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# Technocratic Populism and the Pandemic State

Performative Governance in Post-COVID

Sri Lanka

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

**Centre for Policy Alternatives**

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## **Introduction**

On the back of a landslide victory in August's General Elections, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), has begun a project of constitutional reform which seeks to transform the nature of the Sri Lankan state; a process which yields significant implications for the future of constitutional democracy in Sri Lanka. This paper will focus on a particular political phenomenon which serves as an instructive entry point into understanding the forces that have led us to this political moment, as well as the political trajectories we may see in the post-pandemic period.

Specifically, the paper will identify President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the political constituency supporting him as a group of political actors who have been able to employ a counterintuitive and underexamined form of populist rhetoric, that of technocratic populism. The paper will look at the ways in which the SLPP has counterintuitively combined the narrative resources of both technocracy and populism, highlighting the ways in which these two ideologies are not in tension with one another, but are, in the Sri Lankan context, compatible and mutually reinforcing.

The paper will go on to examine the ways in which technocratic populist rhetoric serves to present political processes such as executive aggrandizement and militarisation not as unwanted political side effects, but as integral components of a political project which may cure Sri Lanka of its political and economic ills.

It will also explore the ways in which technocratic-populist legitimisation stories for authoritarian practices will be impacted by the pandemic, highlighting the ways in which the success or failure of the pandemic response will affect the credibility of these narratives and the conceptions of legitimacy which underlie them.

## **I. Populism as Ideology**

### *The Logic of Populism*

In the past decade, populism has come to prominence as a fixture in global political discourse. The Rajapaksas have long been identified as archetypes of autocratic populists, a framing which is in many ways accurate. However, to conceive of them as straightforward representatives of a global trend of emerging authoritarian strongmen is to abstract away from more salient features of the SLPP's political practice which arise out of their specific context.

That the Rajapaksas are populist leaders has become something of a truism in polemical analyses of Sri Lankan politics. What is perhaps more illuminating is the specific variety of populist logic being deployed by the SLPP, the context within which it is deployed and the results of this deployment.

To begin with, it would be instructive to outline what exactly we are referring to when we speak of populism. Populism has been a contested concept in political discourse, approached through a number of different frameworks. There are a number of family resemblances shared by the phenomena to which we ascribe the label populist, but of these resemblances one that is most significant for the purposes of this paper are captured by Cas Mudde in his definition of populism.

Cas Mudde characterises populism as a 'thin centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous camps, the "pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" where politics should be an expression of the *volonté général* (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004:543). At its core is not a substantive view about how society ought to be organised. Indeed, populism may take many forms from across the political spectrum with different conceptions of the ideal political society, but underlying each is a certain form of logic.

Jan-Werner Muller highlights three aspects of this logic, each of which are applicable to populism in the Sri Lankan context.

- 1) It is monist: It values a particular segment of the population, the authentic 'people', as the only group worthy of democratic decision making.
- 2) It is moralistic: It proclaims this segment of the population as morally pure in contrast to a corrupt elite.
- 3) It is anti-pluralist: It denies the validity of competing interests within the political boundaries set by liberal institutions. (Muller, 2016).

Populism does not exist within an ideological vacuum, with manifestations in many forms across the world, from left wing-class centric forms of populism to ethno-centric nationalist ones. It requires other ideologies to give form and substance to an otherwise barebones conceptual structure comprising of the distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite. Who are the authentic people? Who are the corrupt elite? What form does the political antagonism between the two take, and what effect does this have on the way political actors behave? Populism cannot be assessed or its effects understood as a standalone phenomenon, devoid of the context in which it is employed and to what ends its logic is instrumentalised in the service of. These ends themselves are dependent on the adjacent ideologies and concepts that form the ecosystem of ideologies of which populism is a part. In the case of populism in Sri Lanka, one of the most significant presences in this ecosystem, is the ideology of ethnic majoritarianism.

## *Populism and Ethnic Majoritarianism*

Ethnic majoritarianism has been one of the key ideological driving forces in modern Sri Lankan politics. This paper will not attempt to do justice to the influence and complexity of this ideology in and of itself; however, any treatment of the question of populism and its effects requires an appreciation of the ways in which the form it takes is influenced by this cornerstone of the political terrain.

Ethnic majoritarianism plays a key role in substantiating the notion of ‘the people’, ‘the corrupt elite’ as well as the moral content underlying the conceptual distinction between the two. The notion of the people leveraged by the SLPP’s brand of populism is one which places Sri Lanka’s Sinhala population at its centre. In this way, the conception of the people within the technocratic populism of the SLPP is not reinvented but is rather inherited from the broader ethno-majoritarian ideology in the country. Conversely, ethnic majoritarianism itself cannot be adequately theorised without taking into account the moralised distinction between ‘the corrupt elite’ and ‘the pure people’ that is central to populism.

That ethnic majoritarianism involves a populist conception of the Sinhala community may be understood through an acknowledgement of the extent to which Sinhala nationalism is largely an anti-elite phenomenon. Though it has indeed been a political force that has been mobilised by elites for political gain, ethnic majoritarianism has also been used to mobilise against elites and is articulated with the use of an anti-elite grammar. Populism and ethnic majoritarianism are in this sense co-constitutive.

The populist conceptions of the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ are heavily moralised and distinct from a strictly class-based conception, though class related discourses are often incorporated into populist narratives. The historical westernisation of elites has played into this distinction,

allowing for the imagined authentic Sinhala Buddhist subject to be contrasted with that of a corrupt comprador class.

While populism along with the ethno-majoritarian ideology that lies adjacent to it have always been influential in Sri Lanka's modern history, it has been given new ideological vigour through its unintuitive interaction with other powerful ideological trends. A particularly consequential point of contact is that between populism and a political ideology which on first glance seems to embody its exact opposite, the ideology of technocracy.

## **II. Technocracy and Performative Governance**

### *Technocracy and Legitimacy*

Technocracy can be characterised as a mode of governance where political actors and institutions are granted decision making power on the basis of expertise and technical competence; a kind of 'rule by experts.' This involves a managerial approach to governance, where priority is afforded to efficient administration over democratic representation and deliberation.

