#RiseUpSL: The Role of Social Media and Citizen Engagement in Sri Lanka's Political Crisis

Anuradha Rao

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka is in the midst of an unprecedented constitutional and political crisis. The Supreme Court's final verdict on the legality of the move to dissolve Parliament, expected on 13 December, and how parties respond to it, will have deep implications for the country's democratic future. Meanwhile, an unexpected outcome of this crisis has been the equally unprecedented level of citizen engagement and civil society activism, fuelled to a large extent by social media. The ferocity and level of citizen engagement and critical discourse online and offline has taken political actors and observers by surprise, and has played a key role in shaping political discourse and collective actions. Although it is too soon to tell whether the citizen upsurge can effect real political change, its significant role in upholding democratic traditions at this critical juncture in Sri Lankan history must be acknowledged.

It is more than a month into the political turmoil that rocked the very core of Sri Lanka's democratic foundations, precipitated by President Maithripala Sirisena's controversial decision to sack Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and replace him with former strongman Mahinda Rajapakse. This controversial move on 26 October 2018, and subsequent political manoeuvres by the Sirisena-Rajapakse camp, triggered political turmoil and public outcry, unleashing a flurry of legal activism, and bringing people onto the streets in protest. On 3 December 2018, the Court of Appeals issued an interim order staying Rajapakse and his cabinet from functioning. The decision elicited much relief and joy from citizens outraged by the blatant subversion of democratic process, particularly by a President who rode into office on a wave of popular support just three years ago. The Supreme Court's final verdict on the legality of the move to dissolve Parliament is expected on 13 December: the ruling itself and how parties respond to it will have deep implications for the future of Sri Lanka's democracy.

The motivations, nature and ramifications of this unprecedented constitutional and political crisis, as well as its geopolitical implications, have been well discussed by several commentators. However, an aspect that has yet to be fully appreciated, is the equally unprecedented level of citizen engagement and civil society activism during the crisis. A key factor in this upsurge of democratic engagement has been social media, with Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp being used to critique, analyse, and present narratives from the citizens themselves. Once the crisis broke, both political camps and their supporters took to

social media to sway public opinion in their favour, with the Rajapakse camp dominating the conversations and narratives. Although civil society was slower to catch up, the ferocity and level of citizen engagement and critical discourse took the Rajapakse camp, as well as observers, by surprise. Sanjana Hattotuwa, Senior Researcher at the Sri Lankan think-tank Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), who is currently doing his doctoral research on social media and politics, has highlighted the significant role of social media from November onwards in changing the dominant political discourse and fuelling citizen discontent[1].

Social Media: Good and Bad for Democratic Engagement

Accordingly, this article examines the role of social media in the political crisis in Sri Lanka, focusing specifically on the way social media is being used by civic actors in their democratic engagement activities. It builds on interviews with civil society actors and citizens that have been actively engaged in efforts to defend due democratic processes and fight misinformation and propaganda. I have also relied on the research and media outputs of these and other actors for secondary data, in the form of blogs, (English) social media posts and news items. Such an exercise is significant for two reasons: firstly, reactions and counter-reactions to events have largely played out on social media, making it the central arena for political and civic discourse and engagement. Secondly, an examination of the way main stakeholders leverage social media, and the key discourses online, provides important clues about the role of social media in influencing public opinion and collective actions. Thus, to ignore the influence of social media in this political crisis is to risk overlooking a key factor shaping public attitudes and events on the ground.

On the other hand, expectations of social media-enabled engagement should be tempered by the nature of the media landscape itself. In the case of Sri Lanka, any analysis of the role of social media in the present crisis must consider the context of the repressive media environment within which mainstream media operates, as well as social media's propensity to spread hatred and misinformation[2]. Nonetheless, at this juncture, the critical role of social media in shaping political discourse and civic engagement in Sri Lanka cannot be overstated. The government's attempts to restrict social media in the backdrop of communal violence in February and March this year reflects its growing anxieties about the digital domain. From 7-15 March 2018, the government initiated a nationwide block of social media (and some political news sites), and initiated attempts to reign in media freedoms in a more comprehensive way[3]. However, these efforts were met with resistance

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[1] Sanjana Hattotuwa, 'Pyrrhic putsch', (2 December 2018), https://sanjanah.wordpress.com.
[2] Gehan Gunatilleke, 'Two faces of Sri Lankan media: Censorship and resistance', in Sahana Udupa and Stephen McDowell (eds.), *Media as politics in South Asia* (Abingdon, OX; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017) pp. 143-159.
[3] Interestingly, the government blocked access to Viber, Facebook and WhatsApp, but not Twitter.

by civil society organisations (CSOs) and concerned citizens, who viewed such censorship with alarm, given the state's propensity to silence and repress the media.

