

Political Parties in the Mirror of the 2024 Presidential Election in Sri Lanka

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Democracy is unthinkable without political parties, a US political scientist once said (Schattschneider 1942). He was, of course, referring to Western liberal democracies, where the centrality of political parties – as mediatory institutions between the government and the governed in giving effect to pluralist competition, representation, popular consent, and contractual obligations between the state and society – is assumed.

However, today, scholars engaged in the study of democracy do not pay much attention to the nature of contemporary political parties and the ways in which they function and impact democracy. Sri Lanka's case demonstrates, as many others do, that democracy and political parties have a close, mutually reinforcing, and uneasy relationship, in the sense that one impacts, and even frames, the other for better or worse.

For example, it is the political space of democratic freedom and pluralism that enables political parties with diverse agendas, ideologies, and social bases to emerge and function freely. In contrast, societies with less democracy can provide only limited breathing space for political parties to survive as institutions of democracy. Conversely, political parties can either enable or prevent democratic space and values, which will, in turn, define the nature and quality of democracy. This troubled mutuality of democracy and political parties has complex dynamics specific to and dependent on the histories, social contradictions, and citizen responses in each society.

The origin of Sri Lankan political parties goes back to the late 1920s. After 1956, political parties proliferated. This process became heightened after the late 1980s. At present, there are 83 registered political parties in Sri Lanka. Yet, the scholarly attention given to political

parties in Sri Lanka remains dismally inadequate.¹ As a direct outcome of the limited scope for citizen political participation and activism associated with parliamentary representative democracy, even public engagement with political parties is often confined to election times. Elections are the time when political parties, including the dormant ones, and voters get activated afresh, revealing trends in party-voter relations and inter-party dynamics, not to mention the dark underbelly of party politics. The re-activation of party-voter contacts and interactions also produces valuable evidence to critically evaluate the behaviour of political parties as institutionalised agencies of democracy.

The 2024 presidential election is one such moment. It has already begun to disclose the nature of political parties and their leaders, and how political parties function in Sri Lanka's democracy. Importantly, the election season also reveals the bright as well as dark sides of the Sri Lankan version of representative democracy.

This essay briefly examines the evolving nature of political parties and inter-party dynamics in the face of competition for political power as revealed in the context of the ongoing presidential election campaign. It also probes the possible effects of the changing electoral behaviour of political parties on democracy in Sri Lanka.

Candidates of alliances, not of political parties

The displacement of political parties by alliances as the institutional home of presidential candidates is a trend that has re-emerged in 2024 with much vigour.

¹ There are only three book-length studies on political parties in Sri Lanka. They are Woodward, C. A. (1969). *The Growth of a Party System in Ceylon*. Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University Press; Shastri, Amita, and Jayadeva Uyangoda. (2018). *Political Parties in Sri Lanka: Change and Continuity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; and Peiris, Pradeep. (2022). *Catch-All Parties and Party-Voter Nexus in Sri Lanka*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

The three main candidates – Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sajith Premadasa, and Anura Kumara Disanayake – are candidates of political alliances, and not of the specific parties with which they are otherwise identified. Ranil Wickremesinghe, despite being the leader of the United National Party (UNP), has entered the presidential race as an independent candidate. He has dropped the ‘elephant’ electoral symbol, a well-known party symbol for decades, for the ‘gas cylinder’, provoking many sarcastic memes and cartoons. Sajith Premadasa, leader of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), contests the election as the representative of a collective comprising the SJB, several individual politicians who have abandoned their former party identities due to political disagreements, and a few other parties, most of which are electorally weak minor parties or groups. Anura Kumara Disanayake is the candidate of the Jathika Jana Balawegaya or National People’s Power (NPP), a political movement under the shadow control of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a party with a ‘radical’ history. The NPP is a unified alliance of several political collectives and is built around and under the leadership of the JVP. The NPP is quite different from the alliances that Wickremesinghe and Premadasa have forged to contest the presidential election. Two main differences can be easily identified. The NPP is a closed alliance with restricted entry to ensure that its public image as a party with ethical principles is not harmed. It offers its own ‘pro-people’ vision for a ‘system change’ in the cultures and practices of politics and governance. Another specificity of the NPP is that it is not an alliance of parties based on ethnicity.

