

**IS THE CURE WORSE THAN
THE DISEASE?**

**REFLECTIONS ON COVID GOVERNANCE IN
SRI LANKA**

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Foreword

In the Sri Lankan context, the possible long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are particularly disturbing. What public satisfaction prevails with the government is based on the relatively low number of deaths and infections. The public has not seen beyond their immediate health concerns to consider the impact of the pandemic on the key question of governance. And it is here that there is cause for serious concern.

COVID-19 has provided the government the perfect excuse for effective Executive aggrandisement and militarisation. Parliament did not sit for some 03 months, and therefore there was no legislative oversight of public finance. Management of the pandemic is through the Presidential Task Force headed by Army Commander Shavendra Silva, aside a number of other Task Forces staffed by current or former military personnel in the main, to ensure a disciplined society and to look into archaeological sites in the Eastern Province. The latter does not reflect the multi-ethnicity and pluralism of the Province. Regulations have become the order of the day with the President declaring that his pronouncements constitute government policy. Furthermore, there was a rush to introduce legislation such as the Port City Commission Bill, which nevertheless was challenged by political parties and the civil society in the Supreme Court. The bill had to be amended, before being passed, as per the Court's decision.

Militarisation has fed into this aggrandisement of Executive power made possible by the passage of the 20th Amendment removing checks and balances on the exercise of Executive power and authority. Apart from the Task Forces, military personnel with wide ranging powers have been appointed to the 25 districts as chief coordinators to facilitate quarantine requirements. Air-force drones

as well as “Sri Lanka Army Quick Reaction Riders Team” are used to apprehend those who violate quarantine regulations. Alongside this, the shrinking of the space for civil society, the harassment and intimidation of civil society actors in the North and East in particular, and the use of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) continue. As with the experience of Emergency rule, the danger is that the practices and procedures adopted to combat the pandemic will come to be seen as normal, before it is too late.

This volume raises these questions in relation to a host of issues currently in society concerning democratic institutions, governance, welfare impact of the pandemic, ethnic relations, free education, migrant workers, and political patronage. I trust the volume will encourage discussion and debate on these issues, and thereby constitute a contribution to better governance and government in Sri Lanka.

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