

One Year of the NPP in Sri Lanka Realising the Anti-corruption ‘Dividend’

HARINDRA B DASSANAYAKE, RAJNI GAMAGE

One year after the National People's Power came to power in Sri Lanka, the new government has made anti-corruption campaign the central pillar of its reform agenda. The government's anti-corruption campaigns have emerged as key sources of legitimacy, constructing a moral narrative that centralises power and mobilises a whole-of-state approach. While the campaigns enjoy broad public support, their framing risks consolidating executive and party dominance at the expense of democratic inclusion, institutional checks, and more strategic, long-term reform.

The shelf life of the red scare that the anti-National People's Power (NPP) camp tried to mobilise in the lead-up to elections in 2024 has expired. The most recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) review congratulates the government on its performance, a continuation of the economic agenda under the previous government (IMF 2025). However, this macroeconomic stabilisation has not significantly improved the living conditions of the 25% who live below the poverty line, nor met the consumerist-led development aspirations of the lower-middle classes (*Economist* 2025). The everyday experience of people who invariably have to visit the private pharmacy to buy regular medication, which had been provided by government clinics, especially before the pandemic, is an indicator of economic vulnerability. Despite various promises in the interim budget to improve social welfare, poverty and affordability remain insurmountable challenges (*Morning* 2025). The IMF conditionalities for state austerity are felt most in these sectors, and not in the sectors that guzzle public money such as Sri Lankan Airlines or the military, where reforms were promised (*Daily FT* 2024).

Despite these economic hardships, most people appear to have steadfast hope in the government to deliver on its anti-corruption mandate (Senanayake 2025). The government benefits from the political stability that this mission has brought about for two reasons. Anti-corruption provides the government a strong moral high ground and casts the opposition as a political no-go. It also has popular buy-in with a lot of hustle surrounding these mediatised arrests. The government's anti-drugs operations also have much more credibility, compared to similar initiatives launched

previously under former President Maithripala Sirisena or former Minister of Public Security Tiran Alles. This portrayal of fighting all vices on all fronts has popular support. However, framing the anti-drug campaign as beyond debate or discussion serves to pre-empt oversight and limit checks on potential government overreach, especially in upholding human rights.¹

The tacit contract behind the popular support for these missions stems from the promised dividend of clean governance to arrest the outflow of spoils of corruption and redirect it to improve the lives of the ordinary people. Delivering on the anti-corruption agenda is a tall order, and any lack of conversion to realise this dividend could lead the government to mistake it for a drop in popularity as a sign that they need to go into accountability overdrive. Some signs of this are already being seen in accounts of senior civil service officials hesitating to be proactive and make executive decisions for fear of being drawn into issues within the legal ambit (*Examiner* 2025). Perceived or real, there are fears among these ranks of some degree of judicial manoeuvring to shift the blame of political malpractice onto them (Yusuf 2025). The resulting state slowdown could be interpreted by the government as undermining strategies of the opposition, and in turn could frustrate the political leaders to dominate and alienate the civil service.

NPP's Dualism: Both Outsider and Establishment

An emerging pattern in the government's messaging can be observed in the recent past. Pushback to the government's policies was initially discarded as the politics of a delegitimised opposition and their supporters (Parliament of Sri Lanka 2025). When such opposition reaches a threshold of popular support, especially on social media and/or involving the religious establishments, the government is seen to recalibrate its position and assure the affected constituency of its flexibility (*Sunday Times* 2025b). The conservative backlash to

Harindra B Dassanayake (contactharindra@gmail.com) is a researcher and founding member of Muragala | Centre for Progressive Politics and Policy, Sri Lanka. Rajni Gamage (r.gamage@nus.edu.sg) is a research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.

some of the progressive measures that the government has tried to push through recently, such as an amendment banning corporal punishment of children and being inclusive of LGBT+ communities, has led to some signs of potential backtracking by the political leadership. In a recent speech, the President assured that laws that are not agreeable with the public will not be passed in Parliament (David 2025).

