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Authoritarian trends and their continuity in Sri Lankan politics: A study of operationalizing of authoritarianism from 2005 to 2015 Period

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This study talks about the authoritarian trends and their continuity in Sri Lankan Politics since 2005. Sri Lanka was considered a model Third World Democracy at the initial phase of political independence from colonial rule. However, the country has been converted into a constitutionally established authoritarian type regime through constitution making exercise. This trend was increased in galloping speed with Mahinda Rajapakshe regimes since 2005 to 2015. The defeat of Rajapakshe regime in an unexpected electoral defeat where election was calculated as an opportunity to extend the regime with the possibility of eroding democratic values forever made the possibility of democracy in the country a clear sign. The regime went beyond authoritarianism type and embraced many features of a totalitarian type regime. However, totalitarian trends long last event after initial defeat of such regimes. This trend remains largely unexplored and non-theorized within the Sri Lankan scholarship. The objective of the present study was to fill the aforementioned gap in the scholarship. The methodology of the study has been the observations made by the three authors for the said period and they have been critically reflected upon and presented. The study concluded that the biggest political challenge ahead of Sri Lanka is to do away with the ethnic consciousness nurtured among the majority Sinhalese as a political tool of maintaining totalitarian culture and those legacies need to be address in harnessing democratic culture

Key words: Authoritarianism, totalitarian, Mahinda Rajapakshe, Sri Lanka, Third World totalitarian.

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka had been treated a model "Third World Democracy" at the early stage as a new state. However, its democratic structure as well as practices inherited from British Colonial Legacy has been transformed into a constitutionally established powerful rule with the enactment of first autochthonous constitution in 1972 and

culminated with the enactment of Second Republican constitution in 1978 and subsequent amendments to the constitution except 13 and 19th Amendments. The protracted ethnic war and government propaganda on absolute necessity of powerful government, by extension, of the executive presidential form of government has

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provided for legitimation of mono-centric power concentration.

The time period covered under the present study is the Rajapakse Regime of Sri Lanka from 2005 to 2015. The research also had covered the period from 2015 to date to identify continuity and discontinuity of authoritarian legacies in the co-habitation government led by President Maithreepala Sirisena and Premier Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The few scholars on Sri Lanka have characterized Rajapakse regime differently. However, there is a general agreement that Rajapakse Regime shared many features of an authoritarian regime (DeVotta, 2010), sometimes, even passing the phase of authoritarianism and entering the phase of totalitarian rule¹ features. The specificity of Mahinda Rajapakse Regime was that the regime had steered Sri Lanka towards a totalitarian rule through legal and constitutional means while using a cultural mechanism to totalize power in and around the executive presidency and its occupant Mahinda Rajapakse and attempted to perpetuate his rule forever.

The political development that took place during Rajapakse regime go beyond authoritarian type of government and has incorporated features a totalitarian rule. The regime since 2005 had sought to gain total control over all aspects of almost everything, both public and private sectors. The ruling regime has taken steps to perpetuate totalitarian regime headed by him together with his kith-and-kin since 2005. The second level leaders of the political party which he chaired become loyal and timid appraisers of not only him but also of his family members. However, his rule abruptly ended on 08th January 2015 to the dismay of many people that had been trained to the Mahinda Cult and corrupted politicians who have been patronized by the regime.

This study belonged to the normative tradition of political science and critical sociology and it is based on the critical reflection of socio-political process and events of the country since 2005. The objectives of this article were two fold. The first was to look into the mechanism of totalizing power during Rajapakse rule and to explore well-planned totalizing power mechanism in each and every sphere of lives of the people of the country. Second objective has been to examine the democratic challenges that the Post Totalitarian Sri Lanka has to face. The article had organized into five sections. In the first section of the article, an attempt was made to clarify the concepts of totalitarianism and post totalitarianism.

The specificity of Rajapakse Regime and associated totalizing of power mechanism is explored in the second section of this study. The third section of the article is dedicated to examine the causes of the collapse of the totalitarian regime within a time span of around ten years.

The fourth section of the article has dealt with post totalitarian legacies and challenges. Finally, an attempt was made to point out the way out of legacies of

totalitarian practices.

