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# SRI LANKA: FROM TURMOIL TO DYNASTY

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Scholars of democracy understandably assumed that the “third wave” of democratization which began in the mid-1970s would, like the two waves preceding it, also give way to a reverse wave.<sup>1</sup> What transpired instead was not a surge of full-blown democratic reversals, but rather a rise in the incidence of regimes that are, roughly speaking, democratic but also seriously illiberal, and prone in some cases to further authoritarian backsliding.<sup>2</sup> The reality of this trend is made especially clear by the annual country rankings that Freedom House has assembled over the past decade. Sri Lanka offers a case in point: The island went from being a commendable democracy to an illiberal democracy, and over the past five years has retrogressed further to the point of soft authoritarianism.

An illiberal democracy is a type of political regime that maintains the trappings of democracy but whose leaders subscribe selectively (at best) to such key tenets of constitutional liberalism as the rule of law, free and fair elections, limited government, and freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion. Political elites in these states undermine good governance in order to bolster and perpetuate their rule, yet attempt to mask the attendant democratic deficit by highlighting whatever they think will make them look “democratic.” Thus elections are held with great fanfare even as polls are rigged to favor the ruling party; threats, violence, and defections are engineered to ensure that opposition parties and candidates remain weak; and the media are allowed relative freedom as long as they go easy on critical coverage of the ruling party, its leaders and their families, and the venal and predatory practices that these elites use to amass wealth and power.

The longer that such regimes stay in place, the more they disregard the rule of law and act with impunity, which in turn makes it harder for them to envision losing power. Indeed, the desire to avoid being held account-

able for crimes committed while in office is a major reason why elites in illiberal regimes veer toward authoritarianism. Numerous authors have analyzed the resultant hybrid regimes that combine aspects of democracy with authoritarianism, using a bewildering variety of names.<sup>3</sup> This hodge-podge notwithstanding, the specifics associated with the country under study and its evident trajectory may justify a particular designation.

Generally speaking, authoritarianism ranges from the “hard” form (found in China, for instance), which runs by *diktat*, to the “soft” form (typified by Singapore), which allows basic freedoms as long as no one challenges the rulers and their key institutions too directly.<sup>4</sup> Elites in soft authoritarian states also prefer persuasion over coercion, while making clear that the latter can be applied should they deem it needful.<sup>5</sup>

Since first winning election to Sri Lanka’s presidency in November 2005, Mahinda Rajapaksa of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) has favored a governing style that has exacerbated the island’s democratic deficit. Worrisomely, that deficit is poised to widen as Rajapaksa seeks to create a political dynasty and avoid being brought to book for crimes committed during the last and extremely violent phase of the war that eradicated the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sri Lanka’s democratic regression has taken place gradually and is rooted in the quest for dominance by the island’s Sinhalese Buddhist majority, which makes up about three-quarters of its total population. The ways in which the country’s postindependence ethnocentric practices empowered the majority Sinhalese, marginalized the minority Tamils, and fueled a civil war are well known and amply documented.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Sri Lanka is a classic example of how ethnocentrism can undermine liberal democracy.<sup>7</sup> By the time the conflict ended in May 2009, this country that was once touted as having “the best chance of making a successful transition to modern statehood”<sup>8</sup> had also been transmogrified into a veritable ethnocracy.<sup>9</sup>

When Mahinda Rajapaksa became president, the civil war was in its twenty-second year and many considered the LTTE to be invincible. The group had withstood the Indian army in the late 1980s after India cavalierly sought to enforce a peace settlement, had beaten the Sri Lankan military in numerous battles, and had built in northeastern Sri Lanka a de facto state with functioning institutions, including formidable land and sea forces and even a nascent air force. The LTTE’s Black Tiger unit had pioneered new forms of suicide bombings, and its suicide cadres had murdered former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991 and Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa in May 1993, with a near-miss attempt on the life of Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga in December 1999. The group also assassinated numerous Sinhalese and Tamil politicians, military leaders, and Tamils who refused to recognize the LTTE as their sole representative. The LTTE was notorious for extorting funds from Tamils within Sri Lanka as well as in the million-strong

**MAP—SRI LANKA**

diaspora, and was vilified for forcibly recruiting children. More than thirty countries—including India, the United States, and states belonging to the European Union—banned the LTTE as a terrorist organization, yet the group appeared set to continue the Tamil struggle for a separate homeland for a long time to come.<sup>10</sup>

Three successive governments had negotiated ceasefires with the LTTE, but none held, thanks to the LTTE's intransigence and the governments' inability to agree on devolution. As president, Rajapaksa also pursued talks with the LTTE and initially refrained from retaliating against the group's ceasefire violations. But when the president resorted to war, he did so more decisively and ruthlessly than had his predecessors.

