IS THE CURE WORSE THAN THE DISEASE?

REFLECTIONS ON COVID GOVERNANCE IN SRI LANKA

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3

Healing the population by constructing subjects: Pandemic governmentality of Sri Lanka

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Introduction

> Pandemics have shaped the course of human history, felling tottering empires, altering colonization patterns, and endowing populations with competitive advantages. Depending on the circumstances, they can also restructure labor markets, with potentially far-reaching consequences for inequality and social organization. (Gingerich and Vogler, 2021, p. 393)

The history of pandemics has taught one thing for sure; sooner or later they will go away, but their impact on society and politics will be felt over many generations. Gingerich and Vogler (2021) studying the deadliest pandemic of the last millennium, the Black Death (1347-1351), illustrate how it has made a lasting impact on the social and political landscape of Europe. A pandemic is hardly a product of human choice (unless it is developed as a biological weapon), but responses to it clearly are. As discussed in the introduction of this volume, in their fight against COVID-19, many governments across the globe have declared a state of exception

and imposed disproportionate regulations on the justification of necessity in tackling the health crisis. (Cheibub et al, 2020) In the guise of battling the pandemic, rulers have consolidated their powers, undermining checks and balances which are essential for democratic rule. Despite their tyrannical undertones, 'pandemic governmentality' – the procedures, technologies, and rationalities employed in governing populations during COVID-19 – is widely tolerated and sometimes even applauded by citizens due to fear of the virus. Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House, has opined that "[w]hat began as a worldwide health crisis has become part of the global crisis for democracy" (*Democracy under Lockdown*, 2020).

In this chapter, I examine how Sri Lanka's COVID governance is reflective of the vision of those in power as to the sort of rule they aspire to have. I have embarked on writing this chapter with two objectives in mind; i) to provide a brief account of the process of the government's pandemic response and ii) to examine the key political outcomes of the COVID response. This analysis is mainly founded on qualitative interviews and secondary information. In order to understand the rationality of the leadership through the pandemic response, a number of senior bureaucrats and military officers were interviewed. Media - print, electronic, and social – reports on the topic provided valuable insights into the public's perception of such.

The discussion in this chapter starts by inquiring into the public's opinion of COVID governance during the early stage of the pandemic. Next, I proceed to narrate the government's pandemic response under four larger themes: i) Militarisation of the COVID response, ii) inconsistencies and insensitivities of the pandemic response, iii) reproducing hierarchies, and iv) politics of the pandemic response. While it is not my intention to provide an exhaustive account of Sri Lanka's COVID response, I do wish to draw to attention the broader patterns emerging from within this context, that have serious ramifications for the democratic life of the Sri Lankan public.

Public opinion during the early stage of the COVID response

The findings of the survey reveal that people were fairly satisfied with the way the government managed the first and second waves of the pandemic. For example, 67% were satisfied with the way the government handled the situation until February 2020 (please refer table 41 in annexure 3). However, among those who live in Municipality areas, where the spread of the virus is relatively higher given the larger concentrations of population, four out of every ten persons expressed their dissatisfaction on this count. It should be noted that Sri Lanka was at this point doing fairly well compared to many developed countries that, at the time, were struggling with more than 2000 deaths a day, when Sri Lanka had reported only 316 deaths and 6682 COVID positive cases by January 31st, 2021 (*Sri Lanka Coronavirus – Worldometer*, 2021). This satisfaction towards the government's COVID response pattern mirrors the global trend. Analysing survey data from 14 countries, Chen and team show that people pay more attention to the results of their governments' battle against COVID-19 (number of confirmed cases and deaths per million population) rather than to what policies they initiate, when assessing their country's COVID response (Chen et al, 2021).

Assessing the role played by various sections of the executive branch of government, a majority expressed their satisfaction. Even though people were satisfied with the role played by the President in this regard, its level was slightly lower compared to the satisfaction that was extended to other officials such as PHIs, Grama Niladaris, the police, and the military. Interestingly, only one third of the community who participated in this survey has stated that they are satisfied with the involvement of the Parliamentarian of their area in the government's COVID response (please refer tables 5-10 in annexure 3). This speaks to the truth of politicians having little role to play in the larger pandemic response, a theme I will take up in the subsequent sections in relation to increasing militarisation and the President's demonstrable preference of 'experts' over career politicians.