In recent times it has come to be associated with big data and IT oriented innovations in the public sector. However, technocracy does not simply refer to the use of such methods to improve the functioning of government, but rather a broader ideology about who ought to operate the machinery of the state. In the Sri Lankan context this has emerged in the form of calls for 'professionals' to be given political positions within government, to whip into shape a state apparatus whose incumbent operators are viewed as inefficient and corrupt.

Through a promise to get 'professionals' in positions of power, technocracy presents itself as a solution to problems of short termism and inefficiency associated with traditional



administrative bureaucracies (Drápalová and Wegrich, 2020). Whilst populism gains its legitimacy through its representation of the authentic will of the people, technocracy gains its legitimacy from the perceived expertise, managerial competence, and efficiency of these technocrats.

Technocratic legitimacy is thus strongly linked to another form of legitimacy that has been theorized in the context of more straightforwardly authoritarian regimes such as that of the Chinese Communist Party, the concept of ‘performance legitimacy’. This is the idea that in the absence of formal democratic processes, political legitimacy is attained through the attainment of tangible results that may justify power to those over whom it is exercised. Such results would be for instance outcomes like economic growth or social stability (Zhu, 2011).

As such while technocratic legitimacy comes from expertise and effective administration, this is on the assumption that technocrats will be able to achieve results such that they are in the long term, able to attain performance legitimacy. Strategies involving technocratic legitimization stories can thus only hold up, and allow for the consolidation of power, if this transformation from technocratic legitimacy to performance legitimacy is achieved. Though performance legitimacy does not preclude democratic accountability and the attainment of ‘procedural’ legitimacy, as we shall see is especially the case in Sri Lanka, the latter is often framed to be detrimental to the achievement of the former by Governments and other political actors. In the Sri Lankan case hostility to procedural legitimacy does not extend to *vertical* accountability to voters but is more pronounced in the context of *horizontal* accountability, to bodies such as the legislature or independent institutions. As such rather than the procedural legitimacy involved with the political processes and institutions of traditional liberal democracies, technocracy ultimately prioritises and depends on this performance legitimacy.

However, the concept of performance is salient in another sense, in the sense of ‘theatrical dimension of state behaviour’ (Ding, 2020). That is as a way by which language, symbols and gestures are deployed to create the impression of effective governance (Ding, 2020). This does not exclude the possibility that such performance is accompanied by substantive changes, or the intention of doing so. Governments, or at least certain individual agents within them, may in fact buy into the narratives they espouse whilst at the same time playing to an electoral audience. However, whilst the Government’s will and ability to implement substantive changes will vary with time, the political performances they deploy will continue to have significant impacts on the way their actions are received by the public.

The performance of ‘technocracy’ is a powerful weapon in Sri Lankan politics. Public administration has been mired by corruption and inefficiency. Inefficiencies in bureaucracies in particular, the site at which the government interfaces with the public at an administrative level, have been seen as explicit manifestations of the sheer scale of political dysfunction. Any political programme that presents a credible narrative about how this problem will be solved will invariably garner significant support.

### *Technocracy as a Political Performance*

The elite constituencies backing Gotabaya Rajapaksa, represents a coalition between the military establishment as well as business and professional elites. A coalition that has been keen to present itself as a technocratic class who are able to provide the expertise required to fix Sri Lanka’s political and economic problems and reorient the country on a pathway towards development.

Newly formed pro SLPP civil society organisations such as Viyathmaga and Yuthukama are prominent members of this alliance, with members of the former obtaining seven seats at the

recent general election. Viyathmaga in particular were a conspicuous presence, describing itself as a group which aims to mobilize ‘the nascent potential of the professionals, academics and entrepreneurs to effectively influence the moral and material development of Sri Lanka’.<sup>1</sup> They have been mascots for a technocratic project which seeks to distinguish Gotabaya Rajapaksa from populist Presidents of the past, the most significant of which being his brother.

The tendencies of both Mahinda Rajapaksa and Gotabaya Rajapaksa presidencies have been similar in terms of the centralization of power, the fostering of ethnic majoritarianism and varying forms of militarization. However, the constituency backing Mahinda Rajapaksa and the shaping of the state under his presidency was more typically nationalist populist in character. The conspicuousness of the Sinhalese business and managerial class in the campaign was not present in the way it has been under Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s presidency is different in that while it retains its nationalist populist character, it aims to further legitimize itself through claims of technocratic distance from the corruption inherent to the Sri Lankan political establishment.

This rhetorical strategy was on display in the lead up to elections, for instance, when Gotabaya Rajapaksa gave a speech at the Viyathmaga conference where he stated:

“Even in developed countries, clever administrators do not emerge at the same rate as lawmakers. They too spend much time arguing about law, instead of implementing policies. It is thus the responsibility of the politician to understand the need of the people and to include it into national policies. Those policies must be enacted by the technocrats, who are actually officers with a comprehensive knowledge on the subject and are tasked with the responsibility of administrating that that sector.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.viyathmaga.org/about/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ft.lk/top-story/GR-unveils-blueprint-for-success/26-685422>

Within the framework the President describes, the validity of technocratic reason takes precedence over democratic debate (de la Torre, 2013), where the latter is presented as a politically decadent impediment towards the ability of the state to ensure the welfare of the people. The core of the technocratic project can, in this way, be seen as a labour in shifting governance out of the category of the ‘political’ and into a post-political framework of administrative efficiency.

That is to say, on this view, politics ‘can only prevent the adoption of the technically most proficient solution to any given challenge....it lacks the technical proficiency and specialist knowledge required to select the optimal policy choice; it is costly, inefficient, bureaucratic and self-referential to the point of being tiresome’ (Hay, 2007, p.93).

This narrative has also been emphasised in the President’s social media communications, with straightforward promises of appointing technocrats in statements such as one from October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019 which noted that “Appointments to State Institutions, Corporations and Statutory Boards will be on meritocracy, subject-matter expertise, experience and track record. A group of ‘Technocrats’ will be mobilized to guarantee services are effective, efficient and free from political interference.”<sup>3</sup>

The idea that technocracy protects against the possibility of ‘political interference’ is one of its key features. In this way it gains its authority through its claims to be able to stand ‘outside politics’. Of course, this does not mean that it is in actual fact apolitical. The process of formulating technocratic policies necessarily involves not just the technical knowledge required for the successful implementation of a project, but also value laden judgements about which projects to undertake, which interests to prioritise, and thus which sacrifices are acceptable.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/GotabayaR/status/1189450768757092352>

The framing of technocratic governance as purely results oriented and post-political, allows the maintenance of a certain distance from the policies enacted and the costs associated with them. In this way there are significant political benefits to be gained from the presentation of policy as technocratic, expert-led and ‘depoliticized’. This framing is particularly advantageous when such processes give rise to legitimate and politically inconvenient grievances which can then be safely disregarded as ‘politicized’ and not the legitimate demands of ‘the people’.