Ironically, by barring many Tamils within the areas that it controlled from voting, the LTTE had assured Rajapaksa's narrow 2005 election victory. Knowing that he was a hard-line Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist, the Tigers preferred him to a rival whose commitment to peace

talks, they feared, would impede their plan for creating a separate state through force of arms.<sup>11</sup>

Among the first important decisions that President Rajapaksa made was to name his younger brother Gotabaya defense secretary and General Sarath Fonseka army commander. Both were hard-liners who believed that the LTTE would never accept a negotiated settlement and that the only way to beat terror was with terror. It was also obvious that the LTTE had negotiated previous ceasefires merely as breathing room within which it could recruit and rearm.

The government was determined to ensure that the next phase of the war would be the last. Consequently, it beefed up the armed forces, gave them specialized training, adopted new tactics, and bought sophisticated weaponry. Cowing Tamils in government-controlled areas, minimizing NGO involvement, controlling the media, suffocating civil society, and keeping political opponents weak and confused were all deliberate strategies that the Rajapaksa government adopted in order to give itself the freest possible hand in its fight against the LTTE.

Within months, death squads went to work: Just two months after Rajapaksa came to power, the military in Trincomalee publicly lined up and shot five young Tamil men. Tamils exemplifying leadership ability were especially targeted for assassination,<sup>12</sup> and large-scale search operations were also conducted (especially in the capital city of Colombo) to disrupt LTTE sleeper cells and apprehend LTTE supporters. Many among those arrested and detained without charge are said to have disappeared. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has noted that in 2006 and 2007, the number of such “disappearances” in Sri Lanka exceeded that in any other country.<sup>13</sup>

The government also began forcing NGOs operating in LTTE-controlled areas to disband and forced many NGO personnel off the island by refusing to renew their visas. Furthermore, authorities strictly controlled entry into future battle zones so as to ensure that no independent sources could monitor the military’s behavior. The quest to cleanse the region of outsiders was, in the main, complete when the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, comprising Scandinavians, ended its operations in January 2008 after the government unilaterally abrogated the ceasefire with the LTTE.<sup>14</sup> The government also clamped down on civil society organizations, especially those speaking out on the plight of Tamils, by threatening their members, auditing their accounts, searching their offices, and making certification requirements more difficult. The media too were targeted and more than a dozen journalists were killed, numerous others fled the country, and many more resorted to self-censorship.

Members of parliament from the main opposition formation, the United National Party (UNP), were either harassed into silence or bribed with ministerial portfolios, thereby strengthening the government’s hand

even further. Those who insisted on remaining critical found themselves branded as traitors and LTTE sympathizers.

In March 2004, well before Rajapaksa became president, the LTTE's commander in Eastern Province, known by the *nom de guerre* Colonel Karuna, had crossed over to the government along with his cadres. This defection proved crucial, especially after the war recrudesced and Karuna and his men helped the army with their deep knowledge of jungle regions and the LTTE supporters within them.

In July 2006, LTTE troops closed the sluice gates of a dam in Eastern Province and cut off water to more than fifty-thousand farmers and other civilians. The military's counterattack to retake the dam gradually expanded until, a year later, the LTTE had been evicted from the entire province. The LTTE thereafter faced reverse after reverse over the next two years as the military closed the ring. The government repeatedly ignored international calls for a truce, and the LTTE's refusal to surrender aggravated the carnage being suffered by the nearly three-hundred thousand Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone.