Coalition or alliance politics is not new in Sri Lanka. Almost all post-independence governments have been formed either by a pre-election or a post-election coalition, or a combination of both. While the purpose of all such coalitions is to win elections and capture political power by forming a government, they can also be formed under the canopy of specific ideological commitments. For example, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike ended nearly two decades of UNP rule in 1956 by forming the broad Sinhala Buddhist nationalist coalition of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, with a strongly ethno-nationalist ideological agenda and identity. It was a coalition that brought together several political parties as well as social and ideological groupings with the aim of winning political power. Most of the ruling and non-ruling coalitions formed since then have had a unifying ideological programme to hold the coalition partners together through a shared ideological identity. Such ideologically centripetal features not only bind the coalition partners together, but also shape the policy directions of the government once the coalition wins

an election. As we will see, during this election, that role of ideology in forming pre-election coalitions and defining the policies of post-election coalition regimes has been drastically altered, giving primacy to pragmatic considerations.

Closely linked to the decline of ideology in party politics in Sri Lanka during the current presidential election is the waning of the political role of religion in electoral mobilisation. Religion has been at the centre of Sinhala nationalist electoral politics since 1956, frequently re-emerging at elections. At the presidential election of 2019 and the parliamentary election of 2020, the Rajapaksa-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna’s (SLPP) election campaign featured a strong element of Islamophobia, weaponising the deep sense of insecurity among Sinhala Buddhists that was caused by the sudden rise of Islamic militancy in Sri Lanka. At the presidential election, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, SLPP’s presidential candidate, was projected as the saviour of Sri Lankan Buddhists and Buddhism under threat. Not surprisingly, the SLPP and its well-oiled ideological propaganda machinery succeeded in generating a massive electoral wave among Sinhala Buddhist voters, securing easy victories at both presidential and parliamentary elections. It is against this backdrop that the absence of religion or religion-based identity politics in the current presidential election campaign has become noticeable.

Coalitions of utility value

If one carefully examines the configuration of the three main electoral alliances formed in 2024, one can notice that only the NPP seems to have formed its alliance with some unstated ideological orientation which may be described as ‘progressive populism’. As the NPP’s policy document issued for the presidential election suggests, the coalition gives primacy to a broad vision for transforming the economy, politics, and society without an ideological labelling. The centripetal force that binds together the NPP alliance partners and even defines its appeal to the voters seems to be its ‘vision for change’, rather than any particular ideological commitment of a radical kind. Moreover, the NPP does not offer an ideologically defined short-term policy commitment for economic recovery or an ideologically demarcated approach to address the national question/ethnic conflict within the parameters of a programme which will also disclose its own ideological commitments.

Yet, all its partners – political parties, youth organisations, women’s groups, and civil society groups – seem to claim a strong commitment to changing the current political culture of the country by forming

a government free of corruption and committed to a new, people-friendly version of good governance. More importantly, the NPP does not have individuals as alliance partners. Rather, it is an alliance of non-elite political and social groups, some of whom may have, in the past, stood for 'radical' or 'progressive' social and political change. They are all now committed to a programme of transformation in governance, seeking to change the dominant political culture of the country and build a new one through reforms. In other words, it is a reformist social coalition built on a vision-based programme of policy rather than a distinct political or social ideology. Interestingly, the JVP, the NPP's 'mother party', has had a strong ideological identity, which is a mixture of socialism and Sinhala nationalism, conceptually packaged as 'patriotism.' In comparison, the NPP comes closer to being a post-ideological political formation.

In contrast, Wickremesinghe and Premadasa are heading two election alliances of parties as well as individual politicians. The latter have extended their support to Wickremesinghe or Premadasa driven mainly by the utilitarian expectations of short-term political gains. In these two coalitions too, ideology plays no role to cement the unity of the coalition partners. They are essentially functional, or pragmatic, coalitions of parties and individuals desperate to win the election or save their political careers. This raises four interesting questions: (a) Has ideology-driven coalition politics come to an end in Sri Lanka? (b) Is the age of ideology over in Sri Lanka's party politics as well? (c) If so, what has replaced ideology as a motivation for joining pre-election coalitions? Is it the allure of office with long-term material benefits or pecuniary gains in both immediate and post-election situations? (d) Has Sri Lanka's electoral politics begun to turn secular, marking the irrelevance of ethno-religious ideologies and religio-identity politics to win elections?

