

SRI LANKA AFTER THE ELECTIONS:

Governance in a Time of Crisis



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ISAS-KAS Roundtable

Sri Lanka after the Elections: Governance in a Time of Crisis

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Executive Summary

In November 2024, the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, together with its partner, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Singapore, hosted a closed-door roundtable which brought together distinguished speakers from Sri Lanka and Singapore. The event included a presentation by the speakers, a moderated discussion with them and an interactive session with invited participants. Titled ‘Sri Lanka after the Elections: Governance in a Time of Crisis’, the event discussed issues concerning Sri Lanka’s new government and its challenges.

In September 2024, Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the National People’s Power (NPP) won the Sri Lankan presidential election. The parliament was dissolved shortly after and a snap general election was held on 14 November 2024. The NPP won a historic super majority, securing 159 seats in the 225-member parliament.

The discussions during the roundtable focused on the critical challenges confronting the new government as it navigates a complex political, economic and social landscape.

The discussions during the roundtable focused on the critical challenges confronting the new government as it navigates a complex political, economic and social landscape. Among the key issues faced by the new government are delivering meaningful economic relief amidst rising inequality, meeting the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) revenue targets while managing austerity measures and addressing the national question through power sharing and other means. The roundtable also explored the enduring impact of the 2022 mass protests on the electoral outcome, the prospects for democratising reforms and the role of public trust in shaping Sri Lanka’s future governance.

Through the examination of these intersecting dimensions, the roundtable provided a nuanced understanding of Sri Lanka’s governance in a time of crisis, offering insights into the opportunities and constraints faced by the new administration in its pursuit of stability, equity and long-term reform.

Introduction

Sri Lanka is at a pivotal moment in its political, economic and social trajectory. Decades of widening socio-economic disparities, entrenched patronage politics and shrinking civil liberties have created an urgent demand for systemic reform. The 2024 election brought the NPP to the forefront, making it a moment that signifies both the people's rejection of the traditional political culture and their aspirations for a progressive and inclusive future.

Despite this historic mandate, the challenges ahead for the new government are immense. Patronage politics, which has long shaped governance in Sri Lanka, are likely to continue influencing public expectations and political decision-making. Sri Lanka's socio-economic landscape further complicates this transition. Rising inequality, inadequate social protection and austerity measures have deepened vulnerabilities across the society. Pension funds diverted for debt restructuring, household debt exacerbated by unregulated microfinance and environmentally unsustainable development projects highlight the fragility of the national economy.

At the same time, the underlying issues of the country's protracted ethnic conflict remain unresolved. The lack of accountability for land grabs (especially in the former conflict areas in the North and East), disappearances and other mass atrocities perpetuate mistrust and exclusion. The use of constitutional provisions to centralise power and the concentration of powers within the office of the executive presidency further hinder progress, underscoring the need for fundamental state reforms. The NPP faces the formidable task of enacting structural reforms while sustaining its political legitimacy and popular buy-in. Whether this moment becomes a turning point in Sri Lanka's history will depend on the government's ability to deliver on its promises while maintaining the trust and support of the citizens who entrusted it to usher in a new era of politics and society.

Patronage politics, which has long shaped governance in Sri Lanka, are likely to continue influencing public expectations and political decision-making.

Economic Stabilisation and Progress

Sri Lanka's economy experienced a significant downturn in recent years but showed a notable recovery by the second quarter of 2024. Faster-than-expected macro-stabilisation has been achieved, and the IMF programme is back on track. However, the continued implementation of structural reforms is expected to determine the country's economic growth trajectory.¹ By December 2024, the country had completed restructuring its foreign debt with private creditors, having postponed repayment of bilateral loans until 2028.²

This stagnation is likely to hamper broader economic growth in the coming years, as infrastructure development and investment traditionally act as growth catalysts.

Key economic indicators, particularly in manufacturing and services, are trending upward, fuelled by a resurgence in tourism. In 2024 alone, over 1.62 million tourists visited Sri Lanka, providing a much-needed boost to the economy.³ Manufacturing has also seen expansion, driven in part by seasonal demand, while agriculture and renewable energy have benefitted from favourable weather conditions, with no major droughts since 2016-17. Consumer activity indicators further reflect an improving economic climate. However, the construction sector has not recovered, originally contributing around 10 per cent of the gross domestic product and has now contracted to six per cent.⁴ This stagnation is likely to hamper broader economic growth in the coming years, as infrastructure development and investment traditionally act as growth catalysts. Addressing this contraction will require targeted policies to revitalise the sector and attract long-term investment.

On the fiscal front, the government has made commendable progress in addressing deep-rooted issues that contributed to the economic

¹ "Sri Lanka Development Update 2024", World Bank Group, 10 October 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka/publication/sri-lanka-development-update-2024>.

² Karin Strohecker, "What we know about Sri Lanka's governance and macro-linked bonds", *Reuters*, 17 December 2024, [https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/sri-lankas-ambitious-governance-macro-linked-bonds-2024-12-17/#:~:text=LONDON%2C%20Dec%2017%20\(Reuters\),ever%20arranged%20in%20a%20restructuring](https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/sri-lankas-ambitious-governance-macro-linked-bonds-2024-12-17/#:~:text=LONDON%2C%20Dec%2017%20(Reuters),ever%20arranged%20in%20a%20restructuring).

³ "Tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka jump 25 pc in October: SLTDA", *India Outbound*, 15 November 2024, <https://indiaoutbound.info/trade-news/tourist-arrivals-in-sri-lanka-jump-25-pc-in-october-sltdda/>.

