

***Mahinda Rajapaksa as a Modern
Mahāvāsala
and Font of Clemency?
The Roots of Populist Authoritarianism***

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¹ **Editor's Note:** This chapter is a reproduction of an article published by the author in 2012, at the height of the Rajapaksa regime. It is republished here without amendment except for minor formatting changes. In the light of the electoral defeat of the Rajapaksa regime in the presidential election of January 2015, the discussion shows a remarkable prescience about the nature of the Rajapaksa regime and the way it might fall, demonstrating the value of deeper understandings of history and culture in the analysis of contemporary politics and constitutional practice.

On 4th December 2011 the *Sunday Island* carried a headline, ‘Mahinda ready to meet General Fonseka’s family over pardon’ – with a picture alongside showing President Mahinda Rajapaksa seated in an armchair perusing an official document – a document in royal red and marked by a recognisable state seal. It is the juxtaposition of the headline and image that drew my interest. In my reading as an analyst attentive to indigenous cultural threads, this combination suggested several interrelated motifs, namely, that:

- A. President Rajapaksa is the epitome of sovereign power, vested with the rights of clemency on high, just like Sinhalese kings of the past who could be supplicated by condemned subjects who crawled on their knees to the palace gates (*mahāvāsala*) and begged for pardon for their evil-doings or crimes;²
- B. President Rajapaksa is akin to a manorial lord of the past, a patrimonial figure who is readily accessible on his veranda to subordinate officials, tenants, and other people seeking favours from this font of *noblesse oblige*;
- C. President Rajapaksa is a son of the soil, native to core. After all, what can be more native than a *hansi putuwa* (armchair)? He is, therefore, as personable as approachable.

In sum, what one sees here in this interpretation is native kingly power on high within a hierarchical situation, marking a flow of authority from an apical fountainhead to persons and ‘satellites’ below. The imagery on this front page suggests motifs that I have incorporated within my theoretical construct, the ‘Asokan Persona.’³ But within today’s modernist setting the imagery also conveys themes that I would describe as ‘populist.’ The essay will clarify each of these concepts in turn.

² See R. Pieris (1956) *Sinhalese Social Organisation* (Colombo: University of Ceylon Press); L. Dewaraja (1972) *The Kandyan Kingdom of Ceylon, 1707-1760* (Colombo: Lake House); M. Roberts (2004) *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period, 1590s to 1815* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa); R. Knox (1911) *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon* (Ed. J. Ryan) (Glasgow: Maclehose & Sons) for background and other relevant details.

³ M. Roberts, ‘The Asokan Persona as a Cultural Disposition’ in M. Roberts (1994) *Exploring Confrontation* (Chur: Harwood Academic Publishers): pp.58-72.

The Asokan Persona as Analytical Model

The Asokan Persona is a distilled picture of the conceptions of authority and symbols of status and power embodied in a *cakravarti* figure in Sinhala society over the past centuries. It assumes varying contexts of hierarchy and focuses upon the relationship between a superior and a subordinate. It seeks to delineate the images of authority and status that inform such interpersonal exchanges. It argues that such conceptions of authority and status are both embodied in, and reproduced within, the mechanisms of social distancing and the verbal and kinesic symbols of status.

It is not simply an issue of a superior being imposing his power on subordinates. The whole point of the paradigm is to mark the manner in which the everyday practices of subordinates – some of which are taken for granted – incorporate and reproduce the status and power of the superior person and/or position. In this manner the Asokan Persona takes one into the realm of hegemonic practices in the sense in which the concept ‘hegemony’ is used by Antonio Gramsci, whereby those subordinate and inferior participate in their own subordination.⁴

One illustration of the meaningful practices which embody the Asokan Persona and perpetuate its reproduction over time is the Sinhala word *pirivarāgena* as it is understood in several contexts. This term describes the entourages around powerful personages. Such a term not only arises in political contexts as well the adulation around film stars, cricketing greats, and other people of prominence, but also comes into play in reading the artistic and sculptural imagery in Buddhist temples because the figure of the Buddha is often surrounded by deities or devoted disciples in positions *pirivarāgena*.