Totalitarianism and post totalitarianism

Before venturing into an examination of totalitarian characteristics of Mahinda Rajapakse Regime during the stipulated time period, brief deliberation on what is meant by the concepts of totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism is pertinent.

There is a vast literature on totalitarianism. Many have dealt with the ideological and political dimensions of the phenomenon. Scholars that studied the phenomenon have discussed its different dimensions, analyzed its origins and aims, examined its ideas, and described its institutions (Arendt, 1951; Friedrich, 1954; Talmon, 1952; Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956; Eisenstein, 1962; Korchak, 1993).

Totalitarianism is also a socio-psychological phenomenon and this dimension of totalitarianism remains less investigated within the mainstream scholars (Vainshtein, 1994). Totalitarianism is defined as the political regime in which all forms of social control is centralized in and around one person or one institution using the logic of instrumental rationality (Buechler, 2008). The instrumental rationality emerged with the effort of applying techniques of natural sciences to the study of social phenomenon and heading towards progress with social engineering. In this context, a few scholars have attempted at studying the possibility of properly assessing the prospects for totalitarianism as a form of government in the modern world. There are a good number of studies that predict the possibility of emerging totalitarian regimes in societies of Post-Communist Block in the former Soviet Union and its allies (Siegel, 1998). However, Totalitarian regimes' chief objectives are to rule unimpeded by legal restraint, civic pluralism, and party competition, and to refashion human nature itself.

Many of the South Asian Societies had witnessed a kind of totalitarian rule (Tambiah, 1986). However, there are little studies in the context of South Asian Societies and especially in the case of Sri Lanka which had passed a phase of totalitarian rule since 2005 and ending on 8th of January 2015. For the purpose of present study, totalitarianism is defined as a form of government which aims at and also achieves complete, absolute control and total control over all aspects of everything that is either public or private, or political or non-political in a society (Peijuan, undated, 32). The scholars that studied totalitarian regimes had highlighted different socio-political, cultural and economic aspects associated with totalitarian regimes in slightly different ways. Hannah Arendt highlighted closeness of the society, a regime characterized by ideology and movement aiming at and succeeding in organizing 'masses' not as class but citizens and giving them a feeling of super flushness in a classless society (Ibid).

The closed society, regimes characterized by ideology and terror as well as movements aiming at and succeeding

¹ .www.asianews.it/.../Sri-Lanka,-political-industry-at-the-service-of-a-totalitarian-regim.

in organizing 'Masses' (not class but citizens) and giving them a feeling of "super-flousness" in a classless society (Hannah Arendt). Charl J Friedrich in his the Unique Character in Totalitarian Society (1954) and Dictatorship and Autocracy (1956 with Zbigniew K Brzezinski) pointed out those factors that characterize and define totalitarian regimes were to be taken as mutually supportive organic entity composed of the followings:

1. An elaborating official guiding ideology focused on a perfect state of human kind, to which everyone is supposed to adhere.
2. A Single mass party typically led by one person, hierarchically organized and superior to or intertwined with the state bureaucracy
3. A System of terror, physical or psychic effected by party or secret policy,
4. A technologically conditioned, near complete control means of effective mass communication
5. A similar control of all weapons of armed combat and
6. A central control and direction of the entire economy through state planning (Thompson, 2010).
7. It has to be noted that totalitarianism involves ideology, political and socio-psychological aspects.

When totalitarianism is understood, in the sense of ideology which refers to a particular set of views, myths and symbols are intended to indoctrinate the citizens for the necessity of totalitarian rule and to justify its practice. In the political sense, totalitarianism implies a form of social and political order characterized both by particular politica institutions and the specific means used to achieve their goals and to preserve their domination, as well as the peculiar relations of supremacy and subordination between the government and civil society.

In the socio-psychological sense, totalitarianism is a form of mass social consciousness which legitimates these relations of domination and subordination. Such consciousness is distinguished by the existence of a certain composition of various stereotypes, ideological common-places, prejudices, and attitudes concerning politics, economics, and society (Vainshtein, 1994). Totalitarian rulers strive their best to create ideologies, prejudices and belief system through culture industry and fear psychosis though the imminent physical threats of secret policing of dissent.

