

In Quest for Civil Society: An Interview with Dr. Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri



Editors' Note:

Dr. Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri is a political activist and academic who has been at the forefront of a number of significant movements for democratic change in the country. During his tenure as President of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) in 2012, academics from around the country engaged in a three-month long trade union action to demand greater budgetary allocation for education and better pay for university academics. This trade union action was one of the most significant critiques of the previous regime. It also generated an important debate about the relationship between the state and education as well as the role of education in Sri Lanka. Following his decision to step down from the presidency of FUTA, Dr. Dewasiri has continued to be a leading voice in Sri Lanka's civil society movements. Together with individuals like the Late Rev. Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera of the National Movement for a Just Society and Gamini Viyangoda of Purawesi Balaya, Dr. Dewasiri was one of the key civil society activists who supported the victorious Presidential election campaign of Hon. Maithripala Sirisena. In this wide ranging interview, Dr. Dewasiri speaks to SSA's Dr. Pradeep Peiris on the politics of platform building for civil society movements, the possibilities and limits of civil society activism in Sri Lanka, and the crises that have informed his decision to part ways with some of his former civil society colleagues.

Let's talk about your view on civil society under Good Governance. Actually I was prompted to discuss this with you following your announcement on Facebook about disassociating yourself with *Puravasi Balaya* (PB) and the National Movement for a Just Society (NMJS). Can you first explain the relationship you had with these organizations and your work with them in relation to the Good Governance regime, and the reason why a year on, these relations cannot continue as before?

I didn't have a direct involvement with PB. I was not a member of it as such, especially in their decision-making process. I have worked with them. They started their work during the presidential election era. I have attended those meetings and cooperated with them on many occasions. These included discussions, press conferences, and other things. So even though I wasn't a member, I considered PB to be a main organization with which I was involved.

My involvement with NMJS was quite different. I was a member as well as the formal spokesperson of the organization even before the presidential election. I was part of their decision-making body and handled a significant amount of documentation also. With the passing away of Ven. Sobhitha, however, I thought the movement cannot be sustained. He was the reason many people had joined the organization as well as the binding force that kept them together. With his passing, those with different agendas made it difficult to maintain organizational integrity within the NMJS. There was more diversity in the NMJS than in PB, and it was necessary to have a common factor that helped to negotiate these differences.

Before the election, what was the main political objective of both these organizations? Was it just the defeat of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa? Or was it something else?

PB was created in the heat of the election. But NMJS has a longer history as well as more long term aims. Shiral Lakthilaka and Chandrasena Wijesinghe invited me at the time of its creation, but I wasn't really interested. I didn't say no, just that I wasn't interested. I think that was a little more than four, five years ago. Their aim I think was not just

toppling the regime. It had a more interventionist function to it. There may have been individual agendas within it, so it was in a way a kind of loose platform on which various political opinions could be aired. Its main aim was to abolish the executive presidency. That's what Ven. Sobhitha campaigned for. But it also talked about broader topics. Ven. Sobhitha worked with us during the FUTA strike and had an active interest in educational policy. Then he invited me to talk about education at a press conference. That press conference also touched on various other themes like broadening the democratic space, creating a platform on which numerous negative tendencies that emerged during the Rajapaksa regime could be freely discussed and debated, etc.

PB, in contrast, had the specific aim of ensuring the victory of the common candidate at the 2015 presidential election. Then, after the election, the problem arose as to what to do next, especially after the general elections. Some of us worked for the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP); some others had signed an Memorandum Of Understanding with the United National Party (UNP). I have attended and spoken at meetings organized by them. This was before the election. After the elections, we had to question what the function of these organizations would be, now that elections were over. But I don't think there was a great discussion about it.

My experience is that the two camps in the government – Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe – were in a way reflected in the civil society as well. As in, there are these two sections in society that are more comfortable with either Sirisena's side or Wickremesinghe's side. What I observe is that instead of trying to represent the people and their concerns, there is a preoccupation in the ruling bloc with internal power struggles, and the civil society responds to them. In this light, my opinion was that it was difficult to continue PB and NMJS. New civil society groups were emerging, but since they weren't closely associated with these groups that were in power, they were not really affected by these dynamics.

If dissolving PB and NMJS was your aim, what is the reason for breaking away from them?

The immediate trigger was the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM) issue and the whole private medical school problem. A few days before I posted that notice on Facebook, at a forum organized to speak in favour of SAITM, I noticed some names like Viyangoda, Rathnapriya, Weliamuna, and Ven. Dambara Amila. Of them, the first three were also part of PB and NMJS. So they were in favour of private universities. For me, it was a determining factor because I am staunchly against privatizing education. I became part of these organizations while, and first and foremost, being a part of this larger fight. Earlier, during the time of the walk from Galle, we agreed to stand against the commercialization of education. I don't think you can make an overarching agreement like that and then do contradictory

things in individual instances. I have seen these individuals speaking in favour of private universities in public media. That was the main reason why I decided to quit.