Note, too, that the numerous deities of the Hindu dispensation who have been absorbed into the Sinhala Buddhist practices of supplication derive their authority from the receipt of the Buddha’s *varam* or *varan*. *Varan* means ‘delegated authority’ and

⁴ Ibid: pp.57-58, 70-71.

implies hierarchy. It encodes encompassment or incorporation within hierarchy, even if one is a powerful being like a deity who in turn receives supplication from lesser beings (humans). Thus, the deities are encompassed by the Buddha Dhamma.⁵

Equally significant in these illustrations is the fact that such meaningful terminology crosses the domains of politics and religion. This is what one would anticipate for an Asian context where the two have always been intimately intertwined and where the separation of 'State' and 'Church,' politics and religion, has not proceeded in the manner that eventuated in modern Europe in the early modern era and after the French Revolution of 1789.

Populism and Fascism in Comparative Perspective

Populism describes a political current which places the masses (the *volk*) within a nation-state on a pedestal and claims to work for their greater good.⁶ In world practice in recent centuries it refers to a cult of the masses which vests the figure espousing and embodying the popular cause with an enormous concentration of power. Populism was especially pronounced in several Eastern European countries between the two World Wars. In this period, the populist 'cult of the masses' overlapped often with what has been called 'peasant essentialism.'⁷ Eastern Europe in this period saw the emergence of several peasant parties, some drawing inspiration from 'the historical messianism' associated with the

⁵ G. Obeyesekere, 'The Buddhist Pantheon and its Extensions' in M. Nash (Ed.) (1966) *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Series); M. Roberts, 'The Asokan Persona and its Reproduction in Modern Times' and M. Roberts, 'Four Twentieth Century Texts and the Asokan Persona' in Roberts (1994): pp.73-88 and pp.57-72.

⁶ P. Worsley, 'The Concept of Populism'; P. Wiles, 'A Syndrome not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism'; A. Stewart, 'The Social Roots' in G. Ionescu & E. Gellner (Eds.) (1969) *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson): pp.212-250; pp.166-709; pp.180-196.

⁷ T. Brass, 'Peasant Essentialism and the Agrarian Question in the Colombian Andes' (1990) *Journal of Peasant Studies* 17(3): pp.44-56.

Russian *narodnik* movements.⁸ Romania presents a significant illustration that offers qualified comparative insights for those familiar with Sri Lankan history in the last seventy years. Here, the Left intellectual Constantin Stere (1865-1936) moved away from orthodox socialism and drafted an essay in 1908 entitled ‘Poporanism or Social Democracy?’ Addressing Romania’s agricultural context, Stere did not see any future for industrialisation programmes or a proletarian emphasis in politics, and argued instead for a ‘peasant state’ where small agricultural plots would serve as the basis for economic development.

From this moment Stere and Dobrogeanu Gherea spearheaded the campaign to gain voting rights for the Romanian peasantry through the slogan *poporism*. Though Stere has been described as a ‘constitutionalist populist,’⁹ the influence of *narodnik* currents of thought also implanted messianic threads conducive to a cultic dependence on a leader figure. Leader figures were particularly prominent in the organisation known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael, which was set up in 1927 by a religious mystic, Cornelia Zelea Codreanu. The Legion’s ideology was ultra-nationalist, anti-communist, anti-Semitic, and fascist; but, unlike other contemporary fascist movements in Europe, it presented an overt religiosity centred upon the Romanian Orthodox Church. Its fascist character was sharpened in 1930 when Codreanu formed the ‘Iron Guard’ as a paramilitary branch of the Legion.¹⁰ This core group assumed such importance that its name became synonymous with the Legion. Then, in 1935 its leaders adopted a new name: ‘the Totul pentru Țară’ party, literally ‘Everything for the Country’, but commonly translated as ‘Everything for the Fatherland’, or occasionally, ‘Everything for the Motherland.’¹¹

⁸ A. Walicki, ‘Russia’ in Ionescu & Gellner (1969): pp. 62-90; Wiles in Ionescu & Gellner (1969): pp. 171-176; G. Ionescu, ‘Eastern Europe’ in Ionescu & Gellner (1969): pp.104-109.

