

One Year On: Reading the NPP “From Below and to the Left”

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The National People's Power (NPP) in Sri Lanka achieved a significant two-thirds parliamentary majority in the November 2024 elections, the largest single-party majority since 1977. Driven by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the NPP is an alliance of political parties, trade unions, women's organisations, and other civil society organisations. Rather than a Marxist or a 'radical party', the NPP is a progressive social coalition.

The NPP's meteoric rise from a marginal 'third force' to the party of government emerged from a division among the elites that was triggered by the 2022 popular uprising, the *Aragalaya*. This convergence of activists, groups, social movements, and the general public, illustrated a historic moment, “from below and to the left”.

With the *Aragalaya* disrupting alliances within the hegemonic bloc of the Rajapaksa regime, the NPP was able to construct a new set of alliances on a different basis, which drew on many of the same actors. This bloc includes business, political, military, religious, media, trade union, and civil society actors. The new hegemonic bloc is based on a narrow anti-corruption agenda, linked with an efficient economic governance discourse, legitimised through a more inclusive Sinhala Buddhist hegemony under a militarised state.

It is important to recognise that as ever, there is a hidden class war in operation, in which dominant groups and their allies—political parties, media, intellectuals, social media activists, civil society actors—are engaged in misinformation and disinformation campaigns, portraying the NPP as radical, inexperienced, or incompetent. For example, a recent editorial in *The Morning* newspaper, owned by TV Derana owner and now opposition politician Dilith Jayaweera, is titled “Inexperience is Costly” (*The Morning* 2025). Its main aim was to undermine the NPP's perceived legitimacy and potential for success.

This article aims to evaluate the past year of the NPP, by contextualising the emergence of the NPP, its tactical and strategic orientation within representative politics, and thinking through what this might mean for strengthening democratic social movements. This is a reading of the NPP “from below and to the left”, with my assessment of how the NPP is attempting, with mixed success, to expand the politics of the possible within this conjuncture of forces and movements.¹

“From below and to the left” is a slogan associated with the Zapatistas in Mexico that signifies a political philosophy based on grassroots organising and a left-wing, anti-capitalist vision. The “below” in our context refers to oppressed and marginalised groups, such as the struggling farmers, fisherfolk, working classes, Tamil and Muslim communities in the North and East, *Malaiyaha* (hill country) plantation community, women, people with disabilities, ageing people, LGBTQI+ community, and others. The “left” refers to anti-capitalism, positioning people before profit, and proposing alternative futures grounded in freedom from exploitation, oppression, domination and alienation. By the “left” I also mean the political project to extend democracy into the realm of production (workplaces) and social reproduction (families and communities), as well as into organisational cultures and social movements.

The political economic conjuncture

In Sri Lanka, the 1977 launch of the neo-liberal market driven economy shaped party politics. The agenda of deregulation of the economy and the retraction of the state through the privatisation of state-owned enterprises favoured party allies. Meanwhile, the withdrawal of the welfare state through “targeted” welfare enabled party influence over the welfare distribution system. The NPP emerged in a context where the realm of representative

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party politics was dominated by bourgeois parties and family dynasties entrenched in reproducing patrimonial capitalism. It was legitimised through a national-popular project, which consisted of a hetero-patriarchal Sinhala-Buddhist notion of “nationhood”.

Patrimonial capitalism is based on systems of patronage, where patron-client relations enable the political elites to use their control over resources to exchange private benefits for political support. While colonial feudal clientelism (1505-1948) in Ceylon/Sri Lanka was based on reciprocal, customary ties, more current (post-1977) capitalist clientelism is often a transactional, contingent exchange in the context of a market economy. This fragility of loyalties is a site of oppression as well as resistance. The orientation of the elites is to integrate an export-oriented economy reproducing a rentier economy, where profits are generated through owning and controlling assets, rather than through a production-based economy. The opportunity cost of this system is a neglect of profits generated through productive labour or socially and ecologically sound investments that encourage decent work opportunities and strengthen capacities of cultural flourishing.

