

Can Sri Lanka's National People Power Government Keep Its Democratic Promises?

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How democratic will the National People's Power (NPP) government be? How faithful will the NPP leaders - whose political careers began in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) with a background of being committed to the armed struggle - be to democracy after becoming Sri Lanka's elected rulers? Will the NPP government enact a new constitution which not only abolishes the executive presidential system, but also strengthens democracy? Will the NPP's democratic agenda include continuation of devolution and strengthening the provincial councils to meet the democratic aspirations of Tamil and Muslim 'nationalities'? [1] These are some questions that are currently being debated among civil society, academic and activist supporters, well-wishers, and critics of the new administration led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake. This essay seeks to reflect on these questions and respond to them indirectly.

The essay also hopes to make a contribution to promoting a critical discussion on the prospects for, and obstacles to, democracy and democratisation in Sri Lanka under the NPP government. The discussion will be built on a review of the vision and proposal for democratic reforms as articulated in the NPP's policy manifesto, [A Thriving Nation - A Beautiful Life](#), released in August 2024, as part of the presidential election campaign.

Two initial comments can be made. Firstly, the word 'democracy' does not appear to have been given much prominence. There is no thematic sub-heading either in the manifesto specifically dedicated to democracy or democratisation. This raises an interesting question: is the word 'democracy' indispensable to talk about democracy? The answer implied in the NPP manifesto is, 'not necessarily.' Secondly, the NPP has at times employed the language of liberal democracy to conceptually present its democratisation agenda. Does it mean that the NPP's vision for democratisation is ideologically liberal? The answer is, 'not exactly.'

In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, democracy is usually understood by the people as a distinct form of government. That form is generally viewed to be liberal parliamentary democracy, its institutions, values, and practices. Democratisation is supposedly the process in which liberal parliamentary government, its institutions, values, and practices become the only, or the dominant, political culture accepted by the elites and the masses, rulers and the ruled. Although it has Western/European origins, liberal democracy has also been localised in many societies in the Global South, including Sri Lanka, to such an extent that most people are unaware of modern democracy's liberal origins.

Democracy: A Component of Modernisation

It is quite clear that democracy is not given prominence as a distinct thematic topic with self-validating autonomy. Indeed, the word 'democracy' does not appear in the NPP's policy manifesto as a separate thematic focus. Yet, it appears six times in different sections - on the economy, diplomacy, national security, nation-building, and establishing a new constitution. While brief, these accounts given on democracy in different places of the policy document still provide insights into the NPP's unique democratic thinking and democratisation agenda. The manifesto as a whole gives the initial impression that the NPP's vision for democracy and democratisation requires a little more clarity, depth, and elaboration. One reason for the lack of emphasis on democracy is perhaps that the policy manifesto gives primacy to the NPP's modernising project of the Sri Lankan nation, its economy, society, education, citizenship, inter-community relations, and the people's aspirations for a better economic life. Democracy seems to be epiphenomenal, or secondary, to these core thematic concerns that cover a very extensive range of what may be described as 'transformative goals'.

However, even a quick reading of the NPP's policy manifesto suggests that democracy as a political concept is treated as multi-layered in its meaning and presence in the polity and society. The manifesto suggests that democracy principles should define the character, content, and normative mandate of the country's constitution, government, governing institutions, relations between the state and society as well as rulers and the ruled, and people's expectations of those who manage and run the government. Democracy is also expected to define the nature of relations among the citizens, between different identity communities of citizens as well as those identity communities and the state. Thus, the promise of democracy is extended to a range of domains as a standard of evaluation, legitimacy, and validity - the constitution, political culture, nation, citizenship, and the social composition of the personnel who govern and who represent the people. This multi-layered dimension of the idea of democracy is not an invention of the NPP. It indeed is the outcome of how democracy has become the political common sense and the dominant political imaginary of Sri Lankan society.

Meanwhile, the theme of democracy and the goals of democratisation seem to have been viewed by the NPP through an instrumentalist lens. They are not taken as continuing an autonomous process with their own distinct agendas. In other words, democratisation in Sri Lanka is not for democracy's sake. Rather, both democracy and democratisation are an adjunct to the overall economic and political modernising project as formulated by the NPP. It places greater emphasis on economic development, political and social stability, technological advancement, and pluralistic nation-building. As part of the overall project of modernising transformation, the process of democratisation is assumed to consist of interventions aimed at "protecting" (2024: 124), "strengthening" (127), and "guaranteeing" (127) democracy. Moreover, "values such as freedom, democracy, social justice, human rights, and the rule of law" are promoted as integral to "the nation's self-image" (119).

