

Sri Lanka's 2024 Presidential Elections

Elite Circulation and Renegotiating the Social Contract

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On 21 September 2024, Sri Lanka is scheduled to hold its presidential elections. This is the first election after the 2022 debt crisis and the mass street protests which ousted President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. This election is largely fought on a platform of economic stability in the context of an ongoing IMF-led reforms programme. This is challenged by the main two opposition contenders, the SJB and the NPP, in the face of growing inequality. Despite this, there is a growing consensus among the three main candidates on the liberal economy and liberal peace, leaving space for influence by smaller minority and fringe parties.

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In 2022, Sri Lanka reached a high point in elite contestations, when the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government ran out of foreign exchange to ensure a steady flow of essential imports, such as fuel, leading to long hours of power cuts and breakdown of everyday life. These events resulted in youth-led and social-media-driven mass street protests, the Aragalaya, that caused the President to resign and provided a platform for marginal political elites to the point of revolutionary “elite circulation.”

The Gotabaya-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) government came into power in late 2019 on a majoritarian and revivalist economic agenda. Its economic policy relied heavily on local industries and included unprecedented tax cuts to big local businesses, import bans that disproportionately favoured local industrial monopolies, and an overnight, nationwide drive to convert to organic agriculture. These economic policies, alongside the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic inactivity, triggered a crisis in servicing the country's foreign debt. The country officially declared bankruptcy in April 2022.

It is in this crisis context that the “neo-conservative” ruling party, the SLPP, invites its neo-liberal nemesis, Ranil Wickremesinghe, to be President. Under Wickremesinghe, Sri Lanka entered into its 17th International Monetary Fund (IMF)-led reforms programme. This marked a high point in elite bargains among the political elite, between the two main ideologically distinct camps in Sri Lankan politics until then.

Elite circulation provides a useful theoretical lens to understand the nature of

elite politics, during times when the establishment political elite finds it harder to retain power. Sally Cook Lopreato categorises four types of mobility (Pareto 1968) that have a bearing on elite circulation: (i) forced or structural mobility where elites may move into governing positions by virtue of economic expansion or, conversely, are denied access to such positions on the basis of wealth, influence, etc, as there are fewer positions; (ii) elite movement by co-option, where the governing class accepts non-governing elites into its ranks, provided that the new entrants continue to serve the interests of the existing elite; (iii) free circulation, an idealistic state of elite movement where governing positions are occupied by those individuals most suited for them; and (iv) revolutionary circulation, when the incumbents of the governing class are forcefully displaced by individuals from the governed class (Pareto 1968 as cited in Lopreato 1974: 55).

Reformist and Populist Interpretations of ‘System Change’

The Aragalaya in 2022 demanded a “system change” which is popular code for a new social contract. What this system change stood for varied depending on the ideological and class positions of groups within it. They converged, however, on good governance such as accountability, transparency, and anti-corruption. The call for Gotabaya and his cabinet to resign was a part of this common ground. All major presidential candidates promise to usher in this system change.

There were two main interpretations of system change within the popular protests. They are an extension of two groups of highly porous, broad ideas which have dominated the political discourse and election platforms. The first group saw this system change as brought about through a series of liberal reforms of the state, including increased good governance, power sharing, and a reduced role for the state in economic activities (as it facilitates opportunities for corruption and misgovernance). The second group, represented mostly by the nationalist and the left, redistributive

ideological strands, believed that clean and effective governance could be achieved through a strong state, with centralised power in the hands of a benevolent leader. The Aragalaya united the supporters of the 2015 Yahapalana government and the 2019 Gotabaya government on this front. They advocated for good and effective governance, which would ensure their material aspirations of being a “developed country.”

With a growing youth demographic who have a strong sense of intergenerational inequality, anti-establishment, populist sentiments have been on the rise. In the 2019 presidential election, Gotabaya made his presidential bid on populist grounds that he was an “outsider” to the political establishment since he was not an elected politician, despite being a key figure in the previous Mahinda Rajapaksa government. This populist narrative was also mobilised by left-leaning groups in the Aragalaya who called for an overhaul of the political system and rejected all 225 members of Parliament (MPs). Among these, the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) called for a system of power outside the established political system, as manifested in the popular slogan during the 2022 people’s protests—*balaya diyawanawen eliyata* (power outside Parliament). The National People’s Power (NPP), which has a more popular backing, instead sought to capture power within Parliament through elections or by other means.