The national-popular project is about articulating a national political and cultural identity that unites the interests of the dominant class with those of the “popular” or subaltern classes (workers, peasants, marginalised groups) to achieve social hegemony and state power. Since the 1977 launch of the neo-liberal market-driven economy, this national-popular project further polarised ethnic and class divisions, while reinforcing a militarised authoritarian state.

A key aspect was the introduction of the executive presidency in the 1978 Constitution that centralised and concentrated state power with the holder of that office who was at one and the same time the head of state, head of government, and commander-in-chief of the military. A key legal mechanism strengthening the coercive strategies of the state was the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1979, which enhanced state capacities for violent repression of resistance. The ruling party also engaged in co-optation as well as coercion of an emerging human rights discourse in the public sphere.

The authoritarian state also integrated the ruling party with criminal networks, among other activities, engaged in the drugs, arms trade and human trafficking. This is also the period that expanded the casualisation of labour, which created a reserve army of underemployed workers engaged in precarious work.

Locating representative and movement politics “from below and to the left”

The logic of representative politics is about creating consent to ‘reforming’ the existing economic system through a national-popular project. The NPP’s national-popular project is a continuation of market-driven “development” narrowed to “economic growth”, but with a more active role of the state in promoting investments as well as reducing economic inequality.

The NPP, unlike other political parties of the elites, is mostly made of subaltern groups, or urban and rural lower middle-class groups. Their elected MPs, rather than from business backgrounds as under the Rajapaksa regime, are mostly professionals, such as teachers, engineers, doctors, and other middle-class occupations. While the NPP MPs also reflect class mobility, there are enduring alliances with marginalised groups and those ‘below’.

In Sri Lanka in 2022, the richest 10% of the population commanded 40% of the share of national income while the bottom 50% of the population subsisted on only 17% share of national income (cited in Skanthakumar 2025: 91). However, the NPP’s politics of redistribution and efforts to reduce economic inequality, is faced with institutional challenges within the party as well as the state.

The NPP has encouraged the use of the term *Malaiyaha/m* (‘hill country’) to identify hill country plantation communities, ending the colonial-era term of ‘Indian Tamils’. Despite the promises, the government still fumbles with the question of increasing the wages of hill country plantation workers, and the weak implementation of estate housing and infrastructure development illustrate the contradictions of some of the key players within the hegemonic bloc.

More than any previous government, the NPP has taken a stance on recognising the rights of individuals with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions. This challenges the idealised heteronuclear family model, the cornerstone of patriarchal ethno-nationalist projects that evade questions of sexual labour, social reproduction within the family, the commodification of sex, and militarism. However, the NPP tactically retracted affirming rights of LGBTQ+ communities, when faced with the opposition from the senior Buddhist clergy and Colombo’s Archbishop Malcom Cardinal Ranjith (*The Sunday Times* 2025). For those engaged in counter-hegemonic struggles, it is important to recognise the contradictory role of these active allies within the NPP’s hegemonic bloc, as well as

their complicity with authoritarian elite politics of the class war from above. Recognising these contradictions is about identifying the weak points of these alliances, and disrupting them, as well as developing new alliances that are “from below and to the left”

The realm of representative politics overlaps cultures and structures of political parties and the state bureaucracy, including the security forces. The NPP as a political party is entrenched in patriarchal hierarchies with a ‘pragmatic’ orientation that falls into TINA (There Is No Alternative) compromises.

As a ruling political party, the NPP is also integrated with the “national security and rule of law” discourse linked with the coercive state apparatus encompassing the military, police, legal as well as carceral system. Designed to maintain social order and state control through the legitimate (as well as illegitimate) use of force and the threat of violence, these institutions directly impact movements “from below and to the left”. This highlights why social movements from below have multiple challenges when confronting the NPP that now represents a progressive neo-developmental state, which is coercive as well as consensual.