The last phase of Sri Lanka's civil war was waged without outside witnesses, precisely as the Rajapaksa government had desired. Between January and May 2009, nearly a hundred-thousand Tamils still trapped within LTTE-controlled areas were forced to retreat with the group, which used them as human shields. Claiming that it was conducting the world's largest hostage-rescue operation, the military nevertheless targeted civilian areas—including areas that the government had designated as no-fire zones—killing more than twenty-thousand Tamils and wounding almost thirty-thousand more.<sup>15</sup> Although the military urged and helped Tamils to cross over to government-controlled areas, soldiers also killed many civilians, in some instances burying alive those who had sought safety in makeshift bunkers.<sup>16</sup> Reports and video evidence make it clear that troops committed rapes and execution-style murders as well.

The LTTE acknowledged defeat on 17 May 2009; its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran's corpse was discovered two days later. Despite being assured of a comprehensive victory, the Sri Lankan military killed many surrendering senior LTTE cadres—allegedly on the orders of Gotabaya Rajapaksa.<sup>17</sup> The vast majority of the nearly three-hundred thousand Tamils who came out of LTTE-controlled areas were thereafter kept in camps, screened, and gradually released. Access to the camps was strictly controlled with even opposition MPs being barred. Although the government has sought to rehabilitate some LTTE cadres, many among the internally displaced persons were tortured and thousands are said to have disappeared.<sup>18</sup>

According to the Sri Lankan government, the period from July 2006 through May 2009 saw 6,261 soldiers killed and 29,551 wounded, with 22,000 LTTE cadres killed. The military lost 23,000 killed in action during the length of the war, while the total LTTE dead approximated 40,000.<sup>19</sup> Altogether, more than 100,000 were killed, although a joint study by Har-

vard Medical School and the University of Washington claims that up to 220,000 people may have died in Sri Lanka's civil war from 1975 to 2002.<sup>20</sup> (Sri Lanka's estimated population as of 2009 was around 20.3 million.)

The international community hoped that the LTTE's demise would finally allow Sri Lanka's leaders to accommodate the Tamils' legitimate aspirations and move the island toward fuller democracy. Indeed, President Rajapaksa and his supporters had long argued that the LTTE was an existential threat that would have to be destroyed before the Tamils' lot could be made better. Yet now that the LTTE is out of the way, the gap between what Tamils and the international community expect and what the Rajapaksa government is willing to concede still yawns like a chasm. Instead of offering the Tamils a fair deal under which they might live with self-respect and dignity, Rajapaksa has been teaming personal triumphalism with Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinism to further marginalize them and consolidate his own and his family's power. In doing so, he has been taking the authoritarianism that the country tolerated during the civil war and making it worse.

### Consolidating Authoritarianism

Mahinda Rajapaksa and other Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists subscribe to an ideology which claims that Sri Lanka is the designated sanctuary of Theravada Buddhism, that Sinhalese Buddhists are the chosen custodians to preserve and propagate this legacy, that all others who live on the island do so thanks purely to Sinhalese Buddhist sufferance, and that only traitors would seek to undermine Sinhalese Buddhist dominance. Associated with this is the claim that Sinhalese have only Sri Lanka to call home, whereas Tamils can supposedly move across the Palk Strait to the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in which around seventy million Tamils live. Another staple of Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinism is the charge that jealous and hostile NGOs and Western countries are conspiring to undermine Sinhalese Buddhist civilization.<sup>21</sup> Those who subscribe to this nationalist ideology clamored for a military (as opposed to a political) resolution of the civil war and now insist on Sri Lanka remaining a unitary state, even though for hundreds of years the island was home to three independent kingdoms (including a Tamil kingdom).

President Rajapaksa evoked these themes when waging war against the LTTE, and has deftly manipulated Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in order to help him consolidate his grip on power. In addition to branding critics as terror supporters and enemies determined to sunder Sri Lanka, he has portrayed himself as akin to early Sinhalese kings who fought off invaders. Foremost among these is a monarch from the second century B.C.E.—a partly mythical, partly historical figure named Dutugemunu who supposedly defeated a Tamil king and unified the is-

land under Buddhism. Since he became president, Rajapaksa and his supporters have used newspaper articles, streamers, giant cutouts, skits, and music videos to portray him as the new Dutugemunu destined to eradicate terrorism. Since the LTTE's defeat, the Rajapaksa personality cult has extended to talk about how he is ushering the country into a "new civilization" and deserves to be called "King Rajapaksa," "savior," "the leader who conquered the world," "high king," and "wonder of the world and universe." The president's brother Basil even claims that "an era of 'ruler kings' has begun."<sup>22</sup>