You quitting became significant to me not because of this specific reason, but rather because of the broader discourse on civil society. As you yourself pointed out, there's a problem in how civil society is understood in Sri Lanka. There are NGOs, and those that are not NGOs, are mostly nationalist elements. So in this situation the organic intellectuals – to borrow from Gramsci – needed to socialize liberal democratic ideas and norms are absent for now. But there are enough and more organic intellectuals to further the nationalist rhetoric. For me, the importance in the 2015 elections is that it marked the rise of a group of civil society activists that did not depend on Western funding, but that also did not serve nationalist ends. They also have the capacity to reach out to the grassroots level. The political authority would always use its wins to secure its own interests, as is evidenced by the environment the current regime has created in which these civil society organizations can no longer operate. How then can we dream about a Gramscian kind of civil society?

Civil society is defined in a narrow way in Sri Lanka. There are certain self-appointed representatives of civil society who have the networks, the language, and have contacts with a portion of the political elite. Then there's another group that represents nationalist interests. They're not connected to the first group, but they had their own networks during the Rajapakse time. They didn't have the backing of donor agencies. However, they were aligned with popular Sinhala opinion so they had that legitimacy. So civil society is not one entity, but at least two in this sense.

If we take the so-called liberal civil society, what I see is that their relationship with the grassroots is not absent, but present in a very peculiar way. They have created a culture of 'workshoppers' who come for almost all the workshops they organize. These people are from the grassroots, yes, but they don't really say much about actual civil society activism. They'd come for anything. A workshop may be on human rights, AIDS, women's rights, organic farming or whatever, they would go. That's their network. They're professional workshoppers. They get their meals, per diem, travel allowance and what not. There's a whole political economy there. There's a big network like this. It's not hard to get them down for rallies and other demonstrations. These are the same faces.

Even for the FUTA meetings during the strike they came. Uninvited. They sit in front. Then they appear in photos. This whole cycle delegitimizes the event because everybody knows their faces, especially those who criticize NGOs. But these people appear everywhere because it's important to secure their funding. This is a very bad tendency of the NGO culture. In terms of reaching out to the people, this is really bad. There are some issues on which certain people should

not talk, because they always bring with them the NGO aura, and from then whatever the issue, it turns into a NGO issue. But they're not sensitive to that. They want to talk about everything and be everywhere.

The problem here is like you said, it is the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist intellectuals who have the legitimacy to talk to the people. The reception that the other groups receive is much less and much more specific. For example, *Ravaya* has significantly less circulation compared to nationalist papers like *Divaina*. But these alternative groups don't see this as a challenge. Ideally what should happen is these groups should confront their nationalist counterparts. But they don't. There are two negative consequences to this:

1. There is no ideological challenge to the nationalistic rhetoric.
2. Their own limitations are not exposed

As an example for the second point, the nationalist camp with which I constantly engage in the form of debates and discussions, criticizes the 'other' type of civil society a lot. But there is no confrontation from the other side. A main reason for this is some of their own drawbacks such as financial irregularities. This is used by the nationalist camp to dismiss any and all arguments coming from that side. This automatically gives a sort of protection to the nationalist camp and strengthens their argument. That in turn encourages a counter argument from that side based on democracy and pluralism and so on. So we see two parallel universes developing here.

If I may add something here, there is another reason why this is happening. The philosophical framework of the NGO civil society comes from classical liberal ideas. They are also institutionalists. They believe in procedural democracy, so they think if you facilitate the procedures, everything else would automatically happen. I don't think they have the theoretical orientation to take discourse into due consideration. Mostly what is done is borrowing the ideology of the funder for that particular project. Their democratic struggle ends with the creation of institutions. They don't try to take their norms down to the grassroots level.

I don't think they think that philosophically. They have long been institutionalized. Like the Rajapaksa regime that was in power for too long and so got really corrupt, they also have been in the system for too long, thus becoming very corrupt. Sometimes they're even more corrupt than the political apparatus. The political apparatus is at least accountable to the public. But you can't even question these people. We are entitled ask questions of politicians, but not them. They would say you're nationalist, that you're serving somebody's agenda. They just simply refuse to answer. If a politician did that we would have criticized it citing the right to information and all.

Their logic is that the government runs on public money....

I have heard this logic. It's unbelievable! Then in whose name does NGO money come? This money also comes for the public. Then even the government can say we got the money from China, so we'll answer only to China. This money is not given for their personal projects. Western countries give this money to be spent on our public. That is such a classist and conceptually warped argument. If we define public funds broadly, these are public funds. This logic actually disqualifies them from even having the authority to speak on these kinds of matters. They sometimes very arrogantly say that they can't do their other work if they have to spend time answering questions on past projects, and just close the topic. They refuse the notion that they're accountable to the public. This field has lasted for about 40 years in Sri Lanka. These people have been there through almost that entire period. So they know how the system works, where the money comes from, etc. Their financial irregularities cannot be proven because the procedure has been strictly followed. Each cent corresponds to some line item.

Sometimes they burn money on publications that are not donated, sold or disseminated in any way. The publication is one of their activities. There are a number of people involved, all of whom get money out of this, and all they have to show for all that is the publication. This reminds me of Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory which says that when a structure has been in place for a long time, people identify how it works and adjust it to fit their needs.

