

Liberal Democracy in Crisis: Majoritarianism, Democratic Backsliding, and Institutional Decay in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Liberal democracy is widely regarded as the most legitimate form of governance because it combines electoral competition with constitutionalism, the rule of law, and the protection of fundamental rights. However, the experience of many contemporary democracies demonstrates that electoral legitimacy alone is insufficient to sustain democratic governance. This article critically examines the deficiencies of liberal democracy through the case of Sri Lanka, a state often described as Asia's oldest democracy. Drawing on contemporary debates surrounding illiberal democracy, democratic backsliding, and institutional erosion, the article analyses Sri Lanka's political trajectory from the end of the civil war in 2009 to the transformative elections of 2024. It argues that liberal democracy in Sri Lanka has been undermined by three interconnected dynamics: ethnoreligious majoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and institutional decay. The article explores how post-war triumphalism and Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism weakened minority protection and accountability mechanisms, enabling the consolidation of executive power under successive administrations. It further examines the erosion of constitutional safeguards through the Eighteenth and Twentieth Amendments, the weakening of independent institutions, challenges to judicial independence, and the growth of patronage-based governance. The 2018 constitutional crisis and the 2022 economic collapse are analysed as manifestations of deeper structural weaknesses within Sri Lanka's democratic system. At the same time, the article highlights the resilience of democratic forces, particularly through judicial intervention, citizen mobilisation during the Aragalaya protests, and the electoral transformation witnessed in 2024. By situating Sri Lanka within broader theoretical discussions on liberal democracy and democratic erosion, the article demonstrates how formal democratic institutions can coexist with illiberal political practices. It concludes that sustainable democracy requires not only competitive elections but also robust institutions, constitutional restraints, minority protection, and a political culture committed to pluralism and accountability. Sri Lanka's experience therefore offers important lessons for understanding the vulnerabilities and possibilities of liberal democracy in deeply divided societies.

Keywords: Liberal Democracy; Democratic Backsliding; Majoritarianism; Ethnocracy.

INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy combining electoral competition with constitutional limits, the rule of law, and protection of individual rights is often regarded as the most legitimate model of governance. Theoretically, it tempers the potential excesses of majority rule through institutional safeguards for minorities and individual freedoms, ensuring that the state's authority remains subject to law and accountability. Yet, liberal democracy is far from flawless. Its underlying tension between popular sovereignty and constitutional restraint often gives rise to what scholars term "illiberal democracy," where elected leaders undermine the very liberal values that justify their legitimacy. This paradox becomes particularly visible in contexts where ethnonationalism dominates political identity. In such settings, democracy's procedural aspects elections and majority rule can be manipulated to entrench majoritarian

dominance, marginalize minorities, and weaken institutional checks. Sri Lanka, Asia's oldest democracy with universal franchise since 1931, exemplifies this tension between democratic form and illiberal practice.

Over the past three decades, Sri Lanka's experience reveals how liberal democracy can be eroded by ethnoreligious majoritarianism, overconcentration of executive power, and systemic corruption. Despite regular elections and constitutional reforms, successive governments have struggled to uphold pluralism, transparency, and equality before the law. The end of the civil war in 2009, the 2018 constitutional crisis, the 2022 economic collapse, and the transformative elections of 2024 mark critical junctures in this story. Each episode exposes specific weaknesses of liberal democracy from the suppression of minority rights and institutional decay to the failure of accountability mechanisms. This essay critically

examines these deficiencies, situating Sri Lanka's democratic evolution within broader theoretical debates about the limits of liberal democracy. It argues that Sri Lanka's experience demonstrates how electoral legitimacy alone cannot sustain democracy without liberal norms of inclusion, separation of powers, and the rule of law.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: THEORY AND CRITIQUE

Liberal democracy is premised on more than just electoral rule; it requires constitutional constraints on power, independent institutions, and guarantees of civil liberties and minority rights. As one definition notes, liberal democracy seeks to “curb the possible negative consequences of majority rule” by ensuring rule of law and protecting civil and minority rights alongside popular sovereignty. In other words, the “liberal” component demands that democratically elected leaders be restrained by law and respect pluralism. Critics of liberal democracy point out that in many countries these restraints are fragile. Fareed Zakaria famously observed the rise of “illiberal democracies” regimes elected by the people that nevertheless flout checks and balances and trample civil liberties. In such cases, democratic processes confer legitimacy on leaders who proceed to govern autocratically or in the interests of a dominant majority. This exposes a central deficiency of liberal democracy: elections alone do not guarantee liberal outcomes. Without strong institutions and norms, democracy may enable a “tyranny of the majority” or the emergence of elected autocrats. Ethnically divided societies are particularly vulnerable, as majority communal groups can capture the democratic state at the expense of minorities. Scholars like Arend Lijphart have long argued that plural societies require power-sharing and minority vetoes; otherwise, simple majority-rule democracy can fuel conflict. Sri Lanka exemplifies this danger. The country's post-colonial leaders pursued majoritarian policies (such as the Sinhala-only language law in 1956) that marginalized Tamil and other minorities, undermining the inclusive principles of liberal democracy. Over time, ethnonationalism and weak institutional checks created an environment where democratic forms persisted (regular elections, etc.) but liberal norms eroded. Before delving into

