

US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Its Impact on Sri Lankan Democracy

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The last United States (US) security contingent left Afghanistan at midnight on 30th August 2021, ending a 20-year long occupation. George W. Bush along with his Western allies sent their forces to invade Afghanistan in the wake of the ‘9-11’ terror attacks in 2001, in order to wipe out the Al-Qaida and remove the Taliban from power. 20 years later, the US left Afghanistan handing over the country back to the Taliban after spending trillions of dollars of public money, and sacrificing the lives of more than 6,000 of US security personnel and military contractors, over 60,000 of the members of the Afghan security and police forces, and close to 50,000 civilians. Most of the discussions on international – mostly Western – media outlets since the withdrawal pay attention to the possible grim future of the Afghan people in the absence of the benevolent Western occupier. However, my intention is not to dwell on what has happened and will happen in Afghanistan. Rather, in this short essay, I am interested in examining the impact of the US’s withdrawal from Afghanistan on South Asian politics, or to be more precise, democracy in Sri Lanka.

Global powers, the United Kingdom in late 19th and early 20th century, Russia in the 1970-1980s, and the US since 2000, have been primarily attracted to Afghanistan because of its geopolitical location, irrespective of their public rhetoric. The void created by the withdrawal will soon be filled by another global alliance. Although it is too early to predict the actual nature of this new involvement, China clearly appears to be the next superpower to want to wield its powers over Afghanistan. Even before US troops left Afghan soil, China extended its support to the Taliban regime and held talks with the new rulers about the modalities of Chinese assistance, while the Chinese Foreign Ministry

welcomed the formation of an interim government as “a necessary step” and “an end to the anarchy” in Afghanistan (Krishnan 2021). China will enjoy the upper hand in the negotiations with the new Afghan rulers – whoever they may be – as it has significant influence over the Taliban’s closest ally, Pakistan. Therefore, the failure of the West in Afghanistan is a clear victory for China’s economic and expansionist ambitions, and will contribute to strengthening its position in South Asia.

The withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan may not alter the US’s global standing significantly. This move is very much in line with the current shift of US security priorities; to counter increasing Chinese domination in the Asia Pacific region. However, the collapse of the Western-sponsored democratic regime in Afghanistan is clearly a significant loss to India. On the one hand, India’s effort to expand its regional influence – having spent billions of dollars on infrastructure developments – failed with the decimation of ex-President Ashraf Ghani’s rule. On the other, Indian security has become further vulnerable with the country’s arch-rivals – China and Pakistan – gaining a stronger foothold in the region. For decades, India has been losing its sphere of influence in South Asia, and recent developments in Afghanistan seem to have exacerbated the process.

Moreover, Chinese influence in South Asia and heightened tensions between China and the US would have a direct bearing on the Asia Pacific region generally, and South Asian democracies, economies, and security more specifically. China has funded many large-scale infrastructure projects in smaller South Asian countries for more than a decade now, and is becoming a chief foreign lender to many of them. The expansion of Chinese influence – diplomatic as well as military – will certainly restructure the political status quo within

South Asia, given how China's alternative politico-economic model seems to be able to 'get things done' in a way liberal democracy in South Asia has never been able to.

Democracy in Sri Lanka

Although the trajectory of democracy has not been a smooth one in South Asia, an overwhelming majority of South Asians seem to prefer democratic rule to any other form (Shastri et al 2017). Over the past seven decades, South Asian democracy has been struggling with military coups, authoritarian rulers, dynastic politics, religious fanaticism, terrorism, widespread corruption, and endemic poverty among other things. Yet, most of the countries managed to remain as electoral democracies for many decades. In particular, India and Sri Lanka remained democracies since their independence, despite complex social conflicts and civil wars.

However, we know that the procedural view is a minimalist approach to understanding democracy, and that it is limited or inadequate as an indicator of the quality of democracy in our societies. Unlike in the past, contemporary political history shows us that democracy is less vulnerable to assaults from external forces, but rather gradually decays from within. As some scholars have endeavoured to show, since the 1970s democracies have only rarely disappeared through armed coups, but more often have eroded and died slow deaths (Huntington 1991; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Democracy as the hegemonic political paradigm continues to be challenged due to its inability to resolve its internal inconsistencies and its failure to address pressing issues such as poverty, huge income disparities, extremism, terrorism, etc. If one pays attention to the democratic trajectory of Sri Lanka over the past four decades, we can see that Sri Lankan democracy has continued to internalise many features that contradict democratic values. Since the 1980s, almost all successive rulers have attempted to strengthen their Executive powers, turning the country into a system of 'soft-authoritarianism'.

As Stokke and Tornquist (2013) observe, post-war politics in the country is marked by illiberal tendencies towards ethnocratic, clientelist authoritarianism. Despite the multi-party system, frequent elections, and high voter turnout, people exhibit extremely low levels of trust in politicians and the efficacy of elections. For example, the *State of Democracy in South Asia* survey (2017) states that only 31% of Sri Lankans trust political parties, and only 50% trust the Parliament. Of

course, election results and electoral participation are not good indicators of the vibrancy of a democracy. If one looks at the parliamentarians who have been in the legislature since the 1990s or early 2000s, it is clear that the performance of the politicians as policy makers has a minimum impact on their re-electability. Even if they lose a particular election, the corrupt political system still enables them to find their way back to Parliament.