⁴ US Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, Sri Lanka-Country Commercial Guide, 2024, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/sri-lanka-construction>.

crisis. It improved the primary fiscal balance, achieving a reduction from four per cent to two per cent, in line with the IMF's targets.⁵ Some import restrictions remain in place although some car import restrictions are expected to be lifted with effect from February 2025.⁶ Meanwhile, remittances have emerged as a vital source of foreign exchange, with worker departures increasing, even though there is a trend of fluctuating remittance figures.⁷

One of the targets of the international programme is the net international reserves, which have been exceeded for the year. Previously, the central bank was selling the reserves, but it has been purchasing dollars over the last two years. This has led to the appreciation of the Sri Lankan rupee.

In the monetary sector, inflation has come down. The Sri Lankan economy has experienced deflation in the last few months and food and energy prices have come down.⁸ Core inflation is around five per cent, aligning with the target levels. The IMF programme, which evaluates progress through three categories, namely, quantitative performance criteria (binding constraints), indicative targets (non-compulsory) and structural benchmarks, has seen mixed success.⁹ While the primary balance and official reserves performance criteria have been met, indicative targets such as those focusing on social spending remain unmet.¹⁰

While the primary balance and official reserves performance criteria have been met, indicative targets such as those focusing on social spending remain unmet.

Sri Lanka is also the first country in Asia to mandate the IMF's diagnostic assessment. The diagnostic assessment provided 16

⁵ Uditha Jayasinghe, "Sri Lanka balances polls and crisis recovery in 2024 budget deliberations", *Reuters*, 9 November 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/sri-lanka-balances-polls-crisis-recovery-2024-budget-deliberations-2023-11-09/>.

⁶ "Sri Lanka to allow vehicle imports from February 2025", *Ada Derana News*, 18 December 2024, <https://www.adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=104333>.

⁷ "Starting October 1, Sri Lanka to lift the ban on vehicle imports in a phased manner", *Indian Express*, 14 September 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/world-market/sri-lanka-vehicle-imports-feb-2025-9567695/>.

⁸ Hardik Bhardwaj, "Deflation returns to Sri Lanka after 29 years: Boon or Bane", *Wion*, 1 October 2024, <https://www.wionews.com/business-economy/deflation-returns-to-sri-lanka-after-29-years-boon-or-bane-763438>.

⁹ Press Release and Statement by Executive Director, "Sri Lanka: 2024 Article IV Consultation and Second Review Under the Extended Fund Facility, Request for Modification of Performance Criterion, and Financing Assurances Review, International Monetary Fund, 13 June 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2024/06/13/Sri-Lanka-2024-Article-IV-Consultation-and-Second-Review-Under-the-Extended-Fund-Facility-550261#:~:text=Performance%20under%20the%20program%20has,met%20or%20implemented%20with%20delay>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

recommendations, including a focus on corruption and an independent prosecutor. While the NPP government has incorporated many of these recommendations into its agenda, substantial work remains to implement them effectively.

Ideological Shifts and Political Dynamics

The 2022 mass protests (commonly known as the *Aragalaya* or struggle) significantly impacted the country's political trajectory, serving as a pivotal moment in the ideological-political nexus. To understand the context of the 2022 protest, it is important to understand the interplay between ideology and politics that shaped this period. The NPP's electoral victory is noteworthy because it attracted voters not only from the majority Sinhala Buddhist electorate but also from the Tamil and Muslim minority communities, especially in the North, Hill Country and Central Colombo.¹¹ This success extended across urban-rural and north-south constituencies, indicating a broader appeal compared to traditional political movements.

Understanding the NPP's rise requires an examination of the ideological systems that influenced individuals and groups to engage in political action – from grassroots protests to formal voting patterns.

Historically, Sri Lanka's ideological-political nexus can be divided into five significant periods. The first, pre-1956, witnessed a rise in conservative nationalism and left radicalism. Sri Lanka's political elite traditionally belonged to the conservative and moderate nationalist school of thought. Meanwhile, left-radical parties also had a nationalist orientation, especially in terms of their anti-colonial stance.

The political democratisation of 1956 marked a turning point, with the lower social strata mobilising against the entrenched political hegemony. This period also initiated the bifurcation of the Sinhala-Buddhist electorate, creating lasting ideological divides. The 1956 election saw a landslide victory of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna,

The NPP's electoral victory is noteworthy because it attracted voters not only from the majority Sinhala Buddhist electorate but also from the Tamil and Muslim minority communities, especially in the North, Hill Country and Central Colombo.

¹¹ Roshni Kapur and Diotima Chatteraj, "Why Sri Lanka's Minorities Voted for a Sinhalese Party", *The Diplomat*, 10 December 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/why-sri-lankas-minorities-voted-for-a-sinhalese-party/>.

coinciding with a rise in ethno-nationalism and ‘developmental nationalism’.

The third key period, shaped by the events of 1983, was defined by ideological shifts driven by the ethnic conflict.

The fourth period emerged in 2005 with the Rajapaksa governments, characterised by a consolidation of ethno-nationalist politics.

The majority Sinhala-Buddhist voter behaviour has historically been shaped by a combination of factors, including class, caste and entrenched systems of political patronage.

The final and most recent period began in 2022, when mass protests signalled the dawn of ideological transformation and political realignment. The majority Sinhala-Buddhist voter behaviour has historically been shaped by a combination of factors, including class, caste and entrenched systems of political patronage. The voting tradition of the family played a major role. As family ties weaken in an urbanising society and open economy, individual voting behaviour is observed to often deviate from the family’s voting behaviour.¹²

By 2024, the NPP’s victory marked a turning point, introducing new political identities shaped by social media, such as the *Toiyas* and *Baiyas*. These labels reflect deeper ideological cleavages, underscoring the influence of modern communication platforms such as social media and instant messaging services on political discourse.

¹² Uditha Devapriya, “The Baiya and Toiya of Citizenry”, *Colombo Telegraph*, 9 May 2015, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-baiya-toiya-of-citizenry/>.