Etymologically, post totalitarianism implies a situation after the end of totalitarian rule. However, post totalitarian regime is understood in the present context not just a historical category which describes a particular type of regime after its totalitarian phase. It is a political category representing a particular type of political regime still seeking total control over its citizens even after losing some indispensable foundation and features of totalitarianism such as attraction of its official ideology, legitimacy and charisma of its leader (Peijuan, *ibid*). It must be noted that totalitarian legacies simply does not fade away and vanish immediately after the collapse of

totalitarian regimes. Studies have revealed that totalitarian ideology, institutions and psychology persist for long and have got the capacity of re-germinating totalitarianism in some other forms (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

In the case of Sri Lanka, political development since the defeat of Mahinda Rajapakse and attempt to bring him back to power by chauvinist forces that were fostered by Rajapakse Regime suggest the long durability of totalitarian legacy in Sri Lanka.

Elements of totalitarian practices in Sri Lanka

Observation on political development since 2005 to 2015 revealed a process of totalizing of power which has got the key features of totalitarian regimes that had been discussed earlier. In the process of finding an elaborating official guiding ideology focused on a perfect state of human kind, to which everyone is supposed to adhere, the regime had sought the help of historical past which is comprised of legends of benevolent kings of the Sri Lankan Dynasties. The benevolence of old kings were thought of something that has to do with virtues of Buddhist teaching. The propaganda mechanism had propagated ruler as an equal to those benevolent kings of ancient period of Sri Lanka. Michael Robert captured the essence of this process as follows:

"President Rajapakse is the epitome of sovereign power vested with the rights of clemency on high like Sinhalese kings of the past who could be supplicated by connected subjects who crawled on their knees to the palace gate and begged pardon for their evil doings or crimes" (2015).

It portrayed him "akin to manorial lords 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. He is also portrayed as a son of the soil, native to core. After all, he is therefore, as personable as approachable. This imagery helps in incorporating and reproducing the status and power of the superior person and/or positions. This portrayal is helpful in creating a mechanism in which those subordinate and inferior participate in their own subordination" (*ibid*). This superior and inferior relationship is constructed through populism. It is a political current which places the masses within a nation-state on a pedestal and claims to work for their greater good (*ibid*).

Populism is the cult of the masses which vest the figure espousing and embodying the popular cause with an enormous concentration of power (*ibid*). In the case of Sri Lanka, this populism found its support base in ethicized majority Sinhalese that have been indoctrinated to seek emancipation through constitutional monism (Uyangoda, 2013).

In the context of the totalizing power project, xenophobia over ethnic other (minorities) became the central feature of totalizing power mechanism. The regime has effectively

coopted intellectual current known as *Jatika Chinthanaya* in the process of extreme chauvinism to which it has resorted to gain political power and legitimize totalizing of power in and around him and his family. The regime also had strived its best to weaken other political parties through offering political spoils to leading figures of small parties especially to the ones who were vocal to the needs and fancies of majority community. This process has resulted in potential portrayal of Rajapaksa Regime as the top most protector of dominant Sinhalese heritage and power in Sri Lankan Politics. The ethicized politics in post-colonial Sri Lanka helped Rajapakse Regime to sustain a system of terror and justify and legitimate use of terror to achieve political objectives such as law and order. Extra juridical killings of suspects of crime and kidnapping, torturing and killing of political opponents became order of the day. In essence, it had taken steps to create a surveillance state (Sunday Observer, July 19th 2015, Revealing Surveillance in Sri Lanka, p, 11).

The regime also had concerned with means and methods of controlling media both state and public, and print and electronic. The mechanism ranges from legal instruments such as Sri Lanka Telecommunication Commission and physical threats to political patronage of many kinds. Rajapaksa regime did not abandon the open economy policy. Yet, it has attempted to control and regulate economy through various means. The members of the Rajapaksa Family had controlled overall government budget while relegating rest of the Ministers to mere enjoying persons of official privileges and ceremonial dignity. Another dimension to totalitarian regime of Rajapaksa had to be added. That was the capturing of entire social, political and administrative structure by kith-and-kin of Mahinda. It has been reported that the regime offered political appointments to highest positions as well as to lowest echelons of bureaucracy.

