

## Research note

# Authoritarian Developmentalism in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

After the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009), the victorious Government of Sri Lanka was confronted with the need to “win the peace” and re-build the nation in both material and ideological terms. The rule of Mahinda Rajapaksa (president 2006–2015), an example of authoritarian populism in power, was characterized by an infrastructure construction frenzy and the attempt to establish national unity on the terms of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. The post-war period also saw the emergence of new tensions, namely the conflict between Sinhalese Buddhist militants and the Muslim minority, as well as the precarious human rights situation in the formerly secessionist north. Discontent with Mahinda Rajapaksa’s increasingly authoritarian rule and the unsolved problems of the civil war legacy brought his rival Maithripala Sirisena into power in 2015. Sirisena’s attempts to rule on a platform of liberal, more inclusive “good governance” (*yahapalana*) failed due to power struggles within his alliance and a lack of coherent policymaking. The 2019 Easter Bombings by domestic Jihadist terrorists marked the beginning of a new phase of securization and militarization. With the victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the 2019 presidential election and the subsequent instatement of Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister, a process of authoritarian consolidation was initiated. The Covid-19 pandemic opened a window of opportunity to reconfirm the leading role of the security forces in handling domestic crises. Yet the country’s ongoing financial and economic crisis, aggravated by debt and the slump in global tourism connected to Covid-19, question the prospect of stability. The social and ethnopolitical contradictions in Sri Lankan society are not addressed by the current authoritarian policies. Therefore, these contradictions are prone to further undermining the long-term consolidation of governance institutions, national identity, and non-sectarian civil society.

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism; Sri Lanka; ethnopolitics; Sinhalese nationalism; post-conflict development

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## Introduction

The Sri Lankan polity has been oscillating between more authoritarian and more democratic phases for decades. Sri Lanka's political system is late colonial in origin and therefore sometimes described as modelled after the Westminster system. However, the character of the country as a parliamentary democracy was altered with the introduction of the executive presidency in 1977, creating a hybrid or semi-presidential system. Sri Lankan politics are characterized by a number of cross-cutting and recurring cleavages: Between federalism and unitary state (Uyangoda 2013a), between (neo)liberal and socialist/interventionist economic policies (Goonewardena 2020; Bastian 2010), between pluralism and dominant-party model, between rule of law and militarization/securitization (Jayasuriya 2012). These cleavages or tensions run across the ethnopolitical divisions which have garnered more attention from scholars (e.g. Kapferer 2001; Rösel 1997).

Sri Lankan leaders from S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike to J.R. Jayawardene to the Rajapaksas (Mahinda and Gotabaya) have time and again made use of majoritarian ethnopolitical sentiments to gather (electoral) support for their rule. In the nexus of ethnopolitics and the contested functioning of the nation's democratic system, questions of social and economic development have remained unresolved. Despite decisively development-oriented policies, Sri Lankan political leaders have often failed to make good on their promises to improve the wellbeing of the country's population. This contribution aims to investigate how nationalism, development and authoritarian tendencies relate to each other in Sri Lanka. It focuses on the post-conflict period from 2009 up to the 2020–2021 response to the Covid-19 pandemic, covering the presidencies of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015), Maithripala Sirisena (2015–2019) and Gotabaya Rajapaksa (since 2019). It asserts that the development the country experienced after the end of the civil war (1983–2009) was essentially a program of (sometimes less, often more) authoritarian nation-building and that this program can now be evaluated as highly problematic, given its economic, social, environmental and security implications.

## Authoritarian populism, nationalism, and development

In Sri Lanka, ethnonationalist ideology, authoritarian populism, and developmentalist policies are closely interlinked. Sri Lankan politics are dominated by the hegemonic nationalism (Rampton 2011) of the Sinhala Buddhist majority, which functions as the foundational ideology for the major Sinhalese parties. These are the liberal-conservative United National Party (UNP), the welfare-statist Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), but also the radical left-wing, formerly insurrectionary Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front, JVP), and the nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party, JHU). The newcomer among the Sinhalese political organizations, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), is merely a front for the Rajapaksa camp, which had previously belonged to the SLFP.