Social Media and Political Engagement

In the first election since the 2022 protests, Dissanayake's social media engagement reached an unprecedented peak of over eight million reactions on Facebook. His official page's content was shared five times more than his competitors. Social media contributed significantly to the NPP's success by mobilising the youth and diasporic Sri Lankans.

The role of videos and memes as the key drivers of political discourse online were significant, as they facilitated real-time or near real-time interaction with content posted by all three leading presidential candidates. The scope, speed of production and scale of engagement marked an unprecedented development in Sri Lankan electoral history. The emergence of new political storytelling marks a significant shift from traditional political narratives, reflecting the development of a new political vocabulary tailored to digital audiences, including those within Sri Lanka's diasporas. This shift highlights how the political discourse is evolving in response to the changing media landscapes and the increasing influence of online platforms.

Social media discussions during the election provided in-depth insights into contemporary political developments that both match and complement traditional political analysis.¹³ This new approach offers unprecedented accuracy in understanding voting patterns, owing to the volume, scope, scale, spread and diversity of online commentary. This development, too, represents a significant post-*Aragalaya* phenomenon. The significance of social media analysis in Sinhala and Tamil languages warrants deeper exploration. Among the Tamil voters, there has been an evolution in online content, shifting notably from conversations on explicit federalism (as a form of power sharing) to more immediate governance concerns. Practical

The emergence of new political storytelling marks a significant shift from traditional political narratives, reflecting the development of a new political vocabulary tailored to digital audiences, including those within Sri Lanka's diasporas.

¹³ See, for instance, Jayadeva Uyangoda's political commentary in: Amit Baruah, "Sri Lanka is the only country in South Asia that has some political hope: Jayadeva Uyangoda", *Frontline*, 22 November 2024, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/sri-lanka-presidential-election-2024-politics-npp-jvp-sinhala-OECD-economic-crisis-democracy-corruption-south-asia/article68897944.ece>.

issues such as economic recovery and efficient administration took precedence, with comments such as “We need development first; we can discuss structures later.”¹⁴ This shift in focus underscored a growing appetite for pragmatic, solutions-oriented politics across ethnic lines.

However, the conversations still paid specific attention to the implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution and expressed concern over the potential abandonment of a commitment to devolution and power sharing. Conversely, Sinhala discussions on social media focused on systemic change rather than specific constitutional reforms. There was also limited direct engagement with the federalism concept among this user group. The abolition of the executive presidency emerged as a dominant theme within these conversations, reflecting a desire for unity-based governance models over divisive debates on federalism.

The lack of transparent mechanisms to track dark campaign financing through social media and vague media guidelines further left significant gaps in electoral oversight.

Despite the integral role of social media in shaping political narratives, key election-related state institutions, such as the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, faced significant challenges in regulating its influence throughout the election campaign period and in meeting its mandate to protect electoral integrity. It failed to adapt and respond adequately to election-related online disinformation and its media guidelines revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of modern information ecosystems.¹⁵ The lack of transparent mechanisms to track dark campaign financing through social media and vague media guidelines further left significant gaps in electoral oversight.

The introduction of the Online Safety Act (OSA) has further complicated the landscape for freedom of speech and expression, and this particularly affects the Tamil minorities in the North, who have been disproportionately subjected to state surveillance and repressive

¹⁴ Sanjana Hattotuwa, “Tamil sentiment on NPP’s electoral sweep of Jaffna, and Northern Province in 2024 general election”, *The Hindu*, 16 November 2024, <https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2024/11/16/tamil-sentiment-on-npps-electoral-sweep-of-jaffna-and-northern-province-in-2024-general-election/>.

¹⁵ Sanjana Hattotuwa, “Social media, meditations, & mediations: Snapshots of Sri Lanka after the consequential elections in 2024”, LinkedIn, 30 November 2024, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/social-media-meditations-meditations-snapshots-sri-hattotuwa-ph-d--eromc/?trackingId=jKTJlbyLQUqYAPs5xRD5qA%3D%3D>.

laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The Global Network Initiative, a multistakeholder collaboration to protect freedom of expression and privacy in technology, supports the reimagining of the OSA based on human rights norms. Moreover, understanding its impact on foreign direct investment (FDI) is important, particularly in how it conflicts with Sri Lanka's Personal Data Protection Act and the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, effectively preventing entities answerable to these laws from investing in Sri Lanka.

The NPP's Minister of Parliament and Minister of Transport, Highways, Ports and Civil Aviation, Bimal Rathnayake, commented on the social media being integral to the president's campaign victory.¹⁶ He stated that the youth, by commenting, posting and sharing content on social media platforms, had broadened the president's reach.

The NPP government has emphasised delivery over process in its approach to digitalisation, raising questions about the nature of meaningful reform it might pursue. While the new government's prioritisation of digitalisation is important, there is a lack of emphasis on regulatory, policy and legal frameworks to harmonise what is currently an incoherent array of competing and incompatible laws.

The Global Network Initiative, a multistakeholder collaboration to protect freedom of expression and privacy in technology, supports the reimagining of the OSA based on human rights norms.

¹⁶ Sanjana Hattotuwa, "The Online Safety Act and MP Bimal Rathnayake's Take on Social Media's Role in the Election Victories", *GroundViews*, 26 November 2024, <https://groundviews.org/2024/11/26/the-online-safety-act-and-mp-bimal-rathnayakes-take-on-social-medias-role-in-the-election-victories/>.

Tamil Politics in the North and East

Alienated by traditional political leaders, their inability to address pressing concerns of the people and the absence of strong leadership created a space for the NPP to appeal to disillusioned voters, especially the younger generations, who sought alternatives to the political status quo.