specific events, it is important to note that Sri Lanka maintained formal democratic institutions since independence it boasts a universal franchise since 1931 and held periodic elections. Yet, the quality of its democracy has been deeply flawed; international indices have routinely rated Sri Lanka as only “partly free” or a “deficient democracy” given its recurrent rights violations, executive dominance, and civil strife. The following sections discuss how liberal democracy's promises were compromised in practice, through the lens of Sri Lanka's contemporary history.

POST-WAR MAJORITARIANISM AND AUTHORITARIAN TURN (2009–2014)

Sri Lanka's civil war (1983–2009) culminated in May 2009 with the defeat of the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The war's end, while initially greeted with hope for peace, in fact spotlighted a profound failing of liberal democracy: the absence of accountability and minority protection in a triumphalist majority's victory. In the final months of fighting, Sri Lankan government forces were implicated in egregious human rights violations including the deaths of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians yet to this day no justice has been served for these war crimes. A United Nations panel of experts estimated that up to 40,000 civilians were killed in the war's final phase, amid indiscriminate shelling of supposed “no-fire zones” and summary executions of surrendering combatants.⁷ Both the state and the LTTE committed atrocities, but after the war the Sri Lankan state, dominated by the Sinhalese majority, has actively suppressed investigations and shielded perpetrators within its ranks. This culture of impunity is anathema to liberal democratic rule of law. Indeed, as Human Rights Watch observed 15 years after the war, the “unaddressed legacy of the war has bequeathed... practices of abuse, impunity and misgovernance” that plague Sri Lanka and even contributed to its later institutional and economic crises.⁸ In a liberal democracy, military victory should not place leaders above the law – yet in Sri Lanka, war heroes translated battlefield dominance into political dominance free of accountability.

Following the war, President Mahinda Rajapaksa leveraged the Sinhalese majority's adulation to entrench his family's power and push the country toward illiberal authoritarianism. Rajapaksa's government not only ignored calls for ethnic reconciliation and justice, but actively undermined institutional checks. In 2010, soon after the war, his regime passed the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, removing presidential term limits and neutering independent commissions, thereby vastly expanding executive power. One analyst noted that extra-constitutional tactics used to win the war, followed by manipulative constitutional changes and nepotistic practices, ushered in a "soft authoritarian" dispensation under Rajapaksa's emerging family dynasty. The Rajapaksa administration routinely harassed the press, clamped down on civil society, and even impeached the Chief Justice in 2013 when she dared to rule against the government's agenda. These actions illustrate the deficiency of liberal democracy when institutional safeguards are absent: a government with a popular mandate was able to concentrate power and erode freedoms with little resistance. Sri Lanka during these years functioned as an "ethnocracy" rule by the majority ethnic group – rather than a pluralistic democracy. Minority Tamils and Muslims, having lost political leverage, faced continued militarization of their regions and state-sponsored demographic changes (such as Sinhalese settlements in Tamil areas), further entrenching majority dominance. In sum, the post-2009 period in Sri Lanka demonstrates that majoritarian democracy, unchecked by liberal constraints, can slide into authoritarian rule. Formal democratic processes (elections which Rajapaksa handily won in 2010) conferred legitimacy on what was essentially an illiberal regime. This "hardening" of authoritarian control under cover of democracy is a key failing that liberal democratic theory warns against, yet one that materialized in Sri Lanka's experience.

REFORM, RELAPSE, AND CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS (2015–2019)

A brief window of reform opened in 2015, only to reveal further weaknesses in Sri Lanka's democratic governance. In January 2015, Mahinda Rajapaksa was unexpectedly defeated at the presidential election by Maithripala Sirisena, who

campaigning on restoring rule of law and curbing executive excesses. The change in leadership – hailed as a "win for democracy" led to the Nineteenth Amendment (2015), a constitutional reform aimed at repairing some damage to liberal-democratic institutions. The 19th Amendment reintroduced presidential term limits, strengthened Parliament's role, and established independent commissions (for judiciary, elections, public service, etc.) to depoliticize governance. It was described as "an incremental step in the right direction in democratizing the Sri Lankan state," even if it fell short of completely abolishing the executive presidency.¹³ These measures reflected liberal democratic ideals: reining in the once-unchecked presidency and promoting separation of powers and fundamental rights (the amendment even added a right to information). For a moment, Sri Lanka seemed to be correcting course, addressing the prior decade's authoritarian drift.