Militarising the COVID response

Governments of all types – from dictatorships to democracies – looked to their armed forces to combat the threat of the pandemic. The fact that the military possesses an organised national command network, and a pool of disciplined manpower that can be mobilised on relatively short notice render it an asset to civilian frontline services during a national emergency. Therefore, many countries, though to varying degrees, sought assistance of their armed forces at a time when the pandemic has become a near universal-emergency (Graham, 2020). This support was extended by way of providing logistical supports such as transportation, construction of hospitals and other facilities, boarder controlling, enforcing quarantine regulations, providing medical assistances, running vaccination programmes, and so on. However, rather than as a supplement to the civilian authorities to combat the pandemic, some counties have brought the entire COVID response under the supervision of their military. As Euan Graham, a Shangri-la Dialogue senior fellow for Asia Pacific notes:

> In Southeast Asia, countries with a recent history of military intervention in politics, such as Myanmar and Indonesia, have seen the armed forces take on prominent advisory and decision-making roles. Thailand's government, over which the armed forces exert considerable influence, is reported to have largely excluded civilians from a panel responsible for directing responses to the pandemic. (Graham, 2020)

Furthermore, a constitutional democracy such as the UK also sought assistance of its ministry of defence for its COVID response. However, the role of the military was largely limited to logistical tasks mandated under the standing arrangement for Military Aid to Civilian Authorities (Graham, 2020). In Singapore, despite being a country less committed to liberal politics, the military has not taken on any obvious frontline roles, although national servicemen were used to pack masks for every household early on in the crisis (Graham, 2020).

The militarisation of the COVID response in Sri Lanka is perhaps unique amongst democratic regimes. Not only is the military engaged in providing logistical and operational assistance, it has been brought in to strategise and lead the government's COVID response. The President, who is a former Secretary of Defence and military officer, almost single-handedly led the government's COVID response with almost no checks and balances to his actions, appointing military officers to key positions. The government set up the National Operation Centre for the Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO) to prevent the spread of the disease. However, instead of appointing a medical professional or civil officer in charge of the Centre, General Shavendra Silva, commander of the Sri Lanka Army, was appointed. Therefore, it appears that in the mind of the Head of State, the battle against COVID is another military campaign more than a health crisis, in which the role of health professionals is to assist the security forces. This is not surprising given how the President seems to view the military as a panacea for all ills. For example, President Rajapaksa has also appointed retired and currently serving military officials to other key public sector positions including as the Secretary of the Ministry of Health, Director General of the Disaster Management Centre, and Director General of Sri Lanka Customs (Perera, 2020). A retired military official oversees the COVID-19 relief fund as well, and one-fifth of the members of the presidential task force in the post-COVID economic response are from the armed forces (*Militarisation of COVID response, the looming refugee crisis, and Nepal's PM under pressure,* 2020).

Understandably, fighting a pandemic requires swift responses and demands significant engagement of resources and capabilities. Experts believe that the health infrastructure in Sri Lanka has proven to be resilient to such crises, and point to the public health system's track record — "Sri Lanka was declared Malaria-free in 2016 — and its strengths particularly in preventive community medicine are proving valuable at this time." (Srinivasan, 2020a) However, instead of strengthening the existing capacities of the health sector, the government's COVID response has produced a parallel structure made up largely of military personnel.

It should be noted that military engineers have done a commendable job in building the physical infrastructures needed to accommodate the mounting number of COVID infected persons in the country. The private sector has also come forward to collaborate with the military in this task. For example, a leading garment manufacturer in the country collaborated with the Army to construct a 1200-bed hospital with state-of-the-art health facilities by converting one of its factories (*Sri Lanka Army constructs 1200-bed hospital in Seeduwa for COVID-19 patients*, 2021). However, unlike in the case of providing logistical support, activities such as enforcing pandemic quarantine regulations have put the military in direct charge of civilian affairs. Commenting on the deployment of armed forces for civilian duties in situations like a pandemic, Euan Graham says:

> While an overlap exists, specialised military skills do not automatically 'plug in' to civilian emergency-service competences. Given the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, military commanders are likely to be particularly concerned about the force protection aspect, given the potential for personnel deployed in 'frontline' support roles becoming infected. (Graham, 2020)

Quarantining is one of the key strategies of pandemic control. The military was tasked to setup and manage the quarantine process that required significant human and material resources as well as the capacity to enforce strict rules. Describing their role in the COVID response, a senior Army officer said that a total of 54 quarantine centres with 10,430 beds, and 92 intermediate centres – for those who had come into contact with COVID patients – with 22,240 beds are managed under the Sri Lanka military[1]. Further, he explained how military style management helps maintain discipline within quarantine centres and ensures a continuous flow of man power needed to maintain such facilities.