The election results demonstrated a shift in Tamil politics, with the NPP winning three out of six seats from the Jaffna electoral district, where the Tamil minority forms a numerical majority.¹⁷ This marked a historic crossing of ethnic lines to vote for the NPP in this election. This broad-based support reflected a parallel transformation in the political psyche of these groups. Alienated by traditional political leaders, their inability to address pressing concerns of the people and the absence of strong leadership created a space for the NPP to appeal to disillusioned voters, especially the younger generations, who sought alternatives to the political status quo.

The fragmentation of traditional coalitions, such as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), has significantly altered Northern politics in Sri Lanka. The TNA had already suffered a significant electoral setback in the 2020 general election, winning only 11 seats, compared to the 16 seats it secured in the 2015 election. This culminated in the coalition's eventual break-up, leading to the formation of breakaway groups such as the Democratic Tamil National Alliance (DTNA). These splits and internal conflicts within the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), the main political party within the TNA, further deepened divisions among the electorate, leaving the community politically fragmented.

This fragmentation coincided with a broader wave of disillusionment with traditional parties in the South and North. In the South, the *Aragalaya* reflected widespread frustration with the establishment's political elite. Although some argue that the *Aragalaya* had a limited, direct impact in the North and East, it undoubtedly influenced the political discourse there as well. It contributed to a collective consciousness about the need for change. The movement highlighted a shared dissatisfaction with governance across ethnic and regional lines, albeit with differing priorities and nuances.

¹⁷ Roshni Kapur and Diotima Chatteraj, "Why Sri Lanka's Minorities Voted for a Sinhalese Party", op. cit.

Moreover, in the North, a new, educated class has emerged with aspirations for greater political involvement. Many of these youth, who grew up during the war and participated in political parties, sought to challenge the traditional leaders' dominance. The diaspora also supported the NPP instead of the Tamil parties and asked their families to vote for the NPP. They identified with Dissanayake, who was seen as more relatable by ordinary people, and they saw the NPP as a viable alternative.

District-level dynamics further illustrate the shifting political landscape. Jaffna became the jewel in the NPP's electoral crown. In Batticaloa, however, the ITAK saw a significant resurgence, with some hypothesising the win to be because of an anti-Muslim wave rather than a Tamil nationalist sentiment. In Trincomalee, the TNA had regrouped but the first Tamil member of parliament from a national party (the NPP) was elected in Trincomalee this time. Currently, seven elected members of the parliament are from the Tamil community, reflecting the community's diverse and evolving political affiliations. The question remains whether this fragmented representation can effectively address the aspirations of Tamil voters, particularly in the context of a broader national movement for systemic change.

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Local Anxieties and Global Challenges

The NPP is a relative newcomer to governance. Its main political party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was a coalition party in the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led government of 2004 but has not previously led a government as the main party/alliance. While its manifesto provides a theoretical framework for its policies, the specifics of its process and approach have remained ambiguous in the early months after coming to power. This lack of clarity presents both an opportunity and a challenge, as it navigates the complexities of governance, especially in the context of an economic crisis.

Balancing domestic and international expectations will, therefore, be crucial for the NPP.

Sri Lanka faces multifaceted security threats – ranging from health crises, cyber vulnerabilities, non-state actors and military risks to technological shifts, climate change and digital misinformation. Presently, security threats overlap between domestic and foreign policy. For example, health security is a sector that inherently overlaps domestic governance and international cooperation, illustrating the interconnected nature of today’s challenges. Balancing domestic and international expectations will, therefore, be crucial for the NPP.

Robert Putnam’s two-level game theory aptly explains how governments negotiate simultaneously at international and domestic levels.¹⁸ Such two-level negotiation requires the government to engage with the citizens to understand their expectations and priorities at the domestic level and, subsequently, integrate these domestic imperatives into international negotiations, where compromises will likely be necessary. Following international agreements, the government must, in turn, communicate the outcomes of these agreements to the domestic audience in a way that resonates with them and aligns with their expectations. The success of these agreements hinges on finding policies that satisfy stakeholders on

¹⁸ Robert D Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games”, *International Organization*, Vol 42, No.3, 427-460.

both levels – a delicate balancing act that requires skilful negotiation and effective communication.

The NPP's legislative supermajority gives it a strong mandate to implement foreign policy decisions, bolstering its international credibility. However, this supermajority also presents a paradox. While it enhances the government's ability to communicate and implement negotiated agreements domestically, it diminishes its bargaining power on the global stage. Unlike governments with less legislative control, the NPP cannot reject unfavourable international conditions by citing parliamentary or domestic resistance.

In a time of global realignment, the NPP government will have to face significant challenges. Ongoing inter-state conflicts, such as those in Ukraine and Gaza, could impede Sri Lanka's ability to secure its economic future. The rise of far-right parties in global politics will also alter the landscape of international diplomacy, requiring the NPP to adapt its strategies to negotiate with less predictable actors. Additionally, shifting power dynamics among the great powers will necessitate caution over whether to align with or balance against dominant global players, as these choices will shape Sri Lanka's geopolitical standing.

Despite these challenges, the NPP can leverage the shifting global landscape to its advantage. The traditional principle of non-alignment is less relevant in today's interconnected world. Instead, Sri Lanka can benefit from diversifying its trade relationships, particularly by expanding ties with emerging markets in South and Central America, where existing relationships provide a foundation for growth. Moreover, strengthening ties with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries and seeking new alliances in the Global South could open avenues for economic and strategic collaboration.

The rise of far-right parties in global politics will also alter the landscape of international diplomacy, requiring the NPP to adapt its strategies to negotiate with less predictable actors.

Constitutional Reform

There is a school of thought that the social contract in Sri Lanka requires reinvigoration through constitutional reform. Constitutional reforms are expected to provide an overarching framework within which other critical reforms can be passed. Effective reform necessitates a two-thirds majority in parliament and the NPP government's supermajority uniquely positions it to prioritise this critical task.

