

The Election of Ranil Wickremesinghe: Reaction and Prospects for Democratic Revival in Sri Lanka

Devaka Gunawardena

Ranil Wickremesinghe's ascent to the Executive Presidency represents a system in utter decay. But the unsteady structure will not topple with one final push. Instead, we have seen that after ousting Gotabaya Rajapaksa, protestors have encountered a far more elaborate and complex State machinery behind the President himself, much as Antonio Gramsci discovered the "trenches and fortifications" of bourgeois civil society that inhibit a straightforward revolutionary capture of the State. Even though Rajapaksa went on the run, a delegitimised Parliament stepped in to buy more time for a political saviour who could rescue the system.

The people's movement, while bold and imaginative, is now forced to consider the deeper ramifications of its agitation, and the anxieties it has provoked among the propertied. This backlash works through the remaining aspects of Rajapaksa power, including their continuing stranglehold on a dysfunctional Parliament through money and influence. But it is also manifest in wider ideological attempts to discredit the struggle. These represent ways in which arguments about the Constitution and legality have become a mask for hierarchy, in what is now a polarised field of opposing social forces.

The question of what constitutes a viable new political and economic order requires serious thought and debate, including how best to implement constitutional reform through consultative and participatory mechanisms on a clear timeline. But in general, a person's position on the law increasingly depends on whether they see themselves within the people's movement or outside it. The clearest and most recent example is the brutal attack on protestors at Galle Face by the Wickremesinghe

regime, which is eager to consolidate power and prepare the way for greater austerity and privatisation.

In the face of repression and tactical setbacks, the reality, however, is that given the scale and diversity of the resistance across the country, the issues provoked by the uprising are not going away any time soon. The class question is breaking through the abstract debate about democracy. Accordingly, the type of political strategy for the people's movement that can ultimately be successful, despite the current setback, depends on understanding the ongoing reconfiguration of reactionary forces inside and outside the State.

Wickremesinghe's Class Programme

Wickremesinghe has applied his political skills as a deal maker to pull off a seeming volte-face. But it represents his enduring character as a defender of the elite. He can now buy time to consolidate power. The ongoing economic collapse will also force him to develop a policy that will have deep class implications. Wickremesinghe may benefit from new foreign inflows of capital. He may even appropriate aspects of an alternative economic programme, such as prioritising foreign earnings to provide relief to people. But he will also be pursuing an agenda that involves significant privatisation. The signal became clear when the government suggested earlier this year, for example, that the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) duopoly with Lanka IOC could be broken, and new foreign enterprises allowed to sell fuel in the local market. Next on the chopping block is likely to be the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). Wickremesinghe's strategy of relief with State retrenchment will have strong class effects that will manifest over time.

Meanwhile, Wickremesinghe's government faces a deteriorating external environment. His vision, along with that of the other elites, has been fixated on the notion of turning Sri Lanka into the next Singapore. But the reality is that global trade and investment are going into reverse as the downturn accelerates. Inflows of investment are not likely to materialise on the scale Wickremesinghe expects. This will create significant pressure to pursue more unconventional economic strategies. Given Wickremesinghe's lack of a social and political base, however, efforts to mobilise food production will also face ongoing challenges. Earlier this year, Wickremesinghe proposed redistributing under-utilised State lands to people. But there has been no parallel effort to increase investment in this area. Moreover, without scaling up technical and financial support for farmers, and given their further lack of confidence in political leadership, they will likely continue to withdraw from local production.

Comprador elites¹ fear the transformation of economic relations away from the failed strategy of foreign debt borrowing to one that involves domestic redistribution. Wickremesinghe's government will avoid the latter. Accordingly, his government will likely face a renewed food crisis, which he can only attempt to resolve in the short run through imports. But in the long run, this will create further instability as sectors that were previously supposed to absorb labour, such as tourism, have completely collapsed. It is unclear what Wickremesinghe's medium to long term vision for the economy is, given that Sri Lanka is already characterised to an overwhelming degree by dependence on the external sector. Trying to coax foreign investors through speculative investments in places such as the Port City will not resolve the breakdown in people's incomes due to the depression. Even Wickremesinghe himself admitted the need for printing money to temporarily cover the salaries of State sector workers.

This is where things become especially tricky for Wickremesinghe. He may be far more imaginative in doing whatever is necessary to solve the foreign exchange crisis, up to and including prioritising foreign earnings. But he does not have the same interest or skill in mobilising people through a redistributive economic programme, or even working through existing networks of patronage. Wickremesinghe will be wholly reliant on the discredited Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna's (SLPP) system of patron-client relations. It has already experienced severe strain as the overwhelming mass of people has turned against the party because of the economic collapse. Wickremesinghe has taken over some aspects of the Bonapartist² State, and he may even

entrench these. But he does not appear capable of or willing to use the entirety of the apparatus developed by the Rajapaksa family to try and win back the people.

Instead, moderate relief combined with privatisation is a recipe for deepening inequality that will develop the social forces capable of generating a far more intense popular explosion in the future. The question is timing. Much depends on the types of foreign inflows that materialise, and Wickremesinghe's own efforts to canvass investors. These investments, however, are unlikely to generate the jobs and income that will replace what people have lost during the depression. Under these circumstances, with the informalised service sector collapsing and agriculture desperately needing but lacking stimulus, there will likely be continued mass immiseration. The option for many remains seeking out work abroad. While some can leave, however, most will be forced to stay and endure.

