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# Sri Lanka. Politics and Ideology in the Sinhala Press: A Site of Power and Struggle

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During a recent dinner party for media personnel at President Mahinda Rajapaksa's official residence, he reminded his guests of the significance of his regime's development initiatives. "The huge development in the country including North and East can be perceived only by those who love nationalism and securing consent parliamentary elections indicates as much. Indeed, noting their country," he said. [1]

It is clear that President Rajapaksa's unique brand of parliamentary populism exhibits a keener awareness of the importance of a certain language and register of nationalism than that of his typical forbears, the Bandaranaiques. Rajapaksa's manipulation of all forms of media to construct his public image as an embodiment of Sinhala patriotism and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's fielding of Sinhalese artists, athletes and cricketers in parliamentary elections indicates as much. Indeed, noting the live telecast of military operations on government-owned TV channels, especially during the last phase of the war, it seems the historical significance of the Rajapaksa phenomenon should be contextualised in terms of what Serena Tennekoon, writing of the 1977 to 1990 period, described as the shift from newspaper to television nationalism. Much recent scholarly political analysis has rightly centered on the visual media's role in extending the ideology of nationalism and securing consent for its hegemony. What has perhaps been lost with this focus is the continuing criticality of the Sinhala-language print media as a site for political ideological struggle and the systematic manufacturing consent.

I discuss below dominant ideologies are propagated and contested in the Sinhala print media. My analysis, based on newspaper reports from the past few weeks, indicates how an appreciation of the structural, political economic dimensions is vital to the assessment of the media. We have to examine the criteria by which themes are prioritised, marginalised or excluded within the Sinhala press. Although newspaper reportage reflects its specific biases on class, nationalist ideology, language and community, coverage of recent party political critiques of the regime, however problematically framed by politicians, reveals the Sinhala print media's potential as a space for dissent, to contest the regime's hegemony.

### Ownership and political and ideological affiliations

The print media in Sri Lanka are closely tied to the leaderships of mainstream political parties. The government-owned Lake House newspapers, *Silumina* and *Dinamina*, have a history of functioning as mouthpieces for successive governments, regardless of which party is in power. [2] Interestingly, Lake House is accustomed to dramatic changes in its internal hierarchies, trade union leadership and patronage networks - usually within days of a regime change. [3]

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In some cases, political parties are also linked to family networks that operate through economic ownership, editorial connections, patronage links and ideological support. *Lankadeepa* (the sister newspaper of the English weekly *The Sunday Times*) is owned by the Wijewardena family. The Upali Group, which publishes the pro-Sinhala nationalist *Divaina*, founded by the late Upali Wijewardena, a close relative of United National Party leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, is now owned by Wijewardena's former wife, who is married to a minister in the current government. The Sumathipala family owns *Lakbima*, and has a close patronage relationship with the Rajapaksa regime; Thilanga Sumathipala, a former UNP-er who joined the Rajapaksa regime in 2009 is a Colombo District MP. *Ravaya* is a left-oriented weekly and although its founder cum chief editor has become a close associate of President Rajapaksa, the other staff members seem to maintain a critical distance from the current regime. *Iruresa* (the sister newspaper of *The Sunday Leader*) is owned by the pro-UNP Wickrematunga family and *Lanka* is an organ of the

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

Although these political-economic connections do not automatically reflect the ideological positions of these newspapers, it is safe to say that in many cases they at least impact on the ideological-political space within which the editors and writers are allowed to exercise their journalistic liberty. This is more explicit in the case of *Iruresa*, *Lanka* and the government-owned Lake House newspapers because of their direct political connections and biases. But most of the other papers, including *Divaina*, *Lankadeepa*, *Lakbima* and *Ravaya*, try to demonstrate that they maintain an impartial position in terms of editorial independence, multiplicity of views and the formal right to dissent.

However, the idea of impartiality is often problematic. During decisive moments of national politics, such as parliamentary elections, party leadership struggles and budget debates, this limited idea of editorial liberty reveals its true face. For instance, during the campaigning for the last parliamentary election, *Lankadeepa* provided a significantly large space for the personal campaign of Gampaha District candidate Ruwan Wijewardena, a close relative of its owner. *Lakbima* published many news items and articles on welfare activities carried out by the Sumathipala family and especially by its candidate, Thilanga Sumathipala. Meanwhile, *Divaina* gave a prominent place to Nimal Welgama, the husband of its chairwoman. The opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe once stated in a media conference that he was well aware of those who attacked him from within *Lankadeepa*, because nothing happened in *Wijaya* newspapers without his knowledge. *Ravaya* has long maintained a relatively balanced position, in terms of the political opinions of the editorial and its writers. As stated above, most of the editorial writers and other journalists on the paper are more critical of the current regime than the founding chief editor who has become a supporter and even a defender of President Rajapaksa. [4]

Another important factor in newspaper politics is the role of market relations in determining, fashioning and framing news content and ideological messages. In Sri Lanka, daily and weekly newspapers are generally dependent on advertising because of high production costs and limited circulation. There is no doubt that this creates certain barriers for investigative journalism.

