

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh Cautionary tales for democrats

Active citizens can serve as a social check on the government.

Sunday 8 September 2024, by [ROB Ramisa](#), [UYANGODA Jayadeva](#) (Date first published: 4 September 2024).

As we approach a month of Sheikh Hasina's fall in Bangladesh, Dr Jayadeva Uyangoda, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka, speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star regarding the parallels with Sri Lanka's democratic movement in 2022, and the lessons to learn for Bangladesh.

Do you see any similarities between the ouster of the Rajapaksa family in Sri Lanka and the ouster of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh?

In my view, there are four key ones. First, element of spontaneity: both protests were citizens' direct actions which suddenly erupted with no prior leadership or direction. Second, both were borne from people's accumulated anger against an autocratic ruler. Third, both began as low-key movements against the government without a political agenda, before long acquiring a mass character, becoming an independent voice, outside the agendas of political parties, driven by people's desire for change. And fourth, they were democracy-enhancing protests opening the political and social space for new initiatives for setting in motion a process of substantive change.

How would you describe the political climate in Sri Lanka freshly after the revolution and what can Bangladesh learn from it?

In Sri Lanka, the political climate became "normalised" in a very strange manner when a right-wing backlash against the protest movement succeeded in July-August 2022 to overcome the political challenge from the protesters. A new elite coalition was swiftly forged by the Rajapaksa family and Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the right-wing United National Party, to save the status quo by using their parliamentary majority. This new coalition used its majority to consolidate the authority of the weakened ruling class. That soft "counter-revolution" succeeded without much violence. The protest movement slowly began to dissipate in the face of a repressive response by the government led by the new president.

The first lesson I would suggest for Bangladesh from Sri Lanka's experience is: be watchful of a possible counter-revolution, which might not be very soft. Second, continue the democratising role of the protest movement as an ongoing political actor as a citizens' check on the political parties as well as other actors who want to take the country away from democratic consolidation. And lastly, if possible, initiate a new democratic coalition to participate in the next parliamentary elections so that the agential role of the student movement for democratic transformation can be sustained.



Bangladeshis are currently going through a period of immense anxiety and the interim government is grappling with ongoing instability. What is something that you would say to a Bangladeshi, as a Sri Lankan during this time?

I would say: consolidation and strengthening of the present interim government; establishing a working coalition between the interim government and the democratic civil society; having a road map to restoring genuinely pluralist parliamentary democracy through free and fair elections; and taking precautions to prevent the extremist and right-wing forces from undermining the transition from autocracy to democracy are the key things to concentrate on at the moment.

How do you think the region as a whole can navigate the culture of nepotism, political dynasty, and loyalism?

This is a difficult, yet necessary task. Difficult because corruption, nepotism, dynastic politics and political cronyism have become normalised, and even incorporated into the practices of governance. Necessary because re-building democratic political cultures in our societies is a precondition for sustainable democratisation, economic development with equity and social justice, and re-establishing the legitimacy of government. It is not easy to clean up corrupt governance in South Asia unless through popular uprisings, like what we saw in Sri Lanka in 2022 and in Bangladesh in 2024. I notice that in Bangladesh, there are efforts being made at present to rid the politics of these political and social evils. An active, alert and vigilant citizens' movement, without pursuing political power, will hopefully be a powerful force to cleanse our political systems and cultures by democratic means and continue to function as an active social check on governments, bureaucracies, and public institutions.

In terms of economy, Sri Lanka's recovery has been noted, though we understand the economic crisis still persists. Is there a cautionary tale that you want to tell Bangladesh?

Beware of the IMF-inspired solutions to the economic crisis without calculating their immediate social and political costs. Do not accept the solutions offered by the IMF as well as your own economic bureaucracy without calculating the terrible social cost of economic recovery. Similarly, do not allow the IMF or your own economic bureaucracy to pass the burden of the crisis recovery on to the ordinary, poor, working, and middle-class families through varieties of direct and indirect taxation. These families are already victims of the social mismanagement of the economic growth of your country. And ignore the social and political consequences of economic crisis management.

How do you view the tensions in the region since Sheikh Hasina's fall?

I think this tension is unavoidable given the one-sided and personalised nature of India-Bangladesh relations during the recent past when Prime Minister Hasina was in power. India's relations with almost all South Asia's neighbours have come under stress at varying degrees. A similar crisis occurred to China-Sri Lanka relations when Mahinda Rajapaksa was the president. My humble view is that India needs to review, reset, and re-imagine its relations with Bangladesh as well as other neighbours for a democratic and peaceful South Asia.

How did Sri Lanka navigate geopolitical relations after the 2022 protests, and what can

Bangladesh do to stabilise its geopolitical position?

The geopolitical challenges for South Asia today are quite complex. They have the potential to generate tension, and even enmity, among the South Asian states too. At the moment, we don't have a truly South Asian intergovernmental forum to discuss, debate and understand these challenges at the level of governments.

I have always thought that SAARC needs to be revived in the true spirit of cooperation and solidarity among the peoples as well. It has been too statist and overtly bureaucratised. Some of its founding clauses need to be revisited and revised in order to enable the SAARC to promote, and be an effective forum for, regional dialogue, interaction and cooperation.

Sri Lanka's protest movement did not raise issues concerning foreign policy as such. There are some murmurs from some in Sri Lanka that it has become closer to the US and India, at the expense of the relations with China and Russia. Obviously, the regional and global powers were watching what was going on in Sri Lanka during the protests because of its geopolitical significance. They were also obviously watching whether there would be a regime change in Sri Lanka and what would be the political colour of the post-protest regime, as I am sure is being discussed now in Bangladesh. The simple lesson we have to learn is that internal political changes in our societies are not free of worrisome consequences to regional and global powers, and that there is always the likelihood of external interventions, mostly covertly and sometimes overtly. That is also why the small countries in the world today need a new and updated version of the vision of non-alignment to protect their peoples from the unwanted fallouts from the big-power—there are quite a few of them around us these days—rivalries.

Are the Sri Lankan people better off now, and if so, how can Bangladesh follow the same path?

Well, soon after the citizens' protest became subdued, the government's immediate response was to restrict the democratic space for protests and the politics of resistance. The government introduced new repressive legislation restricting civil rights and upgraded the repressive capacities of the police, turning it to more or less like a semi-military force, obviously to curb more effectively the next phase of protests. So avoiding that is crucial for Bangladesh.

Yet, one good thing about democracy in Sri Lanka continues to remain, the knowledge of which perhaps may benefit Bangladeshi citizens. Politically alert and democratically conscious citizens continue to play their role as a living democratic force. The forthcoming presidential election, scheduled for September 21, will tell us where Sri Lankan people are as democrats.

Ramisa Rob

Jayadeva Uyangoda

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