The resilience of people in Sri Lanka has been acknowledged in many commentaries on the uprising. So has the stunning collective agency of the people that has become visible in the ouster of Gotabaya Rajapaksa. But now more than ever we must move beneath the surface of events, to grasp the trends that will shape Sri Lanka's polity over time. While the people's movement has been temporarily deflected, Wickremesinghe's economic programme, even in its most heterodox and unconventional form, is unlikely to speak to the reconfiguration of class forces that has been revealed in the uprising.

In this regard, the interconnection between the political and economic has become visible. Commentators focus on the distinction between legality and legitimacy in interpreting the Constitution. But there is also the deeper question of the class bloc of working people that is erupting to the surface of political debate. The point is that democracy is not only about the separation of powers but the locus of authority insofar as it is rooted in popular sovereignty. The question of the way in which the people's will is reflected breaks through during periods of deep political and economic transformation, or what Gramsci called organic crisis. This will ultimately prove decisive, though not in a predetermined way.

The Next Phase of Struggle

Wickremesinghe, having ascended to the top, is staring back down into the abyss. He is likely to gamble Sri Lanka's future on the foreign investments that he hopes will materialise with the new government. But unlike the master of multilateral diplomacy who he

could be said to imitate, the 19th century German archconservative Otto Von Bismarck, he lacks the same advantage of a powerful country with a burgeoning industrial sector to pursue hard-nosed initiatives on an international level. Domestically, Wickremesinghe will be relying on the weakened structure of patronage created by the Rajapaksas, together with the military to try and suppress potential dissent. This is not a plan for long-term stability. Accordingly, Wickremesinghe's fate is linked to the international actors who are willing to back him. Time and again, they have proven willing to use unpopular authoritarian leaders for their own instrumental purposes and abandon them when they prove to be either no longer useful or unable to maintain their grip on power.

Meanwhile, the class forces that have become most visible in the crisis – including the ranks of the immiserated that will continue to expand – may continue waiting for a real saviour. The danger, of course, is that this delayed, if not denied, expectation could offer a xenophobic demagogue the opportunity to rally people against the backdoor manoeuvring that has enabled Wickremesinghe to become President. But there is also the reality that we are closer now to revolution, understood in the fundamental sense of transforming economic relations, than perhaps at any previous point in Sri Lanka's history. Such a turn of events includes the possibility of politicising the lower ranks of the military, though they have not suffered the catastrophic defeat in war that usually provokes the dramatic crossing of the barricades to the people's side.

But even this may not be the critical factor if popular protest overwhelms the barriers put up by the State when the next phase of the crisis provokes further class consolidation. The danger instead is that because of the most recent parliamentary rejection of the people's will, representative democracy could itself be delegitimised in the process. This could open the way for intervention by reactionary forces. Far from anticipating a dual power situation – most famously the struggle between the Soviets and the Provisional Government in Russia after the February Revolution of 1917 – progressive forces must prepare for a situation that heads off multiple threats to democracy, from elite coup to fascist takeover. Moreover, working people may prepare autonomous organisations, such as cooperatives, necessary to mobilise for an alternative economic programme that can channel popular frustrations and energies. But that project must be complemented by a flexible, party-

like formation that can draw from the commune-style atmosphere of recent popular mobilisation to offer coherent leadership.

A takeover understood in the classic Bolshevik sense, and which is projected in the rhetoric of some of the more vanguardist participants of the people's movement in Sri Lanka, will not work. The complexity of the modern economy requires explicitly articulating the relationship between the autonomous organisations that can transform economic relations and the State that can guide them. This is especially true because Sri Lanka remains embedded in the massive and deeply entrenched structure of global dependency. There is no direct path that simply involves the revolutionary capture of State power, as past examples have demonstrated. While the people's movement has been on the offensive, it can switch to being on the defensive. The focal point remains working through, rather than claiming to transcend, democracy. Accordingly, we need to emphasise the interplay of radical and representative aspects of democracy in working people's struggles, while recognising the much longer and difficult task of reconciling these two dimensions.

Even as the people's movement prepares for another eventual wave of mobilisation, it must avoid the blind spots that enabled Wickremesinghe to replace Mahinda, and now Gotabaya. It must continue to take the institutional arrangements of representative democracy seriously. That includes calling for general elections along with abolishing the Executive Presidency as soon as possible, in addition to the longer struggle for a constitutional reform process embedded in society that reflects progressive demands. Meanwhile, only by insisting on the radical dimension of democracy as an attack on the excessive concentration of wealth and property, and an explicit call for redistribution to overcome economic depression, will there be a possibility that the next wave of struggle results in lasting and transformative change.

Devaka Gunawardena (PhD, UCLA) is an independent researcher.

Notes

1 Editor's Note: Local capitalists who are intermediaries for foreign capital in investment and trade, instead of agents of national capitalism (especially domestic industrial production).

2 Editor's Note: In the absence of one class (usually of capitalists) exercising its unmediated power over the State, an individual or regime that appears to stand above all classes takes charge.