Gehan Gunatilleke, a human rights lawyer and freedom of expression researcher, highlighted the dilemma that divided civil society opinion on the proposed social media regulation at that time, viz., the desire for an untethered social media space versus the need to control its pernicious effects[4]. The implications of an unregulated social media space is, of course, a complex issue, especially as Sri Lanka has been susceptible to violence generated by hate speech and misinformation circulated online. In the context of the current crisis, however, interviewees pointed to the critical role of social media in providing credible reportage and open spaces for discussion and debate. Twitter and Facebook have been popular platforms for civil society actors and the legal community, as well as for some mainstream media journalists, who have gained credibility as authentic and analytical information sources[5]. They also act as media watchdogs, counter misinformation and propaganda, and highlight opportunities for citizen engagement.

Resistance Online and Offline

As a researcher focused on new media-enabled democratic engagement, the role of social media in fuelling citizen engagement has been a striking feature of the crisis. Being connected to civic-minded Sri Lankan friends on social media, I began to follow the conversations (admittedly, in English) as events unfolded. A preliminary study of Facebook posts and Twitter feeds of these actors and activists since the crisis unfolded reveals that social media has been primarily used for the following activities:

- provision of information updates and analysis of events
- public education and knowledge repositories
- debates about constitutionalism, democracy, and the legality of the dissolution of Parliament and subsequent events
- scrutiny of the actions of elected representatives
- calls for citizen action to save democracy
- tackling propaganda and misinformation

Although this is a cursory analysis, it helps to shed light on the ways that social media is being leveraged for civic and political engagement, which is significant in light of the restrictive media environment. This is not the first time, however, that the social media-

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[4] Skype interview on November 22, 2018
[5] Some Twitter accounts providing critical, factual, corrective frames of the crisis are: @sanjanah, @the_hindu, @AzzamAmeen, @colombogazette, @vikalpavoices, @groundviews, @NalakaG, @welikalaa, @gigipurple, @Amethystinia

citizen participation alliance has influenced Sri Lankan politics. The 2015 Presidential Election was a watershed election, where extensive social media use by citizens and CSOs played a strategic role in the shock defeat of two-time president Rajapakse. It marked the advent of social media as a democratising factor, which could compete with state resources and machinery, and genuinely influence political outcomes[6]. Despite several similarities in the use of social media in 2015 and now, a distinguishing feature in the current context is the high level of citizen action online and *offline*, exemplified by a variety of individual and collective actions, captured and fuelled by social media. Nalaka Gunawardene, a leading commentator on ICTs, society and politics in Sri Lanka, notes that a myriad of resistive acts have occurred in different parts of the island, and by citizens from all walks of life[7]. These include hashtag activism, political commentary, cartoons, satire, memes, as well as individual and collective symbolic acts expressing displeasure, despair, and disgust at opportunistic political actions and actors.[8]

The crisis has also triggered a keen interest in the country's constitution and other legal provisions related to fundamental rights and freedoms. On social media, citizens are closely following, commenting on and analysing the ongoing legal proceedings challenging the dissolution of Parliament. Shanaka Amarasinghe, Attorney-at-Law in Colombo, who observed the historic court proceedings challenging the President's power to dissolve Parliament, told me he was enthused by the level of engagement and initiative shown by the legal fraternity[910]. He highlighted how social media has played an important role in generating and sustaining public awareness and interest in this unprecedented legal activism, as well as by allowing judges to be cognizant of the public mood and various legal arguments being debated. In addition to generating political discourse, Amarasinghe also pointed to the role of social media in facilitating the unprecedented level of citizen engagement on the ground.

Spectacular Citizen Engagement

In my view, a key outcome of this crisis has been the reinvigoration of citizen engagement in a very public and spectacular fashion, in the full glare of the authorities and media channels. Historically, CSOs have played a significant role in the country's socio-political life, with

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[6] Nalaka Gunawardene, 'Was #PresPollSL 2015 Sri Lanka's first cyber election?', *Groundviews*, (January 13 2015), https://groundviews.org/2015/01/13/was-prespollsl-2015-sri-lankas-first-cyber-election/. Accessed on 28 November 2018)

[7] Nalaka Gunawardene, 'Resist, defy, demand: Citizens speak online and offline', *The Morning* (2 December 2018), http://epaper.themorning.lk/Home/ShareArticle?OrgId=a1ac1c34&imageview=0.

