

The Effects of Integrating Liberal Democracy in the Sri Lankan Government: A Review

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ABSTRACT

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka between the majority Sinhalese population and the minority Tamil population has grown to become a complex and pressing matter within the country. The election of Mahinda Rajapaksa as president in 2005 furthered these tensions as his administration passed legislation suppressing the Tamils, ultimately leading to the development of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an extremist organization representing the Tamils who support independence from the country. Rajapaksa's pro-Sinhala Buddhist government greatly appealed to the Sinhalese population, but his administration's lack of action towards domestic and foreign issues resulted in the election of Maithripala Sirisena, a liberal democratic leader who significantly improved the status of Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, with the prevalence of Buddhist nationalism and the recent election of Rajapaksa's brother, the economic, political, and social environment within the country has again begun to decline. Thus, given Sirisena's positive contribution to the country's affairs, this paper attempts to view the impacts of his government on the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict, foreign relations, and the possible future repercussions of integrating liberal democracy within the government in order to propose a feasible solution to and assess the likelihood of stabilizing the ongoing ethnic conflict.

Introduction

According to Vinod Khobragade (2008), Assistant Professor at Dayalbagh Educational Institute, South Asia is a "mosaic of fissiparous tendencies" due to its diverse population of ethnic groups (p. 911). Within Sri Lanka, this diversity remains the primary cause of tensions between Sinhalese Buddhists and Hindu Tamils. Prashant Amrutkar (2012), Doctor of Philosophy from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, mentions that Sinhalese Buddhists were encouraged by neo-revivalist attitudes since the 1980s and sought to establish a Sinhala "hegemony" that was "antagonistic" towards non-Sinhala groups, using their majority advantage to elect Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2005 (p. 747). With strict adherence to revivalism, Rajapaksa exemplified the "Tightness-Looseness" (TL) theory proposed by Michele Gelfand (2020) and her colleagues from the Department of Psychology, which suggests that "some groups' norms are tighter" and hence more difficult to alter (p. 9). For example, Rajapaksa enacted numerous legislation specifically targeting the local Tamil minority, including the declaration of Sinhala as the official language and limiting Tamil seats in Parliament (Amrutkar, 2012). Hence, while some scholars argue that Rajapaksa was beneficial for the Sinhalese, Rohini Hensman and Faizun Zackaria (2015), researchers and activists for Sri Lankan democracy, assert that his administration was "corrupt and nepotistic" (p. 25) due to its "reckless indebtedness," (p. 26) thus damaging the country as a whole.

The culmination of discriminatory legislation and unequal representation ultimately led to the rise of extremist groups that threatened to form an independent nation-state. The most prominent extremist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), killed 80,000 people during its 25-year insurgency, causing a significant influx of Tamil migrants to the neighboring countries of India and the Philippines (Amrutkar, 2012). As receiving countries experienced a refugee crisis, the ethnic conflict quickly escalated to international scope and furthered the debate regarding minority representation. Therefore, people from all groups demanded the institution of "liberal democracy,"

defined by Arne Heise and Ayesha Khan (2019), professors of economics, as a government structure in which the “minority rules” instead of a “majority” state through a “meritocracy” system (p. 230). Collectively, Sri Lankans voted for liberal democratic leader, Maithripala Sirisena, who established numerous reforms that overall stabilized the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict and improved foreign relations (Hensman & Zackaria, 2015).

Regardless, in accordance with the TL theory, Sinhalese nationalism still remained prevalent and was the main reason for the election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the brother of the former president, as President in 2019. Therefore, given the positive effects of liberal democracy on the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict and the contemporary re-emergence of autocracy, the question becomes increasingly prevalent: To what extent should Sri Lanka integrate liberal democracy within its government to rehabilitate ethnic relations between Sinhalese and Tamils? Ultimately, liberal democracy should be integrated within Sri Lanka’s government structure to provide equal representation for all ethnic groups and diversify foreign relations to subsequently increase the country’s economy and rehabilitate relations between the Sinhalese and Tamils.

Increase in Equal Representation

First, it is necessary to discuss the national consequences of liberal democracy integration. By allowing more representation in Parliament via appointing members of minority communities, Tamils are able to intervene in government affairs and develop legislation that addresses their needs. Specifically, President Sirisena’s liberal implementation of the 13th amendment was a “good start” for language rights as it declared both Sinhala and Tamil as the official languages of Sri Lanka (Hensman & Zackaria, 2015, p. 27). The authors imply that by incorporating minority and majority languages, Tamils who were formerly unable to converse in Sinhala are now represented and able to participate in education and jobs. Nira Wickramasinghe (2015), Professor of Modern South Asian Studies at Leiden University, furthers Hensman’s argument regarding increased Tamil representation by mentioning that Sirisena appointed a “civilian governor in the Tamil-majority north” and an ethnic Tamil as chief justice (p. 155). While liberal democracy increased Tamils’ political representation via legislation, Hensman’s positive assessment fails to consider continued social under-representation, as evidenced by Iromi Dharmawardhane (2015), a Senior Analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, who claims that Tamil regions have been “suffering from food insecurity and high unemployment” since concluding the civil war against the LTTE in 2009 (p. 49). Thus, Dharmawardhane disagrees with Hensman and Wickramasinghe’s positive assessment and calls for “more programs to reduce the economic vulnerabilities” (Dharmawardhane, 2015, p. 49).

