

Sri Lanka Presidential Election: From Citizens' Protests to Regime Change

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The election of Anura Kumara Disanayake as Sri Lanka's president on 21 September is an event of historic significance for the country (*The Daily Star* 2024). When he was sworn in an unusually simple ceremony at the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo on 23 September (Office of the Chief of Defence Staff 2024), the symbolism of those who were present had one unmistakable message. The new president is an ordinary citizen in social terms with no pretensions to public display of power, taste, wealth or grandeur. In fact, he embodies the zeitgeist of the new social forces that have come forward together under his leadership to redefine, from below and the perspective of the ruled, the idea of political power. Presidential simplicity is also symbolic of what differentiates the new regime from the habits and cultures of the political elites who held power since Sri Lanka's independence from colonial rule in 1948.

The victory of Disanayake and National People's Power (NPP) alliance promises a fresh phase of political change in Sri Lanka. NPP's vision and policy statement are direct responses to the multiple crises and challenges Sri Lanka has been experiencing in the spheres of economy, society, governance and politics. The NPP also proposes new approaches to key areas of public policy. It places heavy emphasis on ending corruption, political cronyism, public sector waste, and haphazard policymaking. Correcting the neglect of the poor and the vulnerable social groups in policy interventions to manage the economic crisis has a special place in the NPP's agenda for inaugurating what it calls a "fresh renaissance."

NPP and its history

NPP as a political movement has some unique characteristics. It is a relatively new political movement that has remained in the margins of electoral politics for several years. Its victory at the presidential election has immediately sent shockwaves among Sri Lanka's dominant political and social elites. Even the international press refers to Disanayake as a Marxist, socialist, leftist, and radical. These are labels that come from the early political history of Disanayake and the political party he belonged to for about three decades since the 1990s.

NPP is an offshoot of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People's Liberation Front), formed in 1965 as an underground revolutionary movement, committed to building socialism. That was the time when peasant-armed struggles erupted in India and East Pakistan. Like its other South Asian counterparts, the JVP was influenced by Marxism and Maoism. The JVP launched two armed uprisings, one in 1971 and the second in 1987-89, to capture state power. Both failed and the JVP's human cost at defeat was very high on both occasions.

In the aftermath of the second defeat, a new generation of JVP leaders took initiatives to transform the JVP into a parliamentary party, abandoning the path of armed struggle. Anura Kumara Disanayake was among this new generation of reformist young leaders who embraced parliamentary democracy. The NPP was formed in 2019 as a socially broad-based and ideologically non-dogmatic front of the JVP.

Winning the presidential election is also the first major success for the NPP. At the 2019 presidential election, Disanayake could obtain only a little over three percent of votes. NPP won only three seats in parliament at the 2020 parliamentary election.

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From being a small party in the opposition for years, how could the NPP succeed to win a sharply contested presidential election? The answer lies partly in two recent developments. The exacerbation of Sri Lanka's economic, social and political crisis since 2021 is the first. The second is the paradigm shift in politics facilitated by the citizens' protest movement in April-August 2022.

There is also a third factor specific to the NPP. At a time when Sri Lanka's democracy and the entire system of governance were crumbling amid widespread political and bureaucratic corruption, the NPP and Dissanayake spearheaded a massive anti-corruption campaign for clean and principled politics.

Triple crisis

The presidential election that saw shifting of political power from the elites to a candidate of the non-elite social forces also had a favourable political context. A protracted triple crisis in the economic, social and political spheres had defined the specificity of that backdrop.

The economic crisis exploded in the form of a debt crisis in 2020-21, pushing Sri Lanka into economic bankruptcy. The government's crisis management strategy, worked out in partnership with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), stabilised the country's economy to some extent, but with a massive social cost. The economic recovery strategy and its austerity programme, worked out jointly by the IMF and the Sri Lankan government, placed most of its burden on the people through a twin policy of higher taxation and the drastic reduction of government spending, particular in the social sector.

The social crisis, which has been building since the COVID19 pandemic in 2020-21, was a direct outcome of the economic crisis and crisis management policies of the government. Between 2020 and 2024, Sri Lanka was devastated by two waves of poverty. During the first one, the poor became poorer. During the second one, the middle classes became poor. This is a process that the Sri Lankan government and its IMF partners chose to ignore. They also probably thought that the spread of poverty was an unavoidable social cost of economic recovery.