[8] Popular hashtags include: #RiseUpSL, #Constitutionalcrisis, #ConstitutionalCrisisSriLanka, #CoupLK, #constitutionalcrisislk, , #FakePM, #ResistanceLK

[9] The Fundamental Rights petitions filed by the legal fraternity, political parties, and civil society groups and individuals, are being heard by a bench of 7 justices, presided by the Chief Justice, from December 4.

[10] Skype interview, November 22, 2018

varying degrees of friction and cooperation with the state[11]. However, this crisis has precipitated citizen engagement and involvement on a scale not witnessed before. Gunatilleke attributed the extraordinary surge of citizen participation as a marked defence of democracy, arising from perceived threats to the very foundations of Sri Lanka's democratic system. This is palpable among the citizenry, online and offline: social media posts, commentaries, and placards of protesting citizens reflect anxiety about the future. This fear, combined with anger over the blatant disregard by the Sirisena-Rajapakse camp for democratic institutions and procedures, triggered a wave of protests that have continued for over a month. In addition to civil society actors, those working in the arts and theatre, the business community, and members of the general public have gathered in large numbers, come rain or shine. The protestors have adopted tactics and strategies of internet-enabled collective action common to urban civil society and social movements in recent years[12]. With catchy and heartfelt slogans and innovative protest methods aimed at exerting continuous pressure on political actors, they have used social media to broadcast their messages and appeals to both domestic and international audiences.

Amalini De Sayrah and Raisa Wickrematunge, members of the Civic Media team of CPA, whose coverage of the citizen-led protests has been unparalleled in the independent digital media space, noted that social media has been the main channel of organisation, mobilisation, and documentation of the protests[13]. These have been Colombo-centric, and largely attended by people who live and/or work in the area and the surrounding suburbs. As protests have been organised by several CSOs and independent collectives, such as women's groups, LGBTQ activists, human rights groups, they have been attended by a cross-section of citizens from across the socio-economic spectrum. The images emerging from these protests, as well as other resistive acts, shared on social media have given them immediate publicity, legitimacy, and support, turning them into 'spectacular' events capable of drawing new civic actors onto the streets and cyberspace, and giving these efforts a wider character and reach. These protests have sent a clear message to the political class: that citizens are no longer willing to be mute spectators while democracy is at stake in Sri Lanka.

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[11] Vinod Moonesinghe, 'The history of civil society organisations in Sri Lanka', *Thuppahi's Blog* (18 March 2018), https://thuppahi.wordpress.com/2018/03/23/the-history-of-civil-society-organisations-in-sri-lanka/. Accessed on 1 December 2018.
[12] Anuradha Rao & Mohan J. Dutta, 'Repertoires of collective action in an "IT City": Urban civil society negotiations of offline and online spaces in Bangalore', *Communication Monographs* (2016) https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2016.1257140.
[13] Team members sent me their responses via email on 6 December 2018

Conclusion

At a Roundtable on Digital Politics organised by ISAS on 5 December 2018, some panellists, myself included, highlighted that we need to avoid viewing social media as a monolithic entity, and be cognizant of the various ways in which platforms are being used for democratic engagement. In Sri Lanka, both civic and political actors are using Facebook and Twitter in very different ways, and issues of language, class, and ethnicity intersect to influence civic and political communication and engagement. In examining the democratic potential of social media, we should also be mindful of the various limitations of both social media and civil society in the Sri Lankan context. The virulent role of social media in fostering hate and violence on ethno-religious lines was on full display earlier this year. Prior to this crisis, falsehoods, hate speech and radicalisation thrived in Sinhala and Tamil social media spaces. How to contain fake news and divisive discourses online is an issue that technology companies and governments worldwide are struggling to resolve. At this juncture, however, the dangers of an unregulated social media are outweighed by its critical democratic role. This aspect was highlighted by my interviewees, who all agreed that since the coup, social media has been largely used for pro-democratic and pro-social discourses and purposes. This is a cause for cheer in a country where an uncertain political future looms large. It is too soon to tell whether the citizen upsurge can outlast political resources and political manoeuvring, and effect real change in the way democracy is viewed and practiced in Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, the spectacular nature of social media-fuelled citizen engagement deserves to be acknowledged and studied for its crucial role when a fragile nation is at the crossroads.

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Dr Anuradha Rao is an independent researcher and consultant on information and communication technologies (ICTs) and civic and political engagement, digital politics, and smart cities, based in Singapore. She completed her post-doctoral fellowship and PhD from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and has held various teaching and research positions at NUS and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). She can be contacted at anuradha.rao62@yahoo.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.