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Prospects for Democracy Amidst Two National Elections in Sri Lanka

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On September 21, 2024, Sri Lankans participated in a national election to select their Ninth Executive President. The election resulted in the victory of Anura Kumara Disanayake, marking a shift in the country's political landscape. In less than two months, on November 14, Sri Lanka will hold another election, this time for the 225 seats in the parliament. The outcome of the election will be revealed in the coming weeks, as will whether President Disanayake's party, the National People's Power (NPP), will secure a majority or whether Sri Lanka's opposition groups will elect a majority of Members of Parliament (MPs). These two elections hold significant implications in a country that continues to grapple with socio-economic uncertainties.

The September presidential election had several new aspects. The election marked the first national elections since the economic crisis in 2022 and the massive people's mobilization known as the *Aragalaya* (the Struggle), which demanded a transformation of the political system. Against this background, there was a clear desire among citizens for a change in the political culture and style of governance. The election was a highly competitive one, with an unprecedented 39 candidates vying for the presidency. Furthermore, in contrast to previous electoral campaigns, the economy and corruption were the primary focus of the debates, marking a shift from previous elections where ethno-nationalism and cycles of violence were the central issues. Additionally, the election was notable for its relatively peaceful nature, with few incidents reported during the campaign period and on the election day. This is an important change from previous polls, which were marred by violence. Moreover, a distinctive feature of this election was that the initial tally of votes did not yield a clear majority for any candidate, necessitating a subsequent recount. The second count resulted in Disanayake from the NPP, a left-wing coalition, being declared the winner with 42% of the vote (Election Commission of Sri Lanka 2024).

The election of President Disanayake represents a remarkable trajectory for an individual who originated from modest circumstances. The political landscape of Sri Lanka has been historically dominated by prominent elite families with previous presidents having family or professional ties to the country's long-standing power elites. The election of President Disanayake represents a rejection of the political elites and the political culture in the island nation, indicative of the demands for change amidst an economic crisis and the massive public mobilization in 2022. The parliamentary election, scheduled for November, has already been affected by this, with several veteran politicians who have held elected office for decades having chosen not to contest the election. This includes three former executive presidents and several other individuals who have previously held cabinet positions. The

exit of these individuals and the inclusion of numerous new candidates are a notable shift from previous years, reflecting a growing demand for change.

The Power and Mobilization of the People

In recent years, Sri Lanka has experienced a series of political crises, including a constitutional crisis in 2018 and the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. These events led to the election of former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa. His tenure was marked by a new level of mismanagement and policy incoherence, which ultimately led to the 2022 economic collapse. The economic crisis resulted in 12-13 power outages daily and a scarcity of essential items, which had a significant impact on the lives and livelihoods of Sri Lankans across the country. This resulted in citizens from all walks of life, representing a diverse range of backgrounds and professions, taking to the streets to demand a change in government, governance, and the political culture. The *Aragalaya* movement led to the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his government.

The resignation paved the way for the appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe to serve the remainder of the Gotabaya Rajapaksa presidency. The Wickremesinghe administration took steps to stabilize the economy and address the debt crisis, culminating in an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Subsequent reforms resulted in the implementation of austere fiscal policies and elevated taxation rates, which disproportionately affected the poor and the middle class, leading to a surge in public discontent towards the government. A direct consequence was the intensification of societal polarization, with the affluent remaining largely insulated from the economic turbulence, while poverty and inequality continued to escalate. Coupled with this was a growing sense of frustration with the Wickremesinghe administration for not tackling the governance crisis and the rampant corruption.

In this context, the NPP emerged as a popular force, resonating with the grievances of many and promising a pro-poor government and governance style devoid of corruption, cronyism, and nepotism.

Implications for Democracy in Sri Lanka

The election of President Dissanayake has, once again, opened up spaces for democratic reforms including the abolition of the executive presidency, electoral reform, transparent and accountable governance, among others. Additionally, there are high expectations regarding the fulfillment of other promises made during the presidential campaign, including the delivery of economic relief, governance reforms, and accountability for corruption and violence.

The anticipation of democratic reforms is not a novel phenomenon. Similarly, post-war Sri Lanka observed a comparable opportunity in 2015, when the Yahapalanaya government was elected on the basis of its commitment to good governance. Despite the introduction of certain reforms, such as the enactment of the Right to Information law, the regime was engulfed by political upheaval as seen with the Constitutional Crisis in 2018 and the fallout from the Easter Sunday attacks. The upheaval and uncertainty of this period gave rise to a populist candidate Gotabaya Rajapakse to be elected to office in November 2019. This outcome illuminated significant structural deficiencies in governance, including the entrenchment of patronage, corruption, and cronyism. Additionally, the period was marked by a rise in ethno-nationalism and setbacks in the implementation of reconciliation

initiatives. These factors, in conjunction with the subsequent economic crisis, have intensified the hardship experienced by the impoverished and exacerbated existing inequalities, thereby compounding the challenges inherent to a nation riven by profound divisions.