Particularly during the past two years under former president Ranil Wickremesinghe, there was an official insensitivity to the widespread and increasing social suffering among the Sri Lankan citizens. This seems to have given rise to a groundswell of social discontent. People were particularly angry because they were

direct victims of the debt crisis and also of the IMF-led solution to the crisis. The radical outcome of the presidential election is a direct political expression of this widespread social discontent and anger. Sri Lankan voters have not only refused to endorse the blatantly neoliberal economic and social policies of the former president, they have also given him an astonishingly low rating, with just 17 percent of total votes.

Political crisis

The immediate political crisis that prepared the ground for the NPP to emerge as the leading oppositional political force has been in the making since 2022. Its most dramatic manifestation was the citizens' protest movement called the *Aragalaya* during April-August 2022. A key point that the *Aragalaya* highlighted is the total erosion of public trust in the dominant political class of the elites as well as the political parties they have led, and even the parliament they have dominated. Thus, the political crisis was also a crisis of governance, democracy and democratic institutions.

The slogan of "system change" advanced by the protesters gave expression to a deeply held belief among the citizens that not piecemeal reforms but a systemic transformation could reverse the continuing democratic decay. The notion of "system change" embodied three expectations of radical reform. A change in the social/class character of who governs was the first. The second entailed the question of on whose behalf the rulers should rule—on behalf of a small minority of economic and social elites or the vast majority of the people. The third expectation emphasised the ethical/normative framework of governing so that the old, corrupt political culture could not be built anew.

However, in the absence of a political party or an organisation to give institutionalised leadership, the protest movement could not ensure an immediate regime change. Its success could not go beyond forcing the then president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country and resign from office. Even the NPP, which was participating in the *Aragalaya*, did not possess enough parliamentary strength to effect an immediate political change. With just three MPs, the NPP could not make claims to power within the framework of the Constitution. The absence of a political agency to take the protest movement to a higher level enabled Ranil Wickremesinghe, the succeeding president, to launch a sort of counter-revolution and restore the old order.

Meanwhile, it is the continuing spirit of the *Aragalaya* that preserved the social and political space for the NPP to take the struggle for political change through

elections. The local government election was scheduled for March 2023. The NPP launched a well-organised election campaign attracting a massive wave of public support. Sensing an easy victory for the NPP, then president Wickremesinghe did what an autocratic ruler would do with no ethical concerns. He forced the Election Commission to postpone the local government election indefinitely on the pretext that the national treasury faced with the economic crisis did not have money to fund an election.

Although subverted by the president, the local government election campaign was the moment for the NPP to re-emerge as a formidable electoral force. In retrospect, it was that moment that really prepared the NPP for the bigger fight 18 months later.

Regime change

Anura Kumara Disanayake's victory is not just an election of a new president or bringing a new political party into power. It is not a mere change of government either. It is a regime change in a wider sense. It marks the gaining of political power by a political movement representing the subordinate social classes through democratic means. It also inaugurates a new phase of democratic politics in which the political power of the old class of elites has come under threat. In other words, Disanayake's victory can be read as a major step forward in the democratic revolution that the Sri Lankan citizens launched in 2022 in the form of the *Aragalaya* protest movement.

Thus, the NPP-led regime change also embodies the popular wish for a clean break from the past and a new beginning in Sri Lankan politics.

Meanwhile, the defeated class of elites will certainly regroup and try to come back by undermining the new government with the political and other means available to them. Yet, unless thoroughly reformed, no group of Sri Lankan elites would regain the people's trust to win a free and fair election.

There are a few simple lessons the Sri Lankan elites should learn from the trouncing they got from the voters, the majority of whom are poor and middle-class citizens. They should recognise, even belatedly, the simple fact that the social bases of political power have effectively shifted away from them. They should also admit that both the economic crisis, which their wrong policies spawned, and their recent policies of crisis management have subjected a vast majority of the citizens to new waves of economic and social deprivation. Ultimately, they had their day of judgement on 21 September.

President Disanayake has now dissolved Sri Lanka's parliament (*Reuters* 2024). Parliamentary elections are scheduled for 14 November. The new challenge for the new president is to secure a comfortable majority in the 225-member legislature. Meanwhile, it is the outcome of the parliamentary election that will better reflect the new configurations of political forces and the dimensions of the new balance of power. It will certainly be the moment for a renewed battle between the weakened old order and the energised new.

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