Democratic social movements (movement politics) from below are integral to transforming the NPP as well as the realm of representative politics by encouraging the active participation of the public. The internal dynamics of social movements, their relationships with political parties and collective learning, shapes the strategic orientation of social movements. There are authoritarian social movements (patriarchal, fascist, ethno-nationalist) and democratic (counter-hegemonic) ones based on a range of social and ecological justice concerns.

Both representative and movement politics involve transnational dimensions of global networks, consisting of diaspora communities, party networks, civil society, and movement networks. For example, some local trade unions are linked with global union federations and networks, and local political parties are linked with global networks of political parties and diaspora supporters with varying degrees of activism.

New culture of governance

Democratic social movements from below in Sri Lanka are faced with an authoritarian patriarchal Sinhala-Buddhist militarised state, which is currently led by an NPP regime with a progressive agenda. Therefore, the NPP’s reform discourse is embedded in tactical and strategic manoeuvrings. A key achievement of the NPP

is the fostering of a new culture of governance and of representative politics. The absence of major electoral violence was important given the history of political party integration with criminal networks and a heavily militarised state, with former soldiers and deserters often forced into criminal activities in a context of scarce access to meaningful employment with a living wage.

The NPP has also transformed the expensive and elaborate state rituals, which were mostly about maintaining and reproducing the authority of the state and fostering a sense of order and obligation. But within patrimonial capitalism, this was also about reproducing patron-client systems of representative politics. Interventions such as the scaled-down parliamentary inauguration rituals and the Independence Day celebration, abolishing pensions for former parliamentarians, and reduced security spending for ministers are both about fiscal responsibility as well as creating a less elitist culture of governance.

Economic dimension: to the left?

In terms of the economic dimension, the NPP government has maintained a path of macro-economic recovery assisted by improved tourism revenues and remittances. Inflation has declined since 2024, giving some relief to the majority low-income consumers. Despite a campaign promise to reduce electricity tariffs, under pressure to meet IMF demands, the government increased the cost of electricity by 15% in June 2025. Meanwhile, the merchandise trade deficit has widened (with increase in imports of vehicles and general consumer goods) and debt servicing has risen (World Bank 2025). Overall, the IMF has been pleased, announcing in October 2025 that the NPP’s “ambitious reform agenda continues to deliver commendable outcomes” (IMF 2025).

However, the NPP government has expanded the social welfare program (*Aswesuma*), increased public and private sector minimum wages, raised pensions and allowances for the elderly and disabled, and boosted student scholarships and allowances. Measures have been introduced to address the issue of predatory microfinance loans (such as the Microfinance and Credit Regulatory Authority Act, approved by the Cabinet in August 2025), which have disproportionately impacted women. Subsidised loans were provided to small rice mill owners, and the fuel subsidy for fishermen was increased. The Paddy Marketing Board was reactivated and reorganised, and the fertiliser subsidy for paddy was increased.

Despite the success in raising minimum wages in some sectors, the NPP remains strategically engaged in labour market reforms, which is mainly about giving business more capacity to casualise and exploit labour. Its approach is marked by the lack of negotiations on labour market reforms with sections of the labour movement opposed to the JVP trade unions. In school education, it is promoting wide-ranging modernisation of curriculum, methods, and infrastructure; while backtracking from the abolition of corporal punishment and disappointing teachers who await long-standing salary revision.

Internationally, the government secured stronger ties with regional powers, particularly China and India, attracting foreign direct investment while balancing security arrangements. Following the visit of an EU delegation in May 2025, the current GSP scheme, providing duty-free access to the EU market for eligible exports like textiles, garments, and seafood, was extended until the end of 2027. The announced increase in US tariffs to 44% in April 2025 was reduced to 30% in July 2025, indicating the NPP's capacity to negotiate a relatively favourable agreement. However, the termination of USAID programmes has impacted government as well as civil society programmes (Gamage and Dadlan 2025).

Tactical and strategic elements of anti-corruption and the hegemonic bloc

The “from below and to the left” approach positions the NPP's anti-corruption agenda, involving tactical and strategic dimensions, as integral to a broader struggle for a multi-layered democratic transition, while transforming structures of patronage capitalism.