When responding to a national emergency like a war, a terrorist attack, an environmental disaster, or a health crisis, it is expected that people may need to partially forego some of their

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1   Discussion with a senior military officer in charge of a quarantine facility, 17 July 2021.

rights and freedoms. However, deployment of the military that has minimum or no training in civilian affairs could lead to outright violations of human rights. To reiterate an example from another chapter in this volume, the military engaged with Free Trade Zone workers in a heavy-handed manner, in order to enforce quarantine regulations. As a report by CPA illustrates:

> They were given only five to ten minutes to collect their belongings before being rounded up into crowded buses to be sent to quarantine centres where conditions were poor. The workers were not told where they were being sent and no PCR tests were conducted nor masks provided, thus increasing the likelihood of contracting COVID-19 in these crowded conditions. (Fonseka and Dissanayake, 2021, p. 23)

On the pretext of efficient control of the pandemic, the military also deployed its intelligence units to collect personal information, ostensibly for COVID-related surveillance purposes. In fact, even private mobile service companies collaborated with the military by providing details of their clients to support the battle against the pandemic (*Intelligence units to trace contacts of COVID – 19 patients*, 2020). Perera (2020) points to the lack of transparency as to the kind of information being collected, the duration of its retention, whether such information will be used beyond contact tracing, and which state agencies are sharing information (Perera, 2020). In this connection, Shahbaz and Funk (2020) argue that "Brick by brick, governments and companies responding to the public health crisis are laying a foundation for tomorrow's surveillance state."

In Sri Lanka, militarisation of civilian affairs had started well before the pandemic. However, the pandemic has justified this not only as a logical, but also welcome, step in the successful management of an emergency. Appreciating the pleasant experience at a vaccination centre, a teacher from Colombo said that thanks to the military she managed to avoid the usual bureaucratic hassles[2]. This is clearly a positive appraisal of the military for their hard work on pandemic prevention. At the same time, the comment also

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2   Discussion with a secondary school teacher, 11 July 2021.

indicates the possibility of people preferring military delivery of governance over that of the bureaucracy. One needs to understand however, that the quality of service delivery, even if it is exceptional, should not be a justification for the use of the military in civilian affairs in a democracy.

Inconsistencies and insensitivities in the pandemic response

The main propaganda tag of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is that he is a man of discipline and his word. His strong man persona and the distance he managed to maintain from traditional party politics earned him a rewarding reputation amongst his voter base, convincing them that he is different to traditional politicians. The decision to involve the military in his COVID response further boosted the expectation that there will be one rule for everyone. However, these myths were exposed by how the President actually governed the country during the pandemic. Pandemic governance under the leadership of President Rajapaksa is not only rife with inconsistencies, but also tainted by glaring insensitivity to the condition of some communities when implementing regulations. In the following discussion, I examine how these differentiations unfolded in relation to facemasks, social distancing, isolation, lockdowns, and quarantine regulations.

Wearing masks and social distancing

The health ministry guidelines advised people to wear a clean face mask when leaving home, wash hands always, cover their cough and sneeze using the elbow or to use a tissue and dispose of it properly, avoid shaking hands and hugging, avoid crowded places, and maintain at least one meter distance with others while in public. In addition, regulations were introduced either to limit or ban social events such as religious gatherings, weddings, parties, and sports and other recreational events, etc. Further, the government gazetted new COVID quarantine regulations, making masks and maintaining social distancing mandatory in public places (*Health guidelines made compulsory*, 2020). Violation of these regulations is

an offence punishable by six months of imprisonment or a fine of Rs. 10,000 (*Sri Lanka makes masks mandatory under new quarantine laws; to impose fine if rule violated*, 2020). Supermarkets, retail shops, public transport, and other such places of congregation are compelled to maintain a register of persons using them, according to the Gazette, in addition to introducing caps to the number of people who can use a premises at a given time, and means of measuring the temperature of those who enter. However, experiences reported since the beginning of the pandemic illustrate how these regulations were marred with corruption, mismanagement, and discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, and economic status. In addition, the military-styled implementation of quarantine regulations has led to repression especially of the vulnerable in society.