There is no gainsaying that many Sri Lankans, and the Sinhalese especially, appreciate President Rajapaksa for having crushed the LTTE. Determined to capitalize on this sentiment, Rajapaksa called for presidential elections two years before his first term ended, at the same time turning back a challenge from General Fonseka, the victorious commander whom Rajapaksa suspected was aspiring to lead a military coup. After the president sacked him, Fonseka ran in the January 2010 presidential election with wide opposition support. He proved to be an awkward candidate, however, at one point crudely threatening to hang the Rajapaksa brothers once in power.

Over the past two decades, the spectacle of incumbents abusing their positions in order to gain reelection has become a depressingly familiar one on the island. The Rajapaksa campaign plumbed new depths in this regard: state employees, vehicles, and media were blatantly used to support the president's candidacy; opposition posters barely went up before being pulled down; and, much more gravely, newspaper editors who were thought to sympathize with Fonseka received death threats. The government attacked Fonseka for alleged corruption in arms-buying deals and for trying to implicate Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the shooting of surrendering LTTE cadres.

On election day, grenades went off in some northern polling stations to discourage Tamils from voting. Government supporters were also accused of stuffing ballot boxes in certain areas. Rajapaksa would have won the election even without such improprieties; he finished with a commanding 57.8 percent. Far from being buoyed, however, he continued to lash out, sending troops to surround Fonseka's hotel before the results were announced and arresting many of his military supporters. Fonseka too was soon thereafter arrested after being physically dragged out of his office (the Rajapaksas claimed that he planned to murder them as a family). He won a seat in the April 2010 parliamentary elections, however, before being stripped of it (along with other emoluments) by an August 2010 court martial that convicted him of engaging in political activities held to be unlawful for a serving soldier. The following month, a second military tribunal found him guilty of corruption and sentenced him to three years of hard prison time. Fonseka's rough handling is in part meant as a warning to those who might dare to challenge the re-



gime: If a national hero of his stature can be so completely humiliated and harshly punished, the Rajapaksas are saying, so can anyone else.

The April 2010 parliamentary elections saw President Rajapaksa's coalition capture 144 out of 225 seats (just six short of a two-thirds majority), and in September the president engineered more than enough floor-crossers to pass an amendment that abolishes presidential term limits; allows the president to attend parliament once every three months; replaces the ten-member Constitutional Council with a five-member Parliamentary Council led by the president; and empowers the president to consider the "observations" of the Parliamentary Council and to appoint the heads of numerous independent commissions, whereas before these heads had been chosen by the Constitutional Council. These include the heads of the commissions that deal with elections, the civil service, the police, human rights, anticorruption probes, state finance, and electoral redistricting. Moreover, the president is now empowered to appoint Supreme Court justices and a host of lesser judges, as well as the attorney-general, the parliamentary ombudsman, and the parliament's secretary-general. The 66-year-old President Rajapaksa's second term does not end until November 2016, at which point he will be free to run for a third term.

The Rajapaksa family currently controls nearly all the major state institutions, and it is widely expected that the president's relatives will eventually fill some of the posts now under direct presidential authority. Currently, the president himself is acting as his own minister of defense, ports and aviation, highways, finance, and planning. His brother Gotabaya is defense secretary (charged with overseeing the Defense Ministry's day-to-day functions) and also superintends the police, coast guard, immigration service, Urban Development Authority, and Land Reclamation and Development Corporation. The Defense Ministry has unusual powers: It decides which foreigners and journalists receive permission to visit former LTTE-controlled areas and certain areas in the north, and where internally displaced persons may settle. It also oversees NGOs and keeps many under surveillance. Another presidential sibling, Basil, heads the Ministry of Economic Development, a portfolio that includes the Board of Investment and the Tourist Promotion Bureau. Another brother is speaker of parliament, ensuring that any potential impeachment motion against the president will be stalled. All told, the first three brothers control 94 government departments and approximately 70 percent of the national budget.<sup>23</sup> Mahinda Rajapaksa's oldest son and niece have also been elected to parliament, and by some accounts nearly 130 family members occupy prominent and influential government offices.