The idea of technocracy being employed in the service of putatively apolitical development goals bears significant dangers in the context of such issues as civil liberties and minority rights in Sri Lanka.

This was made particularly clear with regard to the President’s framing of issues of reconciliation and human rights in the North and East of the country. Demands for civil liberties and attention to issues of human rights and reconciliation have been presented as unpatriotic; demands which were concocted by politicians for which there was no genuine backing from the people (Fonseka & Dissanayake, 2020). For instance, when asked about reconciliation and human rights issues the President responded:

“I believe development is the answer. For the last so many years, Tamil political leaders and also Sinhalese political leaders were talking about things which were impractical only to fool the people. We should focus on what we can do first. Give everybody the opportunity to live as a Sri Lankan in this country. To get education, live a better life, get a good job and live in dignity. I will create that environment, let the other political things go on, you can’t only focus on that.”<sup>4</sup>

Such sentiments are grounded in a certain ideology about which political demands are legitimate and the responsibilities of the state therein. Development is framed as the central

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9aymd\\_6V2k&ab\\_channel=BharatShakti](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9aymd_6V2k&ab_channel=BharatShakti)

solution to the problems of minorities, whilst considerations of civil liberties and human rights are framed as political distractions concocted by politicians.

This framing is grounded in both technocratic and populist narratives. Specifically, it invokes technocratic notions of legitimacy in claims of prioritising and bringing about development, and populist conceptions of what constitutes legitimate demands from ‘the people’.

This is reflective of a more general intersection between technocratic narratives and populist ones in Sri Lankan politics, with significant implications for the country’s political trajectory and the way this trajectory is perceived by its citizenry.

### *The People’s Technocrat*

Populism and technocracy are not distinct strategies resting uncomfortably side by side, but mutually inform one another in the political practice of the SLPP. We’ve established the technocratic nature of the SLPP’s rhetorical strategy, but what makes it technocratic *populist* in nature and what is the significance of the confluence of these two modes of political thinking?

On first glance these ideologies would seem to be incompatible, and this has been reflected in much of the public discourse internationally. Technocracy and populism have been portrayed as opposing ideologies, each fuelled by the political threat represented by the other. However, the boundaries between the two ideologies may be more permeable than they first appear.

Indeed, it seems intuitive that a technocratic politics in which actors gain legitimacy from their status as experts is in opposition to a populist politics in which an authentic ‘will of the people’ is central. However, these forms of legitimacy are conceptually compatible, and in the Sri Lankan context, their combination is particularly politically resonant.

These two modes of political logic share important elements in common that allow for their combination. Specifically, both populism and technocracy, oppose a ‘procedural conception of political legitimacy’ (Bickerton & Accetti, 2015). This is not to say either rejects democracy altogether, indeed the maintenance of procedural democracy is a foundational element of the Rajapaksa’s brand of populism and its attendant notions of the will of the authentic people. Neither populism nor technocracy can be said to be inherently anti-democratic in this broad sense.

Rather, they both reject certain aspects central to *liberal constitutional* democracy in particular. Both reject the idea that processes such as parliamentary deliberation or the oversight of the legislature and independent committees, should interfere with the decisions of technocrats or those of the authentic representative of the people respectively.

In the Sri Lankan case technocratic populist narratives serve to devalue and present other forms of accountability as ones which are in opposition to this vertical accountability. Specifically, it presents horizontal accountability as one of these impediments.

The legitimation of the SLPP through the invocation of the will of the people, is itself at least partly constituted by the technocratic legitimation promised by SLPP technocrats. This makes sense when we consider the ways in which what Gotabaya Rajapaksa promised represented a welcome departure from the perceived administrative incompetence of governments that came before him.

While populism preaches the leader’s proximity to the people, technocracy emphasises the leader’s distance from inefficient and corrupt bureaucrats and politicians. In the Sri Lankan context, there is no conflict in between these orientations, the political paths charted by each ideology map onto one another. The corrupt elite are not a technocratic class but are constituted

in the popular imagination by incumbent politicians and bureaucrats who are perceived as both unscrupulous and incompetent in their handling of the machinery of the state.

The presentation of the SLPP's qualified technocrats as representatives of the people in opposition to a corrupt, inefficient and nepotistic political class is especially prominent in their communications, from campaign material to the President's speeches. For instance, in his first speech at the sitting of the new parliament, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa stated

“After I assumed office as the President, changing the existing system, a methodical procedure was introduced to appoint heads of Government institutions whereby qualifications of prospective appointees were examined through a panel of experts. A well-experienced team of professionals, entrepreneurs and academics was appointed instead of relatives, acquaintances and followers”<sup>5</sup>

This technocratic rhetoric is combined with a populist self-presentation in which Gotabaya Rajapaksa is presented as the latest in a long tradition of authentic leaders of the people, but also an outsider to the corrupt political classes.

There is a significant performative element to this self-presentation. Even such actions as his decision to wear a suit to parliament instead of the traditional national attire, simultaneously portray him as a moderniser rather than a traditional autocrat, whilst also distancing himself from the incumbent political class.

