickramatunge, the disappearance of the journalist, Prageeth Eknaligoda and the Rathupaswela riots - <http://www.ft.lk/2015/02/27/police-hands-over-reports-on-lasantha-killing-thajudeen-death-to-cid/>

7 See clip of announcement here - <http://adaderana.lk/news/29947/rug-by-players-death-was-not-accidental-police>

8 See Wijeratne (2015), <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/51-99919-news-detail-police-protection-to-thajudeens-grave.html>

9 Due to concerns about what may happen to the body a Police guard was posted after the Magistrate ordered the exhumation on the 6th of August. Furthermore, a DNA test was conducted after the exhumation to confirm the identity of the body (Sooriyagoda 2015). For coverage of the exhumation see the *Daily Mirror* News report - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1jKuPuAWuo>

10 See MP Namal Rajapaksa’s speech here – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHnZp0DA-M8> for coverage of what took place in Parliament subsequently see Marasinghe (2015). Strangely enough, the moment in which the reference to Thajudeen’s death disrupts the sittings of the Parliament coincides with a discussion about the impact of the UNHRC Resolution on the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan State.

11 See, for example, Wickramasinghe (2015) <http://www.dailymirror.lk/74405/whodunnit>

12 See, for example, Kishali Pinto-Jayawardene’s (2015) column on the eve of the election <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/150809/columns/wasim-thajudeen-and-a-bloodstained-state-160008.html>

13 See Namal Rajapaksa’s interview with the BBC here - <https://www.facebook.com/BBCSinhala/videos/528987203925699/>. As an aside it might be worth comparing Namal Rajapaksa’s commentary about the desire for Thajudeen’s soul to be at peace, with Sujeewa Senasinghe’s questions about the body of Thajudeen at the point of death. Could they indicate two conflicting orders of necropolitical interest – the dying body and the peace of the soul?

14 See excerpts from the press conference here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAhwSAudQOI>

15 See excerpts from the press conference here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAhwSAudQOI>

16 This can be read as the final futile attempt to envelope death from spectacle which as Foucault reminds us is what marks a key shift in the history of punishment (Foucault, 1979).

17 See news item, <http://newsfirst.lk/english/2015/09/new-details-of-kotadeniyawa-childs-death-revealed/110575>

18 See, <http://adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=32535>

19 See Karunanayake (2015), <http://www.dailymirror.lk/89603/rsons-hospitalised>

20 See, <http://adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=32442>

21 See Dissanayake (2015), <http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=security/kodaya-reveals-gory-details-his-alleged-crime>

22 See, <http://adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=32588>

23 See, <http://adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=32689>

24 See a clip of some of the protests around the country here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3xcp3VJpFs>

25 View some of the key speeches made in Parliament during this debate here - <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPlu2P1nYXwce-CmN-6SUP0fu62Gtpl46q>. Hon. Hirunika Premachandra who read out the motion in the house began her speech by referencing the efforts made by her dead father twenty years previously to use the death penalty to tackle crime and build a just, decent society. The invocation of her dead father can be read as the passing of a necropolitical torch.

26 See, for example, the speech by UPFA MP Hon. Piyal Nishantha de Silva - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Frj8_izoSbQ

27 See, for example, the speech made by the Minister of Justice in Parliament - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOyS6iEe1g4>

28 See, <http://www.pressreader.com/sri-lanka/daily-mirror-sri-lanka/20151010/282033326026070/TextView>

29 See for example the clip of the protestors in this Derana news item - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3xcp3VJpFs>, see also – Jayawardene (2015) <http://www.divaina.com/2015/09/20/feature13.html>

30 See, 2.22 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3xcp3VJpFs>

31 Furthermore, this affirmation of life is also predicated on patriarchal and stereotypical notions about girlhood.

32 See, for example, http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=135327

33 Watch the funeral oration of President Sirisena here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHZDCbld9d>

34 Former General Sarath Fonseka argued in 2010 that he was a person who gave up his life to protect the country but again like President Kumaratunga his sacrifice is to an external rather than an internal force.

35 Although a number of Heads of State have indexed the loss of a loved one in their campaign, this is still not the same as sacrificing the self for the freedom of the nation.

36 It should also be noted that like this endnote, the civilians who were killed during the last stages of the war are relegated to the margins. In that sense, their deaths require consideration within the framework espoused by Agamben and Mbembe on bare life and its function in politics.

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