For instance, the Police Spokesman addressing the press on 7th May 2021, announced that over 5000 persons have been arrested for violating quarantine rules, further emphasising that "wearing masks alone was not helpful and that it was mandatory to wear face masks in accordance with proper hygiene practices and standards, otherwise the law regarding masks will be enforced." (*Police arrest 238 for not masking*, 2021) In implementation, however, the poor and minorities were subjected to markedly harsher treatment than the rich. Even International news channels reported how the Sri Lankan police were literally lifting people off the road for not wearing a mask (*Mask Police 'lift' people in Sri Lanka*, 2021). However, these instances also clearly show that such cruel treatment was meted out only to poor working class men and women. The media, more interested in ratings than news, sensationalised such tough implementation of COVID rules and portrayed a narrative in which the poor and maginalised were made to be seen as law breakers and criminals, while the rich and powerful roamed freely. For instance, the Minister in charge of the police department, Dr. Sarath Weerasekara, did not even issue an apology for participating in an official event without wearing a facemask, despite widespread criticism in the media (*Min. of Public Security goes 'without' facemask during official function, 2021*).

Social distancing has been a key practice implemented across the world to battle the spread of virus. However, though social distancing is equally beneficial to all, its application is not equally

convenient for everyone given different economic realities. In certain instances, these regulations have also been discriminatory and illogical. For example, public transport services were asked to maintain a gap of one meter between passengers, and limit the number of passengers to 50% of their seating capacity. Taxi services, motor cars, and three-wheelers were to carry a maximum of two passengers (*COVID-19 BEST PRACTICE RESPONSE: PASSENGER TRANSPORT GUIDANCE IN SRI LANKA,* 2020). These regulations are not practical when taking into account the ground realities. Expressing his anger, an owner of a private bus service stated that:

> These new regulations are stupid as they are not practical for anyone to implement. We were making a bare minimum income even before the COVID spread started. It is not financially viable for us to take the vehicle to the road if we can only load 50% of the seating capacity. It is not practical to wait for one passenger to get down to let another in. That is not how private transports function and I'd rather keep my buses at home as I won't be able to cover even the operational cost of the bus if we are to function according to these regulations![3]

However, realising the impracticality of the regulations, government authorities have informally relaxed their implementation rather than changing them. Social distancing in public transportation was never a success ever during the pandemic, because it is simply impossible. This led to the social distancing policy at workplaces and educational institutes also becoming redundant. The purpose of maintaining social distancing inside the workplace or educational institute was defeated after having traveled in a jam-packed public mode of transport. This is by no means to suggest that the government could have provided perfect policy solutions to maintain social distancing, but rather to emphasise the illogical and ad-hoc nature of introducing and implementing COVID regulations.

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3   Discussion with a bus owner from Matara, 10 November 2020.

The process of implementing regulations also highlighted interesting strategies. If the practicality of a particular regulation is in question, the government relaxes its implementation effort, but uses media stations loyal to it to fuel the perception that the given regulation is being implemented. For example, media channels showed how the military and police are raiding private buses that violate quarantine regulations, while the entire transport sector *de facto* functioned under relaxed regulations. Therefore, the COVID regulations of the regime were often better implemented ideologically, through the use of media, than practically on the ground.

Further, the government promised to ease the financial burdens of those involved in the transport sector. Acordingly, just before the 2020 Parliamentary election, the government provided Rs. 5000 each for all drivers and conductors (*Rs. 5,000 allowance for private bus drivers & conductors*, 2020). In addition, the Central Bank had instructed leasing companies to grant a grace period for bus owners to settle their leasing installments. However, this latter directive seems not to have been put to practice uniformly. According to the private bus service owner aforementioned, even though some had received this concession, the respective leasing companies had added an interest for the additional period taken to repay debts. Although the government introduced some reliefs to those involved in transportation, they were notoriously inadequate for the transport sector to operate in compliance with COVID regulations. This could well explain the decision of the COVID task force to relax the implementation of relevant regulations.

