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Sri Lanka's Ethnicized Experience of Democracy: *A reading from the Sri Lankan Survey results of State of Democracy in South Asia*

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This paper attempts to provide a brief insight into the way in which democracy is functioning in Sri Lanka. The perceptions, attitudes and practices of Sri Lankans with regards to democracy are examined by analyzing the findings of the latest survey of the State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA) that was conducted in five countries in South Asia.

The essay begins by providing a brief account of the peculiar nature of the trajectory of democratization in Sri Lanka that has not only widened democracy horizontally, but also has contributed towards deepening ethnic divisions and antagonisms. This essay argues that democracy is the hegemonic ideology in Sri Lanka despite many anomalies in its functioning. However, this clear unanimity with regard to the choice between democracy and authoritarianism disappears when it comes to the nitty-gritty of democracy and its functioning. The paper argues

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that in this regard, not only the ethnic experience, but also ethnic imaginations have come forth to form and shape Sri Lankan's conceptualisation of democracy.

Introduction

Sri Lanka's experience with democracy has been a fairly pleasant and enduring one, especially when compared to many of its neighbours. Despite many challenges - such as the two southern insurgencies in 1971 and 1988/9, the protracted conflict with the Northern Tamil rebels since early 1980s, and a failed coup attempt in 1962 – democracy survived in Sri Lanka as the only game in town. The resilience of Sri Lankan democracy once again came to fore at the January 2015 Presidential election. Sri Lankans came forward to dispose Sinhala nationalist and populist Rajapaksa whose rule had been marred by widespread corruption, nepotism, majoritarianism and authoritarianism.

However, in spite of many successes, Sri Lankan democracy is also fraught with many puzzles and anomalies. This paper focuses on one such puzzle that the State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA) survey highlighted, namely the ethnicized experience of democracy i.e. how one's ethnicity shapes his or her experience with democracy. Using the results of the latest wave of the State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA) survey, this paper attempts to demonstrate how the ethnicized political experience of Sri Lankans has produced a kind of peculiar public attitude towards democracy. The latest wave of the SDSA study surveyed a total of 3400 randomly selected individuals across 24 districts – including former conflict zones- in the country. The field research of the survey was conducted during the period of August 2012 to January 2013.

Democratization and Ethnicization

Sri Lanka is one of the oldest democracies in Asia. Universal franchise was introduced as early as 1931, way before the country was granted independence from British colonial rule. As it is the case in many post-colonial nations, democracy was more the choice of the colonial rulers than the local ruling elites at that time. The local ruling elites in fact doubted the suitability of this system

and argued against it under the pretext that it was too early to introduce democracy to then society. However, once introduced, Sri Lankan elites exhibited a great deal of adaptability in embracing democratic politics. The democratic institutions and competitive party system Sri Lanka had during the early years of independence signalled an exceptionally smooth transition from colonialism to self-rule. As a result, Sri Lanka at that time was looked upon as a model for post-colonial democracies (De Silva 1998).

Sri Lanka's transition to democracy was characterized by two intertwined political developments. On the one hand, transition to democracy empowered the masses, especially the rural 'vernacular' elites, by granting them access to state power. On the other, it also paved way for the rise of Sinhalese and Tamil Nationalisms that later came to define the political character of the country. With the introduction of universal franchise, the nature of elite competition that existed till then in the country changed permanently. Uyangoda states that as a result of democratic transition 'the social bases of the political elites were being widened to incorporate secondary and vernacular elites who have been earlier excluded from the domain of power' (2009:99). However, in the backdrop of heightened elite competition that existed during the formative phase of political parties, electoral mobilization took increasingly an ethnic turn. This further widened the already existing ethnic differences by sharpening intergroup antagonism (Wriggins 1963). Although Sri Lanka achieved a competitive multiparty electoral system within the first ten years of independence, ethnic mobilization undermined the idea of unity on which the foundations for the new state were laid (Uyangoda 2009).