The NPP's manifesto explicitly promises a return to parliamentary democracy but it remains to be seen how this pledge will materialise in practice.

Among the highly needed constitutional reforms are devolution and the abolition of the executive presidency. Since 1978, discussions over the abolition of the executive presidency have been recurrent but not conclusive.¹⁹ The presidency has been criticised for its unchecked consolidation of power, which has often led to governance crises.²⁰ For instance, the political turmoil involving the Rajapaksa family in 2022 may not have occurred under a more decentralised system. The executive presidency has also been a linchpin in perpetuating corruption – an issue the NPP government has vowed to tackle. The NPP's manifesto explicitly promises a return to parliamentary democracy but it remains to be seen how this pledge will materialise in practice.²¹

The counterfactual scenarios surrounding the executive presidency further complicate this reform. While the NPP has committed to abolishing it, the party has also clarified that Provincial Councils will remain intact.²² This election cycle did not prominently feature constitutional reform as a central issue. Instead, the electorate's primary concerns revolved around anti-corruption measures and improving daily livelihoods. This lack of political momentum for

¹⁹ Meera Srinivasan, "In Sri Lanka, two candidates promise to abolish the executive presidency," *The Hindu*, 20 August 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/in-sri-lanka-two-candidates-promise-to-abolish-executive-presidency/article68546741.ece>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Aroonim Bhuyan, Will Dissanayake be the Last Executive President of Sri Lanka, *ETV National*, 24 September 2024, <https://www.etvbharat.com/en/international/will-dissanayake-be-the-last-executive-president-of-sri-lanka-en24092405246>.

²² Samatha Mallemati, "The Rise of JVP-led NPP: A Clear Political Shift in Sri Lanka", *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 29 November 2024, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=12090&lid=7367.

constitutional change poses a challenge to pushing reforms to the forefront of the national agenda.

Moreover, Dissanayake is a charismatic and engaging political leader, with people all over the country relating to him. This complicates efforts to abolish the executive presidency, as many citizens may prefer retaining a strong centralised leadership, particularly during crises. A prevailing school of thought argues that the presidency enables swift action in emergencies, underscoring the need for a nuanced debate on its future.²³ Ultimately, the success of constitutional reform hinges on consistent political commitment and a well-articulated vision that aligns with both public sentiment and institutional imperatives.

A prevailing school of thought argues that the presidency enables swift action in emergencies, underscoring the need for a nuanced debate on its future.

²³ Rajesh Venugopal, "Democracy, development and the executive presidency in Sri Lanka", *Third World Quarterly*, 36 (4), 2015, pp. 670-690.

Political Economy of the IMF Programme

Sri Lanka's economic challenges require a balanced approach between market-driven and redistributive reforms. While market-driven reforms often prioritise global market integration, they frequently fail to align with domestic priorities, especially under the influence of powerful transnational actors, such as corporations and hedge funds. In this context, redistributive reforms should aim to address internal inequalities and bolster Sri Lanka's bargaining power with external entities such as the IMF.

Sri Lankans have endured the worst economic conditions since independence, although there have been a few signs of recovery.

The IMF is governed by an executive board with 25 member countries. The United States holds a significant voting share, allowing it to veto decisions.²⁴ Understanding the IMF's representation of powerful interests and the distinction between its objectives and Sri Lanka's domestic needs is crucial. The current economic crisis has shifted popular consensus. Sri Lankans have endured the worst economic conditions since independence, although there have been a few signs of recovery.

The IMF agreement, negotiated by the previous government, mandates stringent austerity measures and surplus targets, which have deepened public frustration. The NPP's two-thirds mandate reflects widespread frustration with the slow pace of recovery and corruption. The president currently faces the challenge of balancing the demands of foreign creditors with pressing domestic needs. The economic crisis has exacerbated poverty, doubling the rate from 12 per cent to 25 per cent, and has led to increased malnutrition, higher school dropout rates and electricity disconnections for one in five households.²⁵ Job losses drive these deteriorating living standards,

²⁴ Congressional Research Service Report, "The International Monetary Fund", CSR Reports, 14 May 2018, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42019/14>.

²⁵ Ganeshan Wignaraja, Dirk Willem Te Velde, "Sri Lanka: from debt default to transformation growth", Gateway House, 27 August 2024, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/sri-lanka-from-debt-default-to-transformative-growth/>.

halted construction projects, disruptions to seasonal employment and a persistent rise in the cost of living.²⁶

Key factors that contributed to the economic crisis included the 2022 devaluation of the Sri Lankan rupee, the price spike in imported goods due to supply constraints and external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. These have led to a persistent increase in the cost of living despite a reduction in inflation.²⁷

The current IMF programme focuses on addressing Sri Lanka's unsustainable twin deficits – fiscal and current accounts. There is one school of thought that the emphasis should shift toward the current account deficit, which directly affects foreign exchange earnings and reserves.²⁸ When Sri Lanka begins repaying its bilateral creditors by 2028, a large portion of the budget is expected to be allocated for these payments. This distinction between the interests of the creditors and the government's responsibility to its citizens warrants careful consideration.

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Sri Lanka's bargaining position has been weakened by years of external borrowing and the introduction of sovereign bonds. This has left the country vulnerable when sources of foreign exchange collapsed, for example in 2020, most notably, due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on tourism and migrant worker remittances. While the country is compelled to accept the IMF's stringent terms, the focus should also be on how Sri Lanka can make its debt portfolio sustainable.

The traditional view suggests that Sri Lanka needs to curtail middle-class consumption and retrench the public sector workforce. However, the real sources of power lie with the wealthy, who have offshore investments and savings, insulated from austerity and currency depreciation. These elites and external creditors have benefitted from

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Structural and Cyclical Factors behind Current Account Balances", OECD Economics Department Working Paper, No.827, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/structural-and-cyclical-factors-behind-current-account-balances_5kmfkz2t4mbr-en.html.

high interest rates, not the masses. Thus, the real issue lies in the current account deficit, which compels the government to prioritise creditor payments, placing an undue burden on ordinary households.