It is also noteworthy that the quarantine regulations that deprived average citizens of practicing rituals of significant cultural importance – such as funerals, weddings, and various religious functions – did not apply in the same way to ruling party politicians and their allies. This was particularly evident in the public funeral held for late Arumugam Thondaman in Thalawakale, with the participation of thousands of estate works (see Figure 1 below). Nor did the President seem too bothered about COVID regulations when, despite the imminent danger of an intensifying pandemic, he decided to hold the Parliamentary election to consolidate his power. He

further disregarded his own COVID regulations to have his 'Gama samaga pilisandarak' (a conversation with the village) programme where hundreds of villagers and state officials were brought into one place (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 1: The President visiting villages in Huldumulla (25th September 2020)

Source: *Make people living is a battle ...,* 2020.

Figure 2: Funeral procession of A. Thondaman, 29th May 2020

Source: *Curfew declared in Nuwara Eliya as Thondaman's funeral cavalcade enters town,* 2020.

COVID rules were bent not only for political elites but for their relatives and friends too. There were scores of news reports on ruling political elites and their friends hosting weddings and birthday parties at star class hotels in Colombo under the patronage of high officials responsible for battling the pandemic. However, authorities were strict when enforcing regulations on average citizens. To list one such example, on 30th June 2021, the Police Spokesperson announced they raided a wedding that was held in violation of COVID regulations where 20 attendees were subsequently quarantined in the same house (*The wedding that violated quarantine regulation,* 2021). It is clear, then, that the implementation of social distance regulations was marred by inconsistencies and favouritism.

Travel restrictions, lockdowns, and quarantine

In order to contain the aggressive spread of the virus, the government from time to time imposed relatively severe regulations like travel restrictions, lockdowns, and mandatory quarantine for

those exposed to, and may or may not have been infected with, the virus. During the early days of pandemic, travel restrictions were imposed to prevent people commuting between provinces, especially in and out of the Western Province where the spread was significantly high. Though the medical basis and necessity of such measures are unquestioned, the methods by which they were enforced have had adversary effects on sections of society, reproducing and intensifying the sting of already existing injustices and inequalities.

Two chapters in this volume exclusively focus on the experience of the migrant garment factory workers and Muslim community, in order to demonstrate the particular ways in which the pandemic has affected communities in the margins. I, therefore, focus here on the general patterns of experience faced by marginalised communities under lockdown and isolation regulations. It is well known that different social classes are dependent on social interaction to differing degrees for income generation. Therefore, lockdowns and isolations do not similarly affect all across the board. Many white-collar job holders managed to continue their employment activities over online platforms. Those who are in formal salaried jobs managed to retain their employment and a good part of their income despite having to stay home. The income avenues of those who are in the informal sector, especially those living in urban centres, however, were severely affected by isolation regulations[4]. The government's financial support to low-income families living in these conditions has been meagre at best (*Protest in Wanathamulla demanding more relief amidst COVID-19*, 2020). A resident of a low income high rise in Modara describing their dire financial situation stated:

> There is no method of supplying gas for everyone. They [the government] arranged a mechanism for us to access the shops in Block C through appointed officials, but we no longer have the money to purchase basic goods such as vegetables, fish or meat, medicine, and sanitary products for women at our own shops (Gunasekera, 2020).

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4   Those who live in rural areas and are involved in agriculture-related work did not suffer from isolation as much as their urban counterparts.

Consequently, many poor communities came out to protest against the authorities for not taking measures to alleviate their suffering induced by the loss of livelihood, as well as against the preferential treatment of government officials in the distribution of government financial assistance and rations (*Protest in Wanathamulla demanding more relief amidst COVID-19* (2020) *News First*, 2020).

The lives of those living in areas with high population density were also adversely affected by isolation and lockdown regulations. Explaining their situation, another occupant of a low-income high-rise housing complex stated:

> [Our] houses occupy no more than 450 square feet, debunking the claims of 550 square feet of space per residence, which is only accurate if the corridor area is included. There are 927 houses and 870-880 occupied residences. While some households accommodate seven to eight residents, yet others do even more. We are imprisoned in order to protect everyone from corona, but the end result would be the creation of a cluster of individuals with severe mental and psychological problems (Gunasekera, 2020).