The first reference to democracy comes as "economic democracy" in the section on "A democratic economy - An affluent country." The manifesto defines economic democracy as "equitable opportunities in economic activities, participation in the economic decision-making process with an equal say and a fair share of economic benefits" (2024: 56). In this conceptualisation, economic justice, which is the aspirational slogan of the economically weaker social classes, is not included within the meaning of economic democracy. The goal of economic justice is given recognition in the discussion on gender equality to assert that the NPP views "economic justice as a cornerstone for achieving gender equality" (43).

The concept of economic justice is linked to the social-liberal, social democratic and more recently Left and feminist approaches to addressing inequalities in economic opportunities and income. The NPP's concept of economic democracy does not go that far. Its aim seems to be democratising and

levelling the economic playing field for entrepreneurs as a corrective to crony capitalism. Its direct beneficiaries are the business classes who seek competitive equality of economic opportunities free from corruption, political patronage and monopolistic dominance. Incidentally, the NPP is the only political entity to employ the concept 'economic democracy' in order to conceptualise the normative goal of the fight against crony capitalism.

Section 4 of the manifesto called "A dignified life - A strong country" has as its first subsection the topic "A new constitution - A united Sri Lankan nation". A critic might immediately wonder why the word 'democratic' is missing in the main title and the subtitle of the section which introduces the theme of constitutional reform. The promise of a democratic constitution and democratisation of government refers to two proposed reform steps. The first is the abolition of the executive presidency and the second is the appointment of a non-executive president by parliament. This promise seeks to meet a longstanding, yet unfulfilled, democratisation demand of opposition political parties, civil society movements, and the citizens in large numbers. The demand for, and promise of, abolishing the executive presidency and restoring parliamentary government has been a prominent theme in Sri Lanka's constitutional reform discourse since the early 1990s. No government has so far fulfilled this democratic reform goal. Now it is the time for the NPP to renew and deliver on this unfulfilled promise. A challenge before President Dissanayake is to prove that his government will be different from its predecessors in being faithful to this particular democratising pledge. Abolition of the executive presidency is the cornerstone of any project of restoring democracy in Sri Lanka. However, as past experience shows, this is a reform goal that requires an unshakeable political will from the NPP government.

Not a Substitute for Liberal Democratic Commitments

A key feature of the NPP's proposals for democratisation is the liberal-democratic character of the proposed reform initiatives, although the manifesto does not employ its conceptual language. Among the proposed activities are (a) constitutionalising the rights mentioned in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (b) broadening the constitutional law relating to the rights of children, women, and people with disabilities in line with international conventions, (c) safeguarding the voting rights of migrant citizens within and outside the country, and (d) reforming the electoral system relating to parliament (2024: 108). These reform pledges seek to update and widen the charter of rights recognised by Sri Lanka's existing constitution. All of them fall within the framework of liberal procedural democracy. [2] Yet, the NPP seems to have been cautious to avoid any ideological labelling, or even using the language of political ideologies, to describe its democratic reform programme and its content.

It is also important to note that there is nothing strange about the NPP employing the liberal-democratic register to articulate its own democratising vision. Sri Lanka's centrist and left-wing political parties as well as civil society, human rights, and feminist activist communities have also been working primarily within the liberal-democratic framing of their political reform agendas, with of course supplementary additions shaped by their specific ideological commitments to substantive democracy. For example, left and feminist activists emphasise themes such as economic and social justice, social welfare, collective rights, and a positive role for the state to eradicate structural inequalities built into the country's economy and society. All these are themes ignored by the mainstream liberal democratic approach to rights and democracy. This also suggests that the liberal democratic discourse is indispensable, though inadequate in some crucial areas, to articulate the democratic desires of our society. It has also been a powerful idiom for mass mobilisation to advance emancipatory political struggles of workers, peasants, women, and ethnic minority communities. In short, liberal democracy is, as already suggested, the primary democratic imaginary in contemporary Sri Lankan society, despite the fact that nobody would care to attach that ideological label to their political imagination. [3]