The racist and clientelist politics of Sri Lankan political parties over the past 70 years have undermined the country's democratic institutions and values. However, despite all odds, no leader has been able to claim legitimacy, unless he or she is elected through a free and fair election. No matter how powerful the leader, time and again, people still have had the capacity to unseat them democratically. The *State of Democracy in South Asia* survey also demonstrates that even if people are willing to tolerate different types of leadership – experts, strong leaders, religious and military leaders – 90% of Sri Lankans expect their leaders to be elected representatives. Therefore, despite numerous challenges and occasional deviations in terms of commitment, Sri Lanka's democracy has survived the past seven decades as the only viable game in town.

US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Its Effects on Sri Lanka

Let us now turn to how the current developments in Afghanistan could impact our democracy. I contend that the impact of the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan can be felt by a country like Sri Lanka in two different ways. It can alter the current centripetal (factors that push towards democracy) and centrifugal (factors that push away from democracy) forces that shape democracies in this region, by undermining democratic politics at least in the short term, if not for decades.

Like most other South Asian countries, democracy was introduced to Sri Lanka in the dying days of colonial rule. Hence, unlike in Western Europe, our democracy was not the result of a sustained struggle over centuries for social reform. However, the introduction of democracy, like in the case of other South Asian nations, led to many social reforms in our society, including and especially by undermining the caste structure and improving women's status.

It seems, therefore, that democracy and human rights were often used as ideological tools during the Cold War to assert the superiority of Western capitalist civilisation over its rival/s. Especially in the unipolar world order of the US since the fall of the USSR, adherence to

democratic rule and upholding human rights have become key criteria for international legitimacy, determining not only perks but also penalties in the Western-dominated global political order – unless, of course, one enjoys a special relationship with the West. In this world order, even a hardcore authoritarian mind would think twice before doing away with democracy. One can find enough examples in Sri Lanka's recent political history, where rulers backtracked their authoritarian and undemocratic initiatives due to pressure from the West. One of the most recent examples is how the Gotabaya Rajapaksa regime changed its tone – whatever the actual attitude may be – towards human rights in the wake of the recent resolution adopted by the European Parliament, urging the European Commission to consider a temporary withdrawal of the GSP+ facility extended to Sri Lanka.

However, I contend that the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan marks a shift from putting up even a pretence of defending liberties and human rights, on the part of the US, to more overtly curbing Chinese expansionism in the Asia-Pacific region. Especially in the context of new security concerns, India and other members of 'The Quad' (the US, Japan, and Australia) may find it important to retain Sri Lanka in their sphere of influence, rather than holding it accountable to democratic rule and tenets. Therefore, the West may use more of a 'carrot' rather than 'stick' approach in the future, at least till they consolidate forces capable of countering the rise of China. As such, democratic movements, women's rights movements, human, environmental, and labour rights struggles operating domestically may now lose much of the resources and the voice they enjoyed over the past few decades. In this backdrop, the centripetal forces that have existed within South Asian democracies may weaken in the future.

I also believe that the failure of the US in Afghanistan, coupled with possible geopolitical gains that China is able to make in Afghanistan in the next few years would boost the popularity of the 'China Model', i.e. the symbiosis between authoritarianism and state-managed capitalism, amongst South Asian democracies. Already many South Asian leaders, implicitly and explicitly, hail the success of the Chinese model. For instance, Pakistan's Imran Khan is one such leader who has become a cheerleader of the 'China Model' and its ability to address endemic poverty in the region. Similar to how the West manipulated their economic and geopolitical success against the USSR to validate their economic and political model, China will also use the failure of the US to validate their political order.

Furthermore, under this new political 'common sense', the legitimacy of authoritarian leaders will likely not be questioned, whether in the international or the local political arena. In fact, a possible domino effect might even encourage some democratically elected rulers to do away with democratic institutions and processes altogether. This ideology, if it reaches average citizens in the region who are already frustrated with the way things are happening, could destroy the firewalls that have prevented countries like Sri Lanka from sliding into non-democratic rule. Especially under the looming economic crisis and the absence of alternative political forces to the current corrupt political class, people are desperately looking to new and promising leadership. At such a juncture, with weak democratic centripetal forces, Sri Lankan democracy is vulnerable to fatal blows.

Therefore, developments in Afghanistan have not only brought the Taliban back to power, with profound implications for people living in Afghanistan, but also are likely to have a ripple effect on South Asian democracies as a whole including Sri Lanka. In particular, it can provide a stimulus to various non-democratic forces. The progressive policies and discourses that had earned a considerable degree of legitimacy due to decades of democratic struggles of many activists could be undermined – if not completely reversed – under the new political ethos. The oligarchical political alliances of racist, authoritarian, and corrupt elites may find new impetus. As such, one should not take the country's democratic credentials for granted as politics in the country and region will not be the same anymore.

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