Sinhala Buddhist nationalism relies on the imagery of an ancient, continuous Sinhalese civilization as described in the *Mahavamsa*, its core text, and is based on Buddhist values and their manifestation in Sri Lankan society (Rösel 1996; DeVotta 2007). What's more, this nationalism defines Buddhism, the Sinhalese language and its history as central to the Sri Lankan state. It therefore deemphasizes other important strands of Sri Lankan national heritage, such as those of the Muslim, Tamil Hindu, and Christian communities, the colonial legacy and the close connection to the Indian subcontinent, as well as the country's long history as a maritime trade hub. In other words, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism tends to be an exclusionary ethnonationalism. It should be mentioned that the same held true for the Tamil nationalism of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Tamil Homeland ("Tamil Eelam") they aspired to. Ultimately, the spatial politics of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism (a unitary island polity) and militant Tamil nationalism (a separatist state in the Tamil-majority regions, Northern and Eastern Province) were mutually exclusive (Parasram 2012).

Both Rajapaksa presidents, although not in equal ways, combined older ethnonationalist ideology with a form of populism which can be categorized as cultural populism (Kyle & Meyer 2020), directed at the Sinhalese constituency. In addition, they relied on forms of rule that can be called authoritarian, aimed at broadening the space for authoritarianism within the framework of Sri Lanka's liberal democracy. The Rajapaksas have again and again displayed disregard for checks and balances in the political system, but in this, they are no different than some of their successors, prominently Chandrika Kumaratunga (SLFP, president 1994–2005) and J.R. Jayewardene (UNP, president 1977–1989). Among the authoritarian strategies employed were the silencing of journalists and political opponents, suppression of civil society, the excessive use of executive privileges, impunity for human rights violations by security forces, and covert promotion of hate groups (Edirisuriya 2017; HRW 2022). Yet the defining feature of Rajapaksa politics is not merely authoritarianism, but populism.

Populism has come to be defined as an approach to politics based on a thin-centered ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 5). Its main feature is the positioning of a "true," "pure" or "good people" against an evil or corrupt elite. Usually rallied around a charismatic populist leader, populist movements are focused on a confrontational and antagonistic assault on (actual or imagined) powerful groups. Recourse to other political ideologies is a consistent feature of populism, so the merger of populist and ethnonationalist elements in the Rajapaksa political project is not unusual.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, following his successful campaign for the presidency in 2005, presented a public image as an agrarian, as a staunch supporter of the Sinhalese rural population, and as a pious Buddhist (Wickramasinghe 2009, 1050–52). In this way, his symbols and appearances spoke to majoritarian sentiment in the Sinhalese Buddhist population.

Stuart Hall (2018) has coined the term “authoritarian populism,” by which he meant nationalist and jingoistic politics within the framework of neoliberal economics. It could be said that Mahinda Rajapaksa embodied a Sri Lankan variety of authoritarian populism comparable with Modi’s Hindu-nationalist project in India (Chacko & Jayasurika 2017). I would like to explain how this authoritarian populist nationalism is also founded on a certain developmentalist political economy.

Development is a contested and highly politically charged concept, which has undergone transformation over the decades since 1949, when it was first used by Truman to delineate a post-war order (Ziai 2016). Developmentalism historically describes a set of policies and ideological commitments that imply strong involvement of the state in economic matters, especially in so-called developing countries (Wallerstein 2005), with the goal of increasing public welfare, combatting hunger, poverty and upscaling education: all with the goal of reaching a higher stage of development. Developmentalism has a strong tradition in Sri Lanka since independence; in its first “socialist” phase, it was associated with classic, state-led economic development. From the late 1970s, under J.R. Jayewardene’s opening policy, the state lifted some restrictions and encouraged foreign investment in some sectors of industry, most remarkably textile manufacturing. Yet the state still upheld a leading role in the national economy, e.g. through its involvement in large infrastructure construction projects such as the accelerated Mahaweli Development Program (MDP) (Withanachchi et al. 2014). Of particular interest to this contribution is the developmentalist character of nation-building in the post-war period since 2009. It has to be acknowledged that the newer phase of developmentalist activities, since Jayewardene, has remained neoliberal and assigned importance to the private sector, despite Rajapaksa’s often social-democratic rhetoric (Jayasuriya 2012). In a number of cases, the developmentalist program included the appropriation of national assets by representatives of the regime, its leadership clientele, and political allies.