The NPP's indifference to ideological labelling can be observed in the follow up discussions on political reforms as well. The policy manifesto in its section on "A Sri Lankan nation - The universal citizen" pledges, without any deviation from the already familiar liberal democratic goals, to "introduce a new constitution that strengthens democracy and ensures equality of all citizens" (2024: 127). The new constitution, according to the policy manifesto, will also guarantee equality, democracy, and devolution, set up a commission against discrimination, expand the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, release political prisoners, abolish all repressive legislation, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and ensure the civil rights of people in all parts of the country (127). The language used here has some similarity with that of the democratising pledges of the reformist 'good governance' (*yahapalanaya*) regime of 2015. [4] That was a regime jointly led by the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Initially, the JVP strongly backed the formation of the 'good governance' regime with the strategic objective of defeating the Sinhala nationalist-authoritarian regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa. The democratic reform pledges of the NPP in 2024 have also incorporated democratising demands advanced by the Tamil and Muslim political parties as well as civil society activist communities. They too are essentially liberal democratic in character.

What does the NPP's commitment to 'strengthening democracy' mean? In what specific areas does Sri Lankan democracy require strengthening? The NPP manifesto provides only partial answers to these questions. Abolition of the executive presidency is a core issue. Yet, will the government's reform agenda takes a back seat when confronted with the challenges of the continuing economic crisis and the likely re-emergence of social discontent, leading to public protests displaying mass anxieties about economic and social insecurity? Even if the presidential system is replaced by a parliamentary government, will there be a framework of strong checks and balances built into the new constitution, leaving no room for a cabinet-executive authoritarianism? If the NPP government does not undertake its constitutional reform task at the beginning of the new year (2025) and complete it before the end of the year, what political incentives will President Dissanayake and his cabinet team have to champion the democratising agenda they have promised? Indeed, these questions are reflective of some of the immediate reform anxieties shared by critics and well-wishers alike of the NPP government.

'Nation-Building' Via Democracy

There are more openings for democratic imagination scattered across the NPP policy manifesto. The conceptual blueprint for 'nation-building' offered by the NPP warrants some discussion because of its pairing of the concept of 'nation' with democracy. Since pluralistic nation-building has been an unfulfilled goal of Sri Lanka's postcolonial democratisation, it is worth evaluating the NPP's intervention made through the policy manifesto against this background.

The NPP's goal of nation-building envisages a vision that can be described as 'democratising the idea of nation.' The goal of "building a united Sri Lankan nation" is sought to be achieved through policies that recognise "the diversity of identities and ensuring their survival and protection." (2024: 127). Protecting democracy, citizen rights, human rights, and the rule of law are posited to be the means necessary to "maintain harmony and coexistence among the ethnicities" (124) and reach the goal of "building a united Sri Lankan nation" (127). Moreover, making a clear break from the Sinhala ethno-nationalist ideology, the NPP acknowledges the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and pluralist character of the "country". These are clearly ideas that have some resonance with the liberal peace-building, nation-building, and constitutional reform projects that still remain unfulfilled and even partially abandoned. The NPP seems to have decided to acquire those three projects and re-present them in its own terms, yet in the idiom of democratic reformism. That is one instance in which the NPP's commitment to a 'home-grown' vision for democratisation is visible.

A Liberal Limitation to be Avoided

Inherent in this liberal-democratic imagination of nation-building is a specific limitation inherited by the NPP's own nation-building promise as well. It is an inadequacy rooted in the conventional political and constitutional theory which is reluctant to grant acceptance to group rights claims of ethnic or cultural communities, or the 'minorities'. Liberal constitutionalism recognises the validity of claims to equality by the 'minorities,' yet translates such claims in the language of individual rights. It is no secret that liberal political and legal theory is averse to constitutionalising group rights. This negation is based on the assumption that such deviations would result in undermining the autonomy and liberty of individual members of the political community, bringing them under the control of 'illiberal' and 'oppressive' customs, traditions, and group ethics of 'minority' cultures. Liberal political theory's accommodation of 'multicultural rights' is a recent compromise made to respond to the criticisms by liberal-communitarian theorists and campaigners for minority rights. [5] Even then, liberalism is cautious about granting collective political rights to ethnic minority communities in multicultural plural societies because of its reluctance to compromise a fundamental tenet of liberal political theory: the individual is the essential locus of rights.