Although dozens of parties came to contest the first election since independence, Sri Lankan never had a true multi-party electoral system. Since 1956, electoral competition has been dominated by the two main parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). However, their electoral influence has always been mainly limited to areas outside of Northern and Eastern provinces. Electoral competition in the Northern and Eastern provinces was mainly restricted to Tamil parties. Therefore, democratization, right from its outset, followed an ethnicized trajectory. As a result, the nation-building process was influenced by this dialectical process between ethnicization and democratization. Observing this pattern, scholars have noted that the nation-building process led to the growth and spread of majoritarian and minoritarian ethnic politics (Kearny 1967; Jupp 1978; Uyangoda 2009). In order to strengthen their electoral bases,

Sinhalese political parties continued to subscribe to Sinhala Buddhist Nationalist rhetoric, while in the North and East, Tamil political parties competed with each other to be the best representative of Tamil nationalism. As Uyangoda observes, ‘the intensification of ethnic conflict in the early 1980s and thereafter has provided a further reason for political parties to be not only ethnic, but also for some parties to be ethnic exclusivist’ (2010: 42).

This ethnicized practice of electoral politics augmented the competing nationalisms and paved way for a hegemony of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism. Against this backdrop, not only did politics lose its capacity to bring the polarized ethnic communities together, but it also failed to produce any incentive for pluralistic political reform in Sri Lanka. As Uyangoda (2011) states, the Sinhala Buddhist ideology has provided the main framework for legislation and policy concerning ethnic relations as well as institution building. He further states that this Sinhalese nationalist ideology ‘has provided programmatic framework for interparty alliances, electoral mobilization and building governing alliances’ (2011: 53). Borrowing from an Israeli scholar Yiftachel’s (2000) concept of ‘ethnocracy’, Uyangoda (2011) suggests the term ‘Ethnocratic state’ as one that would best describe the contemporary Sri Lankan state. As Yiftachel defined it, ‘ethnocracy is a specific expression of nationalism that exists in contested territories where a dominant ethnos gains political control and use the state apparatus to ethnicise the territory and society in question’ (2000: 725). The extent to which the term ‘ethnocracy’ reflects the nature of politics in Sri Lanka is debatable, but this paper shows that there cannot be any doubt about how post-colonial politics has ethnicized the Sri Lankan democratic experience.

The ethnicized experience of democracy seems clearly in contradiction with the liberal democratic ethos. However, Sri Lankans have proved time and again that they do not hesitate to use their vote as a powerful weapon, when they feel that their interests are threatened. They use their vote against power-greedy politicians and authoritarian regimes. The recent presidential election that was held in January 2015 demonstrated this quality. People defeated Rajapaksa’s bid for a third term. Despite his unparalleled popularity – especially among the Sinhala Buddhist majority- and powers, people rejected him when he evinced that he is in the process of transforming the Sri Lankan state into a ‘Rajapaksa conglomerate’ where he and his family would rule the country as in authoritarian regimes.

Experience of Democracy in an Ethnicized Society

The findings of the SDSA survey provide interesting insights into the functioning of democracy in Sri Lanka. On the one hand the findings illustrate the overwhelming support that Sri Lankans extend toward democracy. On the other, the SDSA survey also demonstrates that the democratic experience of Sri Lankans is hardly uniform and that it varies along ethnic lines to a great extent.

a) Meanings of democracy

Although people unanimously support democracy, in many parts of the world, the understanding of the term ‘democracy’ varies from one social group to another. According to the survey findings, more than 40% of Sri Lankans understand democracy as an instrument for the assurance of their rights¹. Although respondents’ answers were unstructured and unguided, they comprise a collection of interconnected rights that liberal democracy promises; “the right to speak freely”, “the protection of and respect for human rights”, and “the right to vote for everyone over 18 years of age”

Nearly a quarter of the Sri Lankan respondents understand democracy as being the rule of the people. For the purpose of this analysis, responses such as “a governance system on behalf of people”, “a government appointed by the people for the people”, “people having control over the government”, “public servants serving the people in a proper manner” were all considered as constitutive of this understanding of democracy. Furthermore, a sizeable number of Sri Lankans (nearly 19%) perceived democracy as providing a platform for the assurance of group rights. Among the responses that were reflected in this included “equal rights for all”, “respect for minorities”, “majority rule” and the assurance of “an independent, unitary state”. It should be noted however that the term “group rights” has been applied rather broadly with a view to reflecting the possibility that respondents privileged a number of group identities such as ethnic, class and caste rights within this understanding of democracy.