This desire to be popular has been a consistent feature of this government. It is receptive to popular sentiments, especially those which are most vocal, and which enter the fast-track of social media news cycles. While this government has successfully displaced the previously dominant axis of ethno-religious nationalism with a new axis of corrupt versus non-corrupt, it has not dismantled the ethnocratic structures of the state. This has meant that while repeated attempts at fearmongering by nationalist sections of the opposition have not taken off, the NPP too has been politically cognisant enough to pander to a “soft” Buddhist nationalist line to appeal to its majority Sinhala voter base (Silva 2025). This is an indicator of how the NPP is consolidating its position alongside other establishment players, religious and corporate, minus the former establishment political actors (now in the fragmented opposition, inside and outside Parliament). It indicates that the NPP is fast becoming the new “political establishment.” This might seem obvious, but the NPP continues to position itself as an outsider to the political system.

Managing a Pseudo-progressive Electorate

The main challenge to the government does not appear to come from the opposition in Parliament. This opposition, which scrambled together when former President Ranil Wickremesinghe was arrested under a banner accusing the government of “constitutional dictatorship,” revealed the extent of their disconnect with popular sentiment (Warakapitiya 2025). The optics of the gathering itself embodied the decay and dissonance of their political relevance. Within and outside Parliament, Namal Rajapaksa, Dilith

Jayaweera, Wimal Weerawansa and others are each trying their own variants of nationalist politics, but are not able to fully occupy and take control of the Sinhala nationalist camp (Silva 2025). These actors, along with the NPP, are in a race to claim the leadership mantle of this camp. There are no “soft” and “hard” versions of majoritarian nationalism; they exist as points along a spectrum, and all versions of it end up being insidious and hegemonic.

The President faces the challenge of meeting the demands of a voter base in transition, whose common denominator is upward social mobility, but most of whom are pseudo-progressives, advocating progressive politics at times but harbouring reactionary conservatism at the same time. This is a fickle voter base that goes all in with a two-thirds mandate but swings suddenly the other way when the rising tides that the NPP promises will lift their boats fail to materialise.

Opposition Dissonance and NPP Deflection

Meanwhile, the opposition’s dissonance is perhaps best seen in its approach to constitutional reforms. The opposition continues to associate constitutional reforms from the perspective of the national question (resolving the issue of majority-minority relations) and the abolition of the executive presidency. While these remain key pillars of future constitutional reforms, the NPP responded to a post-Aragalaya popular re-articulation of priorities centred around accountability (anti-corruption) and economic rights instead. These demands that circulated in popular discourse were aimed at making governments accountable to their mandate by way of making election manifestos into legally-binding contracts, recalling elected members of Parliament (MPs) who conduct themselves in a manner contrary to their campaign promises, including through crossovers, or who fail to deliver KPIs, and developing checks and balances outside Parliament (People’s Councils) (Korf et al 2024). These demands reflect the anti-establishment articulation that came to the fore of the Aragalaya, due to the striking

failure of the political establishment to honour the prevailing social contract.

The opposition’s main strategy has been to consider Tamil and Muslim parties as their coalition partners and as vehicles of minority votes for their candidates. The NPP, however, has shifted to another plane where it seeks to address the national question by directly taking on the main Tamil political party, on its home ground. For the Tamil political parties, the main ideological and electoral platform remains resolving the national question. The NPP’s relative electoral gains in the North and East call into question the continued political resonance of the opposition’s constitutional reform narrative, as the NPP reorients the terms of public discourse surrounding it (*Tamil Guardian* 2024). The NPP uses the prevailing disconnect of the people with the opposition to deflect addressing the need for meaningful reforms, including power-sharing and any structural reforms regarding the executive presidency. This sidelines longstanding, legitimate demands for constitutional reforms (which generally form a minority—this is reflected in past governments’ preference to avoid reforms that require referendums) in the name of responding to popular sentiments.

Chasing Popularity

If the business community initially anticipated the NPP’s rise to power as a cause for concern, these fears are now likely dissipated. Under the NPP government, the business elites enjoy a privileged—if not a more entrenched—position. One indicator of this has been the appointment of senior executives of major blue-chip companies to public sector positions, while they still continue to serve within the private sector. Such dual appointments of private sector executives have often been justified as acts of national service performed without remuneration, thereby downplaying the serious conflict of interest that arises from such arrangements. These appointments include an executive of a financial advisory company as a key economic advisor to the President, and the appointment of chairpersons to state-owned enterprises who hold positions in private

companies that have interests in the same sector (Pethiyagoda 2025).