As mentioned before, the criminalisation of COVID patients through sensationalist reporting of the pandemic by media have resulted in these communities being further marginalised in society and being labelled as a 'threat'. The deployment of high-tech drones for surveillance of these areas has further fed into such perceptions. The Police Spokesperson, Deputy Inspector General Ajith Rohana said that they are planning to use drone footage to observe whether people are adhering to quarantine regulations in lock-down areas (*15 arrested from lock-down areas following drone monitoring op,* 2020).

Although Sri Lanka is not the first nor only country to deploy drones for the strict enforcement of quarantine regulations, the selective application of this policy has labelled these underprivileged communities varyingly as a nuisance, health hazard, or more seriously as criminals and a threat to society. Awanka Fernando observes in this relation that "[the] antagonistic scapegoating of certain communities has further reinforced their vulnerability." (Gunasekera, 2020) In addition, officers who were deployed to implement lockdown regulations took law into their hands and punished the violators

outside of the law, leading to the poor, weak, and marginalised further suffering due to pandemic-induced complications. Use of the war rhetoric in the battle against the pandemic by the government set the parameters for the front-line implementers to treat communities as potential threats than rights bearing citizens. The following two pictures demonstrate how the poor and the weak were subject to draconian regulations.

Figure 3: Those who stepped out during curfew made to kneel down on the road.

Source: Srinivasan, 2021.

Figure 4: Those who were caught playing carom during curfew chased away.

Source: Hiru News (screenshot).

Image 4 above that depicts a man (a young three wheel driver) holding a Carom Board was taken from a news clip of a private TV station loyal to President Rajapaksa. Image 3 depicts a similar situation where those who stepped out were made to kneel on the road. The caption of image 4 ('the marvelous punishments meted out to those who violated COVID regulations') indicates that the TV station hails the punishment given. This sort of biased media reporting, while justifying this questionable treatment of violators of quarantine laws, stayed mum about such violations by those in positions of power.

Reproducing social hierarchies

Even though the pandemic spreads indiscriminately across society, the effect of virus was felt differently by different groups in the society. For instance, excerpts reproduced above show that the poor who live in slums were more vulnerable to the virus than the rich from upscale housing schemes. More than the virus, however, the response to it has crystalised and reproduced extant social inequalities, as already explained in this chapter.

Like other countries, as the most immediate precautionary measure, Sri Lanka also imposed various foreign travel restrictions to stop the transmission of the virus into the country. First, airport authorities screened all arrivals without imposing complete travel restrictions. But, later the regulations were further tightened in response to the severity of the pandemic, making mandatory a quarantine period either at a designated hotel or centre maintained by the government. However, special tourists and arrivals such as VIPs continued to travel in travel bubbles, quite exempt from these requirements.

Even though inconveniences to regular travelers are to be expected with these additional measures in place, the manner in which policies and regulations were implemented intensified them. For example, during the early days of the pandemic, people did not have much of an option as to where they would quarantine, and had to go to a centre they were assigned to. Some were even taken to distant locations such as Batticaloa and Vavuniya. After having travelled many hours to reach Colombo, having to endure still more extensive travel to reach their quarantine facilities would, without a doubt, have been very taxing. Even though the private sector later stepped into facilitate fee levying quarantine stays, this benefit could only obviously be enjoyed by those who could afford it. During the early days, passengers who opted for quarantine at hotels had to bear its cost as part of the airline ticket. The arrangement, needless to say, made the return of poor migrant workers – such as house maids and various other labourers – further difficult. In addition to travel restrictions, the soaring costs of airline tickets and the added anticipation of further expenses related to private quarantine

facilities resulted in many migrant workers being stranded in their host countries during the initial stages of the pandemic. A senior Sri Lankan Airlines manager from a Middle Eastern station explained the dire situation of the migrant workers (during the early stages of the pandemic) as follows:

> The new regulations since the pandemic caused the increase of ticket prices, which further increased as our tickets had to cover quarantine related costs as well. Many workers were already out of jobs and they had no place to live or means to find food. Therefore, they could not afford to buy a ticket to return home even when the government opened the airport. Many Sri Lankans called or came to see me to find out whether Sri Lankan Airlines can help them as they could not get any assistance from the Sri Lankan embassy here.[5]