## War’s end

In order to understand the authoritarian-developmental moment of post-war Sri Lanka, one has to look at the way the conflict came to an end. From 1983 to 2009, the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) waged a war against the separatist Tamil nationalist guerrilla, the LTTE—a bloody civil war that at times seemed to be unwinnable for either side. The SLA as the army of the national government could make use of significant portions of the national resources and was backed by the Sinhalese majority. In comparison, the LTTE was supported by a global Tamil diaspora, parts of the Sri Lankan Tamil ethnicity at home, and financed by a network of illicit activities. The insurgents temporarily controlled the country’s Northern and Eastern provinces, employed their own navy and air force, and thus managed to hold the government in check for more than two decades (Rösel 1997; Winslow & Woost 2004). What is more, LTTE militancy was characterized by its equally brutal and

innovative strategies—most notably frequent suicide bombings. The last phase of the civil war (2006—2009) was called Eelam War IV and emerged after several failed attempts to broker a peaceful solution, and a ceasefire agreement undermined by both sides (Sørbø et al. 2012; Weiss 2012).

The civil war's final phase was linked to the manifestation of a revitalized form of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism within Sri Lanka's public debate from the 1980s, a political ideology known as *Jathika Chinthanaya* (National Thought or National Consciousness) and associated with Sinhalese intellectuals such as Nalin da Silva and Gunadasa Amarasekera (Dewasiri 2018). It superseded older, left-leaning forms of ethnonationalism embodied by the JVP (Goonewardena 2020). *Jathika Chinthanaya* had emerged from Marxist-dominated debates in the universities of the Sri Lankan South, but shed the neo-Marxist, revolutionary theory while retaining a criticism of Western imperialism and cultural neo-colonialism. Proponents of *Jathika Chinthanaya* also shared with the JVP a staunch rejection of a negotiated peace with the LTTE, which would have resulted in forms of autonomy or federated state (Uyangoda 2013b).

*Jathika Chinthanaya*'s ideology united hardline bellicists in fora like the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT). They managed to change the framing of the Sri Lankan Civil War from the previous paradigm of ethnocultural conflict: they emulated Bush's "War on Terror" in their own country, following a trend seen in other national conflicts of the time (Dodds 2021, xi). Hence the LTTE, a militant nationalist-separatist organization, was framed in a wider context that positioned national security against terrorism. Similar to the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Naxalites in Central India, the war with the LTTE was narrated as a South Asian counterinsurgency against a terrorist enemy. This communicative strategy, when taken up by the Sri Lankan government under Rajapaksa, left no room for a negotiated peace. Indeed, the Norway-led peacebuilding efforts, which would have given Tamil nationalists a relatively large degree of autonomy, was poised to fail, as a Norwegian study details (Sørbø et al. 2011). The Sri Lankan civil war came to an end with what has been described as an "illiberal peace" (Piccolino 2015)—not a negotiated peace, but the complete military annihilation of one conflict party, the insurgent side.

Under Mahinda Rajapaksa, from 2006 Sri Lanka's government worked towards a military victory against the LTTE. In the final episode of the war, LTTE cadres, alongside tens of thousands of Tamil civilians they used as "human shields," were encircled in a small area in the northeast, in Mullaitivu district, and overcome by the SLA in April and May 2009 (Weiss, 2012). According to observers, Chinese weaponry was crucial to the SLA's military success (Popham 2010).

As reported by the UN (2011), up to 40,000 civilians lost their lives during the last two months of the conflict. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) appointed by the Government of Sri Lanka states that 22,247 LTTE cadres were killed in the last phase of the civil war, and 5,556 among the SLA (2011, 37);

the commission refrains from giving an estimate of civilian casualties. The Sri Lankan government, on the other hand, insisted that the armed forces had taken every possible step to ensure that harm to civilians was avoided, and that any “collateral damage” among the Tamil population was to be blamed on the LTTE (LLRC, 115–136).

## Post-conflict rebuilding

The immediate post-war phase allowed Mahinda Rajapaksa to further consolidate his authoritarian power. Internally, he relied on a network of clientelism and employed nepotist practices, with close family members taking important offices in the government. His position within the SLFP appeared to be unquestioned. Outside the corridors of power, Mahinda rode on a wave of support due to the victory in the civil war. However, his intention to proclaim an inclusive “new patriotism” (Wickremasinghe 2009) on the terms of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority could be seen as rather half-hearted; the needs and rights of minorities, most prominently Tamil IDPs, were continuously violated by security forces (UN 2011).