However, the years 2015–2019 also exposed the fragility of those reforms in the face of entrenched political culture and power struggles. The coalition government of President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was unstable and riven by rivalry. Liberal reforms failed to fully take root; for instance, promised transitional justice mechanisms for wartime abuses were slow and incomplete, fostering public cynicism. Then came the constitutional crisis of late 2018, which starkly illustrated a deficiency in Sri Lanka's liberal democratic framework: ambiguous constitutional provisions and opportunistic leadership nearly led to a constitutional coup. In October 2018, President Sirisena suddenly sacked Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and attempted to install former President Mahinda Rajapaksa (his one-time foe) as Prime Minister without parliamentary approval. When Parliament showed resistance, Sirisena unconstitutionally dissolved the legislature, precipitating a grave crisis of governance. For several weeks, Sri Lanka had two claimants to the prime ministership and confusion over who held legitimate power. This episode violated basic democratic norms and the rule of law. It was ultimately resolved only by judicial intervention: the Supreme Court ruled the President's actions illegal, forcing Rajapaksa to step down and reinstating the status quo. The 2018 crisis underlined how weak institutional safeguards and self-serving elites can push a democracy to the brink. The fact that a president felt free to ignore

constitutional limits (despite the recent 19th Amendment) showed that formal rules alone were not sufficient respect for rule of law was lacking. Moreover, the crisis eroded public trust: it signalled that personal and party power trumped democratic process among Sri Lanka's leaders. Events like this illustrate the "democratic backsliding" Sri Lanka experienced, where gains in governance were quickly reversed by authoritarian tendencies. Indeed, observers noted that by the end of 2018, hopes for deeper reforms had dimmed and the country was again sliding toward majoritarian authoritarianism. The Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in 2019 further jolted the society, and security fears paved the way for the Rajapaksa family's political resurgence, as discussed next.

INSTITUTIONAL DECAY AND THE EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Beyond majoritarian politics and constitutional manipulation, Sri Lanka's democratic crisis was characterised by a gradual erosion of state institutions. Liberal democracy requires more than competitive elections; it depends upon autonomous institutions capable of constraining political power, enforcing accountability, and maintaining public confidence in governance. When such institutions become politicised or weakened, democratic systems become vulnerable to authoritarian tendencies and governance failures.

One manifestation of institutional decay was the increasing politicisation of the public service. Successive administrations relied heavily on patronage networks and political appointments, weakening the neutrality of public administration. As DeVotta observes, the post-war period witnessed the consolidation of a highly centralised political order in which loyalty to the ruling regime often superseded institutional autonomy. This contributed to the gradual weakening of professional bureaucratic norms and reduced the effectiveness of public institutions in providing checks on executive power.

The weakening of independent commissions represented a further challenge to democratic governance. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution significantly reduced the

independence of key oversight institutions by expanding presidential influence over appointments. Although the Nineteenth Amendment sought to restore institutional independence through the Constitutional Council and independent commissions, many of these safeguards were subsequently diluted by the Twentieth Amendment. The International Commission of Jurists criticised the Twentieth Amendment as a serious setback for the rule of law, arguing that it undermined accountability and increased executive control over institutions that were intended to operate independently.

Concerns regarding judicial independence also emerged during this period. The impeachment of Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake in 2013 was widely viewed as a direct challenge to the separation of powers and judicial autonomy. While the judiciary demonstrated resilience during the 2018 constitutional crisis by invalidating the President's dissolution of Parliament, the earlier impeachment episode highlighted the vulnerability of judicial institutions to political interference. Such developments weakened public confidence in the judiciary's ability to function as an independent guardian of constitutional governance.

Institutional decay was further reinforced by corruption and patronage networks. Freedom House has repeatedly identified corruption, weak accountability mechanisms, and executive dominance as persistent challenges affecting democratic governance in Sri Lanka. The concentration of political and economic power within a small ruling elite reduced transparency and facilitated decision-making processes that often escaped meaningful scrutiny. These weaknesses became particularly evident during the economic crisis of 2022, when years of poor governance, policy mismanagement, and insufficient institutional oversight contributed to unprecedented economic collapse.