Besides these two main interpretations of system change, there is a persistent pushback mainly from the perspective of Tamil ideological politics. In post-war Sri Lanka, the demands for system change by the majority Sinhala community stem from the conviction that the state does not “work” for the overall welfare of the people, while the Tamil people saw increasing their autonomy as the means of achieving the community’s well-being. From the perspective of identity politics of the Tamil nation, the social contract of Sri Lanka is written mainly by the majority Sinhala people on their terms. The relative disengagement of northern Tamils in the Aragalaya is mainly for these reasons.

A key proposal of system change from the Aragalaya involved establishing an

extra-parliamentary centre of power where “the people” have more voice in decision-making, through People’s Councils, which would be upwardly integrated into a National Council. The liberal appropriation of the People’s Council was evident shortly afterwards in the government facilitating Janasabha, a system of units at local levels where people could participate in decision-making, while the Aragalaya’s demands for more youth representation were followed by the recruitment of youth to sectoral oversight committees in parliament. This example shows how popular ideas within the Aragalaya were co-opted by the government, without addressing the structural problems. Vincent Bevin (2023: 8) writes in *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade & the Missing Revolution* on “leaderless, ‘horizontally’ organised, ‘spontaneous,’ digitally coordinated mass protests in city streets or public squares” in contrast to protests organised by more top-down structures such as political parties. When protests of such nature scale up to a mass level, they often end up reproducing the dominant ideologies of that society. As the ruling class has a lot more means at its disposal to propagate this ideology, many ideas of mass protests end up being co-opted by them.

Economic Stability amid Growing Inequality

Behind the economic crisis in 2022 was a deep-seated crisis of political legitimacy of the establishment political class. The ruling alliance was seen as a coming together of the old political elite against “the people.” The new government under Wickremesinghe embarked on an economic stabilisation programme. The IMF reforms programme entailed the passage of new laws and measures to mainly raise state revenues through increasing taxes and privatising state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As part of the IMF-led debt sustainability drive, the government completed its domestic debt restructuring amid the controversy that its terms were more favourable to lender banks, at the expense of contributory pension fund holders. The president announced a debt restructuring deal with creditor nations, including India, France,

Japan, and China in June 2024, and negotiations with international sovereign bond creditors were completed shortly after.

The government is championing macroeconomic indicators such as easing inflation which was around 70% in 2022, and building foreign reserves up to \$5.4 billion by May 2024. These are part of its legitimising technocratic narrative of having the expertise and leadership to ensure economic stability. However, since 2022, poverty has doubled to 25% of the population. Data shows that households experiencing food insecurity and rising debt are reducing their spending on health, education, and nutrition (Skanthakumar 2024). Currently, the top 1% of the population owns over 30% of personal wealth, while the bottom half of the population has less than 4% of the wealth, making Sri Lanka one of the most unequal countries in Asia.

This technocratic approach carves out a near-exclusive role for the market as the main domain of resource allocation. The government is thereby seen to prioritise economic stability while deprioritising other sources of collective stability. For example, the new social security programme, Aswesuma, was mobilised on a platform of welfare recipients reporting against one another. Such an approach has led to increasing atomisation of society and alienation among people and with the government.

As a part of its reforms programme, the government has passed a number of laws. Here, the different interests of two groups of elites—international financial institutions (IFIs) and the ruling class—become evident. Reforms that are closely followed by IFIs, such as the Central Bank Act and Anti-Corruption Act, adhere closer to democratic standards of checks and balances, while reforms that have more local ownership, such as the Online Safety Act and Anti-Terrorism Act, are more undemocratic, trying to crowd out other local elite groups from challenging them. This shows that although IFIs such as the IMF are careful to avoid replicating reforms that reinforce the negative image they developed since the 1980s, and as corruption is understood to be a key challenge to neo-liberal reforms, they do not push back on local

stakeholders who often subvert democracy to consolidate their power.