The modernization/development drive appeared to aim at producing legitimacy and glorifying the leader’s person. Despite different ideological outlooks, Rajapaksa’s policies mirrored the program brought forth by his UNP predecessor J.R. Jayewardene in several ways. Among these were the fostering of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, the tendency to implement magnificent infrastructure projects, and the sidelining of the opposition within the boundaries of the constitutional framework. Jayewardene’s key ambition in infrastructure renewal was to establish a new capital at Kotte. In a similar vein, Rajapaksa left his mark on the country’s built environment. Examples can be found in the Hambantota Port project; Colombo Port city; the new airport in Mattala (Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport), built in defiance of environmental regulations; and in the new roads constructed during his presidency. It is notable that many of these projects were established in the rural south, a core constituency and of the place from which the president’s family originated. Also, these development projects were largely financed through Chinese debt (Wignaraja et al. 2020), creating what would later be described as a debt trap (Behuria 2018).

In combination with consolidating his personal, charismatic power and embedding his family members and political allies in government (Edirisuriya 2017), Mahinda Rajapaksa embarked on a large-scale project of national renewal which was called “Mahinda Chintanaya,” or “Vision of Mahinda.” The program states (Rajapaksa 2010, 8):

The people of our country are now awaiting the victory in the “economic war,” in a manner similar to our victory in the war against terrorism. I am well prepared and ready to face this challenge. I also truly believe that our economy should be independent, resilient and disciplined, with a strong growth focus, operating as per international standards, whilst maintaining our local identity. <sup>[11]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

The 2010 version of the program, designed as the manifesto for Rajapaksa's re-election on a developmentalist-populist platform, contains a vast number of promises. Sri Lanka was to be developed as a "maritime, aviation, energy, commerce and knowledge hub" in a five-fold strategy (FT 2013).

Victory in the civil war provided the armed forces with an eminent position in society. The social weight of the Sri Lankan Army, a bastion of Sinhalese Buddhist people from the mid-1960s onwards, had increased steadily since the beginning of the civil war. From a moderate strength of 21,600 men under arms in 1985, armed forces personnel numbers first rose past 200,000 in 1995. By the end of the conflict, there were 223,000 members, a number that has not decreased in peacetime (World Bank, 2018). Especially in rural areas in the Northern and Eastern provinces, the security forces showed a marked presence, officially to be vigilant against possible terrorist attacks. The massive deployment of armed forces in former LTTE-controlled regions temporarily created a military to civilian ratio estimated at roughly one soldier to five civilians (EPW 2012).

There is evidence that the Sri Lankan Army was increasingly using its political leverage to expand its economic power. This can be seen as an instance of the phenomenon that Chambers and Waitookiat (2017, 7), in the context of Southeast Asia, conceptualized as "khaki capital," defining it as

a form of income generation whereby the military, as the state-legitimized and dominant custodian-of-violence, establishes a mode of production that enables it (a) to influence state budgets to extract open or covert financial allocations, (b) to extract, transfer and distribute financial resources; and (c) to create financial or career opportunities that allow for the direct or indirect enhancement of its dividends at both the institutional and the individual level.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the president's brother, oversaw the military as Secretary of the Ministry of Defence. A major indicator of khaki capital development was the involvement of the armed forces in economic activities in the Northern and Eastern provinces in the scope of the operations *Uthuru Wasanthaya* (Northern Spring) and *Nagenahira Udanaya* (Awakening East). Officially labelled Civilian-Military Cooperation (CIMIC), these infrastructure developments consisted of holiday resorts and agribusiness projects, so-called "government farms." For example, the SLA was engaged in building a tourist resort at Lagoon's Edge in Mullaitivu, at the very site where the final battles of the civil war took place and many lost their lives (Doyle 2013).

Reconstruction, as Bart Klem (2014) notes for Trincomalee in the Eastern Province, is a form of territorialization, of imposing a spatial order and regulating everyday lives through spatial politics. This territorialization of the Tamil-majority provinces was entwined with Rajapaksa's vision of national modernization, a process to strengthen the hegemony of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and to underline the character of Sri Lanka as a unitary state.