The cumulative effect of these developments was a decline in public trust in state institutions. Public frustration with corruption, impunity, and ineffective governance played a central role in the Aragalaya protest movement of 2022. As Human Rights Watch has argued, the longstanding culture of impunity and institutional weakness that emerged after the civil war contributed not only to human rights concerns but also to broader governance failures that undermined state

legitimacy. Consequently, Sri Lanka's democratic challenges cannot be understood solely through the lenses of majoritarianism and democratic backsliding. They also reflect the consequences of institutional decay, whereby weakened governance structures became increasingly incapable of upholding the liberal democratic principles of accountability, rule of law, and constitutional restraint.

ECONOMIC COLLAPSE AND MASS PROTEST (2020–2022)

In late 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa Mahinda's brother and former wartime defense chief – was elected President, capitalizing on promises of strong leadership after the 2019 Easter bombings. His landslide victory (and the Rajapaksa's simultaneous parliamentary triumph in 2020) returned Sri Lanka decisively to ethnocratic, family-dynastic rule. The Rajapaksa quickly dismantled prior checks by passing the Twentieth Amendment (2020), which concentrated even more powers in the presidency (undoing much of the 19th Amendment's reforms). This set the stage for unchecked decision-making – with disastrous results. By 2022 Sri Lanka plunged into the worst economic meltdown in its history, a crisis that exposed the governance failures and corruption of the ruling regime. The economy's collapse (manifested in sovereign debt default, acute shortages of food, fuel, and medicine, and soaring inflation) was not a mere accident of global forces; it was widely seen as the product of misrule years of populist and reckless policies, nepotism, and impunity under successive governments (especially the Rajapaksa administration). The Rajapaksa government had enacted unsustainable tax cuts in 2019, piled up foreign debt on vanity projects, and in 2021 imposed a rash ban on chemical fertilizer that devastated agriculture. These decisions, made with minimal consultation or oversight, reflected a broader pattern: a small coterie of rulers wielding unchecked power and disregarding expert advice. In a true liberal democracy, robust institutions and transparency would likely prevent such extreme policy mismanagement. In Sri Lanka, the hollowing out of accountability mechanisms enabled catastrophic governance errors.

The economic collapse ignited a remarkable wave of mass citizen protest in 2022, commonly known as the Aragalaya (“struggle”). In a display of grassroots democratic spirit, people across ethnic and class lines took to the streets to demand political change specifically, the ouster of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his family-led government. Protesters decried the corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power that had led to their suffering, coining the slogan “#GoHomeGota”. By July 2022, public pressure climaxed with the dramatic storming of the presidential residence, prompting Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country and resign. This moment was a rare triumph of popular accountability the citizenry, through non-violent uprising, accomplished what formal institutions (Parliament, judiciary, etc.) had largely failed to do: remove an entrenched, illiberal ruling clique. As one analysis noted, “Sri Lanka's democratic crisis exemplifies the fragility of its institutions... shaped by historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and economic mismanagement,” and it took a social upheaval to finally reset the political order. The 2022 protests underscored both a deficiency and a paradox of liberal democracy in Sri Lanka. The deficiency lay in the fact that constitutional mechanisms for accountability (elections, checks and balances) had been so undermined that only extra-constitutional people-power could enforce change. Yet the paradox is that this public uprising also demonstrated a democratic resilience: ordinary Sri Lankans ultimately demanded a say in their governance when pushed to desperation. The protest movement showed a new awareness among citizens of all communities, pushing back against ethnomajoritarian divides to unite around themes of good governance and anti-corruption. Still, the aftermath was uncertain. An interim president (Ranil Wickremesinghe) was installed by Parliament in July 2022, and he imposed emergency measures to quell unrest. For many protesters, this was an unsatisfying elite bargain. The episode highlighted that while popular mobilization can correct a democracy's course, sustainable liberal democracy requires institutional reforms to address root causes in Sri Lanka's case, the “extant embedded ethnocracy” and impunity that Neil DeVotta argues must be dismantled for real transformation to occur.