### **The Authoritarian Playbook**

Authoritarian rulers adopt a number of typical strategies to consolidate their rule, and the Rajapaksas are no different. As already noted,

President Rajapaksa has consistently kept the opposition weak and off balance by dangling ministerial portfolios in order to bring about defections in parliament. Rajapaksa also understands how important it is to rule through a party and enjoy the legitimacy that an institution such as the SLFP affords him. Thus he has sought to accommodate other political elites even as he keeps his family in the driver's seat. Currently, his government has 92 ministers and deputy ministers—fewer than the 109 that his previous government boasted, but enough to give almost three out of every five MPs in his coalition access to the perquisites and rents that come with a minister's or deputy minister's portfolio.

Although some ministers grumble privately about being marginalized, few will dare to challenge the Rajapaksas openly. On the contrary, Rajapaksa's court teems with minions who vie publicly to outdo one another in pleasing the so-called First Family. The same is true of many intellectuals who author panegyrics and apologetics on behalf of the Rajapaksas in exchange for sinecures and perks. Even the universities have not been spared, because increasingly only those openly supportive of the Rajapaksas are favored while those who seem tepid (let alone critical) toward the government's policies come in for threats and denigration.

Intimidating the media and civil society is another common authoritarian tactic. The Rajapaksa regime has sought to muzzle the media with such ruthlessness that Sri Lanka is now considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. As noted above, more than a dozen journalists have been murdered since Mahinda Rajapaksa became president, the most prominent being Lasantha Wickrematunga, the editor of the *Sunday Leader*. Thugs resembling soldiers have attacked media offices. Journalists covering the president's campaigns have been screened closely and asked to divulge details about their families. Rallies protesting General Fonseka's imprisonment have been brutally attacked. Members of the press who report positively on Sarath Fonseka have also been beaten and harassed. Some foreign journalists cannot attain visas, and most are barred from large swaths of Northern Province. Those who are allowed in routinely find themselves followed by military intelligence. The BBC especially has been banned from covering most sessions of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), the Rajapaksa-appointed body that is looking into the conduct of the late war. Authorities have seized issues of the *Economist* containing articles critical of the regime.

The government continues to monitor civil society and threatens its more prominent figures. After 133 civil society activists and academics signed a petition protesting the death threats received by the director of the Center for Policy Alternatives, officials from the Criminal Investigation Department visited their homes and workplaces to take statements. Police intimidation is a hallmark of authoritarian governance, and the Rajapaksa regime appears to have perfected such tactics.

Institutionalizing oppression on trumped-up “national security” grounds is another hardy perennial of authoritarian rule. The Rajapaksa regime’s penchant for railing against critics as disloyal—like its dark warnings about “neocolonial” powers allegedly hostile to Sri Lankan

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sovereignty—takes on special intensity in the context of claims that Sri Lanka’s military committed war crimes during its fight against the LTTE. When a leading oppositionist called for an investigation of the army’s behavior, he was instantly branded a “traitor” and threatened with a no-confidence motion in parliament.

According to a January 2010 U.S. diplomatic cable that became public as part of the WikiLeaks release, “responsibility for many of the alleged crimes rests with the country’s senior civilian and military leadership, including President Rajapaksa and his brothers and opposition candidate General Fonseka.” The government, however, has vociferously denied all allegations. It claims that the country’s military is the most disciplined in the world, that the incriminating videos are fabrications made up by LTTE supporters living in diaspora, and that Western countries are calling for investigations only because the Sri Lankan military’s conspicuous win over a terror group (at a time when Western troops were struggling in Iraq and Afghanistan) has aroused jealousy. Some officials have even taken to suggesting that Western governments, instead of raising questions about Sri Lanka’s conduct of the war, should instead “take tuition” at the feet of its security forces.

A belated response to international pressure was the creation of the LLRC. Leading human-rights organizations have criticized its lack of independence and refused to testify before it. In June 2010, UN secretary-general Ban Ki Moon set up a panel to investigate allegations stemming from Sri Lanka’s civil war. Sri Lanka’s state-run and progovernment media vilified each of the four panelists, to whom the government refused to provide visas. The government has recently moderated its stance, although as of this writing in late February 2011, the UN panel had yet to visit the island.

