

Sri Lanka. New left government steering on an old course?

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One hundred days have passed since Anura Kumara Dissanayake assumed the presidency of Sri Lanka after the 21 September election, subsequently leading the National People's Power (NPP) to an overwhelming victory in the general election on 14 November.

The milestone is an arbitrary one and not of this government's choosing. Its significance in the political lexicon can be traced to the FDR presidency (1932-45) in the US.

Elected in the midst of the great depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his first hundred days took measures of breathtaking scope. He stopped the disastrous run on failing banks by shutting down the banking system to reorganise it; while strengthening political control over the Federal Reserve. Fifteen major bills were passed to aid farmers facing foreclosures, homeowners facing eviction, and the unemployed with no income security, among others. The equivalent today of 12 billion USD was pumped into social programmes in three months.

Few leaders have been able to compete with this record whether in the US or elsewhere in the 90-odd years since. Yet the overwhelming mandate given to the NPP is for 'system change' of a similar magnitude - a new deal for the people crushed by the unbearable weight of the economic collapse of 2022 and the suffocating austerity that has followed.

Bankrupt political class

"Ring out old shapes" was the voters' unforgiving message to the bankrupt political class which degraded and drained this country over several decades. The NPP's own election rhetoric echoed this message. The echo of its campaign cry for 'change' is most visible in the political style of the new government and its members. No extravagance. No unnecessary security nor swollen entourage. No more cabinet members than necessary. This is refreshing.

Elsewhere, the report card is dispiriting.

The brouhaha over the former speaker's doctored qualifications is a case of being hoist with its own petard; and it was poorly handled. For years in public discourse, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-NPP has amplified and reinforced the middle-class perception that intelligent politicians are people with university degrees and titles ("*buddhimath minissu*") - as if Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Lakshman Peiris had neither - leading Asoka Ranwala to dissemble over his.

The NPP's slow response prolonged an unnecessary distraction from the serious business of governing. Its lack of due diligence on its candidates' claims is an unlearned lesson not to do the same with those it now appoints to state institutions in reward for their pre-election support. The former speaker's continuance was untenable. That his forced resignation is hailed as honourable, is symptomatic of a debauched political culture that has awarded killers, embezzlers, and gangsters with impunity for their actions inside and outside government.

Stability as statecraft

To right-wing glee, left-wing scorn, and until now majority acceptance, the coalition of “left and democratic forces” as JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva describes the NPP, has embraced ‘stability’ as statecraft.

What this means was spelled out by President Dissanayake in his first address to the new parliament on 21 November.

Well ahead of the elections, the NPP made clear that its proposed management of the economy would be within the parameters of the 2023 International Monetary Fund (IMF) neoliberal programme. Yet, in its manifesto, it pledged to “renegotiate with the IMF” for relief to be provided to “the poor and deprived”.

The expectation created among the public was that there would be a reduction in regressive indirect taxation by abolishing VAT on essential locally-produced food, healthcare services, and school supplies; that utility tariffs, particularly electricity, would be cut for the lowest income earners; and that public sector wages would be increased.

So far none of this relief has been realised, barring the belated moderation of electricity bills by 20% as of 17 January 2025, following the regulator’s intervention. Its decision to make cash transfers for the schooling needs of children from poor households, instead of making materials more affordable, has been applauded by the libertarian-right Advocata Institute for not distorting “market prices” nor “compromising Sri Lanka’s fiscal sustainability”.

In restructuring Sri Lanka’s external debt with private or commercial as well as bilateral creditors, the NPP manifesto promised to renegotiate the terms based on an alternative Debt Sustainability Analysis, that was more advantageous than that concocted by the IMF and confirmed by the Wickremesinghe-Weerasinghe-Siriwardena triumvirate.

However, speaking before an unrecognisably recomposed legislature and beyond, Dissanayake noted that negotiations with the Official Creditor Committee of bilateral donors and China’s EXIM Bank had been wrapped up (in fact, back in July). An agreement in principle with international sovereign bond holders had been announced by the previous regime just two days before the presidential election, he reminded them. He informed the chamber that reopening both discussions would set back by months or years the completion of debt restructuring.