If the current government accepts the IMF agreement in the short term, the ability to manoeuvre is limited. While some flexibility may exist in where cuts are made, the overall impact on the primary budget surplus and growth is clear. Peter Doyle, former Senior Economist at the IMF, made a comparison of Sri Lanka with its peers before the crisis and showed that countries with tighter fiscal constraints generally experience lower growth.²⁹ Given that growth will likely remain modest, greater emphasis should be placed on redistribution to avoid socio-political tensions due to acute levels of wealth and income inequality. Constitutional reforms offer a potential avenue for change but without an economic social contract that prioritises equity, the risk of rising resentment – and potentially xenophobic or far-right movements – looms large.

Shifting the tax burden from the poor to the rich could stimulate demand and economic recovery.

On the revenue side, tax reforms must go beyond taxing income to targeting wealth. Although the previous Ranil Wickremesinghe government increased taxes on higher-income earners, a robust push for wealth taxation remains absent. Shifting the tax burden from the poor to the rich could stimulate demand and economic recovery. For instance, redirecting investment from luxury real estate, comprising 60 per cent of FDI, toward sectors that enhance economic self-sufficiency would be a more effective strategy. However, Sri Lanka's real issue lies in elite capture, with the economy historically run for the benefit of a narrow elite, leaving the burden of economic recovery disproportionately on the less affluent. While property tax offers a localised and potentially impactful solution, it remains underutilised due to low rates and valuation challenges.

²⁹ "Sri Lanka Debt Restructuring Woes: The IMF, primary budget surplus targets and austerity", International Development Economics Associates, 22 May 2024, <https://www.networkideas.org/announcements/2024/05/sri-lankas-debt-restructuring-woes-the-imf-primary-budget-surplus-targets-and-austerity/>.

While the IMF has called for increased social security spending, achieving this within the constraints of a primary surplus is challenging. Strategic resource allocation is necessary for sectors critical to recovery. Industrial policy planning should also be reconsidered. Given the economic shocks, a robust debate on planning mechanisms is essential to guide future recovery. Budgetary reforms, such as land distribution, could play a key role in revitalising the economy. Guaranteeing access to land will improve livelihoods, particularly among the economically marginalised communities.

Central banking reforms is another critical area. The current mandate focuses on reducing inflation but alternative approaches, such as direct credit policies, could stimulate sectors that address supply constraints and reduce costs.

As Sri Lanka navigates future geopolitical risks, including the Russia-Ukraine war and potential trade disruptions, the focus must shift from mere growth to building resilience against external shocks. Strategic investment in self-sufficient industries is vital for long-term stability. As John Maynard Keynes argued during the 1930s, self-sufficiency is a critical economic strategy.³⁰ While reliance on tourism and remittances may be necessary in the short term, Sri Lanka's long-term economic policies must aim to reduce dependency on these sectors and prioritise investments that ensure sustainable and equitable growth.

Strategic investment in self-sufficient industries is vital for long-term stability.

³⁰ Keynes, John Maynard, "National Self-Sufficiency", *The Yale Review* 22, no. 4 (1933), 755-69.

Human Rights and Civil Liberties

Sri Lanka's protracted history of violence and war has severely constrained civil and political rights over the past few decades. Decades of conflict have left unresolved legacies, with justice yet to be delivered for victims of mass graves, disappearances and arbitrary arrests. Marginalised populations, particularly the ethnic minorities and women, have suffered disproportionately from systemic abuse perpetuated by a lack of accountability. Additionally, victims of land grabs and the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings continue to seek justice, highlighting the broader failures of transitional justice mechanisms.

Sri Lanka's protracted history of violence and war has severely constrained civil and political rights over the past few decades.

Socio-economic challenges compound these issues. The deterioration of the education and healthcare systems reflects a broader decline in social protections, which remain grossly inadequate in the context of austerity measures which have worsened poverty and inequality. Sri Lanka's protracted history of violence and war has severely constrained civil and political rights over the past few decades. Decades of conflict have left unresolved legacies, with justice yet to be delivered for victims of mass graves, disappearances and arbitrary arrests. Marginalised populations, particularly the ethnic minorities and women, have suffered disproportionately from systemic abuse perpetuated by a lack of accountability. Additionally, victims of land grabs and the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings continue to seek justice, highlighting the broader failures of transitional justice mechanisms.

Socio-economic challenges compound these issues. The deterioration of the education and healthcare systems reflects a broader decline in social protections, which remain grossly inadequate in the context of austerity measures which have worsened poverty and inequality.³¹ Pension funds of the citizens were negatively impacted by the domestic

³¹ "Social Protection for Sri Lanka: A Progressive Gender Sensitive Response to the Crisis", Feminist Collective for Economic Justice, May 2023, https://www.srilankafeministcollective.org/_files/ugd/06bf48_e91e38e5a22d47c2a3e3e1684201812c.pdf.

debt restructuring process.³² The working population faced increased vulnerabilities, particularly women workers, with vulnerabilities being compounded by historic and continued identity discrimination.³³ Domestic violence, child marriage and marginalisation of certain identities are prevalent. Moreover, local communities and economies are sidelined, with unregulated microfinance leading to household debt. These developments occur with little regard for environmental sustainability.