This project of renewal could have been read as a deletion of the suffering of the other side. When the UN report accused the Sri Lankan government of “triumphalism” (UN 2011, 111), it hinted at this refusal to acknowledge the war crimes perpetrated.

Another example is found in Silawaputharei, Mannar District, Northern Province, where the Civil Defence Force (CDF) acquired around 2,400 hectares of land to establish a cashew plantation.

The International Crisis Group (ICG, 2012, 23) conducted research on military-led farms in Northern Province, stating: “Most of the army’s agricultural activities seem to be organised at the camp commander level; while heavily subsidised by the central government, it is unclear who ultimately receives the revenues.” It could be that these activities constitute a form of patrimonialism, where high-ranking army officers directly profit from economic activities; in any case, army-led developments strengthen the role of the armed forces within Sri Lankan society.

Rajapaksa’s electoral program for 2010 was outspoken about the plan to redistribute agricultural land to veterans (Rajapaksa 2010, 29). What seemed to have happened was that a window of opportunity opened immediately after the civil war as there was a frontier situation in the northeast. Interested actors, mostly connected to the military and political elites, rushed in to take advantage of the situation. This spurred clientelist networks between the Rajapaksa family and the beneficiaries of military-led development.

## **From Mahinda Chintanaya to *Yahapalana***

In the 2010 presidential election, the joint opposition gathered behind the former army chief Sarath Fonseka, who had a large role in the SLA’s victory over the LTTE and hoped to use his “war hero image” running against Mahinda Rajapaksa. After losing the election by a 17% margin to the incumbent, Fonseka was arrested and charged with military offences that critics of the government saw as fabricated. He remained in prison for a two-year period.

Mahinda Rajapaksa’s second term, from 2010, saw a further deterioration of Sri Lankan democracy towards authoritarianism. The president’s followers managed to push through the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution in September 2010, which dropped the term limit, allowing Mahinda to run for re-election, and brought about even more privileges for the executive presidency (Parliament of Sri Lanka 2010).

Another sign of the authoritarian turn the country had taken was the murder of the journalist Lasantha Wickramatunga, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *The Sunday Leader*. Wickramatunga, a former ally of Rajapaksa turned critic of the government, was shot dead by armed men on motorbikes on January 8, 2009. Gotabaya Rajapaksa was later—after the case was opened again—implicated in the murder. The assassination was allegedly carried out by personnel from the military

secret service, or more specifically of a branch that was directly controlled by Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Kannangara 2017).

Ethnonationalist tensions also re-emerged as the Muslim minority was targeted by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist militants. In 2012, members of the Buddhist clergy formed a new political organization called *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS, “Buddhist Power Force”). The declared aim of this group was to halt what they saw as a growing “Islamization” of Sri Lanka by Muslim citizens. For example, activism was directed against the *halal* label, designating food that pious Muslims are allowed to eat (Steward 2014). BBS had a large role in the outbreak of violent anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama and a few other towns in June 2014; houses and shops belonging to Sri Lankan Muslims were set alight and four people were killed by rioters (Hannifa 2014). Gotabaya Rajapaksa allegedly gave a speech at a BBS convention, establishing a connection to the nationalist militants.

Mahinda Rajapaksa called an early election for the presidency in January 2015, yet it appeared that his appeal had dwindled. His coalition of supporters began to come undone when prominent Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists such as Athuraliye Rathana Thero switched allegiance. The opposition surprisingly chose Maithripala Sirisena, a former minister and secretary general of the ruling SLFP, as a common candidate against Rajapaksa. The national minorities, parts of the educated Sinhalese middle class, and other constituencies Rajapaksa had alienated united behind the opposition candidate. Sirisena won the 2015 election with 51.28% of the vote and Rajapaksa, closely following with 47.58%, had to concede. The newly elected president, allied with the UNP and parts of the SLFP in a “unity government,” promised more accountability, combatting corruption, and a liberal opening towards the West. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesighe was appointed prime minister of what was called the “*yahapalana*,” the “good governance” government.

