

## Elite Politics and its Place in Political Landscape: A Case Study of Regime Change in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** The political elite of many third world countries has played a crucial role for shaping socio political structures. Sri Lanka is a case in point. This paper attempts to critically examine the role played by the political elite of Sri Lanka in recent power struggles and the presidential election of 2015 and the parliamentary election held in the same year. Based on the in-depth depth interviews held by high level political activist of the rainbow grouping who could be identified as political elite, the paper also examines the dynamics and challenges faced by the political elite under the present political structure.

**Keywords:** Political Elite, 'Non-Governing Elites', Parliamentary Election, Sri Lanka.

### INTRODUCTION

Since independence the political elite have played a crucial role in shaping the country's political landscape. In fact, Sri Lanka gained independence by a number of strategic maneuvers of the political elite.

As Oberst [1] observes the political elite of many third world countries acted in a similar manner. The western oriented elites dressed, spoke and acted more like their colonial masters and as they acquired economic power and social status they aspired to acquire political power and developed ambitions to replace their colonial masters.

The political elite who were engaged in political maneuvers in the pre independence period argued that they were equally or more qualified to govern than their colonial masters. On one hand they attempted to demonstrate that they were competent enough to run the state machinery and on the other hand they argued that they were more in tune with the needs and aspirations of the mass of the new nation state that was to be formed. Although both arguments are questionable it provided an ideological rationale for the local elite to acquire the reins of governance of independent Sri Lanka. There is no dispute that the political elite of Sri Lanka have played a significant role in the political sphere of Sri Lanka while the nature of its contribution and influence is much disputed [2]. The non-governing political elite who gathered around the President Sirisena's camp played a decisive role in challenging the nationalistic political slogans in the public sphere [3]. Thus the paper critically examines the role played by the political elite of Sri Lanka in recent power struggles.

### METHODOLOGY

The discussion is based on three semi structured reflective analysis sessions and six in-depth depth interviews held by high level political activist of

the rainbow grouping who could be identified as political elite. They have played an active role in the regime change in Sri Lanka. Members from the following movements/organizations participated in the study i.e. Free Media Movement, *Eksath Bhikku Peramuna*, Transparency International, The bar council of Sri Lanka, , working journalist union, Ceylon Mercantile Union, Amnesty International, Movement for a just society, Federation of University Teachers Association, Christian Workers fellowship.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following key questions will be probed in attempt to understand the formation, dynamics, and challenges faced by the political elite.

- What are the key social formations and political motivations of the rainbow grouping political elite who engaged presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015?
- How is the relationship between the rainbow elite political grouping and the elected power structures been transformed and managed?
- What are the future trends and possibilities of the rainbow grouping political elite's role within Sri Lanka's political sphere?

- It is envisaged that a holistic and in-depth understanding of the new political elite is helpful in mapping out future formations of Sri Lanka's political landscape.

The persons who participated in the reflective brain storming sessions and in depth interviews wished to be anonymous as they felt that a frank expression of opinion could come in to conflict with their social activism and other political engagements. Nevertheless, they did not mind identifying the organization they represented.

All participants of the study had been actively involved in the recent political changes in their personal capacity as well as in their organizational capacity. They were comfortable with being identified with the rainbow political grouping. The rainbow political elite group was largely composed of the non-governing elite.

The reflective brain storming sessions and in-depth interviews were focused around the above mentioned three questions yet participants who were willing to share information of the inner workings and secretive deals within the political establishment were encouraged to do so, such revelations were crosschecked before drawing any inferences. Key question raised at the session was what the social formations and political motivations of the rainbow grouping political elite who engaged presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015.

In order to understand the social formations and political motivations of the rainbow political elite grouping it would be useful to understand the nature of the Sri Lanka's political elite. Fernando, T. [4] observed that there is primarily a distinction could be made between 'governing elites' and 'non-governing elites'. The governing elites are those who wield direct political power and the non-governing elites are those who are closely linked to political power structures and influence the governing elite.

As explained by the participants of this study the rainbow political elite group preferred to hold their influence within the political sphere without being directly involved in wielding direct political power. In order to understand the social composition of this elite grouping it would be useful to discuss this group in comparison to the traditional political elite who largely had aspirations of being part of the governing elite. The traditional governing elite obtained their power by climbing the social ladder by using traditional acquired political power, status such as caste or by capital accumulation that placed them high on social class. In contrast the non-governing elite of the rainbow grouping had acquired their position within the elite circle primarily using three interdependent variables i.e. education, media and the social network.

All study participants agreed that they had acquired a place within the rainbow political circle due to their social and professional engagement and they preferred to remain within the circles of the non-governing elite as they felt that in comparison to the governing elite the circle of the non-governing elite was less polluted.

Almost all participants expressed a desire to maintain a certain distance from those who wield direct political power. Though, this does not mean that they did not have overt and covert dealings with the governing political elite.