Once again, the populist ‘aesthetics of *proximity* to the people’ (Muller, 2016) [emphasis added] weaves seamlessly with that of technocracy's *distance* from incapable incumbent politicians and bureaucrats. The idea that the President is a man of the people, engaging directly with those he represents, unencumbered by the mediation of ineffectual political structures has

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pmdnews.lk/i-will-take-the-country-towards-prosperity-without-succumbing-to-any-force-president/>



been a key aspect of the performative governance of the SLPP.<sup>6</sup> It has been employed on many an occasion with the President's visits to Government offices<sup>7</sup> and has been extended to calls to ensure all civil servants meet with members of the public. During his inaugural speech on parliament Gotabaya Rajapaksa stated:

“In the current political culture, most of the people's representatives, after they get elected, neglect the prime duty of going to the people. When I travelled round the country in the recent past, this was confirmed by the people who voiced their grievance on this matter. Henceforth, ministers, State ministers as well as members of Parliament will fulfil this expectation of the people by visiting them often to understand their issues and find solutions to their issues.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite these actions, the extent to which these technocratic populist promises have resulted in significant changes in the political culture is questionable. To a significant extent, the current administration has engaged in the same patterns of nepotistic establishment politics that both technocracy and populism position themselves against. The actual composition of government, the ministers appointed to Cabinet positions and the politicians elected under the SLPP ticket have not been significantly different to those in previous elections. This is in addition to the several roles in Government assigned to members of the Rajapaksa family. With regard to these issues (at the very least), technocratic populism's functional role primarily as part of a political performance and a set of justificatory narratives is made apparent.

Despite these discrepancies, political performativity does not preclude the possibility that at least some of the political agents who engage in it buy into and attempt to translate such ideas

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/index.php/2020/09/22/president-goes-grass-roots-to-address-peoples-grievances/?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ft.lk/Front-Page/President-visits-Werahera-RMV-office-calls-for-efficient-service/44-692465>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.parliament.lk/en/news-en/view/1882?category=6>

into governance (Ding, 2020). However, what is perhaps more significant than the intentions of specific individuals within this technocratic populist coalition are the effects their narratives and the role they play in whitewashing processes of democratic backsliding and increased authoritarianism.

### **III. Militarisation, Technocratic Populism and the Pandemic**

Technocratic populist rhetoric has served to justify and sanitize pre-existing trends which pose a threat to the maintenance of liberal constitutional democracy in Sri Lanka.

While processes such as militarisation and executive aggrandizement have already been underway, the technocratic populist narratives put forward by the new government provide them with further ideological fortification.

Corrosive features of such processes are not merely masked or sanitized, but are framed as structurally necessary aspects of the attempted transformation of the functioning and character of the Sri Lankan state. COVID 19 has provided the ideal context for the playing out of this narrative, allowing the government to accelerate both of these processes within the context of the pandemic response.

#### *Military Governance*

Militarisation has occurred via a number of avenues. Whilst initially this took place largely through military appointments and the gazetting of several ministries under the ministry of defence,<sup>9</sup> this trend has been accelerated in the pandemic period. The process of increased

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ft.lk/front-page/31-institutions-including-Police-SIS-TRC-brought-under-Defence-Ministry-purview/44-691465#.XfHfMjKk7Cx>.

militarisation has been exacerbated by the virus and the government's decision to place the military at the forefront with regard to the implementation of the COVID 19 response. The COVID 19 response from the military, has included their involvement in everything from on the ground implementation, to high level decision making through their involvement in the National Operation Centre for the Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO), headed by Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva.

Military involvement in governance is presented as a key component of a technocratic populist project which offers the solution to Sri Lanka's political challenges. In doing so, the post war political capital enjoyed by the military has been reinvested to produce a justificatory story for their further involvement in public administration. The idea of 'discipline' has been a key theme in the Government's campaign material<sup>10</sup> and the military is framed as a central actor in inculcating this discipline within the state.

The army is recast as a protagonist in a narrative where they take up the task of whipping the administrative state into shape for the benefit of the 'authentic people' who they represent. A political agent that is both technocratic in its impact on governance, and populist in terms of those it represents. That is to say military involvement in governance is simultaneously granted legitimacy by their perceived ability to provide administrative efficiency and 'get the job done', as well as the conception of the military as being an institution of 'the people' by much of the Sinhalese population.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://gota.lk/sri-lanka-podujana-peramuna-manifesto-english.pdf> 'Discipline' is mentioned 22 times in the SLPP's 88 page manifesto.

## *Ape Kollo / Our Boys*

There is a significant populist element to the perception of the military in Sri Lanka. The military is considered a ‘pro-people’ institution by a majority of Sinhalese voters. Data from polls conducted in 2018 indicate that they enjoy more public confidence than traditional political institutions within the Sinhala community, with ‘trust in the military’ at 91.4% compared to 16.7% and 16% for political parties and parliament respectively.<sup>11</sup>

Further polls show that as much as 30% of the Sinhala community believe that ‘the military should come in to govern the country’<sup>12</sup>. Given the nature of this relationship with the military, there has been minimal criticism with regard to the Military’s increased involvement in administration.

Militarisation has been accompanied by a programme of valorisation in which they have been painted as incorruptible. The end of the civil war has resulted in the military coming to be an exalted entity, largely beyond scrutiny or reproach from the majority voter base. Indeed, criticism of the military has come to be associated with a lack of patriotism and ungratefulness in the aftermath of the armed conflict. As such, assessments of the military’s abilities to effectively perform in positions of civilian administration as well as the ascertainment of the threats that such a trend poses, are influenced by the place the military holds in the post-war political imagination.

Although political rhetoric and ideological framing has done much to create this image, there is a material basis to the perception of the military as an institution of the ‘common man’ at least in the Sinhala community. The demographics of the military play a key role here. For

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<sup>11</sup> <https://groundviews.org/2020/06/14/authoritarianism-is-no-remedy-to-the-countrys-wounded-democracy/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/70-Years-of-Independence-Survey-Report-Social-Indicator.pdf>

much of the rural Sinhalese working class, the military has been one of the main providers of income. The military serves as one of the most important form of employment for young Sinhala men in much of the rural periphery. Among Sinhala men who have ‘completed secondary school, but have no further education, where unemployment levels are high the military accounts for 17% of all employment’ (Venugopal, 2018:113). This is a significant proportion of the population, accounting for half of Sinhalese men aged 18-25 (Venugopal, 2018). Much of this military employment is in the rural peripheries where private and government sector jobs are scarce, for instance in the Eastern province where it accounts for 23% of total employment in the area.

The ‘pro-people’ perception of the military has been used in order to justify their involvement in civilian administration, with government mouthpieces keen to invoke the military’s populist credentials in order to justify this trend. This was apparent for instance, in a piece published in the state-run newspaper The Sunday Observer which argued that the military was being ‘peopolised’ rather than the state being militarised.<sup>13</sup> On this view, it is the military who are becoming a more civilian institution through their involvement in civilian administration.