Cross-cutting these developments is the prevailing centralised model of national decision-making in Sri Lanka. The NPP came to power on an anti-corruption mandate. However, high expectations among the citizens for justice on several fronts may make it difficult for the new government to cater to diverse needs. Moreover, the Constitution's rigidity and lack of inclusiveness, including its failure to make justiciable the right to life, dignity and socio-economic rights, exacerbate political challenges. In particular, the lack of post-enactment judicial review removes the citizens from the legislative process. Moreover, the IMF's conditionalities and austerity measures limit policy flexibility, and there was an absence of transparency in external creditor agreements.

Furthermore, over 100 laws have been enacted in the past two years, many of which lack legitimacy due to the absence of elections and public consultations.³⁴ Economic policies among these include increased indirect taxes, reduced social protection and a focus on repressive financial reforms.³⁵ Legal proposals affecting labour rights protections in a context of increased union busting and informalisation in the plantation sector have had widespread implications for the most economically-disadvantaged sections of working people in the country. Repealing the problematic new laws is a challenge because

The working population faced increased vulnerabilities, particularly women workers, with vulnerabilities being compounded by historic and continued identity discrimination.

³² Jayati Ghosh, Kanchana Ruwanpura, "Sri Lanka's Dangerous domestic debt restructuring, IPS, 21 September 2023, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/economy-and-ecology/sri-lankas-dangerous-domestic-debt-restructuring-7005/>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "YUKTHI Calls All Presidential Candidates to Commit to Democratic Law Reforms", Media Release, Yukthi, 13 September 2024, <https://yukthisl.org/yukthi-calls-all-presidential-candidates-to-commit-to-democratic-law-reforms/>.

³⁵ Lucy McKernan, "Sri Lankan Laws Threaten Democracy, Warns UN Rights Chief, Human Rights Watch, 6 March 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/06/sri-lankan-laws-threaten-democracy-warns-un-rights-chief>.

they are rooted in national security, invoking public fear and limiting discussion.³⁶ Despite these challenges, there are signs of progress. The growing gender diversity in parliament – 21 women out of 225 members – offers a glimmer of hope.³⁷ Coupled with the presence of diverse expertise and increasingly informed constituencies, this diversity could play a key role in advocating for change and challenging entrenched systems of inequality.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Sumudu Sulochana Perera, "Women's Voices in Sri Lankan Politics: Heard in 2024?", Sri Lanka Guardian, 5 December 2024, <https://slguardian.org/womens-voices-in-sri-lankan-politics-heard-in-2024/>.

Challenges in State Formation

State formation in Sri Lanka since the 1930s has been heavily shaped by the need to address health epidemics, land scarcity and access to education. These policies account for Sri Lanka's relatively high human development index, allowing for social mobility but were financially unsustainable. The country faces a split between a patronage system and a need for a more efficient and industrialised economy. While they are not mutually exclusive, political discourse has often prioritised short-term economic interests over the broader management of the political economy, perpetuating systemic inefficiencies.

The 1994 and 2024 elections share a few similarities in their mandates, with both having strong support from the Sinhala Buddhist majority and a social democratic platform. The NPP has a Sinhala Buddhist majority, but it also combines non-nationalist and social democratic votes. In the 2015 election, Sri Lanka had a social-democratic mandate but did not have a Sinhala Buddhist majority.³⁸ Thus, 1994 and 2024 are similar in composition, making their mandate resilient compared to the others. The 1994 government changed its stance to an open economy in months, while the NPP changed its stance on the continuation of the IMF programme, highlighting a liberal consensus.³⁹ On the national question, in 1994, the two main political camps (the SLFP and the UNP) agreed on a power-sharing arrangement to the national question. In 2024, the NPP agreed, through statements, to the continuation of the Provincial Council system and the 13th Amendment.⁴⁰

The NPP has a Sinhala Buddhist majority, but it also combines non-nationalist and social democratic votes.

Since 2010, Sri Lanka has had supermajority parliaments; yet this has not ensured political stability. Since 2015, no government has

³⁸ Danila Berloff, "Sri Lanka 2015: The downing of a new era", *Asia Major*, <https://www.asiamajor.org/the-journal/08-asia-maior-vol-xxvi-2015/sri-lanka-2015-the-downing-of-new.html>.

³⁹ Rathindra Kuruwita, "Sri Lankan President Pledges Full Implementation of the 13th Amendment", *The Diplomat*, 6 February 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/sri-lankan-president-pledges-full-implementation-of-13th-amendment/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

managed to last beyond three years. Therefore, it appears that a two-thirds majority does not necessarily guarantee substantial reforms. Significantly, some of the most significant democratising reforms in the country, such as the 17th, 19th and 21st Amendments, emerged during periods of hung parliaments when consensus-building across political divides was essential.

The NPP's manifesto envisions an export-oriented economy but faces significant challenges, such as capital scarcity and an insular trade policy.

The NPP is a broad-based party which appeals to a diverse spectrum of voters, including liberal, conservative, centre-right, centre-left and far-left constituents (many of which formed the core of the JVP). The NPP government has pledged to continue the IMF programme but at a lower social cost, a stance that makes it difficult to deliver on its campaign promises of lowered taxes, state sector salary hikes and increased social safety expenditure without identifying new revenue streams. The NPP's manifesto envisions an export-oriented economy but faces significant challenges, such as capital scarcity and an insular trade policy.⁴¹ Nonetheless, there remains potential for the agricultural sector to become a more robust export sector. Sri Lanka's economic future also hinges on rethinking its trade and agricultural policies

The economic crisis has exacerbated prevailing, structural gender disparities. The NPP's focus on social security includes measures aimed at supporting the middle class but these efforts must address the structural inequalities exacerbated by the crisis.

⁴¹ Danila Berloff, "Sri Lanka 2015: The downing of a new era", op. cit.