Meanwhile, there has been a parallel rights discourse in Sri Lanka's ethnic minority politics. It has advanced group rights claims in the spheres of language, religion, culture, and political power. With regard to political power, Tamil and later Muslim communities have not been content with representational rights alone, available under the restricted scheme of procedural democratic rights. They have been demanding - Tamil nationalist parties were pioneers in this - collective political rights beyond the civil and political rights based on individual citizenship entitlements. The federalist demand of the Tamil nationalist movement, later revised and downgraded as devolution, was essentially a group-specific claim to share political power in a structurally re-constituted Sri Lankan state. Although Sri Lanka's constitution has accommodated the linguistic, religious, and cultural rights of minority communities in the form of individual rights, claims to power-sharing are a group right that exceeds the inherent limits of the liberal individual rights framework. Such accommodation continues to remain incomplete. This is one reason why those group rights, such as the language rights of Tamil-speaking communities, are legally enacted as individual rights. Devolution, introduced in 1987, is the prime example of the limited flexibility of Sri Lanka's liberal constitutionalism to accommodate, with great reluctance, the validity of the group rights of an ethnic community to claim self-determination. It required a violent civil war and pressure from the Indian government for Sri Lanka's liberal constitutionalism to accommodate some measure of collective political rights - self-determination rights, in this case - of the Tamil community.

Making claims to group rights beyond individualised cultural rights seems to persist among Sri Lanka's ethnic communities, which the NPP terms as 'nationalities'. The Malaiyaha (Upcountry) Tamil community is the latest to draw attention to their own specific collective rights beyond nominal citizenship rights. Such group rights of politically excluded ethnic communities can be described as group-differentiated collective rights. They are distinct from, and additional to, individual, political rights such as the right to vote and representation that come with legal equality attached to citizenship. In plural, multi-ethnic and multicultural societies, inadequacies of individual-centric civil and political rights to address group grievances of discrimination, injustice, and political and social exclusion need to be addressed through a parallel discourse of group-specific differentiated rights. It means that some 'minority' communities need special rights even to fully enjoy individual civic and political rights available to all citizens irrespective of their ethnic or cultural group affiliations. This is one of the key lessons to learn from Sri Lanka's protracted ethnic conflict. Its resolution requires a new minority rights discourse that can creatively merge individual rights and collective rights without one basket of rights overriding or undermining the other.

The discourse of 'positive discrimination' emerged during the mid-1930s within the Indian National Congress and was subsequently incorporated into the post-independence constitution as an

important South Asian example of overcoming the limitations of the framework of liberal equality. Constitutionalising the scheme of “positive discrimination” was partly guided by the spirit of civic republicanism promoted by the founders of the modern Indian republic, specifically Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and B. R. Ambedkar. It created a new constitutionalist and policy doctrine to reflect the social justice philosophy of the Indian National Congress. It is a doctrine that sought to meet the aspirations for social-political emancipation among the extremely marginalised caste, communal, and tribal communities subjected to the denial of substantive equality in the liberal legal regimes of formal equality for generations. The social philosophy which facilitated such an unorthodox approach to constitutional rights in India was social justice.

With this Indian background in mind, one can make the following point with regard to the scheme of devolution introduced in Sri Lanka by means of the 13th Amendment to the 1978 Constitution: it marked an important innovation in Sri Lanka’s constitutional law that, despite its significance, continues to be ignored. The deadlock into which the provincial council system has been dragged can be at least partly explained by the absence of a strong discourse of group rights and social justice even among Tamil nationalist leaders. Ironically, all of these nationalist leaders have been, and continue to be, reputed legal practitioners, yet within the British liberal tradition of jurisprudence and constitutional theory.

Reading through the NPP policy manifesto’s brief accounts of its vision for pluralistic nation-building and citizenship, the impression one gets is that it is also trapped in a contradiction. It rests on the incompatibility of NPP’s instinctive desire for substantive equality for ethnic minorities or ‘nationalities’, women and sexually marginalised communities, and oppressed social groups (caste communities) on one hand, and the rigid limits of liberal, individual-centric discourse of rights, on the other. This calls for some clarity on the NPP’s idea of ‘strengthening’ Sri Lanka’s democracy. A key area of innovation is the broadening of the scope of the rights discourse beyond the limits of individual civil and political rights as sanctioned by the existing regime of constitutionalist orthodoxy with conventional British colonial roots. If the NPP brings back the constitutional reform initiatives proposed by the Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reform during 2015-18, as stated in the policy manifesto, the government will certainly have an opportunity to also ‘deepen’ Sri Lankan constitutional thought in relation to individual and collective rights. Meanwhile, it is worth keeping in mind that it would be a huge political challenge for the NPP to invalidate the group rights claims of minority nationalities, if viable constitutional guarantees for group specific rights are not inserted into its nation-building project.