Ranil Wickremesinghe's coalition move is a wholly novel experiment. Therefore, it also deserves close attention. A key component of Wickremesinghe's presidential election strategy coincides with the unstoppable decline of the UNP as a political party of which he has been the leader for three decades. Decline is a trend that began some time ago for the UNP. It worsened at the parliamentary election of 2020. The UNP, Sri Lanka's 'Grand Old Party', could not win a single constituency seat under Wickremesinghe's leadership. Wickremesinghe came to parliament after 2020 as the UNP's sole lawmaker through the mechanism of 'national seats', a unique feature of Sri Lanka's system of proportional representation. Since the UNP as a political party has not regrouped to

regain its capacity to win elections, an unusual 'non-party' coalition was formed under Wickremesinghe's leadership, so that he could contest the election as an 'independent candidate.' The core of his non-party coalition, which incidentally has no name, is made up of nearly one hundred members of parliament (MPs) who deserted the SLPP controlled by the Rajapaksa family. What does this non-party identity of Wickremesinghe's makeshift coalition suggest about the UNP as a political party?

Wickremesinghe's coalition calculation is, at one level, not very complex because of the transparency of its utilitarian goals. Manipulation and surprises seem to be a major aspect of his strategic moves in politics and have been for a long time. Although Wickremesinghe is a master of unrivalled political manipulation, it is also his weakness as the leader of a once formidable party which had a mass voter base. The continuing downward trend of the UNP's political fortunes under Wickremesinghe's leadership suggests that, even in an illiberal patronage democracy, political parties thrive not by the leader's skills in manipulation and subterfuge alone. Similarly, in a multi-party political system in which two or three dominant parties compete with each other for votes on a national scale, grassroots organisation and mobilisation are crucially important to win elections by open democratic means. Under Wickremesinghe's leadership since 1994, the UNP has been losing its rural voter constituencies. Wickremesinghe is not a charismatic political leader with a mass following either. The party's split in 2020 and the emergence of the SJB as a breakaway party irreparably weakened the UNP's mass voter base. No longer a party with a grassroots membership or organisational networks, the UNP has evolved into a party of office bearers, led by an unrepentantly elitist politician with an old-school knack for political manoeuvre.

After the formation of the SJB, the UNP has become so weak organisationally that it is no longer able to deliver votes to make its leader a winner. Therefore, what Wickremesinghe has done is utilise his presidential authority and resources to negotiate with the SLPP and its parliamentarians to exchange their vote bases for ensuring the security of their political futures or, as his opponents suggest, material gains. This background enables us to make some sense of Wickremesinghe's sudden initiative to form the so-called non-party alliance. What Wickremesinghe has formed for the presidential election is not a coalition of political parties, but a personalised union of political interests. It is in fact a utilitarian or, as opponents might call it, 'unprincipled' coalition of individual politicians with politicised personal agendas.

Thus, the uniqueness of the Wickremesinghe-led non-party alliance lies in the fact that it is a career-saving grand coalition of individual politicians with insecure and uncertain political futures. It is the partyless character of Wickremesinghe's coalition that might have worrying consequences for Sri Lanka's democracy. The peculiarity of this non-party coalition is that it was formed by breaking up a major political party, the SLPP. In order to ensure his electoral victory, Wickremesinghe has also been attempting to break up the SJB in the run up to the presidential election. These developments sound alarm bells for the future of Sri Lanka's multi-party democracy. The question then is: Will a non-party post-democracy or one-party democracy replace Sri Lanka's existing multi-party democracy?

Like Wickremesinghe, Sajith Premadasa too has invited various individual political figures and parties to join him to improve his winning chances. However, unlike Wickremesinghe who only has one seat in the current parliament, Premadasa enjoys the support of 50-odd MPs elected under the SJB. In addition, many former SLPP members, individually and not as coherent groups with party identities, have joined the SJB-led coalition, the Samagi Jana Sandhanaya (SJS, United People's Alliance), extending support for Premadasa's presidential candidacy. Immediate political survival and the allure of future political office, rather than a clear ideology or policy, are obviously the primary reason that binds Premadasa with his individual coalition colleagues coming from other parties, particularly the SLPP which has been a strongly ideological party until quite recently.