THE 2024 ELECTION SHIFT AND DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

Sri Lanka's democratic story took another significant turn in 2024. By that year, the political upheavals and public discontent set the stage for an electoral watershed. In what has been dubbed a "peaceful revolution," Sri Lankan voters decisively rejected the traditional ruling parties and elected an anti-establishment, reformist leadership. Anura Kumara Dissanayake, candidate of the left-wing National People's Power (NPP) coalition, won the presidency in September 2024 a stunning result given that the NPP had been a minor third party previously. He secured a majority (after preference vote transfers) and, in a double breakthrough, the NPP went on to win a supermajority in Parliament in the November 2024 general elections. This outcome marked the end of the country's dynastic politics: for the first time in decades, neither of the main two establishment parties (associated with the Rajapaksa family or the old United National Party/Sri Lanka Freedom Party elites) held power. The elections were historic on multiple fronts: the introduction of ranked-choice voting for the presidency, an influx of first-time MPs and greater female representation, and unprecedented minority support for a Sinhalese-led party (the NPP campaigned on a platform of equality, attracting many Tamil and Muslim voters). In essence, the 2024 elections signaled a possible democratic renewal. Sri Lankans, through the ballot, implemented the change demanded in the streets in 2022 choosing a leader ostensibly committed to anti-corruption and institutional reform. International observers praised the elections as broadly free and fair, noting the high turnout as a sign of citizens' re-engagement in the democratic process.

While the 2024 shift is a hopeful development, it also serves as a reflection on the deficiencies of the prior model of liberal democracy in Sri Lanka. That voters felt compelled to opt for a radical political change implies a searing indictment of the status quo. It suggests that liberal democracy, as previously practiced, had failed to deliver good governance, equity, or the rule of law – so much so that a majority entrusted a formerly marginal left-wing movement to overhaul the system. There

remain questions about how thoroughly the new government can reform entrenched structures. Some analysts caution that the NPP's victory, driven by public anger at corruption, must now translate into concrete strengthening of liberal-democratic institutions such as truly independent courts, depoliticized public services, and protections for minority rights if it is to avoid repeating past cycles of disappointment. Notably, the NPP itself has roots in a Marxist party (the JVP) with a checkered past of insurrection; its transformation into a democratic reformist force will be closely watched. The test for Sri Lanka post-2024 is whether it can move from a procedural electoral shake-up to a deep institutional renewal, addressing the long-standing deficits of liberal democracy identified in this essay. Those deficits unconstrained majority power, executive aggrandizement, impunity for abuses, and weak rule of law will not vanish overnight. Indeed, Sri Lanka's experience resonates with Alfred Stepan's warning about the "majoritarian danger": a democracy that simply empowers the majority without robust safeguards can imperil its own survival. The 2024 elections have, at least, opened a path to escaping that trap by bringing in a leadership ostensibly committed to pluralism and accountability.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka's political trajectory over the last three decades offers a sobering case study of liberal democracy's vulnerabilities. From the end of a brutal civil war through years of authoritarian drift, a constitutional near-breakdown, and an economic freefall, we observe a pattern: democratic structures devoid of liberal principles lead to dysfunction and conflict. A common thread is the dominance of ethnonationalist majoritarianism the Sinhala Buddhist majority's interests repeatedly trumped minority rights and democratic niceties, corroding the liberal foundations of the state. Excessive concentration of power in an executive presidency, especially under the Rajapaksas, further hollowed out checks and balances. These deficiencies meant that Sri Lanka's "democracy" often lacked the substantive qualities of liberal governance: the rule of law was selective, corruption rife, and accountability absent. As a result, the country oscillated between illiberal stability and crises of legitimacy.

And yet, Sri Lanka also illustrates the capacity for course-correction. The crises of 2018 and 2022, while born of democratic deficiencies, also awakened forces that ultimately reinforced democracy the judiciary upholding the constitution in 2018, and citizens mobilizing the masse in 2022. The culminating electoral shift in 2024 suggests that even a flawed democracy can rejuvenate itself through the very mechanism of elections when voters demand change. This dynamic underscores that liberal democracy is not a static attainment but an ongoing project: its principles must be continually defended, institutionalized, and refreshed by an engaged citizenry. Sri Lanka's experience thus provides a dual lesson. On one hand, it warns that without robust liberal institutions, democracy can deteriorate into elective despotism or unstable majoritarian rule, bringing grave consequences (from civil war to economic ruin). On the other hand, it offers hope

that through reflection and reform spurred by crisis a society can address those very deficiencies.

For Sri Lanka, the road ahead will require translating the 2024 political earthquake into lasting constitutional and cultural change: entrenching minority rights, eradicating impunity and corruption, and fostering a political culture that values dissent and rule of law. Only by doing so can the country overcome the democratic deficits of its past. The Sri Lankan case ultimately reaffirms a fundamental truth of liberal democratic theory: elections alone do not a true democracy make the substance of democracy lies equally in constraints on power and respect for pluralism. Failing to heed this can be perilous, as Sri Lanka's last 30 years vividly demonstrate. By learning from these shortcomings, Sri Lanka and other democracies facing similar strains may yet strengthen the liberal democratic model to be more inclusive, resilient, and just.

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