It is also possible to detect differences in the selection and prioritisation of themes between Sinhala- and English-language newspapers produced by the same publishing house. One of the most interesting examples of this is how *The Island* and its sister paper *Divaina* have approached issues related to ethnic relations. Whilst the latter has a record as an organ of Sinhala ethno- nationalist patriotism, and is also an influential proponent of the so-called *Jathika Chinthanaya* (National Thought) project, [5] *The Island* is careful enough to avoid using the same type of ethnicised language. This can be partly explained by the sensitivities of different readership markets. Thus, while *Divaina* is mostly popular among Sinhala-speaking middle class readers, even in rural areas, *The Island* seeks its constituency among an urban and mostly Colombo and sub-metropolitan-centric English-speaking readership, containing a significant number of bilingual Tamils and Muslims; hence messages need to be packaged differently. More generally, news items related to external affairs acquire less importance in the Sinhala press than they do in English newspapers. It can also be argued that market competition has made a contribution to the spread of Sinhala-nationalist patriotism, especially during the last phase of the war, when almost all Sinhala-language newspapers competed with each other to exploit the emerging market for ethno- nationalist patriotism.

## Class, ethnicity and the politics of press coverage

The logic governing the inclusion, prioritisation or exclusion of themes and subjects is determined by their relevance to, and power and influence vis-à-vis the Sinhala newspaper market. Most marginalised communities have not only been under-represented but also actually erased from visibility in the mainstream media. One of the best examples of this is the Sinhala press coverage of the so-called “conflict” between peasants and elephants. This issue was generally approached from an environmental perspective that blamed peasants for the annihilation of elephants in the country, while not a single article was written from the perspective of the poor peasants who struggle with

elephants for their survival. As some activists working with these rural communities told me, the root causes of this problem lie in how the planning of agrarian settlement schemes has been insensitive to environmental issues. This case clearly demonstrates the class politics within print media since the voice of the rural peasantry, a class not included in the newspaper market, is not heard.

Meanwhile, the exclusion of certain issues from coverage in the Sinhala press based on the ethnic identity of protagonists is slightly more complicated than it appears at first sight. People in the war-affected areas have long been forgotten or erased from the Sinhala media, especially during the period of the war when this active forgetfulness was supported by certain stereotypical and dehumanised notions of Tamil separatism, terrorism, and even Tamil-ness. Some Sinhala extremists have even rationalised the post-war situation in the Northern and Eastern provinces as a necessary price that must be paid by the Tamil people for their illegitimate support of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

At the same time, it seems that certain mechanisms of governance that go hand in hand with the “military-development industry” also play a significant role in this social insensitivity to the problems of internally displaced persons and people in northern Sri Lanka. Some of these development-related issues are not actually ethnically specific. For instance, only *Ravaya* and the pro-UNP *Iruresa* were brave enough to publish articles about the militarised nature of development activities carried out in Colombo. Since the takeover of the Urban Development Authority by the Defence Ministry, thousands of the urban poor in Colombo have been forcibly evicted from their homes. Most recently, some businesses in Colombo’s Chatham Street were suddenly identified as illegal and destroyed. *Ravaya* reported that the police had refused to accept complaints made by the inhabitants. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission is another event barely reported in the mainstream Sinhala media. [6]. The LLRC was established with the narrow mandate of examining the failure of the Ceasefire Agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, from 2002 to 2008. Although almost all newspapers have ignored many important and critical issues discussed at the LLRC, the pro-government *Dinamina* gave a prominent place to Sinhalese nationalist Nalin de Silva’s evidence before the Commission. He is reported as saying that Tamils have no specific problem because of their Tamil-ness and that the ethnic conflict is nothing but an invention of colonialism.

### Recent critiques of the regime

However, it seems Sinhala papers are less reluctant to address critical issues when politicians or socially influential figures such as religious leaders refer to them. Many criticisms of cases of abduction, murder, and the emerging trend of organised crime in the Northern Province gained wider publicity in Sinhala papers after the opposition highlighted these incidents in its news conferences and public rallies. For instance, UNP parliamentarian D.M. Swaminathan’s statement, critical of the government’s failure to safeguard peace and harmony in these areas, was published almost in full even in the Sinhala-nationalist *Divaina*. Some newspapers quoted the firm statement of the JVP that raging crime in the Northern and Eastern provinces is “state terrorism against the Tamil people” and that emergency law is anti- democratic and repressive.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this might be understood as a defensive tactic on the part of journalists in a context of ongoing government suppression of media freedom.