Patronage in Sri Lankan Politics

Sri Lanka's political landscape has long been dominated by a patronage system, where elites maintain power by distributing state resources to secure loyalty and influence. This system has benefited the average citizen and contributed to social transformation.⁴² Voters view these benefits as justice being served to various groups. In the 2024 election, Dissanayake's victory reflected a complex interplay of public sentiment. Voters supported the NPP for its promises of change and rejected the entrenched political elite. The NPP capitalised on widespread dissatisfaction and the momentum of the mass protests, positioning itself as a credible alternative to the status quo.

However, the NPP's capacity to implement radical change is still somewhat constrained, with concerns that the citizens may not be prepared for the sacrifices such changes might entail. Thus, a two-thirds majority does not necessarily mean a super-consensus. In their call for reforms, progressive democratic systems such as the abolition of the executive presidency, proper implementation of the 13th Amendment, or distancing from crony capitalism were not among the priorities. These reforms have not been forthcoming so far due to the lack of political will amongst the ruling elite. In 2024, with the NPP's victory, an exceptional moment in Sri Lankan history has been reached, where there is a different political class in power with the capacity to make radical change. Yet, while appealing, the party's anti-corruption platform does not necessarily translate into widespread public readiness for the sacrifices required for meaningful democratisation. Transforming a society embedded in a culture of patronage and social relationships is not an easy undertaking. While the voters may complain about corruption and politicians with undue wealth, they are unlikely to refuse patronage. This resistance to change presents a paradox. As memories of corruption scandals

Transforming a society embedded in a culture of patronage and social relationships is not an easy undertaking.

⁴² Shyamika Jayasundara Smits, "Political Patronage: Underbelly of Everyday Politics", Cambridge Core, 29 July 2022, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/an-uneasy-hegemony/political-patronage-underbelly-of-everyday-politics/6EA61203A3DBCFB131B7B2F8DB96E0D9>.

Discontent could resurface, threatening the NPP's ability to sustain its reform agenda.

and the 2022 protests fade, the public may grow disillusioned if the new government's reforms deprive them of the immediate benefits they once enjoyed. Discontent could resurface, threatening the NPP's ability to sustain its reform agenda.

Thus, the NPP has a difficult balancing act to accomplish – enacting meaningful reform while navigating the inherent resistance to change within a society accustomed to patronage politics. The party's success will depend on its ability to build consensus, maintain public trust and demonstrate tangible benefits of reform, ensuring that the promises of a progressive and democratic Sri Lanka are realised without alienating the very citizens who brought it to power.

The Way Forward

Sri Lanka stands at a pivotal crossroads, where the potential for meaningful change exists alongside deep, structural challenges. To move forward, the focus must shift from merely responding to immediate crises to enacting structural reforms that address the deep political, economic and social issues that have affected the country for decades.

At the core of this reform agenda has been the call to abolish the highly centralised executive power structure, which the current government has committed to do. A more decentralised approach to governance would allow for more inclusive decision-making processes that are better equipped to tackle the country's complex challenges. The shift from a presidential to a parliamentary system would redistribute power, reduce the concentration of authority and encourage more meaningful participation in political decision making. However, overcoming resistance from entrenched interest groups and a public favourable of a strong, centralised leadership will be a significant hurdle.

To navigate these challenges, the NPP must focus on building a broad-based consensus for change. This will require engaging with the civil society, creating the space for political opposition and critique, and making governance processes more inclusive of marginalised communities, to ensure that reforms are not merely top-down but participatory and representative. Transparency in decision-making, particularly regarding foreign debt and international agreements, will be crucial in maintaining public trust. Additionally, the NPP should invest in strengthening democratic institutions, including the judiciary and local governments, to ensure that power is more widely distributed, and that a centralised and arbitrary exercise of power is checked. Sri Lanka's path forward will be fraught with challenges, but it also presents an opportunity for deep structural reforms that could lay the foundation for a more democratic, equitable and prosperous society.

Transparency in decision-making, particularly regarding foreign debt and international agreements, will be crucial in maintaining public trust.

Appendix 1

About the Roundtable

Opening Remarks

Associate Professor Iqbal S Sevea

Director

Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

Session 1: What Happened? Making Sense of the Present Conjuncture

Chairperson

Dr Ronojoy Sen

Senior Research Fellow and

Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance)

Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

Speakers

Mr Murtaza Jafferjee

Chair, Advocata Institute, Colombo

Sri Lanka

Dr Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri

Senior Lecturer

Department of History

University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa

Former Research Director

The Disinformation Project, New Zealand

Mr S C C Elankovan

Lawyer, Freelance Consultant in Development and Human Rights; and
Advisor, Organization for Integrated and Sustainable Development
Kilinochchi, Sri Lanka

Dr Nimendra Mawalagedara (*Via Zoom*)

Political Scientist
Georgia State University
United States

Interactive Session

Session 2: Looking Ahead: What to Expect Next in Sri Lanka?

Chairperson

Dr Rajni Gamage

Research Fellow
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

Speakers

Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu

Executive Director
Centre for Policy Alternatives, Sri Lanka

Dr Devaka Gunawardena

Research Fellow
Social Scientists' Association
Sri Lanka

Ms Ermiza Tegal

Attorney-at-Law and Human Rights Activist
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Mr Harindra B Dassanayake

Independent Policy Analyst
Sri Lanka

Dr Pradeep Pieris (*Via Zoom*)

Senior Lecturer
Department of Political Science & Public Policy
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Interactive Session

The Way Forward

Dr Rajni Gamage

Research Fellow
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

Concluding Remarks

Mr Andreas Michael Klein

Director
Political Dialogue Southeast Asia
Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Singapore)

End of Roundtable

Appendix 2 About the Authors

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Dr Gamage holds a PhD in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Queensland; a Post-doctorate from NUS; an MSc in International Relations from S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Nanyang Technological University; and a BSc in Political Science from NUS.

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Ms Kanika Kaur is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She graduated with a Master's degree in International Affairs from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS, specialising in International Security.

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