In this context, the NPP has emerged as a significant political force, advocating for change. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist political party, continues to represent a significant component of the NPP. The party has a history of involvement in political violence during two insurgencies in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s. The years of violence between the Sri Lankan government forces and the JVP resulted in thousands of deaths, a past legacy that continues to cast a shadow over the party. Dissanayake was a student member of the JVP and subsequently ascended to the position of party leader, being elected to Parliament in 2000 and serving a brief tenure in government in 2004. He has positioned himself as a new figurehead for the JVP and a compelling orator in Sinhala, offering an alternative to many who have been disgruntled with the political elites and the ineffectiveness and corruption of the current governance style. In addition, the NPP is comprised of a heterogeneous group of individuals, including retired officials, academics, activists and artists, many of whom are novices in the realm of elected office. This includes Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, who was appointed Prime Minister in September and is a candidate in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Dr. Amarasuriya and other representatives of a broad coalition that comprises the NPP are portrayed as embodying the change that has been demanded in recent years.

Similarly, other parties and formations have gained prominence in recent years, while older parties such as the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) have experienced a decline in influence. The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) was the leading opposition party in the previous parliamentary session. Its leader, Sajith Premadasa, was a presidential candidate in the September election and will also contest the forthcoming November parliamentary election. The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the political party of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, enjoyed considerable popularity among the majority Sinhala community and electing a majority of MPs to the 2020 Parliament. Yet, its association with the Rajapaksa's and others linked to the economic crisis saw a decline in its popularity, as evidenced by its poor performance in the presidential election. Additionally, this is occurring concurrently with significant internal divisions within minority political parties and the fragmentation of political alliances. Amidst this context, the emergence of the NPP and SJB as key political actors indicates a shift within the established political landscape in Sri Lanka.

The November parliamentary election will serve as the inaugural electoral test for the incumbent President and his party. To usher in reforms and consolidate power, the President should secure a majority in Parliament of over 113 seats. The election of President Dissanayake and the perception of a change from the established political elite have generated considerable enthusiasm among voters. It remains to be seen whether the NPP will be able to maintain this momentum and secure a majority in Parliament. There is a considerable degree of anticipation surrounding the capacity of the new administration to fulfill economic promises and to address the issue of corruption, which constituted a central theme of the presidential campaign. Moreover, the presidential election results demonstrated that the NPP performed well among the majority Sinhala community but poorly in areas representing Tamil and Muslim communities. It remains to be seen whether the NPP will be able to gain the confidence of minority communities across Sri Lanka, particularly in light of the party's stance on the ethnic issue. President Dissanayake's comments shortly after taking the oath of

office demonstrated his awareness of the multifaceted challenges and the country's deep divisions (President's Media Division 2024). However, his ability to address the numerous grievances and unite the nation will be contingent upon various factors, including the composition of the next Cabinet and Parliament, and the presence of political will to implement progressive reforms.

Conclusion

The year 2024 has witnessed a series of elections in Sri Lanka. A new president was elected in September, and the country will see the election of a new parliament in November. Additionally, the year saw a significant ruling from the Supreme Court regarding the right to vote. The court ruled that the delayed local government elections must be held at the earliest possible instance (Soorivagoda 2024). This suggests the potential for another electoral cycle in 2025, which would provide voters with an opportunity to engage with elected officials and political parties and hold them to account.

In light of recent developments, there is a certain degree of optimism regarding the future of democratic processes in Sri Lanka. The preceding government's rationale for lacking the necessary financial resources to conduct local government elections in 2023 was contested by opposition parties and civil society. The highest judicial authority in the land intervened, emphasizing that the franchise cannot be subordinated to political expediency. Moreover, the recently concluded presidential election was the most peaceful one in recent years, serving as a testament to the cumulative efforts of independent institutions, election monitors, and civil society towards the advancement of free and fair election. It remains to be seen whether this will extend to the parliamentary elections scheduled for November.

Despite these positive developments, Sri Lanka is confronted with multiple challenges. With regard to the economic situation, it remains unclear how the government will address the daily struggles of many citizens, implement the necessary reforms and repay external debt. Another issue is the necessity for governance reforms and addressing of corruption. One significant pledge made by the NPP during the presidential campaign was the abolition of the executive presidency. This demand has been expressed on numerous occasions, including most recently in the *Aragalaya*. Another challenge confronting the government is how it will proceed in addressing the ethnic issue and questions of reckoning and reconciliation.

The responses to these questions will be dependent on the political resolve of the government and the capacity to form a government in November. A majority of seats in parliament to the NPP could facilitate the promised structural reforms; however, it also raises concerns of potential abuse of power, as evidenced by instances in recent years when governments have enjoyed a majority in parliament. Therefore, it is imperative that a robust opposition emerge, capable of spearheading progressive reforms and providing a vital check and balance on executive action. It is equally important to have independent institutions and a vibrant civil society and media that can monitor and act as an effective check on executive overreach and abuse of power. As evidenced by the experience of Sri Lanka, a vigilant citizenry and public mobilization are essential for ensuring accountability and advancing democratic reforms.

Elections represent a crucial avenue through which citizens can determine the trajectory of their country. In September, Sri Lankans exercised their democratic right to vote for change. The extent to which change will occur is contingent upon a number of variables. In November, the citizenry will be presented with another opportunity to determine and delineate the future direction of Sri Lanka. ■

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