A sizeable proportion of respondents also emphasized on the emancipatory promise of democracy; 10% of the respondents indicated that to them democracy meant freedom from all forms of oppression. This articulation of democracy as a form of negative freedom was apparent in

responses such as “the ensuring of justice irrespective of caste, class or creed”, the ability to “live free from racial, religious or caste differences” and a “society free from violence and fear”. A similar amount of respondents (10%) perceived democracy as a form of positive freedom, indicating that democracy to them was the ability to live freely. Some of the responses that were included in this understanding of democracy were “allowing people the freedom to make decisions and live independently”, the “ability for people to earn as much as they want and live freely” and the freedom “to live, eat, drink and handle our own matters, and live peacefully with others, without discriminating against anyone.” Other responses to the question “what do you understand by the term democracy?” made reference to democracy as a form of good governance (4%), as a means of ensuring social welfare (3%), and as a form of representation (3%).

Ethnic disaggregation of the data indicates that the understanding of democracy in Sri Lanka is clearly ethnicized. To put it differently, the different ethnic communities attribute markedly different responses to the question “what does democracy mean to you?” The survey findings show that the Sinhalese have a rather coherent understanding of the meaning of democracy as an overwhelming majority of the Sinhalese (52%) view democracy as an instrument for the *assurance of rights*. Interestingly, 23% of Sinhalese respondents also understand democracy as a *platform for group rights*. However, only 12% of Sinhalese say that democracy is the rule of the people. In contrast, the understanding of democracy as *the rule of the people* is the most popular view among the minority communities with 43% of Tamils, 42% of Up-Country Tamils, and 30% of Muslims expressing this sentiment. The understanding of democracy as an instrument for the assurance of rights is also relatively lower among minority groups with only 30% of the Tamil, 25% of the Muslim, and 28% of the Up-Country Tamil community agreeing with this understanding. Significantly, the understanding of democracy as freedom from all forms of oppression is also comparatively higher among the Tamil (15%), Muslim (24%), and Up-Country Tamil (17%) communities than it is among the Sinhala community (4%). The data also suggest that there appears to be relatively less agreement within the Muslim community about the understanding of democracy. These findings highlight the significant challenges that the country faces in its attempt to bridge majority and minority aspirations for democracy, particularly in Sri Lanka’s post-war context.

b) Attitudes towards democracy

As already discussed, the term ‘democracy’ means different things to different people. Therefore, the survey presented three statements and asked respondents to choose one that indicates their attitudes towards democracy. The three statements were: i) Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government, ii) Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one, and iii) For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or a nondemocratic regime. A significant majority (74%) of Sri Lankans state that democracy is always preferred to any other form of government. Only 4% of the Sri Lankans expressed their willingness to consider an authoritarian form of government even under certain circumstances. About 17% was undecided. Therefore, it is clear that democracy is the only game in town. Interestingly, this high degree of support for a democratic form of governance can be observed across all ethnic groups in the country.

Therefore, democracy is an idea that has gotten strongly rooted in the imagination of Sri Lankans, irrespective of their ethnicity, class or creed. Since independence, all the main political forces extended unwavering support for democracy, although it was solely a colonial decision to introduce a democratic form of government to Sri Lanka. Even the Leftist JVP (People’s Liberation Front) that led two unsuccessful uprisings to capture state power later joined democratic politics. Since the 1990s, it has been playing a key role in the country’s politics as an opposition party. Therefore, despite the continuous criticism of how democracy functions in our society, it appears that it has become a hegemonic idea whose underlying principles and assumptions are hardly questioned.