However, this justificatory story does not stand up to scrutiny in light of the desired mechanism that military involvement has been instituted to bring about. As we shall see the stated purpose of getting the military involved in administration is precisely to change the functioning and character of the state apparatus. As such while it may be true that the military is a populist institution, this has little bearing on the question of whether the military is being ‘civilianised’. Indeed, it is the very process by which the functioning of the bureaucracy becomes more and

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2020/05/24/opinion/why-nobody-buys-spurious-%E2%80%98militarization%E2%80%99-story>

more military-like in character which represent the purported mechanism by which efficiency is increased.

The origins of the perceived increase in efficiency through military involvement are the very same as those out of which arise the fears of militarisation and threats to democracy. What proponents laud as the inculcation of ‘discipline’ both within the state and with regard to the way governance is carried out, are the very same processes which inspire worries of a military state.

This typifies a more general trend with regard to the activities of the government, the solutions offered by technocratic populism and fears of de-democratization. Processes such as militarisation are not presented as undesired effects to be tolerated, but rather are presented as providing the very mechanisms by which problems of administration are solved.

### *Technocracy, the Military and COVID 19*

Militarisation is not only framed as a ‘pro-people’ populist development, but as a key feature of a broad technocratic project designed to increase the efficiency of the state and bring about the political goals of development and security. The footing of the military in civilian administration has been bolstered by the technocratic focus on efficiency and the results-oriented legitimacy it promises.

This narrative has been put forth most explicitly in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, where the efficiency and expertise of the military has been framed as the primary reason for what had initially seemed to be an effective pandemic response.

A statement on the Ministry of Defence’s website for instance lauds the efficiency of the military in implementing the pandemic response.

“Extremely effective sanitization programs, military managed quarantine centres with commendable state of facilities for patients, food distribution programs during the initial stages of the pandemic etc. bear testimony to the greatest synergy built upon the perfect blend of the efficiency of the military with the praiseworthy proficiency of the health sector of Sri Lanka in countering the invincible threat thus ensuring the country's national security.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the contribution of the military to efficiency and its links to technocratic legitimacy, militarisation is justified through the framing of the military as a kind of technocratic actor in its own right. The military’s expertise with regard to matters of security has been instrumentalized through the reframing of the pandemic as a security threat, the kind of threat the military has the unique capability of being able to resolve.

In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks and the failures of the Yahapalanaya Government of 2015-2019, national security came to prominence as a central political issue to an extent that had not been seen since the end of the civil war. The expertise of the military and the promise of its increased integration into the functioning of the state thereby became a valuable political commodity in the run up to the 2019 Presidential elections. This securitized framing of the COVID response was made clear in a number of statements by high ranking military figures. Major General Kamal Gunaratne for instance stated:

“The military has to fight with the enemy that will destroy the entire nation if not properly fought. Therefore, the military is saddled with a huge responsibility to ensure national

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<sup>14</sup>[http://www.defence.lk/Article/view\\_article/2463?fbclid=IwAR2KZ0FHQt6VQnfWNUhebfq4dtxABatALrNQ8tTaaRJTk5ZF1qRtETfGW5A](http://www.defence.lk/Article/view_article/2463?fbclid=IwAR2KZ0FHQt6VQnfWNUhebfq4dtxABatALrNQ8tTaaRJTk5ZF1qRtETfGW5A)

security whether it is a threat or an attack from terrorists, a pandemic or natural disaster.

Similarly, even in a pandemic the military is tasked to ensure national security.”<sup>15</sup>

Anil Jasinghe, the Former Director General of Health Services reiterated this message noting that the COVID response ‘is like the war on terror, the difference is the enemy.’<sup>16</sup>

This kind of rhetoric plays a crucial role in reframing the crisis in such a way as to emphasise military expertise as providing a solution. The military’s position as a political institution that is fit to play an increased role in governance is increasingly consolidated as a result. Several dangers arise as a result of the securitization of the pandemic and the broader militarisation project it has taken place in the context of, each of which are obscured by technocratic populist narratives which have been produced to support it.

### *The Threat of a Militarised State*

Four main dangers arise as a result of the securitization of the pandemic response as well as militarisation in general. Firstly, the effects on citizens’ right to privacy and the threat of continued surveillance posed by the use of military intelligence in the COVID response. Secondly the structural threats to democracy coming from a lack of civilian oversight of the military. Thirdly, the effects with regard to approaching issues of human rights and finally the change in the functioning and character of the state apparatus itself, that is the increasingly militarised character of governance.

The role of the military in surveillance will have significant impacts on civil liberties and privacy in Sri Lanka. Military intelligence has been used in the contact tracing process and has

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2020/04/19/opinion/prompt-intervention-military-and-police-reduced-impact-covid-19-defence-sec-maj>

<sup>16</sup> ‘360 with Anil Jasinghe’, interviewed by Dilka Samanmali, Derana, 20 April.



been enthusiastically championed as one of the key reasons for the relative manageability of the pandemic at the initial stages.

The legitimisation of surveillance creates ample opportunities for the targeting of critics and the silencing of dissent, shielded by the threat of the pandemic, and the technocratic populist narratives put forth to place the military at the forefront of the pandemic response. The consolidation of surveillance infrastructure as well as the precedent set during this period may well set the stage for further incursions of the right to privacy of Sri Lankan citizens.<sup>17</sup>

In conjunction with the threat of continued surveillance by the military is the diminishing ability of civilians to exercise any form of oversight over the military. The decision-making process of the NOCPCO led by Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva has been opaque, making the exercise of accountability difficult. In the context of a pandemic response which was conducted in large part in the absence of parliament (the implications of which shall be further explored in section IV) this resulted in the military only being held accountable to an executive branch which it is deeply politically entangled with. This structural issue risks being extended beyond the pandemic period in the context of a 20<sup>th</sup> amendment with increases executive power as well as a near supermajority for the SLPP in parliament who support military involvement. In this context, the space for civilian oversight is rapidly shrinking, with worrying implications for the relationship between the military, the state and society.

The dangers of militarisation must also be understood in the context of the particular role the military has played in Sri Lanka's recent history. With regard to issues of human rights in particular, the interests of the military and those advocating for these issues are in many ways diametrically opposed. The military's increased role within the state present serious concerns

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Discussion-Paper-Right-to-Privacy-updated-draft-4-1.pdf>

with regard to the resolution of these issues and an acknowledgement of this antagonism must be central to any serious appraisal of the effects of militarisation.