Consolidation-conscious authoritarians seldom fail to look to the proper care and feeding of the military, and here too the Rajapaksa regime is no exception. In Sri Lanka’s case, war-crimes allegations against both civilian and uniformed leaders have sparked the formation of an impressive executive-military nexus. Given Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s earlier career as an army officer and the regime’s unconditional commitment to defeating the LTTE, it is no surprise that the president and his family enjoy stronger ties to the military than any of his predecessors.

More than 98 percent of Sri Lanka's military personnel are Sinhalese from the mainly rural areas that have long formed the SLFP's key bastion. With roots in the rural south and strong Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist credentials, the Rajapaksa family comes naturally to its role as the military's chief defender and ally.

President Rajapaksa justifies the maintenance of a powerful military establishment by pointing to the Tamil diaspora's continued clamor for a separate Tamil state on the island, and by claiming that LTTE sleeper cells are lying in wait with plans to destabilize the country. He refuses to retire the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979, which allows the security forces to arrest and imprison suspected subversives for eighteen months without trial, or to end the state of emergency that was first imposed in 1983. The usefulness of such broad powers to a regime bent on unaccountable rule hardly needs comment.

The civil war ended in May 2009, yet the military budget continues to increase (by 6 percent in 2011 alone) and, at US\$1.92 billion, now accounts for nearly a fifth of all government spending. The Defense Ministry has plans to station an army division in each of the island's 25 districts. It has now installed closed-circuit TV cameras in many prominent areas in Colombo and plans to expand this surveillance system throughout the country. (The president's secretary has even suggested that there should be administration moles spying on all government departments—a role that some believe members of the SLFP youth wing operating under the president's eldest son are already filling). The government justifies such surveillance by pointing to various threats, but all this allows it to monitor groups that may mobilize against the regime.

The robust nexus between the military and executive branch has also led to military personnel replacing civil servants in prominent positions. For instance, retired military officers have received diplomatic postings, been appointed to head state agencies and corporations, and in a couple of cases have even been given provincial governorships. Furthermore, the military, similar to the militaries in Pakistan and Egypt, has begun investing in various business enterprises.

Ensuring control over the military has also meant retiring, transferring, or discharging personnel whose loyalty to the regime is suspect. Senior officers who supported General Fonseka's candidacy were asked to leave the armed forces, and the Defense Ministry appears to be contemplating the dissolution of Fonseka's old regiment, whose soldiers are conspicuously absent from presidential details and are reportedly barred from carrying weapons around the Rajapaksas and their current army commander.

Authoritarian states tend to seek support from other authoritarian states. Sri Lanka under the Rajapaksas has developed strong ties with China even as it has played India and China against each other. Both countries have major investments on the island, yet China's increased involvement (coupled with its increased involvement in South Asia as a

whole) has caused New Delhi immense concern. China's development of the Hambantota port in southern Sri Lanka and other Chinese-sponsored infrastructure projects have bolstered Sino-Sri Lankan relations at the expense of the island's ties to the West. Indeed, China has voted in international forums to support Sri Lanka against human-rights allegations, and the Sri Lankan leadership is confident that China would veto any UN Security Council resolution targeting the island for war crimes. The Chinese also appear to be helping the Defense Ministry to monitor Internet traffic and block sites critical of the government. Such strong support from Beijing has reinforced the Rajapaksa government's authoritarian tendencies and provides some of the explanation for its willingness to traffic in anti-Western rhetoric.

The final method of authoritarian consolidation that President Rajapaksa and his family have employed is one unique to Sri Lanka. This is the deft blending of their ambitions with Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist aspirations—a move that has allowed the Rajapaksas to position themselves as valiant defenders of the country and its Buddhist legacy even as they harden and extend their grip on the state. This has meant instituting policies that appease Sinhalese hard-liners even if they further marginalize the already put-upon Tamil minority. To give a small but telling example, the government recently sought to make the Sinhala version of the national anthem the only one that may be used—including in the northeast, where Tamils have been singing a version in their own language since the 1950s. Indeed, Tamil students in the north have been forced to sing the Sinhala version of the anthem during government-sponsored ceremonies.