However, the significant support extended towards the idea of democracy plunged into a low level when people were asked about their satisfaction with the way democracy functions in the country. About 57% of people stated that they are satisfied with the way democracy works in the country, while about 27% stated that they are not satisfied. Interestingly, the Upcountry Tamil community - whose social conditions are significantly poorer compared to other ethnic groups, expresses the highest satisfaction (68%) with the functioning of democracy, when, close to one third of the Tamil and Muslim communities express their dissatisfaction with the way democracy functions in the country. It would be extremely difficult to explain this somewhat peculiar satisfaction of the Upcountry Tamil community with the functioning of democracy. However, one cannot ignore the

history and nature of their electoral politics that stands unique to them. At the time of independence, the Upcountry community (then called as the Plantation or Indian Tamil community who were brought into Sri Lanka for plantation labour from India) constituted the second largest ethnic group in the country. However, since the disenfranchisement of plantation community in 1948 in order to weaken the Left, they had to wage a long democratic struggle to win back their citizenship rights. In addition, they have been the most unionist ethnic community in the country, and without the democratic struggle they waged they would not have managed to win whatever little victories they won over the past half a century. Through decade's long clientelistic politics of the trade unions, the main political agent of this community, these communities have also got used to bargaining their ballot for various patronage goods such as housing, roads, health care, welfare rations, and sometimes even for less worthy commodities- such as umbrellas and hot water flasks. However, it should be noted that clientelistic politics is a common practice in Sri Lanka and not exclusive to the Upcountry community (Jayantha 1992; Uyangoda 2010; Peiris 2014). The difference is that the Upcountry community seems to have very less options other than patron-client relationships sprouting off democracy in getting their needs met.

c) Trust in Democratic Institutions

Liberal democracies can be considered as procedural democracies as well, where institutions and processes are expected to play a key role in ensuring popular control over state. However, in their practice, these institutions and processes are often influenced by the political culture – sometimes undemocratic - of the society. Therefore, legitimacy that these institutions hold varies from society to society. In order to explore Sri Lankans' attitudes towards democratic institutions, the survey asked respondents to indicate how much trust they have in various democratic institutions. The survey questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they trusted the President, the National Government, the Provincial Council, the Parliament, the Local Councils, the Courts, the Civil Service, the Political Parties, the Military and the Police. According to the survey results people indicated the highest degree of trust in the Military (81%) and in the President (81%). The Courts (76%) and the Civil Service (74%) enjoy the second highest level of trust. It is also significant that Political Parties (32%) were the democratic institution that the respondents trusted the least.

The ethnic disaggregation of the survey findings suggest that the higher level of trust extended to the Military and to the President stems mainly from the Sinhala community. In contrast, the Tamil and the Muslim communities express a markedly low level of trust in the Military, President, National Government and the Police compared to their Sinhalese counterparts. In general, compared to the Tamil and the Muslim communities, the Sinhalese and Up-country Tamils place a comparatively higher level of trust in most of the democratic institutions. It is also noticeable that compared to the other communities the Tamil community places a higher degree of trust in local government institutions.

The survey findings illustrate that the public places the highest level of trust in institutions that are commonly considered as the least democratic in Sri Lanka– Executive President and Military. Sri Lankan democracy rests on a set of institutions which enjoy legitimacy among only a section of the population. Especially Tamil and Muslim minorities do not seem to trust those institutions as much as their Sinhalese counterparts. This highlights the need for the restructuring of democratic institutions especially by taking into account the post-war political agenda of the country where reconciliation has been the key priority of the country.

d) Democratic Rule and its permutations

It is true that well over a hundred states call themselves democracies since the third wave of democracy. It is also true that with the proliferation of democracy across the world, the definition of the term ‘democracy’ expanded too, resulting in a wide variety of forms of governance being recognized as democracies across the world. David Collier and Steven Levitsky have referred to this as ‘Democracy with Adjectives’ (1997). In their famous essay they state:

The recent global wave of democratization has presented scholars with a major conceptual challenge. As numerous countries have moved away from authoritarianism, the concept of democracy has been applied in many new settings. Although the new national political regimes in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the former communist world share important attributes of democracy, many of them differ profoundly from the democracies in advanced industrial countries. Some, it is widely agreed, cannot be considered fully democratic.