An overwhelming majority of the 1.2 million Sri Lankan expatriate community, despite being the main foreign income source and being one of the main support bases of the current government, suffered due to lack of attention of the government. Due to the sheer size of the workforce, it would admittedly have been a challenging task for the financially embattled Gotabaya Rajapaksa government to undertake their return single-handedly. However, given the considerable inflow of international aid to battle the pandemic and the government's own records accounting only for a fraction of it as already spent (please refer the chapter on Sri Lanka's social security provisions during the pandemic for a detailed account of such aid its utilisation), it is unacceptable that a scheme was not introduced to at least offset some of the cost of travel for this group of citizens to return to their country.

The income avenues of those who were employed in government jobs and formal salaried occupations were affected comparatively less compared to those engaged in the informal sector. In many countries, aid typically targets the poor or people working in the informal economy and are therefore unlikely to

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5   Discussion with a senior Sri Lankan airline residential manager from a Middle Eastern country, 10 February 2021.

secure assistance through other programmes; or else conditioned on a person's job having been affected by shutdowns (*Coronavirus bailouts: Which country has the most generous deal*, 2020). Canada, for example, is providing CAD 2,000 (£1,150; $1,400) per month for up to four months to those who have lost income due to the pandemic, while Costa Rica is funding a monthly allowance of $220 (£177) for people who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. However, the Sri Lankan government could not offer such national level systematic financial assistance families financially affected by COVID. Therefore, the financial suffering induced by the pandemic differed across income brackets, in the absence of state intervention which left individual families to bear the brunt of the misery.

The psychological campaign of the government hailed some professionals as warriors who brave the pandemic to keep society safe. Many bill boards were erected praising the role played by medical professionals, members of the military, police officers, and local level bureaucrats in this regard. However, the contribution of other professions that also made lockdown and isolation much more bearable such as the staff of delivery services, supermarkets, and taxi drivers has hardly been appreciated. In doing so, not only was their contribution undervalued, but also the danger to which they expose themselves was unacknowledged. The importance and urgency demonstrated in the vaccination of doctors and their family members was not extended to the blue-collar workers who also contributed to keeping society functional. In fact, despite teaching activities being completely conducted online, the government prioritised university teachers over taxi drivers or supermarket workers. As Achille Mbembe's (2003) *Necropoltics* illustrates, the government's COVID prevention strategy implicitly has established a social order based on which lives are worth saving and which, disposable.

Politicisation of the COVID response

The way the President responded to the pandemic clearly demonstrated that it was primarily a means to manage his politics. His pandemic response seemed to have broader political targets such as the consolidation of power, militarising the bureaucracy and

civilian affairs, and clearing the path for unhindered implementation of his economic and political vision. For one, despite the looming health crisis, President Rajapaksa decided to dissolve Parliament and call for an election. As Allen Keenan puts it:

> The Sri Lankan government has declared its intention to rule without parliamentary oversight for the first time in the country's modern history, potentially sparking a serious constitutional crisis. Elected in November and without a majority in parliament, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa seized his earliest opportunity to dissolve the legislature on 2 March and schedule a general election for 25 April. As the COVID-19 emergency grew serious in late March, the National Elections Commission (NEC) delayed the vote indefinitely. With the constitution stating that parliament can remain dissolved for only three months pending fresh elections, Sri Lanka will head into dangerously uncharted territory unless the president or courts take decisive action before the deadline expires on 2 June (Keenan, 2020).

President Rajapaksa continued to disregard the absence of Parliament and the legal validity of the regulations enacted to battle the pandemic (Sumanthiran, 2021). He not only sidelined Parliament, but also the politicians who contributed to his ascent to power. Speaking in Parliament, MP Sumanthiran for instance, slammed the President for not using the expertise even within his own party, such as that of pioneering virologist Prof. Vithana and community medicine specialist Dr. Frenandopulle, and on top of it appointing the Army Commander to lead the country's pandemic response (*MP Sumanthiran speech on the Parliament*, 2021). On top of all this, the rushing through of highly questionable legislation such as the 20th Amendment that envisages expansive powers and greater immunity for the Executive President (Srinivasan, 2020b) was also largely done hiding behind the rush of the crisis situation.