There is also the issue of the institutional character of the military itself and the ways in which it has been set up to deal with problems. The militarisation of administration does not merely alter power dynamics and create worrying trends with regards to oversight, it also changes the very nature and functioning of the state itself. Specifically, it creates the threat of harmful effects on the way that policy is formulated and implemented, giving these processes an unduly combative character.

This has been apparent to a significant extent during the pandemic response, for instance with regard to the reported antagonistic and invasive treatment of workers in the Free Trade Zone who were suspected of being COVID positive.<sup>18</sup> This instance is reflective of a more general heavy-handed aggressiveness that comes as a result of the treating of issues of governance through the lens of war being waged.

Such instances are reflective of the fact that the origins of the dangers the military poses are a result of the institutional character of the military itself; the very same sources from which promises of efficiency and expertise are derived. For this reason, there is little possibility for military involvement to be ‘civilianized’, that is for it to be defanged and rendered more palatable. The threat that military involvement in administration imposes are intrinsic due to their institutional disposition.

Despite these significant and clear threats, the technocratic populist justificatory stories that accompany militarisation have served to garner consent from the SLPP voter base. This is

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<sup>18</sup> <https://economynext.com/ensure-impartiality-of-brandix-internal-inquiry-worker-rights-collective-requests-boi-74811/> <http://www.ft.lk/columns/Sri-Lanka-Vulnerable-groups-pay-the-price-for-militarisation-of-COVID-19-response/4-708073>

consent which has been derived to a significant extent from the lens of national security and the notion of military efficiency. The military has been displayed as possessing the kind of expertise required of them to administer responses to crises of various kinds, be they the threat of terrorism or even a public health crisis. This operates in tandem with a parallel set of narratives regarding the military as an institution that is more ‘of the people’ than other institutional and political actors; any antagonisms thereby laundered by their populist credentials. The structure of these narratives is not limited to the process of militarisation, but is also present within accounts which attempt to vindicate another long-term political trend, that of executive aggrandizement.

#### **IV. Executive Aggrandizement**

Technocratic populist justifications serve not only to sanitize those aspects of the project of constitutional reform that are erosive to liberal democracy, but to present this very erosion as necessary to solving Sri Lanka’s deep seated political and economic issues. The process of executive aggrandizement is one political phenomenon in which such justificatory narratives have been particularly pronounced.

Executive aggrandizement is the process by which ‘elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences’ (Bermeo, p.10 2016).

The threat of executive aggrandizement has been a lingering presence in Sri Lankan politics, reaching its most recent high point under Mahinda Rajapaksa during his tenure as President. While this process was temporarily abated during the previous Yahapalanaya Government and the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment which imposed significant checks on presidential power, the failures of

governance during their tenure have contributed to the garnering of support for this process, which is now seeing an expected resurgence under the Presidency of Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Executive aggrandizement has been brought about through various routes. However, the most clear and significant of these routes is through the project of constitutional reform. Specifically, the proposed removal of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, to be replaced by the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment, as a precursor to the formation of a new constitution altogether. This paper will not go into detail on the specificities of what this entails, with the topic being covered comprehensively elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> Rather it will examine the ways in which technocratic populism framing serves to manufacture consent for this process.

As with militarisation, efforts to justify executive aggrandizement are two pronged. Old populist justificatory stories have been revamped under the current Government and given new impetus by the technocratic narratives which have been woven into them.

Executive aggrandizement has been justified with reference to two sources of populist legitimacy. Firstly, through the claim that both executive aggrandizement and the undermining of independent institutions required for it, has been mandated via popular sovereignty through the election of the President. Secondly, through the ways in which the substantive content of the project of constitutional reform draws from populist resources in its engagement with Sinhala nationalist ideas about sovereignty and statehood.

At the same time as these populist justifications are deployed, executive aggrandizement is argued to be necessary on the technocratic grounds that it is the only way to ensure efficient and competent administration in bringing about security and development.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Final-doc-Summary-of-Changes-Under-the-Proposed-20th-Amendment.pdf>

## *Popular Sovereignty and the Undermining of Independent Institutions*

One of the narratives used to justify the increasing concentration of executive power has been one in which the electoral mandate received by the President at the 2019 election (on a platform promising constitutional reform) is said to validate this process.

This narrative of the SLPP is one in which the democratic notion of popular sovereignty is used to undermine the institutions that exist to ensure oversight of those who have been democratically granted power. It advances a populist conception of illiberal democracy which depends on an emphasis on the mandate of the executive over other branches of government and institutions, with the former being framed as representing the office which bears the direct mandate of the people (Berneo, 2016).

As such in attempting to justify the provisions of the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment, the SLPP has invoked a democratic agenda of its own. Indeed, the Government's technocratic populist narratives are not necessarily hostile to the democratic notion of majority rule, but rather to more specific liberal constitutional democratic ideals. They are hostile, in particular, to the independent institutions which exist precisely to ensure that the former does not result in the 'tyranny of the majority' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

As such these narratives exploit points of tension within the conceptual architecture of liberal constitutional democracy and the compromises between competing values inherent to it. It attacks those institutional pillars which place limits on the power of governments over individuals and which ensure that checks and balances exist to prevent the accumulation and abuse of power by individuals in government. That is to say it delegitimizes horizontal accountability in favour of a putative commitment to vertical accountability. The entities who exercise the former, such as independent institutions and other bodies who provide oversight, are framed as a barrier to the unmediated relationship between the executive and his voters.

The positioning of vertical and horizontal accountability as in opposition to one another, once again, incorporates both technocratic and populist sources of justification. This was encapsulated in remarks made by the President during a speech delivered to the Bar Association of Sri Lanka.

“The executive in particular has a mandate to act to fulfil the requirements of the people. It is therefore important that the judiciary does not obstruct the development efforts undertaken by the executive to ensure the wellbeing and prosperity of the people.”<sup>20</sup>

This statement illustrates the way in which the SLPP have sought to justify executive aggrandizement by employing the idea that it is the President who has a direct mandate from the people and as such that checks on the executive amount to a suppression of the people’s will. Processes such as judicial oversight are thus presented as undemocratic insofar as they hinder the enactment of the general will through the executive, as well as a hindrance to the objective of bringing about development and security for the people. The procedural legitimacy of judicial oversight is trumped by the populist notion of representation of the pure people as well as by the promise of performance legitimacy through the bringing about of development.