Democracy Within and Beyond the Constitution

One major shortcoming of the conventional approach to democratisation in Sri Lanka has been the excessive faith in, and focus on, broadening the liberal democratic features of the constitution. Restoring parliamentary democracy, strengthening the fundamental rights chapter, building new institutions to ensure executive accountability, protecting the rule of law, introducing new checks and balances on the legislature, and strengthening the independence of the judiciary are some of such measures of reform that had been prominent in the democratisation agenda. This has at one level produced a strong body of thought on constitutional reform for a democratic transition from executive authoritarianism to a post-presidential and democratised form of constitutional government. Meanwhile, a unique feature of the NPP’s agenda for democratic change is that it seeks democratisation of not only the constitution, but also the nation, citizenship, and state-society relations.

In Sri Lanka’s specific context, ‘democratising the nation’ should ideally imply a vision for unity among ethnic communities on a political foundation of multi-ethnic pluralism and multiculturalism. It will be a condition mediated by liberal democratic constitutionalism, which is supplemented and in turn strengthened by differentiated group, or communitarian, rights. Democratisation of state-

society relations requires reforms in two major spheres. Empowering the citizens with a stronger bill of rights that ensures their civil and political as well as differentiated group rights, not subjected to illiberal restrictions, is the first. The second is the positive social role of the state to provide economic and social security to large sections of society who have fallen victim to the neo-liberal and predatory market forces. Persisting economic and social poverty in society calls for transcending the free-market capitalist limits of liberal civil and political rights and inviting social democratic and communitarian approaches to broaden the terms of the rights discourse.

The strengthening of civil and political rights of the citizens have assumed a new, and indeed a novel, significance in Sri Lanka today in view of the spread of citizen political activism.

The *Aragalaya* of 2022 has demonstrated the crucial political importance of protecting and expanding rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom from arbitrary arrest and torture, and of course, the right to dissent and protest. Active citizens and active civil society activists require constitutional guarantees to protect their civil and political rights from arbitrary and potentially authoritarian actions of the state. Thus, ensuring unhindered civil and political rights by means of constitutional and legal guarantees, including the repeal of anti-terrorism and other similar legislation, is a prerequisite for democratising state-society and state-citizen relations in Sri Lanka at present.

Although a critic might say that there is nothing new in the NPP's proposal for democratising state-society relations through a strong commitment to citizens' civil and political rights, there indeed is a truly novel idea in the NPP's policy manifesto for democratising the social bases of who runs the government and its administration. Since this is an unusually new proposal, its description warrants reproduction verbatim:

For the first time in Sri Lanka's post-independence history, governance will shift from the control of a few corrupt elite families to a people's government. From the presidency to every representative body and operational mechanism in the country, *all positions will be free from elite family connections and will be filled by the children of ordinary citizens produced through free education*. An NPP government will usher in a new era of citizen activism, collective intervention, social justice, and the application of good governance principles. The elitist relationship between rulers and the people that has existed since independence will be replaced by a new social contract—one of proud citizens and leaders who are friends of the people they serve (2024: 6, emphasis added).

If one were to conjure a neologism to describe this promise by the NPP, it is a proposal for 'de-elitisation' of the government machinery. If the NPP government's leadership and the majority of elected representatives have non-elite class and family origins, the government's bureaucratic and administrative personnel are to mirror the same social profile of its elected representatives. In other words, it is a further step to be taken by the NPP government to complete the process of curtailing the power of a small class of privileged social elites in controlling political and administrative power. It is obviously guided by a vision of social equalisation of who governs the people and administers the state.

Bringing the State Back for Democratisation

There is also a social-democratic or social-liberal policy component in the manifesto that reflects an effort towards democratising state-society relations. It seeks to abate the disastrous social consequences of the neo-liberal policy framework implemented with great conviction by the previous Ranil Wickremesinghe administration. It is a proposal for allocating a positive role for the state to intervene in managing social and economic inequalities, the victims of which are ordinary citizens with no claims to wealth. Blaming the government that preceded the NPP government for leaving "the entire burden of cost-of-living on the people", the NPP policy manifesto promises to "absorb a

substantial part” of it into the government (2024: 6). Elaborating on this policy stance further, the manifesto recognises that there is “a pressing need for a comprehensive social protection programme to rebuild the economy and society” (39). It further states that the NPP “views social protection and welfare as a core responsibility of the state” (6). Compared with the intense antipathy of the Wickremesinghe administration to any direct role for the state in alleviating the social suffering of the people under neo-liberal reforms, this indeed is ideological heresy.