An in-depth analysis of the interviews revealed that the distancing was largely a 'construct'. All participants who took part in the in depth interviews acknowledged that they had some dealings with the governing elite that they did not publicly acknowledge. They argued that such dealings were necessary to fulfill their activist and lobby roles. Some argued that such alliances were needed for mere survival. In a country marked with a long history of political violence it is not surprising that people with strong political opinion had to maintain secretive links with whom those who supported as well as opposed.

All participants who participated in the study maintained close links with the opposition as they felt that such alliances provided some security in a political uncertain environment. They observed that within the current scenario political alliances as well as ideological leanings were somewhat blurred with no clear lines of demarcation. In such a situation the rainbow elite group has been diluted from a strongly, motivated group who spearheaded aggressive political campaign to a loosely connected set of individuals.

Responding to a probing question within the in-depth interview the participants agreed that a loosely connected set of non-governing elites with a reasonable amount of political influence is a new phenomenon in the Sri Lankan context. Previously the non-governing elite were largely the political left who somewhat clearly identified themselves as a distinguished grouping. However, the current grouping does not have such clear ideological leaning. The political motivations are rather issue based; the non-governing elite were clearly passionate on good governance.

Another key question asked from the participants was how the relationship between the rainbow elite political grouping and the elected power structures been transformed and managed. The rainbow political elite grouping has acted somewhat differently from the previous political elite groups who were involved in regime change. Most of the non-governing political elite who were involved in regime change crossed over to the governing elite by finding opportunities within the state structure. Many of them

found opportunity within the government and its cooperation. They believed that it was proper or their privilege to give political leadership for state ventures. In contrast to this trend the rainbow political grouping has largely kept away from accepting government appointments.

All participants of the reflective brain storming sessions said that they felt comfortable reaming within the non-governing elite as they had more space to express themselves as accepting positions within the government would curtail their freedom of expression and political activism. A further probe reviled that there was a number of tensions within the governing elite of the new government elite and the governing elite the new government.

The participants of the study revealed that there is continues dialog between the governing and non-governing political elite. Some of these conversations happen in the public sphere while other conversations happen 'behind the doors'. There have been instances where the tensions have flared up during media debates. There have been instances where the governing elite have accused the non-governing elite of been out of touch with the political reality.

The respondents of the study were in agreement that they are faced with a dilemma. On one hand they were not fully satisfied with the performance of the ruling coalition that they supported and on the other hand they perceive that they are threatened by a comeback of the nationalistic forcers rallied around the former president Mahinda Rajapaksha. The participants confirmed that they are trapped in a situation with limited alternatives. Some said that they are considering an exit from (elite) politics while others agreed that the role of elite politics has been largely limited by the lack of constructive dialogue between the governing and non-governing elite.

Within the brain storming session of the study it was revealed that the non-governing political elite has lost its credibility to some extent within the socio political sphere. The rainbow grouping political elite could reemerge if they are capable of developing a space within the social sphere as force that is not governed and controlled by the political elite but an influential force that is independent enough to have a voice of its own that the wider public consider rational and credible.

Although there is little doubt that the contemporary political elite have had a significant influence on the recent happenings and still have a prominent place within the political sphere the level of influence keeps changing. The presidential election was a very closely contested battle between the president Mahinda Rajapaksha who had called an early election and Maithripala Sirisena, the General Secretary of the

Sri Lanka Freedom Party who crossed over to be the common candidate with support of the United National Party which was then the main opposition. The Rajapakshaksha camp emphasized the need of a stabilizing the gains achieved by winning the war and expanding infrastructure development while the joint opposition led by Sirisena stressed a change that would bring about good governance [5]. The Siriena camp was largely supported by the intelligentsia who thought that serious reforms in governance and relevant legislation were needed. These non-governing political elite who rallied around good governance were very diverse and for the purpose of this discussion they could be identified as the rainbow political grouping.

As being viewed by the participant's non-governing political elite who gathered around the Sirisena camp played a decisive role in challenging the nationalistic political slogans in the public sphere. They used limited media space that was available and vigorously campaigned at election meetings. There is a wide spread belief that the contemporary political elite who represent themselves within small groupings are disgruntle of the rainbow revolution they mastered.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study indicates that the influence of Sri Lanka's political elite within Sri Lanka largely depends on how it manages its negotiations with the governing elite. This is primarily because the non-governing elites have largely been confined to issues of governance that the governing elite have a monopoly. The strategy of the non-governing elite has been to work thru the governing elite rather than identify itself as an entity with some identity of its own. Further the non-governing elite are also seen to be responsible for the malfunctions of political management in post independent Sri Lanka. Non governing political elite has played a crucial role in recent power struggles and the presidential election of 2015. Nevertheless, the tensions arise by the political elite in the post-election era over a number of issues arising from ideological and pragmatic concerns i.e. reluctance to abolish executive presidency, inconsistency and delays in dealing with the allegedly corrupt of the previous regime, lack of vigor and commitment to constructional reform, disagreements with economic policy are among the reasons sighted. Even though a number of strategies are being employed to manage these tensions by the government these attempts are not adequately enough to cater the aspirations of none governing political elites in Sri Lanka.

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