The President capitalised the relative success in controlling the first and second waves of the pandemic to legitimise his rule. Pro-regime newspapers featured sensationalised accounts of the achievement prior to the Parliamentary election, claiming that "Sri Lanka and its President Gotabaya Rajapaksa have been ranked 9th in the Global Response to Infectious Diseases (GRID) index."

(*SL ranked 9th in Global Response to Infectious Diseases (GRID) index*, 2020) However, this victorious narrative did not last long with the steady worsening of the situation with the third wave of the pandemic. In addition, in the backdrop of an ever deepening financial crisis, the President came under scrutiny for his policies and conduct, leading to widespread protests across the country. Farmers protested demanding fertiliser; civil society organisations protested government-sponsored deforestation and the government's decision to sell resources to foreign countries; teachers, students, and various political organisations protested privatisation and militarisation of education, while teachers called for a countrywide strike by way of boycotting online teaching, demanding the resolution of their salary discrepancies.

However, the government directed the police to suppress rising dissent using quarantine regulations as an excuse. Social distancing regulations that were relaxed due to a slowdown of the spread of the virus were strictly imposed on the protesters. The Director General of Health Services, Dr. Asela Gunawardana instructed the Police to ban protests and public meetings until further notice, ostensibly to prevent the rapid spread of COVID-19. However, this has not stopped protesters from exercising their democratic rights. Many protesters were arrested, beaten, and even forcibly carted off to quarantine centres, even after receiving bail. Members of the teachers union, including its secretary Joseph Stalin were arrested for violating quarantine regulations and later sent to quarantine centres. Similarly, many protest campaigns were disrupted using health regulations which did not apply for Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage and his supporters who marched in Nawalapitiya on 15th July 2021 disregarding the general quarantine law. The government's pandemic response, therefore, does not aim to manage the health crisis alone, but rather seeks to serve the larger political agenda of the President.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the dynamics of Sri Lanka's pandemic governmentality and its consequences for the democratic political life of the citizen. The government's COVID response is primarily founded on the governance rationality of the President instead of the expert advice of epidemiologists or virologists. The state of exception that is increasingly being normalised under the COVID pandemic has given new impetus to Gotabaya Rajapaksa's aspiration for authoritarian style rule by; a) concentrating powers of all three branches of government in the hands of the Executive President, b) clearing out any obstacles to his rule by freeing the Executive from any checks and balances, c) having a disciplined and obedient society instead of a democratic society predicated on criticism and dissent, and d) a government that focuses on macro outcomes and population than individual human needs and interests. Therefore, Sri Lanka's battle against the pandemic, which primarily functions *on and for* the President's political vision, can be seen as a political onslaught against the country's remaining democratic institutions.

The COVID response of the government has given a smooth passage for the military to intrude into civilian affairs. This new normal has great potential to last beyond the health crisis. The fact that the operations of the military is increasingly coming to embody a panacea for all the ills one may find in the civil service – corruption, mismanagement, and lethargy - people may find themselves becoming less and less uneasy about involving the military in civilian affairs.

The COVID governance approach in Sri Lanka mirrors the President's choice of alliances. Unlike his predecessors and quite unusual in the county's political practice, the President has by and large not involved political elites, including the ones who brought him to power, in addressing the COVID health crisis. He has clearly side-lined the traditional political elites of the senior Rajapaksa network by bringing new technocratic political classes closer to his reign. Irrespective of whether this chose is strategic or for sheer convenience, this new power constellation would upset the apple cart and its consequences will certainly last beyond the current health crisis.

Sri Lanka's COVID response, like in many other countries, has clearly focused on managing the health of the population. Hence statistics on death and infections, economic indicators, and the popularity of the rule have come to matter more than the actual victims and vulnerabilities in the pandemic situation. The government in this context is seen waging a war against its own people by labelling them as a threat to the population, rounding off and transporting them to quarantine centres. This has been particularly so with marginalised groups in society, thus reproducing and exacerbating hierarchies. Therefore, the governmentality of the COVID response has triggered the transformation of our society, not to a more democratic and egalitarian one where people enjoy a dignified life, but rather one that does not tolerate dissent or criticism, and functions on highly utilitarian principles and factional politics where the majority will live as subjects than rights bearing free citizens.

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