The President has generally tackled dissent in a heavy-handed manner, cracking down on anti-government protests by activists and strikes by trade unions. The government has also embarked on “Operation Yukthiya,” an anti-drugs programme, which enables it to assume a decisive, strongman role by constructing moral panics of drugs and increased crime. Moreover, the government has been criticised for the appointment of individuals, who are widely believed to be corrupt and alleged violation of the law, as members of his cabinet and in key positions in government. In defending these positions, the President as the executive has collided with other arms of the state, namely the judiciary and legislature (including the Constitutional Council, which is a parliamentary mechanism meant to act as a check on the executive presidency). These are all sources of politically injected public distrust and the declining political legitimacy of the government.

Key Contenders in the 2024 Presidential Elections

President Wickremesinghe and the SLPP: President Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the UNP, is running on an independent platform for the 2024 presidential election. This independent platform allows groups and members of other parties to join and build a broad electoral campaign. The President’s campaign narrative is of being the only one who stepped up to the task during the 2022 crisis, when allegedly no one else was willing to take on such an enormous risk. His economic performance is amplified in campaign slogans such as *Aarthika Yuddayen Galawaagath Wiruwaaneni* (To the Hero Who Rescued Us from the Economic War). This campaign tries to co-opt the post-2009 language of war victory by Mahinda Rajapaksa. The President is also trying to appeal to the northern Tamil politicians, vying for their support.

In the lead up to elections, the SLPP has split over the issue of whom to back. Around 90 SLPP MPs (out of 145 who

were appointed at the 2020 general elections) are claimed to have declared support for the President. Meanwhile, the SLPP declared its candidate as Namal Rajapaksa, the son of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. This development has enabled Wickremesinghe to distance himself from the increasingly delegitimised Rajapaksas. Similarly, for the “left nationalist” Rajapaksas, the end of an expedient marriage with Wickremesinghe was politically inevitable and necessary.

A significant aspect regarding the SLPP split is how the family-first nature of the SLPP is rejected by non-family MPs, who feel that opportunities open to them are limited. This has driven the patronage politics-based electoral machines of the 94 SLPP MPs to back Wickremesinghe, where there is more room for political manoeuvring. This includes mobilising state-linked patronage programmes such as the Urumaya land programme and distribution of other freebies such as public sector salary and pension increases, increased welfare payments through Aswesuma, farmer subsidies and writing off crop loans (Pinto-Jayawardene 2024). Observing campaign strategies through the lens of patronage politics provides a more nuanced understanding of elite politics. Patronage politics works in a way where support for a particular candidate gets activated when their chances of winning improve. They have an all-or-none logic. This forces candidates to launch larger than life and spectacular projections of victory, and this applies to all three major presidential candidates.

Meanwhile, Namal Rajapaksa has called on the SLPP MPs who back the President to return and support him and the party. This move to field Namal Rajapaksa as the SLPP candidate may be seen as an attempt to prevent some of its voterbase from gravitating towards the NPP, which in turn would be advantageous to the President. In keeping with the Rajapaksa brand of left nationalism, Namal Rajapaksa’s campaign opposes privatisation of SOEs and devolving police or land powers to the Provincial Councils. These policy stances are similar to those of the NPP and

Sarvajana Balaya (discussed below), although delivered with more credibility by the Rajapaksa camp. In the context of the Rajapaksa family being delegitimised by the Aragalaya and the Supreme Court finding the three main Rajapaksa brothers guilty of triggering the island’s worst financial crisis by mishandling the economy, the upcoming election will test the Rajapaksa family’s electoral viability. Namal Rajapaksa therefore does not represent a mass political movement at this election, and is consolidating the Rajapaksa ideology to be a more serious contender in future elections.

Anti-establishment party—National People’s Power: The NPP is a political alliance where the Communist-Leninist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is the main political party. The JVP has led two youth-led communist insurrections in the 1970s and 1980s, and occupied a strong Sinhala nationalist approach to the ethnic conflict. Since the 1990s, the JVP has entered electoral politics, and has, occasionally in its coalition politics backed or been in government with various political groups across the ideological spectrum. While the NPP did not play a central or leading role in the Aragalaya, it thereafter emerged as its main beneficiary, being able to capture only around 3% of the vote in previous elections. The NPP’s current rise has been possible in the context of the establishment elite being unable to reach an elite bargain. The growing popularity of the NPP is evident in its large campaign rallies, the support of the Sinhala diaspora, and vocal support on social media. As a political movement that does not have the backing of significant legacy media, the NPP’s meteoric rise is remarkable.