## Resurgence of the Rajapaksa camp

The heyday of the new coalition was short-lived as the government faced a number of challenges it was unable or unwilling to manage. Among these challenges were the investigation and prosecution of war crimes and human rights violations in the last years of the civil war; the re-ordering of the national treasury; foreign debt; and national reconciliation between the ethnic groups (Goodhand & Walton 2017). A series of smaller and larger societal conflicts kept the government occupied. For instance, a political conflict over the resettlement of Muslim IDPs in a region bordering Wilpattu National Park stirred public opinion and became entangled in ethnopolitics, not least through the involvement of the BBS. Sirisena found a solution which accommodated some of the demands of environmentalist NGOs, but irritated parts of the Muslim constituency (Köpke 2021).

At first, it looked as if the turn towards authoritarianism had been averted. The executive presidency was limited in its power when the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment was revoked

through the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 2015. Sirisena (2018) made a statement before the United Nations General Assembly in September 2018:

When I was elected by the people of Sri Lanka as Head of State in January 2015, the Executive Office that I hold today, had excessive powers, which were comparable to those of a king, or even an emperor. I am pleased to state that I was able to relinquish these emperor-like excessive powers and transfer them to the Parliament of Sri Lanka, fulfilling the utmost duty of an elected leader.

However, Mahinda Rajapaksa remained a player to reckon with in Sri Lankan politics. He was elected as an MP in the 2015 general election and quickly became leader of the joint opposition, which included parts of the SLFP (leading to a curious situation where one party was simultaneously in power and in opposition). When Rajapaksa's camp initiated the SLPP as a new platform for their political activities, it was clear that a reconfiguration of the Sinhalese majoritarian political landscape was underway (Köpke 2018). The SLPP's sweeping victory in the 2018 local elections emphasized Mahinda Rajapaksa's ongoing popularity among voters.

Under the pressure of these political developments, relations between the incumbent president and prime minister were increasingly marred by rivalry. This rivalry escalated when in October 2018, Sirisena attempted to liberate himself from his dependence on Wickremasinghe and appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa the new prime minister, while dismissing the former from office. The subsequent constitutional crisis raised questions over the constitutional roles of president and parliament, and ended with the reinstatement of Wickremasinghe as prime minister by decree of the Supreme Court after seven weeks. The episode highlighted the inefficiency and divisions in the so-called *yahapalana* government.

On April 21, 2019, domestic jihadi groups loosely connected to the so-called Islamic State perpetrated terror attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels in Colombo, Negombo and in Batticaloa, killing more than 250 people (Bastian et al. 2019). The fact that the terrorists and their supporters were Sri Lankan Muslims, and that they targeted the small Christian minority in Sri Lanka, weighed heavily on already fragile interethnic relations. What is more, security forces had been warned of the strikes by a foreign intelligence service, but had failed to act pre-emptively on this intelligence (Constable & Perera 2019). The large-scale and coordinated attack appeared to illustrate the government's neglect of security concerns and angered many citizens. It marked the beginning of a new phase of securization and militarization, as it paved the way to the election of Mahinda's brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa as President of Sri Lanka in November 2019. He was mainly elected for his credentials as a strongman in the face of renewed national security challenges. He also profited from evident power struggles in the UNP, namely between Ranil Wickremasinghe and Sajith Premadasa. The latter, son of the former president Ranasinghe Premadasa (in office 1989–1993) ended up running against, and losing to, Gotabaya, who received 52.25% of the vote. Three days after his inauguration, Gotabaya appointed his brother Mahinda as prime minister of the country. In the

2020 parliamentary election, held during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Rajapaksa-affiliated Sri Lankan People's Freedom Alliance (SLPFA) ran as a political front comprised of SLPP, SLFP and several other left-leaning/nationalist parties. It won 145 out of 225 seats, securing a clear parliamentary majority.

The authoritarian character of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's politics further came to light in the context of the One Country One Law Taskforce, an advisory committee for legal reform, led by the Venerable Gnanasara Thero, a founding figure of the BBS. With this highly controversial figure as advisor, the strategy of ethnonationalist securization pursued by the Rajapaksa regime could hardly be denied anymore. The appointment especially posed a threat to Muslim constituencies (Jeyaraj 2021; FT 2021; Usuf 2022).