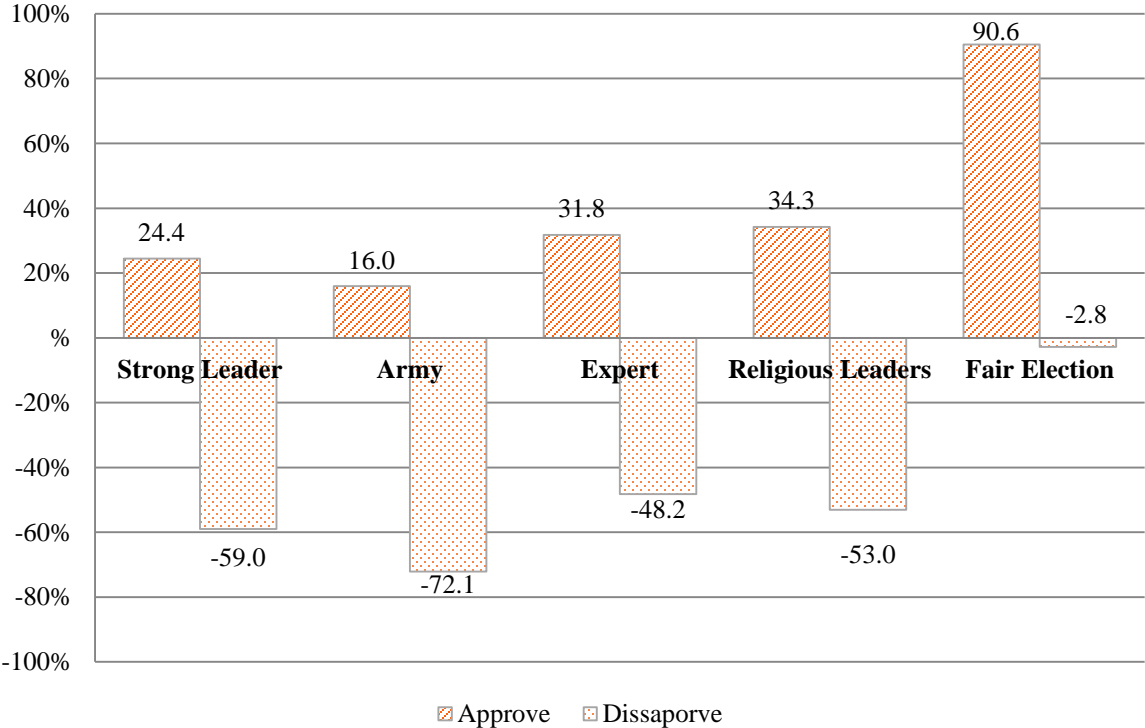
Others are often viewed as meeting minimal criteria for democracy, yet still exhibit features that scholars find problematic (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

At present, there are many democracies across the globe that have internalized various undemocratic features while holding regular elections. The military, religious authorities, and powerful personalities play a key role in the decision making processes of some of these so called democracies. In many democracies in the world, ‘national security’, ‘political stability’ and ‘development’ have become the key proprieties instead of ‘popular control’. As Uyangoda has observed, in Sri Lanka too, under many regimes since 1978 democracy coexisted with soft authoritarianism (Uyangoda 2012). Especially under J. R. Jayewardene’s regime, the idea that ruling the country by an expert or a strong leader who does not need to worry about the next election when making decisions was popularly advocated as well as captured the imagination of some sections of society. In addition, the Buddhist temple has always played a very influential role in Sri Lankan Politics (Kearny 1973; Jupp 1978; Phadnis 1976; Uyangoda 2009). However, for decades, this role of the temple and the monks in politics has been limited to extra-Parliamentary bodies. This covert nature of monk-politics changed with the entrance of nine monks to Parliament at the 2004 electionⁱⁱ. Electoral politics further changed with the 2010 Presidential election where the former Army Commander came forward as the common candidate to challenge the incumbent president, Mahinda Rajapaksa. It was the first time a very senior military figure came forward to contest an election to become the president of the country. Therefore, despite Sri Lanka’s uninterrupted democratic history, in its real practice democracy has never been able to completely divorce from illiberal undemocratic features. Public opinion and attitude towards various forms of government, captured in the survey, confirms that people do not pick one form against the other, but rather choose both forms of rule that could even seem contradictory.