Nonetheless, Hensman and Zackaria dispel these concerns by claiming that a scheme similar to India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee is in progress, which would “create employment” and “reduce food prices” (Hensman & Zackaria, 2015, p. 27). When fully implemented, the program was widely successful in rehabilitating the country’s economy and providing for Tamil regions. According to Chandra De Silva (2017), an Emeritus Professor of History at Old Dominion University, core inflation “remained at about 4%” as revenue collection became more efficient and “health care, housing,” and many “essential foods” were exempted from taxation to accommodate the economically vulnerable population (p. 53). Thus, De Silva and Hensman assert that Sirisena’s democratic government was able to represent minority groups by providing economic stability and programs that equally represented and prioritized Tamils’ needs; therefore, forceful opposition was unnecessary.

Despite the inclusion of both Tamils and Sinhalese in the government, the strengthening of Buddhist revivalism since the late 1980s caused Sinhalese to maintain support for Rajapaksa as they felt their nationalist beliefs were not represented. According to Syed Soherwordi (2010), a teacher at the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Edinburgh, Buddhist nationalism aims to “create a purer Buddhism” by participating in rituals, such as celebrating Buddha’s death, that provide Sinhalese with a “sense of belonging” (p. 41). Through his explanation of contemporary revivalist methods, Soherwordi argues that the Sinhalese have strengthened intergroup relations by rejecting other ethnic groups, furthering the ethnic divide with Tamils. Michele Gelfand furthers Soherwordi’s argument

by generalizing the consequences of revivalism. While Gelfand acknowledges that participating in ritualistic behavior “increases cohesion,” she claims that synchrony also promotes “aggression” and “destructive obedience” (Gelfand et al., 2020, p. 3). The government exemplifies Gelfand’s TL theory, evidenced by the contemporary election of Rajapaksa’s brother who was significantly supported by the majority Sinhalese population, providing concern about the feasibility of fully implementing a liberal democracy. Nonetheless, given the decrease in aggression between Tamils and Sinhalese during Sirisena’s government, liberal democracy should be deeply integrated into the government structure to increase the equal representation of all ethnic groups.

Diversified Foreign Relations

By incorporating minority groups, liberal democracy stabilized Sri Lanka and positively influenced foreign perception, strengthening Sri Lanka politically and economically via trade. Before elaborating on the consequent reduction in Tamil-Sinhalese conflicts, it is necessary to investigate the influence on foreign perception as a result of democracy. According to Carsten Rauch (2016) from the Peace Research Institute, democratic countries often encourage the development of other democracies to create a global alliance in accordance with the Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) which mentions that “democratic states do not wage war against each other” (p. 5). Rauch claims that as a result of the DPT, countries enter into an unofficial pact to support one another in an effort to maintain democracy domestically and ensure its prevalence globally. Thus, a shift to democracy would likely include Sri Lanka in the DPT, providing the country with stronger security and foreign aid.

For example, Nicole Klitzsch (2014) from the School of Politics at Queen’s University, claims that following a Tsunami disaster in Indonesia, western powers provided “generous financial assistance” to support the country’s democratic leader amid rising communist groups (p. 560). During Sirisena’s regime, a similar phenomenon was observed as Sri Lanka received an “extended fund facility of US\$ 1.5 billion” from the International Monetary Fund, an organization partly financed by the United States (De Silva, 2016, p. 42). Nevertheless, while increased foreign relations diversified Sri Lanka’s income, Jayanath Colombage (2019), Director at the Centre for Indo-Lanka Initiatives, argues that the economic aid negatively impacted Sri Lanka’s political relations. He claims that neighboring countries, especially India, viewed Sri Lanka’s relations as surrendering its “sovereignty to other countries” who would likewise interfere in economies throughout South Asia (Colombage, 2019, p. 53). Colombage stresses that relations between the two countries were already strained due to discriminatory practices against the Tamils, who are highly concentrated in South India as well; however, Sirisena’s foreign connections have furthered mistrust (Colombage, 2019). Although Sri Lanka-India relations are not entirely rehabilitated, Colombage fails to consider Sirisena’s positive reforms. Samantha Mallempati (2019), a Research Fellow for the Indian Council of World Affairs, disagrees with the decline in relations with India. Instead, she asserts that following the election of Sirisena, India and Sri Lanka “witnessed a productive bilateral engagement,” largely due to the decline in Tamil refugees escaping to India amid Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict (Mallempati, 2019, p. 21). Hence, with increased stability resulting from an equal representation of minority groups, India encouraged its citizens to visit Sri Lanka, emerging as a “top country for tourist arrivals” and increasing Sinhalese contact with Tamils (Mallempati, 2019, p. 22).