⁹ Ionescu in Ionescu & Gellner (1969): p.102.

¹⁰ Wiles in Ionescu & Gellner (1969).

¹¹ For background see *ibid*; M. Bucur, ‘Carol II of Rumania’ in B. Fischer (Ed.) (2007) *Balkan Strongmen* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press).

The Iron Guard's support base seems to have been strongest among students and peasants. However, it garnered only 15.5 per cent of the vote at the elections in December 1937, coming third behind the National Liberal Party (35.9%) and the Peasants' Party (20.4%). At this point in 1938 the factionalised and fractured state of democratic politics and the widespread resort to violence from many sides, especially the Iron Guard, encouraged the constitutional monarch, King Carol, to intervene with a *coup d'état*, which rendered him dictator. Carol is described as having played "a very similar populist card as Cordeanu during a period of political and social instability [in order] to rally support for his personal authority."¹² In the event, his dictatorship did not last long because the onset of World War II in 1940 and foreign pressures altered the political scales in Romania in ways that are too complex and/or irrelevant for our comparative reflections.

The Romanian tale between the two World Wars can be supplemented by the events that unfolded in Italy and Germany between 1918 and the early 1930s. The rise of Mussolini and Hitler, as we know, was facilitated by the parliamentary process of elections in their respective countries. The vote and a parliamentary base provided their respective parties with the platform to seize power. While there must surely have been differences in the factors aiding the advances towards dictatorship in both countries, the critical point here is that the democratic process enabled both these fascist parties to muster popular support and thereafter legitimise their authoritarian regimes with a plebiscitarian hue that was not wholly dissimilar to the world's first 'popular dictatorship,' namely, that established by Napoleon Buonaparte.

Sri Lanka: 1956-2012

The establishment of universal suffrage in 1931 as Sri Lanka moved towards political independence encouraged political activists to cultivate popular appeal through vote banks, patronage, and rhetoric. After independence was secured by D.S. Senanayake and his aides in 1948 through a pragmatic course

¹² Bucur in Fischer (2007): pp.100-101.

that utilised the geo-political context, the United National Party (UNP) grouping which he had founded as an elite-led cross-ethnic coalition was challenged in the mid-1950s by the Mahajana Eksat Peramuna (MEP), another coalition fostering two major political currents: (a) the force of cultural nationalism centred upon the Sinhala language, indigenous imagery, and Buddhism; and (b) the grievances and demands of the underprivileged directed against the privileged classes.¹³

The demands of the have-nots were bolstered by powerful socialist and Left currents of thought that had their roots in the Marxist parties that had taken shape in the island from the 1930s. Their vociferous attacks blended neatly with the nativist disparagement of the privileged as a Westernised and denationalised body of people. The MEP slogan of ‘Sinhala Only’ therefore distilled both currents of thinking and promised avenues of advancement to both the Sinhala-speaking have-nots and those aligned with the coalition. In the event the MEP led by an elitist Oxford educated aristocrat, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, swept to power through a momentous triumph at the general elections of 1956, completely out-muscling the right-wing UNP in a landslide victory. For this reason one can speak of the ‘1956 revolution’ and the ‘1956 ideology.’ A central dimension in this movement was the rhetorical emphasis on the *duppath podhu janathā*, namely, ‘the poor [suffering] people’: a slogan that reverberated throughout politics in subsequent decades and also promoted the emergence of the Janatā Eksat Peramuna (JVP, see below).