These NGOs also know they face this accusation. There is an economy built on this whole structure. A structural defect in their design is that they are not ideological. They are only working for an ideology given by somebody else. If you take the staff, apart from one or two people, everyone else is just helping out. So they have librarians, technicians, writers, etc. For them it's just a job. As a result, they're not equipped to socialize liberal norms. So even if organic intellectuals appear, how can we sustain a programme? What is the future? What is the projection that you see?

I know it has to be done, but I don't know how. There is a challenge non-nationalists face that nationalists don't: Finding a non-party space as an agent of political transformation. Nationalists, now, they used the Rajapaksas to get their thing done. But even they didn't enjoy a very close relationship. Non-nationalists don't have this luxury. The extent to which they can use party politics is limited. The initial funding sources were what ultimately corrupted them. Nationalists have two advantages that this group doesn't:

1. What they say fits with the dominant political fantasy
2. There are nationalist businessmen and other such parties that are able and willing to fund these ideas

Non-nationalists don't really have locally based funding sources that they can tap. International funds take this to another level. So they can't actually engage with the grassroots in any other way than how they do it now which is through workshopping. So that risks their legitimacy and makes what they have to say unattractive. They have to negotiate these challenges when they work.

So according to you, the economy has become the major determining factor. This is in accordance with Marxism as well. From what I understand, the nationalist project has its own economy. There are ways and means by which money gets circulated among this crowd. Take for instance nationalist, Buddhist sermons. That opens up other avenues to them that are not open to others who do not deliver nationalistically oriented sermons.

Yes. If we take JHU for example, even if they didn't have a lot of funds, they could still have their meetings at temples and other Buddhist places because they represent a Buddhist cause. These temples are sustained by rich Buddhists, so it doesn't matter if you as a political party or group don't have money in your own right. You can always rely on the apparatus that is built around Buddhism.

Do you think Sri Lanka not having experienced an Enlightenment period like Europe has had an impact on this situation? More specifically, does the absence of an Enlightenment era arrest our ability to comprehend these things?

I don't think you can say that we didn't have an Enlightenment period. We did, and it was always tied to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The Buddhist Revival Movement, the opening of Buddhist education institutions, the Temperance Movement etc. are actually part of our Enlightenment project. What we have today is an extension of that. Then the Human Rights discourse, democracy and all that have come up as an anti-nationalist project. Historically since they came up as a result of the Tamil struggle, it was anyway destined to confront Sinhala nationalism. So there's a thick wall between the two. Sinhala nationalism at a very early stage identified this discourse as a serious threat to itself, and picked a very sensitive spot to strike back – financial accountability.

As the last question, January 2015 was a milestone in Sri Lanka. An authoritarian trend was stopped by the people of this country. But the group we handed power over to seem to have a very similar programme. This has resulted in a section of civil society – that which uses Enlightenment language – to retreat. So is it correct to say that civil society now only has a reactionary role, rather than a proactive one?

No, I don't think so. My most recent personal experience is the reaction I got for my Facebook status update about quitting. I got a very high number of likes, which means that there are people out there who are aware of, and who

take an active interest in these developments. Then you have emerging civil society groups like *Aluth Parapura*, which, even though they are divided on certain ideological grounds, haven't emerged from the traditional NGO society. It's a new generation. It would be a challenge to convert them into an organized movement, but that is a prospect. We also have some intellectuals who are also located outside of the NGO world. So I'm not entirely pessimistic about this.

Another development is that it is now difficult to do big projects. Even the NGO field has undergone a lot of diversification. So there is that much less chance to monopolize the funding process like before. Earlier it was controlled by certain individuals, but now it has changed. So there are a lot of openings like that. So we can have hope.

Don't you think that within the non-nationalist, non-NGO civil society it is best to have as many ideological conflicts as possible to enable progress? For instance, the market economy-nationalist economy split will have to be maintained to represent as well as debate.

The problem with that dichotomy is that people don't know what to do with these two categories. Those who reject nationalism embrace the market, but those who embrace nationalism are also with the market. We want a group that rejects both. There is space for that with the emergence of this new generation that is critical of both. But organizing and mobilizing it, as well as getting popular support for it will be a great challenge. Now if we take the Rajapaksa time, the limitations within their nationalism gave rise to a non-nationalist camp. But the market was its limit. It got stuck there. Then opposition to that again strengthened the Rajapaksa project. So how do we create a third force in between? But there is space because the limits of both camps have been marked. For instance, it wasn't easy for the Rajapaksa camp to win an election because they were taking an extremely nationalistic line, which made it impossible for them to address non Sinhala-Buddhist constituencies. So that meant that to win you had to get at least 70% of the Sinhala-Buddhist vote. That is not possible practically. That was the limit of their nationalism. When you go to that point and things get stuck there, people leave the sinking ship and that weakens the nationalist camp. Then the space to think of an alternative increases. My hope lies there.

So to sum it up, you would argue for a non-nationalist, non-market civil society?

Yes. One that does not sway towards the state, but towards the masses.