Specificity of the regime

Power totalizing mechanism of Rajapakse regime, was composed of two mutually interactive elements, that is, law and culture industry. In fact, the constitution making exercises in Sri Lanka were not meant for democratizing the polity but to strengthen the vision of one centre of legislative, executive and judicial power (Uyangoda, *ibid*). This vision of monistic constitutionalism entered into official constitutional philosophy with the enactment of First Republican Constitution in 1972 giving prominence to the culture of the majority Sinhalese. The Second Republican Constitution of 1978, shared everything in essence of Monistic Constitutionalism while constitutionally establishing a dictatorial rule of the president of the republic. The character of government in Sri Lanka became dependent upon the mentality and personality of the individual president of the country with the enactment of Second Republican Constitution.

A study conducted in a different context revealed that

puritanical rigidity, narrowing of emotional life, massive use of defense projection, denial and fear of his own passions combined with fantasies of violence all set within the matrix of clear paranoid and obsessive personality traits which ultimately results in denial of rights to the citizens as individual and groups (Thompson, 2004). The 19th amendment introduced after the defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa, has curbed the power of president to a certain extent². However, totalitarian legacies left by Rajapakse regime and cultured ethos of constitutional monism had diluted the essence of constitutional proposed amendment and prevented an opportunity to democratize political process in the country.

The identities of people of a country are constructed and maintained through mediated means according to insights of the critical theory. The construction and maintenance of polarized ethnic identities is very beneficial for totalitarian political regimes in "state nation" where a big ethnic majority is available. In Sri Lanka, ethnic Sinhalese are more than 70% of the total population of the country. Strengthening "we they" mentality is instrumental for totalitarian regimes where democratic rituals such as elections and referendum and plebiscite are available to harness the undemocratic rule of single individual or extended political families. This was true, particularly, of countries in South Asia. The link between culture industry, media and capital had become significant in this context. Media is the main tool of culture industry and it is extensively used by totalitarian regimes in contemporary world in favour of the group who held the governmental power. For instance, the researchers of the present study had observed since 2005, gradual decline of even news bulletins of electronic media owned by the state. 60% of news broadcasting after 2005, is devoted to portrait the image of the president by way of extensively showing benevolent acts of president such as continuous alms giving to pilgrims who arrived at the holy city of Anuradhapura and gestures of paternal love towards small kids by way of caressing them at development showing public ceremonies. The media had been used to seduce people in development projects while the very same projects remained very oppressive in reality. The balance sheet of development efforts raised the issue whether they had benefited the rank-and-file of the society. The development indicator substantiate that Sri Lanka had been heading from an egalitarian society to none-egalitarian one with mega development projects.

The highway express ways and other development projects had resulted in envelopment rather than development. However, mega projects which did not benefit the worse off sections of the society such as Hambantota Harbour and express ways were presented

² The cult created in and around Mahinda Rajapakse is still alive in Sri Lankan Politics. Sri Lanka Broadcasting Cooperation has recorded that Ex Minister, a Staunch Supporter of Rajapaksa, the United Freedom Alliance is planning to introduce an Executive Prime Minister System under the Defeated Rajapaksa through the Parliamentary Election of 17th August 2015.

as essential for development of the poor and they were being directed to get imagined as symbols of society's march towards prosperous and bright future even though those development projects lack any immediate impact on the betterment of lives of many people while increasing the burden of living through indirect taxes (Abeyrathne, 2000). The mega development projects introduced in the Southern Sri Lanka has not reached the poor and marginalized in the region as expected (Pannilage et al., 2015). The people were invited to become passive audience of development and people were given the opportunity to taste development benefits before ceremonial limitation of benefits of infrastructure development projects to the better off of few through acts such as walking with president on highways etc. There were chosen and trained mouth pieces to speak of imaginary benefits and necessity of such projects³.