As the NPP forms the new political establishment, these linkages with the economic establishment can only further entrench. This makes class collaboration an inevitability, and elections take on the logic of idol franchises. Only one or a few get to cross the class threshold, but everyone buys into the dream of crossing classes. This occurs amid an increasingly atomising society, which has witnessed the decimation of its political left through the 1980s and the rise of the “managerial state” implementing an emerging liberal consensus since the 1990s. The JVP-NPP’s emergence to power against this backdrop invites a closer look at what constitutes the party as a sociopolitical phenomenon.

Since the nationalist reforms in 1956, that mostly favoured the upward social mobility of the Sinhala-speaking community through expanded access to education and public sector employment as a historical redress to those who ostensibly enjoyed patronage under colonial

rule, there has been a strong view among Sinhala nationalists that the “educated rural classes” will gain power in Sri Lanka (Amarasekara 1962). This narrative of a “promised destiny” has a powerful resonance with the majority Sinhalese, and the JVP, whose social base mainly comprised rural, semi-proletarian and petit bourgeois youth from the Sinhala South, became one of its main vehicles to power (Bopage 2013). The JVP has evolved over time, shaped by the political trajectory of its leaders since the 1990s and by key moments in the party’s history in 2007 and 2012, when its radical nationalist and leftist components were shed.

With the formation of the NPP, the arc towards the centre-left was completed, and in its current formation, its main impetus stems from the world views of the rural educated classes as well as the more urban and upwardly-mobile aspirational lower middle classes (who largely comprise of rural educated classes who experienced upward social mobility). This consolidates its “inner core of conservatism,” which ultimately upholds

the prevailing dominant structures. The following excerpt by historian A J Mayer (1975: 411, 436), who theorises the lower middle class and its political dynamics, is useful for understanding the evolution and political manoeuvring of the NPP in the current context. (This analysis does not attempt to reduce the NPP’s electoral performance or future direction to historical determinism; rather, it highlights the range of political values and alignments that are open to it.)

Even if at first sight it [the lower middle class] seems to have no apparent class consciousness—except in times of acute crisis—it does have a sharply defined class awareness [...] In sum, however amorphous the petite bourgeoisie may be in times of normalcy, in times of severe crisis it develops considerable internal coherence. In an early phase of destabilization it may join other groups in an anti-establishment radicalism. But the lower middle class stops short of participating in coalitions and confrontations that threaten to topple the economic, social, and political edifice in which it occupies a definite, though insecure, place. Eventually it even becomes an important social and political carrier of a restabilization that benefits not the petite bourgeoisie but those higher social classes and governing elites on whom it never ceases to be dependent and for



Jointly Organizes
17th International
Conference with



Indian
Economics
Association

AIMS
ASSOCIATION OF
INDIAN MANAGEMENT SCHOOLS

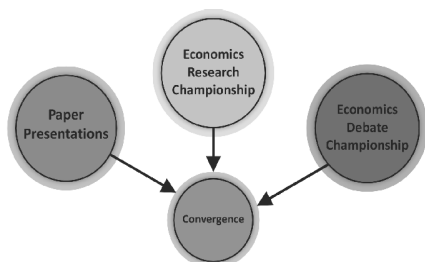


Ecofluence '3.0

International Conference | Research Championship | Debate Championship
Theme : Economics and Public Policy for India in the Digital Century

Date : 20th - 21st February, 2026 | Venue : Indus Business Academy, Bangalore

Program Structure



**Register Now : Avail 10% Discount on Early Bird
Registration till 31st December, 2025**

:- For Details Contact :-

Prof. Prashant Kulkarni

Mob: 98454 85991

Email : ecocon@iba.ac.in

Dr. Mansi Bansal

Mob: 7037212501

Email : ecocon@iba.ac.in



<https://iba.ac.in/ecofluence2026/>

INDUS BUSINESS ACADEMY

Lakshmipura, Thataguni Post, Kanakapura Main Road, Bangalore-560 082

Total Prize Money : ₹ 1,00,000

whom it feels envy exacerbated by resentment. Although it may waver along the way, in the final analysis the lower middle class resolves its ambiguous and strained class, status, and power relations with the power elite above and the underclass below in favor of the ruling class. It is this inner core of conservatism, ultimately revealed in moments of acute social and political conflict, that is common to all segments of the lower middle class and that justifies treating them as a coherent phenomenon and as a significant historical problem.