Implementation of this promise at present or in the near future would certainly be challenging in view of the on-going economic crisis which has led to severe restrictions on the already curtailed government expenditure for social welfare. Nevertheless, it is a commitment for economic democracy that envisages a positive role for the state to protect its vulnerable citizens, victimised by free-market capitalism as well as the IMF-inspired austerity programme aimed at managing Sri Lanka’s debt crisis. It is also a vision to replace the negative role which the state was compelled to play amidst the spread of economic and social inequalities via neo-liberal marketisation of state-society relations.

This commitment amounts to re-writing Sri Lanka’s state-society relations in the language of welfare liberalism or social-democracy. The significance of this commitment, from the perspective of democratisation, is threefold. First, in the realm of ideas, it removes from the Sri Lankan state the neo-liberal ‘night watchman’ role. Second, it re-confirms the conviction that the state has the responsibility to deliver economic justice to the victims of free-market economic reforms. Third, it restores among the non-elite and economically marginalised citizens the trust that the state has a social protectionist mission in times of social crisis. Establishing a positive role for the state as a guarantor of social protection is indeed a key element of ensuring the democratic responsibility of the state to its vulnerable citizens. From the perspectives of socially excluded and economically victimised citizens, it is a vision for democratisation of the state beyond the narrow liberal framing of democracy, despite the doubts some may express about the feasibility of its actualisation when the IMF seems to have the upper hand in defining Sri Lanka’s economic and social change trajectories.

Inclusion of the Excluded: Gender Democracy

One of the liberal slogans of democratisation popularised in Sri Lanka by international donor agencies and INGOs is the inclusion of excluded communities – women, minorities, persons with physical disabilities, senior citizens, and young citizens – in order for them to be able to participate in the democratic process and enjoy the rights and benefits of democracy. This was considered as a move to address one of the neglected democracy deficits in societies where social benefits of democracy are not shared equally or justly among all social classes. It is also an attempt to address conventional liberal democracy’s gender, class, cultural, age-specific, and biopolitical biases.

Democratising democracy seems to be a normative goal that the NPP’s policy manifesto seems to promote in its proposals for the inclusion of women, persons with diverse sexual orientations, youth, senior, and differently-abled citizens. All these categories of ‘excluded citizens’ are given equal attention and space in the section on “An honourable life – A safe country” (2024: 38).

With regard to women, there are several key promises included in the policy manifesto. Examples are (a) ending discrimination, stigmatisation and marginalisation of women because of their “gender identity or sexual orientation”, (b) economic justice as a means to gender equality, (c) enhanced women’s political participation and representation, (d) equal access to state services, rights, and justice, (d) easing the predatory debt burden on women caught up in the microfinance trap, and (e) assisting women to combat period poverty.

Several observations can be made on the themes of principles and proposed activities meant to

advance women's rights and gender equality. Conceptually, they reflect a mixture of progressive liberal and socialist thinking on rights and equality of women in capitalist and patriarchal societies. They also incorporate reform ideas that have emerged within Sri Lanka's feminist movement outside and independent of the political parties. Compared with manifestos of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the New Democratic Front, the NPP's understanding of issues relating to women's rights and gender equality rises far above election-oriented platitudes.

The NPP in Power: Democratisation Dilemma

What we have discussed so far are proposals concerning democracy and democratisation in Sri Lanka as included in the NPP's policy manifesto. Our discussion focused on the big picture of the NPP's promise of democracy and democratisation. We could identify a number of specific features, unique to the NPP's political thinking and proposed programme on the democracy question in Sri Lanka. As the discussion shows, there are three dimensions of the democracy question as addressed by the NPP. The first belongs to the sphere of constitutional rebuilding, ensuring the abolition of the executive presidential system and replacing it with a cabinet-parliamentary system of government. The second dimension is partly constitutional and partly political. It refers to the need to prevent a new cabinet-parliamentary system from turning itself into another form of cabinet-executive authoritarianism. The third is democratising the social sphere as well as state-society relations.