## **Sinhalese Dominance**

Imitating one of China's favorite tactics for dealing with restive minority areas, the Rajapaksa regime has also been promoting what amounts to Sinhalese colonization of the northeast. In the process, LTTE cemeteries and monuments have been destroyed and in some places replaced with Sri Lankan army camps and monuments; new and old Tamil villages and roads have received Sinhala names; soldiers, their families, and other settlers have been transplanted to former LTTE areas; Tamils living along certain sections of the coast have been moved inland so that military and progovernment interests can build tourist infrastructure; and Buddhist temples, statues, and sacred ficus trees are appearing in places where no Buddhists live, as harbingers of future Sinhalese development.

Behind the Sinhalese colonization of the northeast is the conduct of the first all-island census in thirty years. The new data are expected to show a decline in Tamil numbers (nearly a million Sri Lankan Tamils sought refuge abroad during the civil war). Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists plan to cite the new and lower figures in their campaign to promote further

colonization of traditionally Tamil areas. This is an effort that will enjoy the Rajapaksas' support, as it gives them an easy way to benefit their own supporters at the expense of a politically unfriendly minority.

The Rajapaksa regime has continued the practice of using anti-LTTE Tamil groups to pacify the northeast. Prominent among these are the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) under Douglas Devananda and the Tamil People's Liberation Party (TMVP) under Colonel Karuna. The government used both parties' cadres to defeat the LTTE, but it has also allowed the EPDP and TMVP to operate as paramilitary outfits holding sway over parts of the northeast. Both parties are said to extort protection money from Tamil businesses, and according to U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, the TMVP is said to operate prostitution rings for military personnel using Tamil women taken from displaced-persons camps.

Kidnapping, rape, and murder have been on the rise in Northern Province, with targets often being those who have acted too independently or criticized the government or the EPDP. The number of security personnel in Jaffna, the provincial capital, has more than doubled to 35,000 since the war ended, and it is hard to see how these violent incidents could take place without military involvement or connivance. The Rajapaksa regime has no qualms about promoting Tamil-on-Tamil violence as this keeps Tamil society destabilized and justifies the continued military presence in the northeast. The leaders of the EPDP and TMVP, both ministers in Rajapaksa's government, are thus used as satraps to further the Rajapaksa agenda. In a real sense, they have little choice, given the plight of the island's Tamil community and the overbearing position that the Rajapaksa family has arrogated to itself. It is a quandary facing other political elites as well, as Sri Lanka witnesses the rise of a Rajapaksa dynasty.

Had the LTTE, with its deplorable tactics, somehow beaten the Sri Lankan state, it would have been in many eyes a victory for terrorism. Yet upon the ashes of the group's defeat is rising not a better, fuller Sri Lankan democracy—one that might redress some of the discrimination heaped on Tamils since independence—but rather an ethnocentric regime committed to the tenets of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. The Rajapaksas are among the leaders of this nationalist movement, and they have deftly manipulated sentiment surrounding Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony to strengthen their stranglehold on the island.

In addition to the president's three brothers who are involved in Sri Lanka's politics, he has three sons. The eldest of them, 25-year-old Namal, is now an MP and is being groomed to succeed his father. While there are reports of some in the family competing for more control, the most likely scenario at this stage is that someone in the family—if not Namal then one of the president's brothers or younger sons—will eventually take over the presidency.

The Rajapaksas fully realize that dynastic rule would be easier to in-

stitutionalize if the president will retain his popularity, which in turn will require economic prosperity. Sri Lanka's economy grew by 8 percent in 2010, and maintaining this blistering pace is crucial if the Rajapaksas' dynastic project is to continue resting on a softer rather than a harder version of authoritarianism. The president also knows that it is more beneficial to consolidate family rule with popular support than coercion. He has consequently sought to ally with high-profile social groups (such as clerics, businesspeople, musicians, actors, and athletes) to promote government policies. This has been easy to do given the president's enormous popularity following the defeat of the LTTE, and the strategy broadens the family's support base while also allowing them to control the developmental agenda. It also projects President Rajapaksa as a man of the people focused on improving the lot of his countrymen. That said, the regime has now accumulated sufficient power to ensure that Rajapaksa rule can continue even against the popular will. The circumstances under which such a scenario eventuates will determine the island's transition from its current soft authoritarian dispensation to a harder authoritarian milieu.