A sub-theme in the political rhetoric of the 1940s and 1950s was the attack on the ‘kachchery system’ and the administrative order established by the British with the Ceylon Civil Service at its apex. The campaign depicted the system as ‘feudal’ and ‘colonial.’ The Leftist and nativist/nationalist hues sustaining this drive should not obscure the fact that this pressure was a power-grab. The political spokesmen were targeting the separation of powers

¹³ The review of political developments in this section is based J. Jupp (1978) *Sri Lanka: Third World Democracy* (London: Frank Cass); M. Roberts, ‘Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Perspectives: Barriers to Accommodation’ (1978) *Modern Asian Studies* 12: pp.353-376; K.M. de Silva (1996) *Reaping the Whirlwind* (Delhi: Penguin); Roberts (1994): pp.57-72.

installed by the British in what was in effect a major political shift. What one sees from 1956 is a gradual process by which the administrative services were taken over and subordinated by the parliamentarians and politicians (paving the way eventually for encroachments on the judiciary in more recent decades).

Marxist dogma was a central force in this process. When I interviewed Colvin R. de Silva in the late 1960s,¹⁴ he insisted (with typical lucid vigour) that the United Left Front (ULF) required executive heads of departments who were in sympathy with their socialist programmes. In brief, democratic centralism must prevail in the firmament. So it came to pass: this process was set in train when the ULF came to power in 1970. This turn in politics was then taken further with a twist of its own when J.R. Jayewardene established the Gaullist constitutional order of 1978 with some assistance from scholars like A.J. Wilson.

The '1956 revolution' was a triumph for the SLFP led by the Bandaranaiques and the forces of linguistic nationalism in ways that have been deeply etched into the subsequent politics of confrontation. The alienation of the Tamil peoples which it encouraged was further entrenched (1) because the principal other contender for parliamentary power, the UNP, also adopted the linguistic and cultural slogans of 1956; and (2) because the Trotskyist parties abandoned their principled demand for parity of status for both languages and joined the SLFP in the coalition known as the United Left Front (ULF) in 1964. So, the ingredients were in place for the Tamil political activists of most shades to become disenchanted with the idea of federalism and to move towards a demand for a separate state. The republican constitution installed by the ULF in 1972 was the final nail in this trend. The principal Tamil party, the Tamil United National Front (TULF), adopted secession as their goal through the Vaddukoddai Resolution in May 1976.

¹⁴ See Roberts Oral History Project (ROHP) in Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide, interviews dated 23rd June 1967, 20th September 1967, and 4th January 1968.

There was a parallel development in the 1960s to 1980s that has had a significant influence on today's politics. This was the emergence of the Janatā Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) in the Sinhala-speaking regions. The insurrectionary JVP of the period 1967-71 was mostly composed of youth in the age bracket 15-30. In this first phase the JVP was a fusion of two ideological legacies: they were both the children of the Old Left and the children of 1956. Directed by the limited avenues of economic advancement for those educated only in Sinhala within a decrepit economy, they absorbed Naxalite, Maoist, and Latin American revolutionary theories as a path to a seizure of power. The abject failure of their 'boy's own' adventure in revolutionary action in 1971 did not deter their hard-core members. After 1971 those that survived their failed takeover honed their discipline in jail. When fortuitous circumstances led to their release in 1977, some elements regrouped. Further political transformations, notably the emergence of Tamil separatism under the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the intervention of India through its imposition of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in mid-1987, provided the reformed JVP with the opportunity to mount a campaign in defence of national sovereignty. Their second insurrection of 1987-90 was in effect a civil war in the south, involving unbridled ferocity on both sides.

Though socialist ideas informed JVP motivations within this second phase, the 1956 ideology of linguistic nationalism and indigenist currents of thought, gilded with xenophobia, dominated this campaign in the late 1980s. Note, too, that the last quarter of the twentieth century was featured by an intellectual current identified as *Jātika Chintanaya*. Articulated by such advocates as Gunadasa Amarasekera and Nalin de Silva, the *Jātika Chintanaya* sentiments were suffused by a form of indigenist populism.¹⁵ Subsequently, after the second JVP insurrection was had been crushed by brute force in 1989-90, a revamped JVP emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s as a parliamentary party. The new JVP was not that different from the *Jātika Chintanaya*. In the 2000s, however, the SLFP itself was re-invented in the mantle of 1956 once the Rajapaksa clan displaced Chandrika

¹⁵ See chapter by Kalana Senaratne in this book.