The transition from the executive presidential system to a parliamentary system will have legal or institutional barriers as it has had in the past. The NPP has the required parliamentary majority. However, there are no clear signals coming from the government about when steps will be concretely taken. During the first six months of 2025, local government and provincial council elections will occupy much of the government's attention and energy. Meanwhile, the indications are that government leaders are still in the process of establishing the NPP's control over the state and state apparatus. Thus, there is no certainty that the government will launch its constitutional reform process during the first half of the new year. A lesson from the past is that delayed constitutional reform might even mean no constitutional reform. In any case, the year 2025 will certainly be the time when the political will of President Dissanayake and his NPP government for rapid democratisation will really be tested.

Then there is a potential challenge to the stability of the NPP government's democratisation project from those who benefited from the authoritarian and corrupt system of politics and government. This is a concern being expressed in private by even ordinary citizens who voted to bring the NPP into power. Sri Lanka's corrupt system of government has its own patrons and beneficiaries occupying powerful corners of society. Curtailing their power will require what is euphemistically called a 'strong government'. Strong governments, almost as a rule, have little to no respect for the limits of political power expected from liberal democratic governments committed to proceduralism. This is a scenario that is quite likely to confront the NPP government's democracy agenda.

Then, there is the question of reforming Sri Lanka's national security state to create better conditions for citizens' civil and political rights and ensure the democratisation of state-society relations. New regulations to control non-governmental organisations, initiated by the Ministry of Defence and the NGO Secretariat, have already begun to raise serious questions about the government's commitment to "strengthening" democracy and the rule of law. Sri Lanka's democratising constitutional reforms will be, and will have to be, reforms aimed at a democratic rebuilding of the state that has gone through a 'national -security' transformation during, as well as after, the war. Thus, 'democratising the national security state' should be a theme of engagement between the NPP government and democratic civil society groups.

Finally, what should citizens and democracy activists do if the NPP government slows down and delays its democratisation agenda? Such negative eventualities are possible, particularly in view of

the fact that Sri Lanka's crisis period will go on for quite some time to come. The government and its leaders will certainly be preoccupied with multiple challenges of governance in this period of prolonged crisis. Crisis times usually provide incentives for reviving democracy and also for retreating from democracy. If the latter happens, it is citizen activism that can effectively force the government to be faithful to its democratising promises. Actually, democratisation is a process that advances with the participation of three main actors: the citizen, the reformist ruling party, and the civil society. Even under the NPP government, the citizenry and civil society will have to continue as active agents for democratisation. Constructive engagement between civil society activists and the NPP government is one helpful way to take the democratisation agenda forward.

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Image credit: Suresh Amuhena

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Footnotes

[1] Interestingly, the JVP and now the NPP have avoided the use of the concept and the term 'minorities.' The concept preferred by the JVP from early days to refer to what liberals would call 'ethnic minorities' is 'nationalities', or 'jaathikathvayan' in Sinhala. The concept 'nationalities' has Leninist origins to refer to small cultural-linguistic communities who are not supposed to have evolved themselves into 'nations.'

[2] Liberal democracy is described as 'procedural democracy' because it gives primacy to the electoral process and the rule of law as the source of legitimation of political power. In contrast, 'substantive democracy', associated with left-wing, social democratic and feminist political theory emphasises equality of outcomes of the democratic procedures.

[3] Liberal democracy's historical association with capitalism and colonialism also raises questions about the legitimacy of the term being used to describe popular struggles for 'democracy' in post-colonial contexts.

[4] There is a minor irony here in the employment of a concept associated with the political vocabulary of global neo-liberalism to promote neo-liberal 'governance' being used to encapsulate popular wishes for corruption-free government.

[5] Will Kymlicka, a Canadian liberal political theorist has made a path-breaking effort to reconcile this tension between individual and group rights in liberalism. In his well-known work, *Multicultural Citizenship: Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (1996, Oxford: Clarendon Press), he built a revisionist liberal theoretical approach, asserting that group-specific rights help realise, rather than undermine, liberal equality. His argument, very briefly, is that since the cultural community of which we are members provides us with a range of options for how to lead our lives as well as means to evaluate each option available to us, our cultural group membership is vitally important to ensure our personal autonomy. Thus, membership of the cultural community is indispensable for the autonomy of the individual. Therefore, liberals should concern themselves with the well-being of cultural communities. That entails liberal commitment to group rights.