On economic policy, the NPP swings between its single largest alliance party, the JVP’s strong anti-IMF stance, and the more moderate position the NPP is trying to occupy with regard to the IMF. Evoking the popular criticism that the IMF is an agent of neocolonialism, its leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake said in August 2023 that

Sri Lanka is now under the clutches of the IMF just as we were under British colonial

rule, where Sri Lanka had no freedom or sovereignty to decide on its taxation or fiscal policies. (*Daily Mirror* 2023)

The party's economic growth policy is woven around a statist narrative of growth, prioritising industrialisation and manufacturing, supporting local businesses and agricultural productivity, and harnessing technology and research and development.

However, there is a duality observed within the NPP's discourse. On many occasions, the party has said it would renegotiate the IMF deal once it comes to power, on terms more favourable for the poorer, more vulnerable sections of society. This duality reflects its attempt to appeal to a broader section of the aspirant middle and business classes which previously supported President Gotabaya in 2019. This shift marks the metamorphosis of JVP-NPP into a big-tent party, as it moves from the periphery to the centre.

The governance model the NPP promises is what makes it stand out the most, and much of its legitimacy comes from this narrative. Its campaign platform strongly advocates for good and clean governance, promising to end corruption, recover stolen money, and ensure a meritocratic system. Addressing a key demand of the Aragalaya, the NPP has championed being inclusive of women, youth, and the disabled, and mobilised their support. In this election, the number of new voters is estimated at 1.1 million out of 17.1 million registered voters (*Economy Next* 2024). This youth vote is likely to be captured mainly by the NPP.

The growing appeal of the NPP largely derives from the cost of economic reforms being transferred largely to the poorer segments of the society, through the government's IMF-driven economic reforms programme. Its campaign rhetoric attracts anti-establishment angry voters, who are calling to take those who caused the country's breakdown to book. This appeal to an angry vote also dovetails with heavy-handed assurances of justice being delivered to an oppressed people. This "us versus them" narrative makes the NPP insular and prevents it from forming alliances with other mainstream political parties or factions.

This narrative has taken a divisive tone, typical of left-populist electoral campaigns, and the frequent crossovers of MPs between the Wickremesinghe and Premadasa camps strengthens this narrative further. The NPP's campaign rhetoric also reveals its internal contradictions between its revolutionary JVP and more liberal-leaning formation of the NPP. These contradictions have led to fears among some voters over latent ideological dogmatism, coupled with concerns over the NPP's lack of experience in governance.

A liberal alternative—Samagi Jana Balawegaya: The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) occupies a position that is able to accommodate crossovers from a wide spectrum of parties. This is in contrast to the government and NPP, which embody the establishment and anti-establishment narratives most strongly, and occupy the two ends of the spectrum. Having members who have occupied governments before, the SJB positions itself as the party familiar with governance and not corrupt as the SLPP (and UNP aligned with it). The SJB's main critique of the NPP is its purported lack of economic acumen and policy experience, and references to the JVP's past violence.

The SJB's economic programme is slightly left of centre to that of the current government. Its leader Sajith Premadasa has been cultivating an image of

a pro-poor leader, tapping into his father's (former President Ranasinghe Premadasa) legacy. The party also portrays a technocratic and business-savvy economic team. On policies such as tax and other reforms to qualify for IMF funding, the SJB has been consistent that it will work closely with the IMF, while negotiating with the IMF to reduce the economic burden on the poor. On democratic freedoms, the SJB has generally been vocal in its opposition to reforms that threaten them.

The party appears to have provided a more unifying space for ethnic minorities, evident in its backing by key Muslim and Tamil political parties and actors. The party has formed a broad political alliance, the Samagi Jana Sandanaya, with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the People's Freedom Congress (SLPP breakaway) the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), and a faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). According to one pre-election poll, the SJB and NPP appear to be in the lead (*Institute for Health Policy* 2024).