Inter-party rivalry

The dynamics of intense animosity between the NPP and SJB, the two leading coalition formations at present, warrant some attention. The tension between the two coalitions came to be expressed even before the presidential election campaign officially began. A key reason for that enmity appears to be rooted in the fact that both camps are competing to get the support of more or less similar voter constituencies. Among these are (a) a significantly large number of voters who backed the SLPP and Rajapaksa camp in 2019 and then deserted the SLPP *en masse* in 2022; and (b) youth voters. These voters do not have stable party loyalties and, therefore, they are what some pollsters have been calling 'undecided voters'. They are also disillusioned with the traditional parties and their political leaderships. As a result of the absence of strong ideological differences and the presence of broad similarities between the reform appeals advanced by the

two sides – fight against corruption, people-friendly economic policies and governance, new political culture, and 'system change' of a sort – the SJB and the NPP seem to have been compelled to demonise the adversary. Mutual recrimination and hurtful attacks, rather than substantive policy debates, have come to dominate their exchanges during the election campaign. How will the voters respond to this enmity between the two main opposition camps? How will it impact the outcome of the presidential election? Will it produce for both sides a mutually hurting political stalemate?

Meanwhile, Wickremesinghe's attempts to invite the SJB to a coalition with the UNP and, simultaneously, the poaching of individual SJB MPs to his non-party coalition warrants an interpretation from his position too. Being the leader of Sri Lanka's political right wing, he has to be acutely aware of the fact that the political domination which his social class has been able to maintain for nearly a century is in a deep, and historic, crisis. The forthcoming election outcome will decide the political fate of that class. The prospects do not seem to be too good. The crisis-ridden UNP alone cannot avert the impending calamity. It calls for rebuilding the UNP with either an alliance with the SJB or bringing into the UNP as many SJB MPs as permissible; MPs who are acceptable to Wickremesinghe's own social class. He has already chosen quite a few from the SLPP who seem to have shifted their political and personal loyalties without much moral qualms. This project of rebuilding the decaying UNP as the authentic party of Sri Lanka's right-wing elite is also recognition by Wickremesinghe of the real possibility of an acute polarisation of Sri Lankan politics along a class-based elite and non-elite divide, with or without an NPP victory.

Political parties in decline?

These developments unfolding in the run-up to the presidential election of 2024 raise some interesting questions about the nature of Sri Lankan political parties, the loyalty of voters as well as party functionaries to the party and its leader, the allegiance of MPs to the party and its leadership, and the peculiar challenges that the election process brings to political parties. One trend that is revealed in our discussion on the making of coalitions in the run-up to the presidential election is the sheer flexibility, unpredictability, and uncertainty of the loyalty and allegiance to the party leadership among MPs and functionaries attached to some leading parties. This is not a new trend. It has come back to reconfirm the continuing transformation of the venerable idea of party loyalty. In other words, the political bonds, such as ideology and policy, that had in the past cemented

the unity among party functionaries and cadres to form a unified electoral force called the party, have been replaced by the commitment to advancing or protecting one's own individual interests. In contemporary party politics among the mainstream political parties – UNP, Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), SLPP, and, to a limited degree, SJB – bonds with the party as well as the leader have become unstable and easily alterable. Conscience, or ideology, is not an influential factor to determine political allegiance. What assumes primacy are the personal interests and individual agendas, evaluated in terms of political and pecuniary benefits, of the MPs and functionaries. Incidentally, the two leaders who have promoted and effectively weaponised this trend are former president Mahinda Rajapaksa and current president Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The decline of party loyalty has penetrated politics at the grassroots levels too. The SLFP, the UNP, and the SLPP embody this trend of traditional political parties losing the loyalty of mass voter constituencies. Each party has its own self-made reasons for the decline of locally rooted foundations and voter bases. For the SLFP, the shift of party leadership to former president Maithripala Sirisena in 2015 marked the beginning of the weakening of the party's appeal to local-level constituencies. Sirisena's coalition alliance with the UNP, the formation of the SLPP by Mahinda Rajapaksa, the weaponising of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology for electoral gains by the SLPP, and the lack of commitment by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe to rebuild the grassroots foundations of their respective parties stand out as key reasons for the rapid erosion of the social bases of the UNP and the SLFP. Ironically, the loss of mass appeal of the SLPP was an outcome of its election victories in 2019 and 2020 as well as the arrogance of power demonstrated by its leaders, ministers, MPs, and local level party functionaries. Corruption, abuse of political power and ineffective governance at the time of a severe economic crisis after 2020 led to irreparable erosion of the loyalty of the SLPP's mass constituencies. It is not for nothing that the primary target of the citizens' anger expressed during the *Aragalaya* in 2022 was the SLPP, its government, its MPs and ministers, and the authoritarian politics it promoted. Meanwhile, the SLPP's existential crisis has at present been exacerbated by Wickremesinghe when he engineered a mass defection of its MPs to support his presidential candidacy between late July and early August this year.