Kumaratunga (nee Bandaranaike) at its masthead. The stance adopted by Mahinda Rajapaksa was directed towards the rural folk and was explicitly anti-elitist in rhetoric (as distinct from practice). In dressing itself under the banner of ‘Mahinda Chintanaya,’ it effectively stole the sarong and vest from the JVP even as the two allied together in the 2005 parliamentary elections in order to trump the rejuvenated UNP. Having secured this ‘democratic’ victory, the Rajapaksa regime split the JVP by its offer of spoils to some leading lights within that party. It also embraced the small party known as the Jātika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is widely regarded as an ultra-nationalist organisation directed by Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism. In effect, the new SLFP of the Rajapaksas became the dominant expression of Sinhala heritage and power in Sri Lanka’s political firmament, a force that is often depicted by radical and moderate commentators as ‘Sinhala supremacist.’¹⁶

The Rajapaksa brothers were a key element in the combination of forces that engineered the comprehensive defeat of the LTTE as a military force in the island by May 2009. This momentous change has been a major benefit to most people in the land and therefore contributed immensely to the prestige and authority of Mahinda Rajapaksa. His roots in the southeast encouraged local people, including sycophants, to see him as modern day Dutugemunu and to clothe him with the honorifics bestowed on famous Sinhala kings in the past. Moreover, political rhetoric under the Rajapaksa regime was regularly threaded by a reiteration of extreme Sinhala nationalist positions, spiced with the occasional strain of xenophobia and the bashing of some Western state(s) and/or NGO’s. Mahinda Rajapaksa’s emergence to supreme power in the recent past was accompanied by a considered distancing from the elites of Colombo. His appeal has been to the rural bourgeoisie and underprivileged. The successful expansion of the Rajapaksa-led SLFP’s clout by patronage and electoral process was confirmed in his clear victory over Sarath Fonseka at the presidential election of January 2010, and then consolidated at the parliamentary elections of April 2010. Note that it is a

¹⁶ For instance see the articles published by Tisaranee Gunasekera and ‘Shanie’ (Lankanesan Nesiah) in the local English-media newspapers, and some of the essays in the websites like *Groundviews* and *Transcurrents*.

standard practice within Sri Lanka's political dispensation for a ruling party to call the presidential elections before those for parliament. The presidential executive can tilt the parliamentary process.

Returning recently to his village Happawana-Harumalgoda after a life in exile, the radical Dayapala Thiranagama noted its transformations since he was child in the 1960s: "it no longer bears the hallmark of destitution and abject poverty" and it "will continue to change at increasing speed." But this is a footnote to his verdict that "President Rajapaksa enjoys a solid political support among the Sinhalese rural masses, which hitherto no other political leader has been able to command."¹⁷ Coming from a Left radical whose article also conveys reservations about the anti-democratic trends in contemporary politics, this is a significant pointer to the character of 'the Rajapaksa regime' (a considered phrase that I have deployed elsewhere as well¹⁸).

What, then, one sees in Sri Lanka is the development of 'populist authoritarianism' built upon Sinhalese nationalism and a rural-cum-urban vote within a context where the Sinhalese have constituted some 69-80 per cent of the population over the last fifty years. Since virtually every political party in Sri Lanka has been oligarchic in its internal structures and favours a top-down mode of operation, sometimes augmented by dynastic threads and the Marxist concept of 'democratic centralism,' the overall tendency in Sri Lanka's politics has been towards the periodic creation of 'populist authoritarianism.' The authoritarian character of the present Sri Lankan state is also supported by the 1978 Constitution, as consolidated by subsequent amendments,

¹⁷ D. Thiranagama, 'Ending the Exile and Back to Roots: Fears, Challenges and Hopes', *Groundviews*, 2nd January 2012: <http://groundviews.org/2012/01/02/ending-the-exile-and-back-to-roots-fears-challenges-and-hopes/> (accessed 30th December 2014).