The NPP's achievements on the anti-corruption agenda is tactical in order to maintain public trust by delivering some convictions. It is also strategic because there are different bureaucracies (including the legal, administrative, and policing system), which are important for the day-to-day governance of the system. Reforming the system is a complex governance process of negotiating diverse interests while overcoming non-compliance, in order to sustain the long-term strategic goal of institutional reforms.

The NPP's crackdown on corruption has included: the imprisonment of two former chief ministers of provincial councils, the former sports minister sentenced to 20 years, and former Sathosa corporation chairman and former trade minister jailed for 25 years. Former president Ranil Wickremesinghe was arrested and then released on bail, for the misuse of

public funds. Former president Mahinda Rajapaksa and his predecessor and successors were removed from their official residences in Colombo after passing the Presidential Entitlements (Repeal) Bill. Meanwhile, there are on-going investigations, including into a former navy commander, arrested for the alleged abduction, detention in a secret facility, and murder of a civilian.

The strategic goal of remaining in power relies on maintaining a coalition of alliances within the hegemonic bloc. The competition and contradictions among these actors illustrate a hegemonic bloc that is changing as well as emerging.

It is this dynamic within the hegemonic bloc that is often implicated in the discussions around the NPP's rigidity (not doing enough, unwilling to compromise) and flexibility (doing enough, and willing to compromise). For some on the left, the NPP illustrates too many compromises (compliance with the IMF, maintaining the presidential system, lack of effort towards ethnic reconciliation, maintaining patriarchal cultures, undermining trade unions, ignoring climate mitigation interventions, etc.).

Leaning left

The NPP emerged from the disruption of the hegemonic bloc by the *Aragalaya*, a popular uprising “from below and to the left”. The *Aragalaya* leaned left, in terms of promoting a solidarity economy (mutual help, communal activities and a notion of the commons), along with ecological sensibilities of a new generation.

The protest was against authoritarian elitist politics, encouraging solidarity with the marginalised and participatory democratic practices committed to non-violence. This was despite the violence of the ruling regime, including misinformation and disinformation campaigns to delegitimise the collective memory of the *Aragalaya*, which is on-going.

The NPP's first year in government has illustrated its strategic commitment to an anti-corruption agenda, grounded in a neo-liberal capitalist project with social democratic tendencies. The NPP has strategically avoided a left discourse of class struggle, that critically engages with patriarchal ethno-nationalism by highlighting common economic interests (in transforming the exploitation of labour) across gender and ethnic divisions. Similarly, the NPP's “green capitalism” orientation misrecognises and mystifies how the capitalist pursuit of profits and unlimited accumulation (and consumption) is the driving force of

ecological harm that mostly impacts the marginalised classes. The exploitation of the environment is inextricably linked to the exploitation of labour.

In terms of ethnic reconciliation, the NPP remains entrenched in a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist project, depicted by the demand for a domestic rather than an international or a hybrid mechanism in addressing the issue of war crimes. The strategic delay in addressing war crimes (Perera 2025), which the hegemonic bloc under the previous government denied, illustrates the persistent vested interests of the Buddhist clergy, the military as well as the media (*Tamil Guardian* 2025).

Social movements from below are faced with historically aggregated “movements from above”, with privileged access to state structures, economic and cultural resources (Cox 2024). This is why any evaluation of the strategic orientation of the NPP, demands articulating an alternative to authoritarian, militarised, patriarchal Sinhala-Buddhist (ethno-nationalist) capitalism (to avoid TINA compromises), by strengthening local and global networks of counter-hegemonic social movements.

The NPP illustrates multiplicities, ambiguities, opportunities, and contradictions. Multiplicities reveal how identity is not singular but a collection of many fluid, sometimes contradictory, experiences, narratives, and perspectives. Fostering new effective alliances within the hegemonic bloc sustained by the NPP, demands tactical and strategic interventions. In this historic phase of a democratic transition, the practices as well as critical analysis within and outside the NPP remain significant for nurturing the spirit of the *Aragalaya*, “from below and to the left”.

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