The SDSA survey shows that Sri Lankans show clear preference (90%) for democratically elected governments than any other form of rule. Despite this overwhelming support for governance that is based on free and fair elections, the survey findings suggest that Sri Lankans also express willingness to accept other alternatives as well. In other words the findings suggest that for Sri Lankans, governance by free and fair elections need not preclude the willingness to be governed by religious leaders, experts, the military or by a strong leader. For example, although 91% approve

a form of government where leaders are elected through free and fair elections, 34% agree that ‘all major decisions about the country should be taken by religious leaders rather than politicians’ and 32% believe that ‘we should get rid of elections and parliaments and have experts make decisions on behalf of the people’.

Figure 1: Democratic Rule and its Permutations



Furthermore, 24% of those surveyed agreed that ‘we should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things’, while 16% said that ‘the army (military) should come in to govern the country’. In terms of disapproval for these alternatives to a democratic form of governance, it is noticeable that respondents have expressed the least degree of tolerance for the involvement of the military (72%) in governance, while respondents appear to be more open to involving experts in governance with only 48% expressing their disapproval of this alternative.

The ethnic disaggregation of this data indicates that the level of approval for free and fair elections is consistently high across ethnic groups. However, while the findings show that among the minorities - Tamils (44%), Muslims (43%), and Up-country Tamils (44%) - governance by experts appears to be the second most popular form of governance, while the involvement of religious

leaders in governance is the second most popular option among the Sinhalese respondents (34%). Furthermore, although the Muslim (3%), Up-Country Tamil (3%), and Tamil (5.3%) communities show a rather low level of approval for involving the military in government, Sinhalese respondents express some level of approval (18%) for such a form of governance.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that in Sri Lanka, democracy is a hegemonic ideology even though there are myriad of issues related to its practical functioning. People clearly prefer democracy to any other form of governance irrespective of their ethnicity, gender, age or class. Not only do people prefer democratic government, they also clearly refute a government of an authoritarian form. However, this clear unanimity with regard to their choice between democracy and authoritarianism disappears when they start discussing the nitty-gritty of democracy and its functioning. In this regard, not only the ethnic experience, but also ethnic imaginations have come forth to form and shape Sri Lanka's conceptualisation of democracy.

As this paper demonstrates, the Sinhala community prefers a majoritarian form of democracy that assures their rights, or to put it bluntly, their hegemony. The overwhelmingly high trust they placed in the Sinhalese Nationalist president Rajapaksa and his security forces has dwarfed the other democratic institutions. In addition, Sinhalese prefer those institutes at the center instead of ones in the periphery. Although the minority communities do not subscribe to this majoritarian conceptualization of democracy, their imagination of democracy does not constitute one homogeneous idea.

The challenge for Sri Lanka is not about preserving democracy. Instead, it is about the kind of democracy we must preserve. Throwing away the democratic system is out of question, not only for Sri Lankans but also for many across the world, not only because democracy has become a hegemonic ideology, but also because the idea of democracy has been stretched wide to accommodate many non-democratic features. The Sri Lankan survey warns of possibilities of multiple future trajectories: Not only the consolidation of Sinhala majoritarian form of democracy but also a democracy that manifests a combination of features like populist authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, quasi-military or technocratic rule. Unfortunately, the determinants of

the trajectory of Sri Lankan democracy do not exist exclusively within the boundaries of the nation state. While ethnic politics will play a significant role in determining the nature of democracy that Sri Lanka would experience, the current global right wing politics too would underpin the future ethnicized trajectory of democracy in Sri Lanka.

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ⁱ These findings are from the open-ended question on 'what the term democracy means to you?'

ⁱⁱ Of course, that was not the first time a Monk entered the parliament. Ven. Baddegama Samitha, a member of the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) contested parliamentary election in 2001 and became a member of parliament from 2001 to 2004.