The inference is that his government weighed the expeditious conclusion of negotiations with creditors, as more crucial than its skewed terms. Evidently the NPP swallowed the advice of the Central Bank, the Finance Ministry, and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, that a bad deal is preferable to no deal; and that restructuring sovereign debt – by prioritising early repayment, without a significant haircut nor substantial reduction in interest – is the precondition to economic recovery out of crisis.

Three Cs

In policy, in place of change, citizens have discovered that the “three Cs” of the NPP are continuity, caution, and conservatism.

Its response to the rice shortage attributed to hoarding by large-scale millers was first to cave in to their demand for a higher control price; and thereafter to persist in past practice of liberalising private sector importation of rice. As we know from precedent, this is a bonanza for the business class, including some of the big millers’ themselves, and not of benefit to producers or consumers. The NPP thinks it can use the play of market forces to undermine oligopolists, without reforming the

markets that have been structured and manipulated by those same players.

In other areas too, there are missteps. Instead of abiding by its own manifesto that promised repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and reform of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA), the government is backtracking.

Either to placate the national security apparatus or defuse Sinhala nationalist sentiment, the PTA it is said will now be merely amended. It is the duty of the state to protect people from terrorism, and not only of non-state actors. However, are other ordinary laws, rather than emergency-type ones, not adequate for this purpose? The NPP's invocation of the PTA in response to terror alerts over Israeli tourist hotspots such as Arugam Bay weakens the case for its abolition.

Meanwhile, the NPP, which has courted and received the support of Muslim male business and religious elements, has apparently lost its nerve to remove gender-discriminatory provisions in the Muslim personal law, that violate the right to equality of all citizens regardless of gender, age, and faith. No different to its predecessors, it hums and haws that the reactionary clerics of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) must be mollified.

In the matter of the 102 Rohingya refugees who were rescued in territorial waters shortly before Christmas, appalling pronouncements have been made by the Minister of Public Security Ananda Wijepala. He has indicated that they will be returned to Myanmar from where they fled ethnic cleansing by the brutal military regime. Wijepala went further by stoking public panic, alleging that if not deterred through refoulement, "intelligence reports" (of course, unsubstantiated and unverified) forecast an influx of 100,000 more.

Transcend the political

The new government which spurns labels of any kind has implicitly positioned itself where, to borrow from another context, [1] it appears "to elide conflict of a fundamental nature and thereby to transcend the political, the realm of contestation and confrontation".

The only post-victory grand plan of the NPP administration, the 'Clean Sri Lanka' programme, is an obvious instance of such a philosophy. It is sufficiently vague to seek, as this government does in general, to be 'all things to all people'; from cleaning up frills and furbelows on buses and trishaws, to rooting out corruption and malpractice in the bureaucracy.

The parliamentary opposition meanwhile is at sixes and sevens. Its factions will now hope to make the local and provincial council polls in 2025 a referendum on the government's performance in office; as they wait and hope for the people to become disenchanted with their new favourite, and to forgive and forget the misdeeds of their old.

Already, opponents are cheered by the surprise defeat of NPP candidates in contests for membership of Multi-Purpose Cooperative Society committees, a weather vane of public sentiment in between elections, in Angunakolapelessa, Beruwela, Kelaniya, Homagama, and Welivitiya-Divithura.

Meanwhile, despicable opponents of the NPP are going after prominent women legislators over being unmarried and childless; friends with a married man; and with sexual slander. Vile misogyny has been triggered and not stamped out in the near-doubling of women's parliamentary representation.

The era of the 'common man (sic)' was first announced in the 1956 general election result. However, what transpired was an alteration of rulers and circulation of elites, on the back of farmers, workers,

and intermediate classes. Has the die been cast? Are these first hundred days definitive of an old course of a new government? Or is it a feint, as the NPP gathers momentum for transformative socio-economic change in 2025 and beyond?

Of course, whether the future is still open to progressive outcomes is not a matter of the ambition and courage of the new regime alone; but also, among other things, the movement of those below. The lightning march of the NPP from the margin to the mainstream of political power should not be another false start.

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Footnotes

[1] Tormey, Simon. (1998). "The vicissitudes of 'radical centrism': The case of Agnes Heller, radical centrist avant la lettre." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 3 (2): 147-167. DOI: 10.1080/13569319808420774