## NOTES

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3. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Elections Without Democracy? The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 51.

4. Andrei Illarionov, "Reading Russia: The *Siloviki* in Charge," *Journal of Democracy* 20 (April 2009): 71.

5. Edward Schatz, "The Soft Authoritarian 'Tool Kit': Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Comparative Politics* 41 (January 2009): 203.

6. Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

7. S.J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Neil DeVotta, "Illiberalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 84–98.

8. W. Howard Wriggins, "Impediments to Unity in New Nations: The Case of Ceylon," *American Political Science Review* 55 (June 1961): 316.

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10. Neil DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka," *Asian Survey* 49 (November–December 2009): 1021–51.



11. Mahinda Rajapaksa won 50.3 percent of the votes cast. It is alleged that his camp bribed the LTTE to prevent Tamils from voting and that the LTTE went along as the arrangement was consonant with its strategic view at the time.

12. University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), "Can the East Be Won Through Human Culling?" Special Report No. 26, 3 August 2007; available at [www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport26.htm](http://www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport26.htm).

13. Vicky Nanjappa, "Rights Group Plays Sri Lanka on 'Disappearances,'" 6 March 2008, available at <http://im.rediff.com/news/2008/mar/06ltte.htm>. See also Human Rights Watch, "Recurring Nightmare: State Responsibility for 'Disappearances' and Abductions in Sri Lanka," 5 March 2008, available at <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/03/05/recurring-nightmare>; and University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), "Slow Strangulation of Jaffna," Special Report No. 28, 4 December 2007, available at [www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport28.htm](http://www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport28.htm).

14. Both parties violated the ceasefire with abandon, although the LTTE was accused of many more violations than were government forces.

15. Some reports place the number of civilians killed at around 40,000. The UN's conservative figure suggests that around 7,000 were killed. See Joe Leahy, "Tamil Rebels Concede Defeat in Sri Lanka," *Financial Times*, 18 May 2009; "Slaughter in Sri Lanka," *Times* (London), 29 May 2009, available at [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading\\_article/article6382706.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article6382706.ece); Dean Nelson, "Up to 30,000 'Disabled' by Sri Lankan Shells," *Daily Telegraph*, 24 May 2009; "After the Slaughter," *Economist*, 30 May 2009, 44–45.

16. U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Incidents during the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2009). This report documents numerous other atrocities perpetrated by both the Sri Lankan security forces and the LTTE during the last days of the war. See also International Crisis Group, *War Crimes in Sri Lanka*, Asia Report No. 191, May 2010, available at [www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/191%20War%20Crimes%20in%20Sri%20Lanka.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/191%20War%20Crimes%20in%20Sri%20Lanka.ashx).

17. Stephen Sackur, "HARDTalk 2010: A Year on the Road," BBC News, 25 December 2010, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/hardtalk/9313264.stm>.

18. Swaminathan Natarajan, "Former Sri Lanka Rebels 'Abused in Detention,'" BBC News, 15 July 2010, available at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10647108](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10647108); "Over 10,000 People Have Disappeared from IDP Camps," Lanka News Web, 2 September 2009, available at [www.lankanewsweb.com/news/EN\\_2009\\_09\\_02\\_006.html](http://www.lankanewsweb.com/news/EN_2009_09_02_006.html).

19. The total for LTTE cadres killed is based on the author's calculations using numbers that the LTTE had released as of July 2006. The other figures are from the *Economist*, "Too Many Heroes," 4 June 2009, 42.

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21. Neil DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka*, Policy Studies 40 (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007).

22. "Beating the Drum," *Economist*, 18 November 2010, 49.

23. See "Putting the Raj in Rajapaksa," *Economist*, 20 May 2010, 46–47; R. Wijewardene, "94 Government Departments Under Direct Family Control," *Sunday Leader* (Colombo), 9 May 2010, available at [www.thesundayleader.lk/2010/05/09/94-government-departments-under-direct-family-control](http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2010/05/09/94-government-departments-under-direct-family-control).