An Increased Role for Minority and Peripheral Parties

Despite the distinctions among the three key political candidates drawn above, they all appear to converge on two key issues, namely an IMF-led path to economic recovery and the continuity of the Provincial Council system. The Provincial Council system is the main power-sharing

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arrangement with the northern Tamil community, mandated by the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord which introduced the 13th amendment of the Constitution.

On the economic front, the current IMF programme is now backed, to varying degrees, by all three candidates. This indicates one side of the policy convergence that “there is no alternative” to the IMF. On the ethnic issue, President Wickremesinghe has reiterated the usual UNP position on full implementation of the 13th amendment. The SJB made similar commitments to implement the 13th amendment in full, including providing police and land powers to the Provincial Councils. Opposition to the 13th amendment has been part of the JVP’s nationalism since the 1980s. In 2020, the JVP-NPP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake promised to support the 20th amendment to the Constitution if it abolished Provincial Councils. While the NPP has not shifted to the extent that it supports full implementation of the 13th amendment, its recent commitment to continuing the Provincial Council system is an important shift in the party’s position. This is likely driven by the NPP’s increasing popularity and recognition that it needs to appeal to a broader electorate, including the Tamil minority vote.

While they remain comparable within a liberal consensus framework, the rhetorical competition among the three campaign manifestos is mainly focused on economic policy. Wickremesinghe forwards a “Theravada Trade Economy,” which promotes Sri Lanka as a free trade hub. Premadasa proposes a “social market economy,” which is a correctional approach to pro-market policy. The NPP advocates the concept of “economic democracy,” which calls for more economic inclusion and elements of state-led fair trade.

The apparent and emerging liberal consensus in the current context means that the voter is compelled to choose within this framework. As a result, the main distinction among the key candidates is who would implement this policy with better governance. Moreover, when there is a degree of policy convergence among the main political forces, a space for “challenger parties” to offer alternatives

is created. This forces their mainstream counterparts to readjust some of their narratives and creates a vacuum to be captured by more extreme positions by left and/or ultra-nationalist parties.

A similar dynamic was present in the 1990s, during President Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike’s first term. During this period, the two main blocs led by the SLFP and UNP reached a liberal consensus. This includes a policy shift in recognising that Sri Lanka had an ethnic conflict, and in advocating for a peace process. The second phase of economic liberalisation—an “open economy with a human face”—was driven by a strong global neo-liberalisation drive since the 1980s and ongoing economic restructuring under an IMF programme. Many sectors, including telecommunications, plantation, port terminals, and liquid petroleum gas were privatised during this period.

In the context of this liberal consensus, where it was construed that there were no alternatives to deregulation of the economy and a “political solution” to the ethnic conflict, a political vacuum formed. This vacuum was ultimately captured by small, fringe political parties and groups, such as the Sihala Urumaya (later the Jathika Hela Urumaya) and the JVP. These groups, while able to mobilise only a marginal vote, drove the national policy on the war and economic liberalisation well into the 2000s when Mahinda Rajapaksa came to power. They built the momentum which gave the Rajapaksa government the strength to finish the war by military means, and implement a development regime which relied largely on renationalisation of SOEs, infrastructure development and foreign loans by private creditors, and heavily subsidised a new local patron business class.

On the nationalism front, all three key candidates have used some nationalist rhetoric and avoided taking clearly articulated positions with regard to the right to justice for the victims of gross human rights violations during the civil war. However, no sufficient traction has been imparted from using Sinhala Buddhist nationalist discourse, and this is most likely due to this election being

contested on the single platform of economic recovery. In addition, the Aragalaya’s unifying message of anti-establishment politics meant that hegemonising narratives that legitimised past governments, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism being foremost among them, have temporarily waned.

Attempts by senior monks, such as the chief prelate of Mihintale, Ven. Walawhangunawawe Dhammarathana and the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) General Secretary Ven Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera to generate more support for the political involvement of Buddhist monks have not been successful so far. However, their perceived sense of alienation on the ideological and patronage fronts can easily be leveraged by or against the mainstream parties.