Conflicting Interests and Challenges Ahead

The increasingly cosy relationship of the government with the economic elite may be tested, however, by conflict between the interests of foreign and local capital. Proposed reforms in the energy sector reflect these tensions, including state-owned enterprises trying to secure their interests despite mounting pressure on the government to open up for international market competition (*Daily FT* 2025). While the local economic elite may seek to consolidate their position in a potential plutocracy (government by the wealthy), the government faces the challenges of navigating between various domestic stakes and the neo-liberal capital flow heralded by international financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank. Addressing these, at times, competing interests will also test the government's anti-corruption narrative that tries to win the consent of the middle and lower income classes.

At the international level, much like at the domestic level, the NPP government is chasing popularity to its potential detriment. Sri Lanka remains firmly in the Western (which includes India) orbit, which has been an ever-entrenching reality since the 2022 crisis and the country's entry into the IMF programme. This is evident in the government's policy towards Israel, which appears to be influenced by its efforts at getting a better deal with the US on unilateral tariffs announced in 2025 (Gunasekara 2025). Attempting to balance the NPP's interests with what is expected of them by key geopolitical players, the government's strategy has been to maximise engagement with all the major geopolitical actors. This is seen in the President's recent visits to the US and Japan, the

Prime Minister's engagements in China and India, and two of the JVP's most influential figures, Tilvin Silva and Bimal Rathnayake, meeting with top officials of the Chinese Communist Party (*Sunday Times* 2025a).

The NPP's strategy to increase its presence in all these countries may not deliver much results without a clear strategy. Some indicators are evident in Sri Lanka's absence in the recently held Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit (at a time of growing rapprochement between India and China) and Sri Lanka's isolation at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, where the Resolution on Sri Lanka was passed without a vote (Azeez 2025). With increasing global multipolarity and volatility in the transition, Sri Lanka's vulnerability is increased on the geopolitical front as well, and may leave it open for manipulation by more overbearing and powerful actors.

The NPP government's desire to remain popular and follow public sentiment may lead it to amplify the chorus rather than be the conductor that leads the orchestra of reform. When the government finds out it is not the conductor anymore, it may use its baton to police dissent instead.

NOTE

- 1 https://www.youtube.com/post/UgkxAU-zwXnchre3XXHol9_cG29rBHPZf02ji.

REFERENCES

- Amarasekara, Gunadasa (1962): “මෙම ජනතාවගේ හර ගන්නේ උගත් ගැමි පිරිසයි (The educated rural masses will take over this country's future).”
- Azeez, A L A (2025): “Latest Geneva Resolution: Putting Sri Lanka's Commitment to the Test,” 18 October, *Daily FT*, <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Latest-Geneva-resolution-Putting-Sri-Lanka-s-commitment-to-the-test/4-783142>.
- Bopage, Lionel (2013): “Epistolary Interview: Insurrection Amidst Constitutional Revolution: The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the 1970–72 Constitution Making Process,” *Sri Lankan Republic* at 40, Asanga Welikala (ed) Centre for Policy Alternatives, Sri Lanka.
- Daily FT* (2024): “The Future of the National Carrier,” 23 October, https://www.ft.lk/ft_view_editorial/The-future-of-national-carrier/58-768290.
- (2025): “Electricity Act Amendments: Reversing Reform,” 11 June, <https://www.ft.lk/opinion/Electricity-Act-amendments-Reversing-reform/14-777559>.
- David, Marianne (2025): “Child Protection Law: Backtracking on Law Would Weaken Child Protection—Dr Tara de Mel,” 22 October, *Morning*, <https://www.themorning.lk/articles/vrQAZh7ooqhtXNRmMUBL>.
- Economist* (2025): “Sri Lanka Is Still Reeling from its Economic Collapse,” 4 September, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/09/04/sri-lanka-is-still-reeling-from-its-economic-collapse>.