Though, as we shall explore in the final section, the specifics of this mandate and what actions it justifies have been an issue of contestation. It is fair to say that there was a widespread rejection of the Yahapalanaya Government and indeed the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, however this was a rejection of those specific elements of that government and their project which contributed to their dysfunction. It was not a blank cheque for the accumulation of executive power. Public reactions even from supporters and members of the SLPP to the contents of the recently passed

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<sup>20</sup> <https://economynext.com/judiciary-should-not-needlessly-interfere-with-legislature-and-executive-president-50809/>

20<sup>th</sup> amendment indicate that the loosening of checks and balances it entails has gone significantly beyond what the SLPP voter base have consented to.

### *Ethno-Majoritarian Constitutionalism*

The SLPP also draws upon populist narrative resources to justify executive aggrandizement through its framing of this process as continuous with the political traditions of pre-colonial Sinhalese civilisation, part of a project in which the cultural identity of the Sinhala nation is reflected structurally in the contents of Sri Lanka's constitution.

The centralising tendency of current constitutional reforms cannot be understood without an understanding of the ways in which it is informed by populism by way of its connection with ethnic majoritarianism and Sinhala nationalist historiography.

In keeping with this project, the President has set up a Buddhist advisory council, who have praised the President for 'following (the) advice and implementing suggestions of the Maha Sangha.'<sup>21</sup> The support of much (but crucially not all) of the Maha Sangha has allowed the President and his base to frame the broader executive aggrandizement project as continuous with that of the social and political tenets of a renewed Sinhala Buddhist civilisation.<sup>22</sup> Through claims to authenticity, the increasing accumulation of power and the possibility of authoritarianism are fashioned as part of a grander historical narrative, an act of fidelity to a cultural ideal.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/index.php/2020/09/18/buddhist-advisory-council-commends-president-for-walking-the-talk/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.ft.lk/news/Maha-Sangha-supports-President-to-create-most-suitable-Constitution/56-706013>

The modern project of nationalist constitutional reform is founded on a deep rooted historical and ideological bedrock. Populist historiography produces conceptions of sovereignty and statehood which inform the conceptual underpinnings of modern constitutional project. This has been reflected in the proposals of pro-Government civil society groups such as Yuthukama and members of the Sinhala nationalist intelligentsia. Yuthukama were amongst the civil society groups who, in February 2020, submitted proposals to the President regarding the new constitution and the thinking that informs them may give us clues as to the intellectual foundations that the process of reform is likely to be built upon. Their proposal is one which draws heavily on both the Sinhala Nationalist ‘Jaathika Chinthanaya’ as well as the conceptual framework of the ‘Civilisation-State’ as a replacement to the Western nation state (Welikala, 2020).<sup>23</sup>

On the view espoused by groups such as Yuthukama, Sri Lanka’s current constitution and the political ideals underlying it are artefacts of a colonial period which “ruptured the seamless narrative of Sinhala-Buddhist history since the dhamma arrived on the island” (Welikala & De Silva Wijeyeratne, 2020). The restoration and continuation of this ruptured narrative is a key element of the new populist constitutional project, in the way that it represents a reorientation of a civilizational trajectory through the reconstruction of the state. This is a narrative that carries with it significant cultural resonance for much of the Sinhalese community and imbues it with a populist authority in its rejection of the values of the West and as such, the westernised elite. In weaving in this ideological narrative to their political project, the SLPP’s technocratic populist ideology is able to bring together both ethno-majoritarian narratives of the reclamation of the heritage of Sri Lanka’s civilizational past, to modernising developmentalist narratives of its future.

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<sup>23</sup> For an in depth treatment of Yuthukama’s constitutional project see <https://groundviews.org/2020/07/08/the-coming-constitution-of-the-civilization-state/>



### *Technocracy, Development and Security*

In addition to the legitimacy derived from this project being ‘of the people’ is the technocratic legitimisation it seeks to attain by invoking the administrative efficiency of centralised power and the tangible changes to citizens lives that can claim to be delivered therein.

This view has a significant amount of purchase amongst the voter base with 58.7% of the country believing that the country should ‘have a strong leader, without worrying about parliament or elections’ while 54% believed that the country ought to have ‘an expert to make decisions according to what he believes is best for the country, without worrying about the parliament and election’.<sup>24</sup>

Underlying these views lie a mythology of the ‘benevolent dictatorship’ and the assumption that it will be benevolent of its own accord in the absence of checks and balances. While there is no public support for straightforward autocracy, as dissent even to the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment has shown, a similar conceptual foundation underlies support for increasing the power of the executive, that of the privileging of performance legitimacy over constitutional democratic principles. Technocratic populist narratives are built upon this foundation.

These narratives have been particularly salient in a context in which the most readily accessible representative of these principles was the dysfunctionality of the previous Yahapalanaya government. The link between these principles and ambiguity with regard to the distribution of powers followed by a subsequent inability to govern effectively has been emphasised and weaponised by the SLPP. Development and security are framed as goals which are in

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/70-Years-of-Independence-Survey-Report-Social-Indicator.pdf>

opposition to political processes of accountability, the latter representing an obstruction to the executive's ability to carry out the will of the people.

This idea is conveyed most clearly with regard to discourse surrounding the stipulations of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in terms of the checks placed on the power of the executive. Minister G.L Peiris for instance has stated:

“If the Executive is to be so constrained and hamstrung in every way as to make coherent decision making and movement forward impossible, the inevitable outcome is stagnation, or worse, anarchy.... In truth, political power is not to be viewed with innate fear or obsessive suspicion. The contrary is a facile assumption, intuitively made with a total lack of dispassionate thought. Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and Indonesia are telling examples of Asian countries which could not have achieved the remarkable economic development they did accomplish without the advantage of strong Executive authority.”<sup>25</sup>

The folklore of benevolent autocrats plays a powerful role in Sri Lankan political discourse. In this regard, it must be noted that much of the animus behind nationalist populist politics is not just reverence for and a harking back to a glorious past, but a pervasive sense of mourning for a lost future. The examples of Singapore, Malaysia and the political mythology they have generated have been significant influences in this regard. In popular political discussions leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew are regularly cited as examples of autocratic leaders who were able to bring about development to countries which were once on the same economic footing as Sri Lanka.