On the reconciliation front, some efforts have been made by the President, which showed reversals during the Gotabaya government. These include establishing a Truth, Unity and Reconciliation Commission (TURC) and passing the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) Bill. These efforts have not generated substantial traction for several reasons, including lack of trust by the Tamil polity and with economic stability becoming the primary focus of the government. This aligns with the Western-advocated liberal consensus that comprises transitional justice and economic liberalisation, the latter being manifest in the IMF programme. It explains the government’s alignment with the Indian-led Western bloc that has assumed a dominant position in Sri Lanka’s foreign relations since the 2022 crisis (Wijaya and Jayasuriya 2024). While the present government and a future SJB-led government can be expected to adhere to this foreign policy line, a future NPP administration is expected to open up more space for Chinese influence due to the party’s historical, political and ideological affinities.

Smaller Parties and Alliances: Minority, Nationalist, and Left

Sri Lanka’s presidential electoral system is a subset of preferential voting through a version of instant-runoff voting. Voters rank up to three candidates and are limited

to two rounds. If a candidate is unable to secure a simple majority in the first round of voting, second and third preferences from ballots whose first preference candidate has been eliminated are used to determine the winner out of the top two candidates. The 2024 elections, which is a three-horse race, could be the first time in the country's history when the second round is activated, as past candidates all reached 50% in the first count.

As a result, the role of smaller and/or peripheral parties and their alliance prospects are critical in this election. The numerically largest party among them is the SLFP, which held office for the longest period of time since independence, and which has 13 MPs in the current Parliament. The SLFP, following a series of interlocking legal battles, has split three ways, out of which one supports the president and another supports the SJB.

Minority parties: In a close presidential race, the northern Tamil minority vote will be decisive in determining the winner. In this election, fielding a common candidate of the Tamil people, a fringe idea that has been discussed since the 1990s has now surfaced and is advanced by smaller Tamil parties and civil society leaders, including the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), and the Tamil Makkal Koottani (TMK). The nominated Tamil common candidate is former Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) MP P Ariyanethran.

The largest northern political party ITAK appears to be split over its presidential election strategy. One of ITAK's key leaders, MP M A Sumanthiran, following a meeting of the Central Committee, pledged ITAK's support to candidate Sajith Premadasa. However, this decision was contested by other senior leaders. Another main Tamil party, the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), has not committed to the idea of a Tamil common candidate nor expressed support for any other political candidate yet. These developments indicate that both President Wickremesinghe and Sajith Premadasa appear attractive to

this voter bloc due to historical affinities, and as the NPP has not forged strong relations with this constituency.

Among the parties which represent the hill country Tamils, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) led by Jeevan Thondaman is aligned with the President, while the TPA, which includes key MPs Mano Ganesh and Palani Digambaran, have declared support for the SJB. Within this voter bloc, the balance of power favours the SJB.

The main Muslim political parties, the SLMC and the All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC) are officially backing Sajith Premadasa. This is driven by an emerging perception of Premadasa leading in relation to Wickremesinghe and the Muslim community's anger and distrust towards the SLPP (many of its MPs backing President Wickremesinghe) due to their sense of insecurity during past Rajapaksa governments and the COVID-19 policy that violated Muslim burial rites during the Gotabaya government.

Nationalist and left fringe parties: A new political alliance called the Sarvajana Balaya is trying to capture the "left nationalist" space left open by the emerging liberal consensus since the fall of Rajapaksa ideological politics in 2022. The Sarvajana Balaya's presidential candidate is Dilith Jayaweera who was a key insider in the 2019 Gotabaya Rajapaksa electoral campaign. He is backed by a group of Sinhala nationalists and small left parties who provided the core ideological markers of the Rajapaksa brand of left nationalism. These include the nationalist parties such as the Mawbima Janatha Party, Jathika Nidahas Peramuna, Pivithuru Hela Urumaya, Yuthukama Organisation, and left parties such as the Communist Party. The political rhetoric of this alliance is explicitly economic nationalist and anti-power-sharing. It has an anti-IMF and strong anti-India narrative, alongside opposing SOE privatisation. Its slogan is "fresh hope for 69 lakhs," and promises to provide leadership to the majority Sinhala Buddhist electorate that voted in President Gotabaya in 2019.