The SJB, the core party of the SJS, seems to have succeeded in maintaining its unity, resisting the repeated pressure on its leadership to join the UNP after

Wickremesinghe became the president with the backing of the SLPP's parliamentary group. Wickremesinghe's encroachment strategy has not been very successful in relation to the SJB. With the fragmentation of the SLPP, SLFP and UNP, the SJB stands out as the only major political party with some measure of internal cohesion and organisational unity, despite expressions of internal dissent. The forthcoming presidential election will be a crucial moment for the SJB and the alliance it leads, either to emerge as the new ruling party or to remain as the main opposition party. The SJB too is a non-ideological party, sometimes projected by its leader as a pro-poor party with a social democratic, social market, futuristic, and techno-modernist vision. Interestingly, the SJB as well as the NPP share an unintended resemblance as post-ideological political 'parties'. In both, vision (*dekma*) seems to have replaced ideology.

These developments have impacted voter behaviour as well as election outcomes. The expansion of the number of so-called floating voters and their critical role in shaping the election results are direct outcomes of the increase in 'non-party' voters. There is in fact a symbiotic relationship between the weakening of the grassroots popular social roots of political parties and the expansion of non-party voters. Interestingly, the increase in the number of non-party voters does not indicate voter apathy about democracy. Rather, it represents a sort of post-modern trend in democratic politics – voter incredulity towards political parties and ideologies.

Finally, political parties in Sri Lanka, in Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim communities alike, have entered a phase of loss of social trust and legitimacy as institutions of democracy and agents of democratic representation. In several surveys on the trust in political institutions, political parties have emerged as one of the least trusted public institutions. For example, as revealed in the 'State of Democracy in South Asia' survey conducted by the Social Scientists' Association in 2017, Sri Lankans placed political parties as the least trusted democratic institution in the country; only 31% said they trust them (Shastri *et al.* 2017). According to a survey conducted as recently as March 2024 by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, public trust in political parties among the Sinhala community has gone down dramatically to 13.1%. Interestingly, trust in political parties is much higher among Sri Lanka's ethnic minorities: the figures are 42.9%, 42.9%, and 31.2% among the North and East Tamil, the Malaiyaha (Hill-Country) Tamil, and the Muslim communities respectively (Center for Policy Alternatives – Social Indicator 2024). The figures above have serious implications for SJB and NPP too, which

focus primarily on the Sinhala community. Severe democratic deficits in the party system as a whole and in individual parties in general are a primary reason for the loss of public trust in political parties.

Have parties and politics changed?

The political outcomes of the presidential election and the subsequent parliamentary and local government elections will disclose what new changes have taken shape in the political party system, party-voter relations, and the culture of electoral politics. Students of trends in Sri Lanka's democracy and processes of political transformation should particularly be watchful to find answers to questions such as:

- To what extent have established political parties addressed the question of severe loss of public trust in political parties and party leaderships?
- Will voter behaviour as reflected in electoral outcomes illuminate any shifts in the place occupied by the three conventionally leading parties – SLFP, SLPP and UNP – in the party system of Sri Lanka? Concurrently, will the NPP, along with the SJB, emerge as the two new main parties dominating the political landscape?
- To what extent are the citizens' critique of the dominant political culture and their desire for a 'system change' reflected in the electoral process and outcomes?
- Will the outcome of the presidential election mark a major shift in the social/class nature of

who governs the country? What kind of tension will such a shift bring about in the relationship between new and old political classes, and with what consequences?

- Will the present trend of de-ideologisation of political parties be a lasting feature of Sri Lanka's party politics?
- Will the new trend of non-party electoral politics be a precursor to a non-party or one-party democracy in Sri Lanka?

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