Executive aggrandizement is thereby framed as a process that is part of a broader technocratic project; a process that is argued to be justified by the development paths of these countries. On

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<sup>25</sup> <https://island.lk/why-the-hurry-about-20a/>

this view, certain pillars of constitutional democracy may be dispensed with in favour of a developmentalist project whose results will provide their own form of legitimacy.

### *Crisis and the Reception of Technocratic Populist Justifications*

The same technocratic populist narratives which propelled the SLPP into power have been leveraged to sanitize overreach of power and disregard for the law during the pandemic period. Many of the actions undertaken by the Government during the COVID 19 response which have been deleterious to constitutional democratic principles and the rule of law, have been framed as necessary through the ideological lens that has underwritten their tenure so far.

Several legal issues arose surrounding the dissolution of parliament, the postponement of elections and the constitutional dilemma that came up as a result. The previous parliament had been dissolved in the run up to the general elections and with the repeated postponement of elections, Sri Lanka was left without a parliament over the constitutionally mandated limit of three months.<sup>26</sup> As a result the pandemic response took place with a lack of legislative oversight. There are no prohibitions preventing the withdrawal of the proclamation of dissolution, thus allowing for the recall of a dissolved parliament. Fundamental Rights petitions were put forward by CPA, opposition politicians and several citizens calling for the proclamation of dissolution to be withdrawn and parliament recalled. However, the Supreme Court refused leave to proceed with the case, with no reasons provided for their decision.

Further legal issues emerged in the wake of this outcome, each of which amounted to the consolidation of the power of the executive. With the validity of the vote on account ending on

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Brief-Guide-I- Evolving-Legal-Issues-in-the-Context-of-COVID-19.pdf> .

the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, the pandemic period was one in which there was no legislative oversight over public spending.

In this context executive power has also been consolidated insofar as policy has been determined by a task force that was formed as an extension of executive power and accountable only to the executive. This was just one of a number of task forces set up during the pandemic period, the expansive mandates of which may be ultra vires of article 33 of the constitution under which they were set up.<sup>27</sup>

At a more general level, the lack of adequate legislation and the inability to pass new legislation resulted in a form of rule by press release, setting a dangerous precedent with regard to the relationship between the state, its citizens and the grounds on which the latter is compelled to obey the former or face the threat of punishment. Such a dynamic was seen with regard to the implementation of the island wide curfew, which was conducted with no firm legal basis. The declaration of a formal state of emergency and the implementation of a curfew under the provisions of the Public Security Ordinance require the presence of parliament to be implemented, whilst the Quarantine and Prevention of Disease Ordinance does not provide a legal foundation for a curfew (CPA, 2020). This resulted in a situation in which several citizens were arrested and detained without a legal justification.<sup>28</sup> Despite this, there was little to no criticism even from within the ranks of the Opposition. This is largely unsurprising in the context of party politics insofar as such procedural questions may have been framed by the Government as trivial and motivated by attempts to undermine the pandemic response. The perception of being lenient on those violating the curfew is a characterisation the Opposition

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FINAL-Presidential-Task-Force-on-COVID19-April-2020-copy.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Brief-Guide-III-CURFEW.pdf>

would have been particularly keen to avoid given their reputation for not having the requisite toughness to deal with such crises.

Such a phenomenon sets a worrying standard in which during a time of crisis the rule of law may be jettisoned and regulations as well as punishments may be enforced on the citizenry merely by way of the arbitrary proclamations of the Government. Technocratic populist logic, has created the grounds for these trends through the ways in which it points to a certain type of legitimacy, justifying certain Government actions which are not in keeping with constitutional democratic values.

The broader technocratic logic painting the democratic deliberation of parliament, and adherence to the rule of law as impediments to efficiently dealing with a public health crisis, opens a pandoras box of possible vindications for harmful trends. This logic was further demonstrated in the Presidents demand that his instructions be considered circulars,<sup>29</sup> a demand which is characteristic of this bypassing of formal institutional considerations through claims to be able to ‘get the job done’.

However, the durability of these narratives to justify increasing overreach of the executive and disregard for the law may decrease as claims to efficiency prove to be less and less forceful. While such narratives may have initially been convincing, the eventual unravelling of the idea that the pandemic response has been an unmitigated success creates problems for their continued effectiveness. While the public may be assuaged into allowing authoritarian practices and disregard for the law if it means that governance is effective and the pandemic is kept under control, as it becomes increasingly clear that this is not the case, consent may no longer be forthcoming.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-president-orders-verbal-instructions-to-be-written-circulars-74201/>

The inability of supposed technocratic legitimacy to be transformed to performance legitimacy will decrease the level of public tolerance for movements towards authoritarianism. Patience towards authoritarian practices is thus unlikely to remain as long as this continues, with technocratic legitimisation stories, in their failure to demonstrate concrete results, becoming less and less convincing.

Indeed, as the narrative surrounding the COVID response unravels, in tandem with disenchantment from the SLPP support base about clearly autocratic aspects of the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment, claims of technocracy have come to look more and more performative in nature.

Dissent even from Sinhala nationalists who have thus far been strong allies to the Rajapaksas, as well as the Maha Sangha<sup>30</sup> seem to indicate that there is a public perception of the way in which the proposals of the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment go beyond what had been consented to. The exemption from audit for the Presidents and Prime Minister's offices for instance, are in conflict with the overarching narratives of technocratic efficiency and the elimination of corruption put forth to justify this project.

As elections past have shown, public tolerance only extends so far. If the SLPP are unable to keep their end of the bargain, this will necessitate the formation of new ideological narratives to justify processes for which tolerance is decreasing by the day. Ultimately the speed with which these justifications wear thin, the ability to spin new narratives, not to mention the credibility of alternatives on offer, will determine how much longer they will maintain their place at the forefront of Sri Lanka's political stage.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.ft.lk/front-page/Amarapura-and-Ramanna-Maha-Nikayas-call-for-withdrawal-of-20A/44-707406>

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