In contrast, the People's Struggle Alliance (PSA) is a new alliance that comprises

the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), along with some other left parties and activists who took part in the Aragalaya. The PSA's presidential candidate is Nuwan Bopage, a human rights lawyer, who gained popularity during the Aragalaya. The PSA characterises its agenda as "radical, left progressive." On the economic front, this includes a rejection of the IMF programme and a renegotiation of debt restructuring through a debt justice framework that calls for the cancellation of odious debt. They argue that this debt was accrued by the elite and disproportionately paid by the working class and poor, who did not equitably benefit from it. The PSA has also criticised Indian economic dominance in Sri Lanka through large-scale development projects. The FSP, which is the main political party within the PSA, has held positions in favour of strong power-sharing going beyond the 13th amendment. The PSA has advocated for a local community-based model of alternative power-sharing (Ragavan 2024).

In comparison to the Sarvajana Balaya, which is chauvinistic in terms of ethnic rights and individual rights (such as on gender rights), the PSA is more accommodative on both counts. However, while the PSA, a fringe party, is trying to leverage Aragalaya credentials for its legitimacy, mainstream parties may subvert this narrative to delegitimise the Aragalaya and make the case that the Aragalaya was not a movement with a popular, majority backing.

While these smaller parties do not command significant electoral support, some of them have the potential to push the mainstream parties to adjust their positions to accommodate these views.

In Conclusion

The presidential election must be followed by a parliamentary election. The next parliament is likely to be a hung parliament, and the possibility of a cohabitation government cannot be discounted. Whoever comes to power in September will attempt to renegotiate the social contract in Sri Lanka to bridge the legitimacy gap. Political polarisation in the country has reached a point where there are "no alternatives but

only enemies.” As a result, zero-sum elite and social contestations are heightened, and there are increasingly fewer articulators of a middle ground. This is often equated with the desire to stay or leave the country based on their preferred candidate. This sentiment of “Not my president equals not my country” subjugates the idea of the nation state to the executive.

In the event that a second round of counting causes the first round’s runner-up to surpass its winner, the result will be highly polarising and lead to low legitimacy of the incoming president. Low legitimacy generally compels leaders to make high-handed moves to gain legitimacy. This may test the military’s subordination to civilian authorities, there having been no military coups in the country’s history, while also having to ensure that it is not mobilised to establish an autocracy.

For any candidate, expectations management is a major challenge after being

elected (Uyangoda 2024). This is especially so against the backdrop of an emerging liberal consensus and the current state of straitjacketing under accelerated neo-liberal reforms. The latest phase of neo-liberal economic reforms is likely to fundamentally shrink the welfarist state structures which provided the bedrock of Sri Lanka’s often-praised human development indicators (for its income bracket), mainly in health and nutrition, education, and access to land.

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EPWRF India Time Series

(www.epwrfits.in)

An online database on the Indian economy and society developed by EPW Research Foundation, Mumbai.

Consumption Expenditure Statistics

The screenshot displays the EPWRF India Time Series web application. The main heading is "EPWRF India Time Series" with the URL "www.epwrfits.in". Below this, it states "An online database on the Indian economy and society developed by EPW Research Foundation, Mumbai." The central focus is "Consumption Expenditure Statistics". The interface shows a search bar and filters for "Quantity and Value of Consumption of Cereals and Pulses (Per Person for 30 Days)". The search results list "Cereals and Pulses" with a sub-list of items: Total Cereals, Rice, Wheat, Jowar, Bajra, Maize, Barley, and Small Millets. The filters include Area (Rural, Urban), Variable (Quantity, Value), Approach (Uniform Reference Period, Mixed Reference Period, Modified Mixed Reference), All-India/State/UT (All-India, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, etc.), and Reference Year (1999-00, 2004-06, 2009-10, 2011-12). The interface also includes a navigation menu on the left and a description of the data series.

Contains 2 Sub-modules

1. NSSO's Consumer Expenditure Survey Series

- Level and Pattern of Consumer Expenditure
- Nutritional Intake
- Household Consumption of Various Goods and Services
- Household Consumer Expenditure across Socio-Economic Groups
- Household Energy Sources for Cooking and Lighting

2. Private Final Consumption Expenditure (NAS Series)

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