## Multiple crises

The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic saw a moment in Sri Lanka when, much like in other Asian countries, the executive found it necessary to instate numerous emergency health measures. Sri Lanka was closed to foreigners from a number of European countries in March 2020. At first, army-led efforts to handle the pandemic appeared to be very successful, but a strong wave of infections hit the country in April to October 2021, leading to numerous Covid-related deaths.

Uvin Dissanayake (2020) alleges that Gotabaya Rajapaksa's style of government diverged from his brother's; most importantly, it relied on a technocratic privileging of competence, efficiency and expert rule, creating what Dissanayake describes as "technocratic populism." This serves to both delegitimize democratic procedures and depoliticize government decisions by portraying them as inevitable. Technocratic managerialism is particularly powerful in the face of societal crises, such as that posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which invite the implementation of essentially authoritarian measures such as curfews, enforced quarantines, travel restrictions, etc.

The Covid-19 pandemic opened a window of opportunity to reconfirm the leading role of the security forces in handling domestic crises. Yet the country's ongoing financial and economic crisis, aggravated by debt, currency devaluation and economic recession, questioned the prospect of stability (de Soysa and Ellis-Petersen 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic further damaged the tourism sector, one of the most prosperous growth industries in the country up to the Easter Bombings. In 2021, the foreign exchange crisis went from bad to worse, as the Sri Lankan Rupee (LKR) further devalued against the dollar. Gotabaya Rajapaksa was forced to ask China, Sri Lanka's fourth largest lender, to restructure Sri Lankan debt (BBC 2022).

Addressing the rapid depletion of foreign currency reserves, the government introduced an import ban on cooking oil, turmeric (a spice essential in Sri Lankan cuisine) and also, most dramatically, chemical fertilizers. Prohibiting the import of fertilizers was presented as a measure to boost organic agriculture and curtail some

of the country's worst agri-environmental problems (Köpke et al. 2018). Yet the sudden ban on chemical inputs proved to be a serious disturbance to the national agricultural sector, resulting in fears of a dismal harvest (Srinivasan 2021; Wipulasena & Mashal 2021). The government was forced to step back on the agrochemical ban, first for the important tea sector, later in 2021 for all cultivation (AFP 2021).

The combined effects of the fertilizer ban, foreign exchange crisis, and rising food prices had a dire impact on food security in the country. In August 2021, Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared a national food emergency and appointed a high-ranking general as Commissioner-General of Essential Services. At the same time, the government undertook attempts to avoid further food price squeezes by introducing penalties on the hoarding of sugar, rice, and other essential foods. Long queues for foodstuffs became common (Al Jazeera 2021). In mid-March 2022, an "angry crowd" protesting against the miserable economic conditions and inadequate government response gathered in front of the president's building (AFP 2022).<sup>1</sup>

As the socio-economic situation in the country worsened, it looked as though the developmentalist element of the Rajapaksa project was running out of steam due to lack of resources and external support. There was a tangible contradiction between the regime's expressed goals of improving national welfare and the dismal state the country found itself in.

## Conclusion

In the course of this paper I have tried to trace the connection between authoritarianism, development, and nationalist populism in post-conflict Sri Lanka, focusing on the governments of the two Rajapaksas, but also discussing the phase of the fragile and contested *yahapalana* government under Maithripala Sirisena. I have attempted to show how nationalist ideology, ethnic confrontation, the eminent role of the armed forces in society, and government-led development programs reinforce structures of power in Sri Lankan society. Yet authoritarian developmentalism as a response to severe societal crises is prone to further undermining the long-term consolidation of governance institutions, national economy, and non-sectarian civil society.

Authoritarianism, fueled by divisive ethnonationalism, has become more and more entrenched in Sri Lankan political society. Yet none of the country's urgent problems are getting any closer to a solution. Economic shocks, nepotism, lack of attendance to popular grievances on the part of the government, and authoritarian response to protests can all create a downward spiral. The recent experiences of countries as diverse as Nicaragua, Lebanon, or Myanmar can attest to this. At the time of writing,

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1 After the editorial deadline of this article, the "Gotagogama" ("Gota go home") protest movement against the Rajapaksas became a mass phenomenon. Due to the dynamic nature of current political events in the country, newer developments cannot be covered in the scope of this paper.

Sri Lanka's prospects of escaping a similar fate—slipping towards state failure—look bleak.

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