

# System Stability Not Change: The NPP Abandons Populism for Liberal Democracy

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Judging by its record over the past six months, the National People's Power (NPP) government arguably stands as one of the more committed liberal democratic regimes in Sri Lanka's recent memory. Thus far, there has not been any serious allegation of corruption or abuse of office against the NPP parliamentarians. Through its words and actions over the past six months, the NPP government has shown its commitment to strengthening the institutions for a functioning liberal democracy. Above all, by slashing extravagant spending as a government, as well as by individual ministers and parliamentarians, the NPP has introduced a new political culture to the country, dominantly defined by 'decency'.

## Preserving the old political system with a better political culture?

It is not difficult to figure out that the NPP government is pursuing a regime model known as liberal democracy: a government built on democratic institutions and processes to ensure accountability and transparency, where popular participation is limited to voting in elections. Despite its critical positions while in the opposition, the government does not seem to wish to depart from the neoliberal economic path of its predecessors. It has stuck to the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, perhaps even more faithfully than the Ranil Wickremesinghe government, for "economic recovery".

In addition, the semiotics of the NPP leadership demonstrate a concerted effort to communicate commitment to the traditions and cultural ethos of the Sinhala Buddhist community. It won't be surprising if some are confused as to whether the rule of the Rajapaksas

endures on this count: an announcement was recently made of Indian assistance to install solar panels across 5000 Buddhist religious sites, and the special exposition of the Sacred Tooth Relic for the public has only just concluded (President's Media Division 2025).

It is therefore apparent that the government's priority is consolidation of political power by not making a radical departure from the political conservatism of its predecessors, accompanied by a stabilisation of the economy by any means. Reflecting on the government's first hundred days of rule, *Polity* succinctly summarised the NPP's policy with "three C's": continuity, caution, and conservatism (Editorial 2025: 4).

However, is this what the people who voted for the NPP expect of it in government? A continuation of the same political system nurtured by the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) since the 1950s, upgraded to a more decent package? In other words, continuity of the liberal democratic model established by the Soulbury Constitution (subsequently weakened by the First and Second Republican Constitutions), but with a seemingly improved political culture: eradicating corruption among the political and bureaucratic elite, strengthening democratic institutions by ensuring their autonomy, and implementing a more humane version of IMF austerity.

On the surface, this may sound like 'a good deal'. For those who believe the rulers of the country over the past several decades—an undisciplined, greedy, and more seriously stupid, lot—are solely responsible for its downfall, what the NPP is currently doing may be welcome. However, what is needed and what the NPP promised was "system change", not just a change of political culture. It is possible that they may not have

entirely given up on achieving the promised “system change”. Therefore, at a moment when the NPP marks six months since its general election triumph, it is important to remind the government of the historic responsibility of its mandate from the people.

### The NPP’s mandate: a refresher

The 2024 electoral victory of the NPP defied conventional wisdom of electoral politics by winning 159 seats as a single political force under the proportional representation system. It cannot be compared to any previous outcome in the post-independence electoral history of Sri Lanka. People rejected old politics unambiguously, when they elected an untested party with such a landslide. But what about the old political system or the old political culture? Political systems and political culture are inextricably connected, but qualitatively different things. A ‘political system’ is constituted by a set of formal institutions, structures, and processes through which a country is governed—such as its government branches, laws, and electoral systems. In contrast, a ‘political culture’ encompasses the beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms that shape how people perceive and engage with politics and authority within that system. Both are interconnected, each informing and influencing the operation of the other.

Considering the tectonic shift in electoral politics that the NPP win signalled, what did people expect—explicitly and implicitly—from the NPP? To answer this, we must reflect on who voted for the NPP and on what grounds.

### The populism of the NPP

The NPP’s victory was the logical culmination of the 2022 popular uprising—the *Aragalaya/Porattam/Struggle*. It rode the populist tide of the *Aragalaya* with sophistication, promising a 180-degree turn in how things were done. A brief foray into populist politics is necessary here to understand the scope of the NPP’s historic responsibility at this moment.

Today, the term ‘populism’ is widely articulated in anti-democratic terms. However, theoretically, populism is fundamentally juxtaposed with liberal democracy but not with democracy *per se* (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Populist politicians and movements appeal to civic discontent with the current state of democracy, promising to restore power to the people and to force the political system to address social demands (Stavrakakis *et al.* 2016). Ever widening income disparities, high cost of living, pervasive unemployment, rampant corruption, unaccountable and non-responsive government, and

widespread concerns that public opinion is overlooked by the ruling classes, generally contribute to this discontent with liberal democratic regimes.

In the backdrop of such public disenchantment, populist leaders mobilise masses against the rule of elites and oligarchs, to instate *popular sovereignty*. Populists are therefore inherently anti-establishment, not only working outside of democratic institutions, but also against those institutions hegemonised by the ruling elites. Furthermore, populist leaders prefer to connect with people directly, without any mediation of democratic institutions or processes.

Populist politics is not new to Sri Lanka. For example, the politics of the Rajapaksa brothers—Mahinda from 2005 to 2015 and Gotabaya from 2019 to 2022—were essentially populist projects. Some may even call S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, J. R. Jayewardene, and R. Premadasa as populist leaders. These political projects resembled a strand of ‘right-wing populism’ in terms of their discursive logic and authoritarian aspirations. “Right-wing populism involves the revolt of ‘the people’ against the elite *and an underclass or scapegoat subpopulation*, ‘the people’ viewing the elite and underclass/scapegoat as in association” (Morlock and Narita 2018: 137; emphasis in the original).

