

POLITY

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Polity Turns 30!



30 years ago, the Social Scientists' Association (SSA) of Sri Lanka began publishing in print an English-language periodical of progressive opinion on current affairs, under the direction of Charles Abeysekera, Shani Jayawardena, and Jayadeva Uyangoda. There was no lofty statement of purpose or ambition. Perhaps to simply exist in November 1991, when so many had ceased to do so, was enough. The number of unsigned and collective contributions was another sign of the times.

The contents of the first issue of *Pravāda* (as it was then titled, with meanings in contemporary Sinhalese usage including theses, concepts, and propositions) convey preoccupations that resonate over the past three decades: South Asian regionalism including Sri Lanka's 'India policy'; human rights protection in the cross-hairs of devolution and centre-province relations; constitutional crisis in the wake of the attempted impeachment of President Ranasinghe Premadasa; freedom of expression particularly concerning the print media (in Britain, India, and Sri Lanka); performance and prospects of the Sri Lankan economy; the search for justice for the abduction and murder of Richard de Zoysa; the politics of literature (Nadine Gordimer and apartheid South Africa); higher education reform; campus concerns ranging from the inception of the Centre for the Study of Human Rights in the University of Colombo, ►

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Editors

Chulani Kodikara
Hasini Lecamwasam
Balasingham Skanthakumar

Editorial Board:

Kumari Jayawardena
Pradeep Peiris
Jayadeva Uyangoda

Social Scientists' Association

380/86, Sarana Road, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka.
Telephone: +94 112 501 339
Email: polity@ssalanka.org | Web: www.ssalanka.org/polity-online/

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access and support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, combating sexual harassment; and human rights fact-finding in the conflict-affected north and east.

Subsequent issues of *Pravada* renamed *Polity* in 2003, have provided a space for analysis and advocacy by academics, researchers, and activists, on Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, state reform, nationalisms, religion, anthropology and sociology of development, human rights crisis, women's movement, sports, labour movement, gender justice, Left history, among much more. These original contributions were leavened (in the pre-internet age when access to the international press was limited), by the writing of dissenting scholars and public intellectuals from South Asia, the global south, and the global north, to contest the insularity of domestic discourse and as acts of solidarity and internationalism in the epoch of capitalist globalisation.

Three decades later, these trends are far from being reversed and have indeed accelerated, even after war's end. The present moment in time is marked by the erosion of checks and balances on Executive power and the rise of 'Executive Authoritarianism'; further militarisation of State institutions and functions; a non-transparent Constitution-making process; application and attempted extension of the Prevention of Terrorism Act; and the arbitrary arrest and detention of trade unionists and social activists (among other things). The health and economic crises brought on by the ongoing COVID19 pandemic are not only exposing and exacerbating pre-existing fractures and inequalities in society, but spawning new ones. The public health emergency has also provided a cover for intensified anti-democratic modes of governing, including increased surveillance and restrictions on civil freedoms, and discrimination against Muslims and Christians in the earlier ban on burials of pandemic-related deaths.

In 2021, *Polity* aims to renew and carry forward its mandate, while navigating a transformed terrain of information and dissemination. To produce and sustain a regular publication, both print and online, is an ongoing struggle for the Social Scientists' Association and the editorial team amidst financial, institutional, political, and intellectual constraints. Digital media – including social media as a dynamic platform for expression of opinion, ideas, and arguments – has been both bane and boon for print publications: in competition for content and attention, while also providing a speedier and less costly medium. Recognising this reality and its radical democratic potential, *Polity* went online earlier this year seeking to seize the opportunity to expand its audience, diversify its format, and broaden its contributors.

Polity remains committed to critical reflection on, and progressive alternatives to, Sri Lanka's multiple crises. However, it can only do so if embedded within the causes and struggles around us, and anchored by writers and readers, engaged not only in interpreting the world, but also in changing it.

Polity's print issue for the year 2021 seeks to speak to the socio-politico-economic realities of contemporary society, as well as revisit and reflect on some of the historic milestones that the year marks. This year coincides with a number of anniversaries marked in our pages: 50 years since the 1971 youth insurrections and 30 years since the foundation of the southern Mothers' Front. In forthcoming online and print content, we will aim to also reflect on the 90th anniversary of universal adult franchise and 70 years since the passage of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act. This issue looks back on some of these historical events to consider how they continue to shape contemporary politics, while featuring critical interventions into contemporary debates and developments.