Mallempati emphasizes that during Sirisena’s democracy, India-Sri Lanka relations significantly improved, fostering political stability. Moreover, Sri Lanka was able to capitalize on its unique tourism industry, furthering its economy. Ultimately, Tamil-Sinhalese tensions were reduced as Sinhalese gained more confidence in India as a “multi-ethnic” country that “accommodates the aspirations of all sections of society,” positively reflecting Tamils through increased understanding of Tamil culture via mutually-beneficial tourism (Mallempati, 2019, p. 22). Overall, diverse foreign relations provided economic stability to Sri Lanka which allowed for the government to invest in the needs of minority populations, decreasing unemployment and the necessity for groups to forcefully demand economic representation. Therefore, given the economic and political benefits derived from Sirisena’s regime, liberal democracy should be integrated into Sri Lanka’s government.

Future Repercussions

Despite the aforementioned benefits of liberal democracy incorporation, Sinhalese nationalism still remained prevalent and led to the re-emergence of autocracy. Nationalism according to Alexis De Tocqueville (1835), a French diplomat during the French Revolution, is particularly prevalent within aristocratic nations as aristocracy has the “effect of closely binding every man” by emphasizing traditions and individual respect towards “forefathers” (p. 24). Although Sri Lanka is autocratic, Rajapaksa’s nepotism has created a contemporary equivalent of an aristocracy, demonstrating the prevalence and applicability of De Tocqueville despite his claims dating almost two centuries prior. As a result of close familial relations within an aristocratic government, De Tocqueville emphasizes the importance of Sri Lankan culture to the Sinhalese populations, again furthering the TL theory. Therefore, Sri Lanka’s traditional autocratic government has caused Sinhalese nationalism to remain prominent despite Sirisena’s efforts to promote equality.

Ahilan Kadirgamar (2020), a member of the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum, contemporizes De Tocqueville’s assertion by emphasizing how Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected as President in 2019 “almost exclusively with Sinhala votes” (p. 58). The election was partly a result of an over-emphasis on rehabilitating Sinhala-Tamil relations by Sirisena, creating “security lapses” that failed to promptly address a series of terrorist attacks by the Muslim minority on Easter Sunday, and also an under-emphasis on Sinhala nationalism through equal legislation (Kadirgamar, 2020, p. 58). The pervasiveness of distinct cultures primarily induced the failure of democracy as individuals did not “learn voluntarily to help each other,” impacting Sri Lanka’s “relapse into barbarism” with the re-emergence of extreme views and cohesive groups (De Tocqueville, 1835, p. 25). Especially within the government itself, Rajapaksa has sought to “reconsolidate the majoritarian and militarized policies” by isolating minorities via encouraging polarization on social media to “amplify inflammatory rhetoric” (Kadirgamar, 2020, pp. 58-60). These polarizing policies pose a threat to Sri Lanka’s future stability and further the necessity for a liberal democracy to minimize tensions before they escalate.

Conclusion

With the Rajapaksa government’s recent re-election, tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese have already begun to escalate, once again threatening social and political instability in the country. Thus, given the minimization of the conflict during Sirisena’s liberal democratic administration, it is necessary to consider integrating liberal democratic standards within the government.

Limitations

Although a complete shift to democracy would be ideal, Sinhalese’ tight adherence to the TL theory reduces the feasibility of such a solution. Rohan Gunaratna (2018), Professor of Security Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, claims that simply incorporating liberal democracy will not suffice. Instead, “integrating the Sinhalese [and] Tamils” both politically and socially is a “critical step towards social harmony” (Gunaratna, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, policies must be “dynamic” and address the deeply rooted ethnic differences between the two groups via “indigenous discourse” (Kadirgamar, 2020, p. 64). Through these discussions, the government should ultimately enact legislation focused on equal representation, a method that successfully addressed each group’s concerns and subsequently decreased tensions under the Sirisena administration. Especially with already re-emerging “public discontent over the economic and health fallouts,” as mentioned by Rajni Gamage (2021) from the University of Queensland, western countries have limited funding to pressurize Sri Lanka to handle the situation efficiently and prioritize long-term peace (p. 145). In order to minimize this conflict and fully rehabilitate relations between Sinhalese and

Tamils, “leaders need to rise above ethnic and religious politics” to improve Sri Lanka for the current and future generations (Gunaratna, 2018, p. 4).

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