Electronic media had directed to give wide circulation of such views with the objective of creating false consciousness of the goodness of the ruler and needs of infrastructure projects which did not have any immediacy on the lives of the people. The leisure time of the people meant for enjoyment of literature and performing arts had converted to political propaganda of the ruling ideology. The *Kopi Kade* (It Is a serial telecasted in the Independent Television Network (ITN)) which promotes the image of the ruling ideology and persons in power, and it was used to disgrace politically opposing views to the dominant ideology. The very objective of such broadcasting and telecasting was to hallucinate the people.

There had been very few people who dared to question the rationality of the ends of development projects perused by the political regime. The media has used to disgrace whoever questioned the regime as traitors of the nation. "Betrayers of Mother Sri Lanka" was the label and mobs had been employed to humiliate whoever become critical of government policy. Both public and private media is used in this strategic move of silencing dissent.

Media was used to make people enjoy cruelties meted upon dissenting persons of the ruling regime. Both public and private media were justified, and gave wider publicity to cruelties meted upon such persons. The instrumental rationality behind those practices aimed at justifying extra-judicial judgments and killings as necessary to maintain an ordered society. The result had been the general acceptance of the correctness of punishing

³ . Divaina 12th August 2009. An author Danesh Kodippili Aracci, has written an article to the Wednesday Supplement of the Divaina on Ultimate Factor of the Victory of War. In summary, the idea that this article promotes is that the leaders who happened to grapple with the ethnic problem of Sri Lanka is that majority of them were not true descendant of warrior caste i.e. Kshashtriya (Kingly Caste). They were Brahmin and related to Tamil Stock. D.B. Wijetunga and Ranasinghe Premadas are exceptions. In the case of D.B. Wijetunga, he does not belong to a pure Kingly Caste. Ranasinghe Premadasa is not from the Kingly Caste. The Low Country Govi Sinhalese are the true and Pure descendent of Nepalese Warrior Caste. The Low Country Sinhalese are the majority too. The ultimate factor of military victory over the LTTE was the belonging of President Rajapakse to the Low Country, Pure Govi (Cultivator) Caste which is the true warrior caste in Sri Lanka.

political dissenters and harassing and killing of ethnic others and criminals by the police and armed forces without following the due procedure of law.

Media to a certain extent portrays such incidence as unavoidable and necessary for a developing nation⁴. The media justifies such incidences as something done for the law and order, and conducive for development and good society. Other arts forms such as tele-dramas (like *Kopi Kade*) were used to promote the status apparatus of the totalitarian regime and they aimed at promoting, propagating and inculcating archaic, outdated and hierarchy friendly values such as un-questioned belief in the goodness of the kings of ancient Sri Lanka and their benevolent acts and resemblances of the present regime with that of ancient political order by pseudo pundits who were paid out of public pocket through the power given to government by law. The law enforcing authorities had become the judges themselves and suspects were shot to death and they had been justified (Rivira News on murder and rape case of a young girl and the death of the suspect on 20th September 2014). The remaining 40% of the news bulletin was devoted to educate and socialized majority Sinhalese on ethnic others by reminding by broadcasting and telecasting atrocities done over them by imagined enemy other in chronological order during protracted war since 1983 while paying scant attention to international news of democratic importance and the rest of the time was allocated to sport news.

The politics of cultural industry in Sri Lanka and particularly during the Rajapakse created a mindset of being a permanent minority in South Asia. The Buddhist Sinhalese regard themselves as a minority in Southeast Asia and perceive their ethno-religious identity to be threatened. Hence, the fight against, the Hindu Tamils in Northern Sri Lanka could be interpreted as a violent defensive reaction by the Buddhist Sinhalese. The constitutional monism and strong single person was the necessity to defend the Sinhalese nation. This was the recurrent theme found during Mahinda Rajapakse regime in news items, seemingly serious academic discussion in media, Cinema and other forms of arts.