- Examiner* (2025): “The Government's First Real Budget,” 17 October, <https://www.examiner.media/the-governments-first-real-budget/>.
- Gunasekara, Tisaranee (2025): “The Dangers of Sri Lanka's Israel Nexus Amid Gaza War,” 8 October, *Himal Southasian*, <https://www.himalmag.com/politics/srilanka-israel-palestine-gaza-buddhist-muslim>.
- IMF (2025): “IMF Staff Reaches Staff-level Agreement on the Fifth Review under Sri Lanka's Extended Fund Facility Arrangement,” International Monetary Fund, Press Release No 25/335, 9 October, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2025/10/09/pr25335-sri-lanka-imf-staff-reaches-sla-on-fifth-review-under-eff-arrangement>.
- Korf, B, H Rambukwella, P Peiris, N de Mel, S Sivamohan, C Schenk, S Wijewardene, A Kadirgamar and U Geiser (2024): “The 'Cultural Life' of Democracy in Sri Lanka (and Beyond),” *Geopolitics*, Vol 30, No 2.
- Mayer, A J (1975): “The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem,” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol 47, No 3, pp 409–36.
- Morning* (2025): “NPP's Maiden Budget: Budgeted State Expenditure Soars Above Rs 7 Trillion,” 18 October, <https://www.themorning.lk/articles/SxXTIRbAqAGhTWXovJiL>.
- Parliament of Sri Lanka (2025): “Proceedings of the House on 08-10-2025,” 8 October, https://www.parliament.lk/en/business-of-parliament/webcast/parliament-live-on-demand?option=com_vod_chamber&selectdate=2025-10-08.
- Pethiyagoda, Rohan David (2025): “Corruption at the Heart of Sri Lanka's Anti-corruption Regime?” 25 March, *Sri Lanka Guardian*, <https://slguardian.org/corruption-at-the-heart-of-sri-lankas-anti-corruption-regime/>.
- Senanayake, Devana (2025): “Sri Lanka and the NPP's First Year in Government,” 13 October, *Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/sri-lanka-and-the-npps-first-year-in-government/>.
- Silva, Shashik (2025): “Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism and Political Legitimacy in Contemporary Sri Lanka,” 16 September, *Polity*, <https://polity.lk/shashik-silva-sinhala-buddhist-nationalism-and-political-legitimacy-in-contemporary-sri-lanka/>.
- Sunday Times* (2025a): “As NPP Eyes Long Haul in Government, Alarms over One-party Rule,” 10 August, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/250810/columns/as-npp-eyes-long-haul-in-government-alarms-over-one-party-rule-608312.html>.
- (2025b): “Amid Uproar over Corporal Punishment and Pay, Govt Retreats on Education Reforms,” 19 September, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/251019/columns/amid-uproar-over-corporal-punishment-and-pay-govt-retreats-on-education-reforms-616552.html>.
- Tamil Guardian* (2024): “Provincial Councils 'Unsuccessful' Says Tilvin Silva, General Secretary of JVP,” 20 November, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/provincial-councils-unsuccessful-says-tilvin-silva-general-secretary-jvp>.
- Warakapitiya, Kasun (2025): “Former President Ranil Wickremesinghe Calls on All Parties to Unite Against 'Constitutional Dictatorship,’” 21 September, *Sunday Times*, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/250921/news/former-president-ranil-wickremesinghe-calls-on-all-parties-to-unite-against-constitutional-dictatorship-613041.html>.
- Yusuf, Javid (2025): “NPP's Anti-corruption Crusade and Collateral Damage: Handle the Judiciary with Care,” 28 September, *Sunday Times*, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/250928/columns/npps-anti-corruption-crusade-and-collateral-damage-handle-the-judiciary-with-care-613763.html>.