¹⁸ M. Roberts, 'The Rajapaksa Regime and the Fourth Estate', *Groundviews*, 9th December 2009: <http://www.groundviews.org/2009/12/08/the-rajapakse-regime-and-the-fourth-estate/> (accessed 30th December 2014).

and the subservience of both the judiciary and the leading administrators. Those aspects of political behaviour and those symbolic images that I have called the 'Asokan Persona' contribute to this process. They point not only to the overconcentration of power, but also raise the spectre of a further shift towards a dictatorship.

Recall my opening comparisons: populist authoritarianism is sometimes described as a form of 'plebiscitarian dictatorship' because of its Bonapartist motifs and its mass appeal, and mass support that is sometimes confirmed by referendums. So, the issue arises: are we in danger of sliding in this direction under the impulses of the Rajapaksas and the forces they have assembled? This danger is not only accentuated by the 1978 constitutional structure and its subsequent amendments, but also by the censorship and intimidation of the press that occurred during Eelam War IV in 2006-09. This period saw regular disappearances and assaults on several press personnel, a few killings (notably that of Lasantha Wickrematunga), and pressures which forced others to leave the country.¹⁹ The overarching fears are captured in the metaphor the 'white van' phenomenon. This force encouraged some measures of self-censorship and caution in the reportage of the independent media. Though disappearances have abated in some measure since mid-2009, the overarching fears and constraints, and acts of censorship, continued throughout the Rajapaksa regime. Middle class personnel have even advised me to be cautious in my journeys and writings in Sri Lanka. It is not remiss to talk of 'threads of fear and caution.'

So, what are the prospects of a Rajapaksa dictatorship eventuating and what restraints remain? Apart from Sri Lanka's

¹⁹ Journalists for Democracy (2009) *Sri Lanka: Thirty-four journalists & media workers killed during present government rule* <<http://www.jdslanka.org/2009/08/sri-lanka-thirty-four-journalists-media.html>>; U. Kurukulasuriya, 'I finally boarded the plane', 2nd April 2010 <<http://www.fojo.se/international/freedom-of-expression-around-the-world/uvindu-from-sri-lanka>>.

geo-political situation in the Indian Ocean space dominated by Big Brother India and the overarching moral pressure of the cumulus clouds we call 'the West,' what are the internal restraints? As hypothetical surmise, I mark three major factors that would restrain such a development. The first is the character of populism in Sri Lanka as it has taken root in the Rajapaksa *walauwa* and its corridors. President Rajapaksa believes in his popularity and the popularity of the Rajapaksa dynasty. He desires to sustain it and pass it down the lineage as a legacy. This means that it has to be periodically affirmed through general elections. Therefore familial subjectivity and family interests will influence the future. In this future such a subjective inclination will mesh with the inclinations of the Sri Lankan people. In contrast with the neophyte democracy of Romania in the 1930s, Sri Lanka has 'enjoyed' universal suffrage and elections for 80 years. General elections are an institution and deeply entrenched as an expectation among the generality of people. Any breach of this practice will jeopardise the perpetuation of the populist/popular character of the Rajapaksa lineage.

General elections and Sri Lanka's version of democracy have also institutionalised a multi-party system. However weak the opposition parties, and however oligarchic/dictatorial their internal organisation, they exist as entities. Their presence provides a source of resistance to any dictatorial takeover. True, the Rajapaksas have successfully incorporated many former opponents into their regime through patronage, spoils, and largesse in ways that have created a sprawling government establishment. But there are limits to populist authoritarianism through such patronage. In helping A to get a coveted post, one can alienate B who anticipated that very post. Dissatisfied clients gravitate to the opposition parties; or they await the opportunity to do so. The vast patronage system can leak like a sieve when the popular tide turns.

What all this means, therefore, is that Sri Lanka is presently burdened with a form of populist authoritarianism that is necessarily short-term, one that has to calculate how to reproduce itself at the next general elections. This tendency in its turn

generates its own problems and can cater to the expression of Sinhala majoritarianism within a context created by island's demographic composition and its distribution in space.²⁰ We are hung in the cleft between Scylla and Charybdis.

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²⁰ Roberts (1978).