The other dimension of making Buddhist Sinhalese imagining a minority in South Asia was that making citizens lesser citizens and inculcating of a mindset of absolute necessity of legally established executive where power was totalized in single institution and single person for a long time. Consequently, the legally established totalitarian political set up and culture resulted in apolitical community and it contributed to further and further strengthening of totalitarian tendencies in the country. The suspension of certain rights of the people during war under emergency laws and laws enacted to deal with war and certain politically decided cases by the judiciary had made

⁴ .Gotabaya Rajapakse had warned media on media coverage of police atrocities and taking law into their hand. He was of the opinion that such publicity had been detrimental to silence the Underworld (Divaina, 24th August 2009)

People to lose faith in judiciary as an impartial body that could adjudicate disputes among them and between the government and them. Well planned media campaign had helped people to get hallucinated in developmentalism and ethnic hatred in the political community that comprised of a big ethnic majority group which believed them to be a minority. The controlling capacity of mass media through political patronage had gone hand-in-hand with cultural industry of a totalitarian regime and media had been extensively used for totalizing power. The cumulative result was that of effectively discouraging people in imagining a better future for them which was a precondition of functioning democracy.

The regime also had strived its best to use education to inculcate patriotism and by extension, the ethnic superiority mentality among different layers of student ranging from university students to student of primary level of Education. The researchers had observed a famous folk play among the primary students of Galle area where Mahinda Rajapakse was made equal to divine figure. (It goes as follows, *plain ekak Awa. Janadipathi Bassa. Ethana Malak Pipuna*, (There arrived a plane and President happened to land there and there blossom a flower) ahead of the folk song sung by small kids where the hand of the child is off at particular pause of the song). The researchers also had experienced the difficulty in including the patriotism in the curriculum which was dictated by the University Grants Commission during the Regime.

Post totalitarian legacies

The ending of or abrupt downfall of totalitarian regimes did not result necessarily in democratic governance. The inability to deliver expected result of getting rid of the totalitarian regimes and the new rich that benefited from the previous regime had continued to challenge democratic reforms of the new government by promoting and propagating archaic values and rebreeding of ethnic hatred among the people. The attempt made by the ex-president and certain ethnic minded politicians and parties at August 2015 Parliamentary Election on extreme ethnic line and attempt made to belittle the presidential election victory by the common opposition candidate as one sponsored by imperial forces and conspiracy made by ethnic minorities to divide the country substantiate the fact that mindset created by totalitarian rulers continued to last long. Sometimes, the new elected rulers might follow the path of its predecessor to remain in power.

The success of the propaganda on necessity of going beyond the law of the country to deal with the criminals and terrorists had continued to haunt the mindset of the public. It was visible by popular outcry to hang the suspects of rapist and murders promptly and immediately on many occasions largely promoted by electronic media in recent past. The mouth pieces of people had often express their anguish and displeasure on government.

Following rule of law to deal with such socially disgraced behavior had been presented as inefficiency of the post totalitarian regime. The post totalitarian regime election results substantiate the fact that totalitarian parties and groups still found strong support base among the majority community.

The liberal democratic parties and political left had been reluctant to publicly acknowledge that they were ready to opt for reforming the state-nation structure which was framed after the cultural artifacts of the majority Sinhalese. The pact between United National Party and Jathika Hela Urumaya (Sinhalese National Heritage Party) and Some Members of Sri Lanka Freedom Party that supported the Common Presidential Candidate in 8th January 2015 election against the their own party leader, Mahinda Rajapakse had agreed to continue with the unitary structure of the state while reforming the constitution. It was because the power of ethnized nature of the Sri Lankan Politics and improved chauvinism under the totalitarian regime lasted from 2005 to 2015.

Conclusions

Political challenges of democratization

The critical reflection upon the totalitarian and post totalitarian phase of Sri Lankan society was helpful to recognize key political challenges that is needed to be politically dealt with in democratic governance process. The first challenge is related to doing away with the public mindset among the majority Sinhalese of them being a minority in South Asian context of demography. The historiography within Sri Lankan universities and school curriculum had turned into histories of ethnic difference at the cost of shared history. As identities were cultured and nurtured ones, finding an alternative identity for Sri Lankan political community in which differences of identities remained a political challenge in reforming the post totalitarian phase of political history of Sri Lanka. The cultivated mindset of the people on the necessity of strong and powerful uni-centre for governing given in the particular ethnic geography of Sri Lanka needs to be addressed through reforming the life world of the people of Sri Lanka. In this context, government has to have a holistic approach to politics and culture which implies the requirements of addressing needs of reform in public institution and private life world of the people simultaneously.

Conflicts of Interests

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