The populism of the Rajapaksa brothers deployed a political ideology that combined Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and an anti-elite and anti-Western rhetoric with a strong emphasis on traditional values, often portraying “the people” as threatened by liberal elites and Tamil and Muslim extremists. Employing various semantic tools, both brothers established a strong leader persona and desire for political representation that stretched beyond the institutions and processes of representative democracy. By dominating nationalist and patriotic discourses, the Rajapaksas successfully managed to garner cross-class support by unifying the old elites, new middle classes, peasants, and urban poor. Like other authoritarian populist leaders, the Rajapaksas further strengthened the very same oppressive and exploitative economic and political structures that they claimed to oppose.

One is reminded at this point of Stuart Hall’s illuminating analysis of Thatcherism:

Populism is operating on genuine contradictions, and it has a rational and material core. Its success and effectiveness does not lie in its capacity to dupe unsuspecting folk but in the way it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions—and yet is able to represent them within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the Right. (1979: 20)

The populist politics that brought the NPP to power was fundamentally different, that is, diametrically opposed to the politics of the Rajapaksas or even of other previous populist leaders. It emerged against the old political classes and the system and shaped the dominant worldview among Sri Lankans since the 2022 uprising. The explosion of public anger in March-April 2022 embodied the collective indignation against political elites and their endemic corruption and embezzlement, misuse of public office, human rights abuses, and colossal mismanagement of the country. Farmers' associations, trade unions, student unions, victims of the Easter Sunday bombings, communities seeking justice for the victims of the war, and the urban poor and middle classes joined the protest under a common banner: 'Gota Go!'. Those who despised the bankrupt political class which degraded and drained this country over several decades, from the Left as well as from the Right, subscribed to the populist campaign which was clearly anti-establishment and anti-elitist, but peaceful and pluralist. People decided to settle their resentment with the political elites on the streets instead of the polling booth as they had no faith in the system. During the whole period of street protests, they refused to engage with any political party or even with mainstream civil society organisations.

The resignation of the Rajapaksas from their positions and appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe as the president killed the populist street protests almost instantly. The neoliberalists among the protesters dumped the struggle like hot potatoes; and rejoined the very same political system, only minus the Rajapaksas. However, the progressive elements of the *Aragalaya* continued their struggle for 'system change'. This struggle was characterised by a politics that is not only anti-elitist and anti-establishment but also advocated greater grassroots involvement in politics, strong redistributive policies, and a critique of neoliberalism. Therefore, the post-Gota-Go phase of the *Aragalaya* was a progressive variant of populism. As Mouffe defines it, "Left populism is a political strategy that aims at constructing the people as a collective political subject capable of reconfiguring the existing order in a progressive direction" (2018: 25).

Following Ranil Wickremesinghe's violent crackdown on the Galle Face protest site, the NPP emerged to represent and continue the aspirations of the *Aragalaya*. Therefore, contrary to the views of some (for e.g., Perera 2023), the NPP did not mobilise left-populism, but rather channelled the aspirations of the *Aragalaya*, that towards the latter phase was emblematic of left populist politics. Irrespective of whether it was political

expediency or genuine principle, the NPP's commitment to the ideals of left populism was perhaps the only way to ensure a system change needed to democratise the Sri Lankan polity.

### Realising the promises of populist politics

Therefore, it is somewhat uncomfortable to witness the NPP leadership's enthusiasm in being seen as the protectors of liberal democracy and the conservative ethos that old political elites exploited to retain their grip on power. The populism of the NPP was a response to a political culture similar to what Jacques Ranciere (1999) called 'postdemocracy', i.e., the reduction of democracy to its procedural aspect, devoid of the element of contestation and disruption that constitutes its substantive core. As Stavrakakis *et al.* explain,

This is an impoverished figure of liberal democracy that has emerged across a variety of constitutional regimes... under the impact of neoliberal hegemony and the gradual dissolution of ideological differences between mainstream parties alternating in power. A postdemocratic regime sticks to the formal shell of liberal and democratic institutions. Popular participation in party politics, mass mobilizations, trade union practices, and so on is scarce and in chronic decline. Sovereign power slips into the hands of corporate and political elites, as in nondemocratic polities. Material and political inequalities rise, to the detriment of ordinary working people, favoring large corporations, rich oligarchs, and leading establishment politicians. (2016: 56)

Therefore, the historic role of the NPP at this moment is to give political leadership to a "system change" that installs popular power by instituting a radical variant of democracy; a system that sees conflict and dissent as inherent and vital to democracy; recognises multiple identities, demands and struggles; challenges neoliberalism; calls for redistribution of power; encourages direct participation; and radicalises democracy by extending it to the economic, cultural, and social realms. The mastery the NPP exhibited in mustering the media, especially social media, to castigate the Rajapaksas and their cronies should now be channelled to propagate a discourse that collates the discontent and diverse demands of 'the people', 'radical democracy,' and 'the NPP'.

However, I do not see the NPP making any serious effort to this end. Have they abandoned pursuing reforms painful to the elite and the ruling class, in favour of consolidating their fortuitous rise to power through an efficient operationalisation of liberal representative democracy? The foundation of progressive politics should be principle, not expediency. It is far better to

fail to hold on to power by making a serious effort to deepen Sri Lanka's democracy, than stay in power by giving into liberal democratic and neoliberal orthodoxy.

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