When it comes to emerging debates on economic development, it is very clear that attention has focused on the subjects of the cost of living, poverty, trade union demands and the reduction in government expenditure on education and health. One of the themes that attracted huge media attention during the past few weeks was criticism of the ruling regime from some of its senior ministers. Almost all the newspapers, except the government-owned *Dinamina* and *Silumina*, reported a minister as saying that the government should not jeopardise the long-term economic well-being of the country and people for its short-term advantage. Another minister suggested the government should break the local monopoly of the stock market by intervening in and stabilising production. The opposition has also argued that the Rajapaksa regime has failed to establish any sort of economic stability.

Significantly, this debate on economic policy is being articulated within the terms of nationalist ideology. A significant number of articles were published on the government's decision to employ military forces to sell vegetables. This happened to be a popular theme among cartoonists and the Sinhala-nationalist *Divaina* dedicated its editorial to this issue. It is striking to note how the opposition tries to articulate its criticism of the budget on nationalist grounds, claiming that the Rajapaksa regime is betraying the country to international capital at the expense of the welfare of the people. Another criticism made by opposition groups is that the government has completely ignored how military involvement in trade will impede the working of the free market. This free market argument has been directed at the business community by leading pro-UNP economists, whilst the Sinhala-patriotic critique of economic policies is enunciated by some populist politicians attached to the same party.

On the one hand, this implies continuity with the dual strategy of capitalist economy and national populism, pursued by pragmatic politicians since 1956. On the other hand, the recent debates on economic policy given prominence in the Sinhala print media have given rise to these paradoxical statements in defence of free market capitalism and against it, from a populist positioning. This could contribute to possible points of rupture within the ideology of the hegemonic nationalist consensus. If that is the case, the heightened importance accorded to economic policy in political discourse could disturb the ideological consensus on which the current regime has established its strategy of "rule by consent".

Mainstream Sinhala-language journalism has been dominated by the prevailing ideological environment of ethno-nationalism, although the emergence of critiques of state authoritarianism and the economic crisis have disturbed and complicated the hegemony of this nationalism to an extent. One positive development within the current context is that new debates on the contemporary political process have already started among some leftist groups and young intellectual circles, some of which have been published in educational and cultural supplements in Sinhala newspapers. Given the emergence of these debates, it is important for critical intellectuals to think about the Sinhala press as an important site of democratic struggle and find new avenues and means of intervening in it.

*Post-scriptum :*

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[1] "The huge development in the country including North and East can be perceived only by those who love their country: President says addressing the staff of the Finance Ministry," *Lankadeepa*, 5 January, 2011: 5, Wijeya Newspapers Ltd: Colombo.

[2] The Lake House Group or the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. was founded by D.R Wijewardena, the maternal grandfather of the current UNP leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe. It was taken over or "nationalised" in 1973 by the SLFP-led coalition government because of its long record of UNP support, and since then it has become part of the propaganda machine of each successive government.

[3] I have recorded some interesting stories about internal politics within Lake House. Some of my interviewees say that, soon after the election results begin to show that a new regime will come into power, prominent trade union leaders of the winning party come forward and forcibly remove existing editors and administrators, even occupying their seats in a self-appointed manner!

[4] The *Ravaya* editor has recently invented an interesting theory about the term limit of the executive presidency. According to this theory, it is justifiable to allow President Rajapaksa to contest for his third term because of his historic achievement in defeating terrorism, but his successors should not have this honor, since it is harmful to the future of democracy! No other editor or *Ravaya* writer seems to have shared this naïve argument.

[5] "Jathika Chinthanaya" is an ideological project initiated by Sinhalese nationalists Gunadasa Amarasekara and Nalin de Silva in the mid 1980s. It became very popular amongst Sinhala-speaking university students against the background of the defeat of the second JVP insurrection in

1989, given that Amarasekara and de Silva claimed to explain the crisis of Marxism as a total crisis of Western science and philosophy, what they term *Jewish Christian thought*, and proposed a more effective and indigenous thought for social change. Champika Ranawaka, the founder and the main ideologue of the Jathika Hela Urumaya, was a prominent student of this movement.

[6] A non-mainstream Sinhala paper named *Thulawa*, a publication of National Peace Council, published a full-page article on the LLRC hearings in Mullaithivu, in its January 2011 issue. It is critical to find alternative channels like this to reach Sinhalese readers