

Sri Lanka needs more than economic reform



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by Kulani Abendroth-Dias

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How did an island nation credited with having the world's first female prime minister in 1960 and overcoming a 30-plus-year civil war in 2009 descend into the current chaos just over a decade later?

I moved back to Sri Lanka in 2018 to take up a role with the United Nations after close to a decade in the US, in an effort to 'give back' to my country.

The future looked bright at the time: we had overcome a civil war, and efforts to support transitional justice measures needed strengthening. Sri Lankans had democratically voted out then President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had **embezzled millions of dollars of public funds** and **embraced nepotism**.

I was coming back to a country spurred by the power of the people. Change was in the air, and I was eager to help. I was quickly disillusioned.

Ministers showed up to meetings and events with an entourage of 'yes-men'. True advisors were few and far between, as most ministers did not wish to be corrected or discuss substance. People were surprised by my presence at meetings given my age, gender and lack of familial connections to the political and business hierarchy. Senior ranking government officials, overwhelmingly male, rarely looked me in the eye and avoided shaking my hand. My refusal to obey traditional female norms was met with contempt.

Sri Lanka **currently ranks at 179 out of 189 countries** in terms of percentage of women in national parliament. Women are segregated from leadership in every aspect of political and economic life save one: supporting male candidates for the job. The few women who dare to run for political office or engage in political discourse are **actively shamed** by their families and the public for doing so, often by other women.

The sexism that is rampant in Sri Lanka is often intertwined with anti-Western propaganda. Equity is defined as a construct of the West, and misogyny is folded into culture: instead of giving women the ability to choose, it is said to be culturally appropriate "to do something at home".

More generally, sentiment against US- and European-led initiatives has been on the rise for some time in Sri Lanka. Politicians have been **eager to accept loans from China** to avoid having to align with so-called ‘Western’ values of anti-corruption and female empowerment. While xenophobia in general is evident, it is easier for ministers to do quick deals rather than endure the tedious environmental, social and economic accountability mechanisms that accompany most Western-led initiatives.

The earlier Rajapaksa government **borrowed unsustainably to build infrastructure**. The veneer of prosperity that cloaked the country was difficult to dispel in the five years of a fragmented government led by Maithripala Sirisena. The Rajapaksas knew the power of the media and perception very well – they regrouped and retained a high media profile. Then, the April 2019 Easter terrorist attacks reverberated through the country.

In November 2019, ‘The Father’ who ended the war was voted back in – the same strongman and his family who had been voted out just five years earlier. I watched as people were bussed in for the day to show their support – paid with packets of lunch and dinner and a bottle of liquor. The promise of security and food for the day were powerful motivators in a country where post-war prosperity is still seldom seen outside cities and tourist hubs.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the effects of **human capital flight** and years of poor economic policy decisions. Finally, earlier this year, the government was forced to call in the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

An IMF virtual mission to Sri Lanka concluded that a comprehensive reform package needs to “restore macroeconomic stability and debt sustainability...[ensure] credibility of the monetary policy and exchange rate regimes [and preserve] financial sector stability; and [require] structural reforms to enhance growth and strengthen governance”. This is standard IMF stuff, but will it be enough?

For a start, the IMF should note the rampant **anti-Western sentiment** that kept the government from approaching it for support earlier, despite public calls to do so. It needs to clearly communicate the reasoning behind, and effects of, austerity measures on the economy to avoid misplaced public resentment of Western-led initiatives to reconstruct and strengthen the economy.

Strongman politics, anti-Western bluster and pervasive social sexism have contributed to damaging **brain drain** and led the country to the brink of a failed state. Sri Lanka will be able to truly recover only when this trifecta of obstacles is abandoned. Otherwise, it will continue to see its young people leave and half of its

population sidelined.

The people have made their voice heard through their ongoing protests, resulting in the recent resignation of President Rajapaksa himself. An inclusive, sustainable recovery can only be built upon the values of democracy, meritocracy and participation.

Sri Lanka needs more than economic reform. It needs a structural and social revolution.

Disclosures:

The opinions expressed in this blog are the author's alone and do not reflect the positions of any organisations with which she has been or is currently affiliated.

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