

## MULTIPLICATION CHALLENGES ON THE DEMOCRACY OF SRI LANKA\*

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### Abstract

Sri Lanka's democracy faces significant challenges, particularly in the wake of the 2022 economic crisis and political unrest. Since gaining independence in 1948, the country has struggled with issues such as executive overreach, corruption, and economic mismanagement. These problems have weakened democratic institutions and deepened public distrust. The research examines the impact of the concentration of power in the executive branch, especially following constitutional changes like the 20th Amendment, which limited checks and balances. The 2022 economic collapse intensified public dissatisfaction, leading to widespread protests against the ruling class. The study uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data includes interviews with civil society experts, political analysts, and legal professionals, providing insights into socio-political dynamics. Secondary data comprises constitutional amendments, government reports, and legislative documents to trace governance changes. Findings reveal that weak political institutions and corruption undermine democracy, even as external pressure for reform grows. Key issues include a lack of judicial independence, exclusion of marginalized ethnic groups, and poor governance. The study underscores the need for political and civil society collaboration to rebuild public trust and strengthen democratic values. Reforms focusing on reducing corruption, ensuring an independent judiciary, and promoting inclusivity are essential for long-term democratic stability. Without decisive action, the vision of a united, democratic Sri Lanka remains at risk.

**Keywords:** *Corruption, Democracy, Economic Crisis, Judicial Independence, Political Unrest*

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## **Background of the Study**

Democracy is a term that many people know but often misunderstand and misuse. In today's world, some totalitarian regimes and military dictatorships claim to be democratic to gain public support (Cincotta, 2024). True democracy, however, is a system designed to give all citizens a voice and uphold the sovereignty of the people. It is based on government by the consent of the people, majority rule with protection for minority rights, respect for basic human rights, free and fair elections, equality before the law, following proper legal procedures, limits on government power, and encouraging social, economic, and political diversity to involve everyone in governance (Cincotta, 2024).

The word of "democracy" comes from ancient Greece, where it meant the rule of a part of the people—the demos. This was generally used to refer to the citizen body, the common people, or the lower classes, in contrast to the aristocrats (Finley, 1973). However, Greek democracy was far from inclusive, since it excluded women, slaves, and foreigners completely contrast to modern conceptions of democracy that try to include everyone (Wolheim, 1962).

A well-known slogan describes democracy as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." This idea is linked to two important concepts: freedom and equality. Democracy involves decision-making, governance, and control, which naturally connect to liberty and equality (Graham, 1986). However, democracy in Sri Lanka has evolved through complex, multifaceted history which product of colonial legacies and developments in the post-independence era. The important milestones, challenges, and struggles along this road of history go to influence the country's quest to achieve an representative and inclusive democratic regime.

## **Historical background of the democracy in Sri Lanka**

### **Colonial Period (1796-1948)**

The British introduced modern systems of governance during the colonial period from 1796 to 1948. It was the introduction of the rule of law and local councils which largely served the interests of the colonial rulers. For example, the liberal reforms that were proposed included the establishment of a Constituent Assembly that was to be made up of members elected from various

regions, a civil service made up of Sri Lankans, and an extension of the Habeas Corpus Act to Sri Lanka represented an essential stride toward self-governance and protection of individual rights in 1809 (Wilson, 1954). Nevertheless, the political participation by Sri Lankans was very minimal, and there was tension between the imposed system of governance and the desire for self-rule by the natives. After the British fully conquered the Kandyan region in 1815, it marked the first time the Kandyans came under foreign rule. The British attempted to govern them through the Kandyan Convention of 1815, but these efforts proved ineffective, as demonstrated by the outbreak of the Kandyan Rebellion in 1817 (Wilson, 1954). During the Colebrooke era, an economic system based on state liberalism was established that allowed for economically laissez-faire, and the traditional service system was abolished, considering it not only on economic grounds but also on humanitarian grounds. A turning point in the democratic evolution of pre-independence Sri Lanka came with the Donoughmore Commission in 1931. This commission, quite revolutionary for its time, granted universal adult franchise, whereby all citizens aged 21 years and above could vote (Abeyasinghe, 1992). This was an important step towards democratic governance in the future, although the legislative council enjoyed little power under colonial rule. In fact, universal suffrage did bring a sea change, with far-reaching implications in terms of shifting power dynamics among ethnic groups. It enabled the Sinhalese majority to gain greater political influence while simultaneously raising concerns among Tamil and Muslim minorities about their marginalization—a theme that would resonate deeply in post-independence politics.

### **Post-Independence Era, 1948 onwards**

After gaining independence in 1948, Sri Lanka adopted a parliamentary democracy like the British Westminster system (Withanawasam, 2007). The Soulbury Constitution was a written framework that could be amended with a two-thirds majority. A key feature was the protection of minority rights. It emphasized checks and balances under liberal democratic principles, including the establishment of an independent judiciary and civil service. The constitution made a significant effort to ensure that both the judiciary and civil service operated free from executive interference (Withanawasam, 2007). Thus, this marked the beginning of a new era in Sri Lankan governance.

The Soulbury Constitution guiding the transition provided for the protection of minorities, but the application was often arbitrary, thus laying the grounds for future conflicts. In the same period, however, two major political parties emerged that were going to shape the country's political landscape for decades: the United National Party, shortly UNP, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, shortly SLFP, became the leading forces of Sri Lankan politics. These two parties were respectively headed by D.S. Senanayake and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who played the significant role then. Notably, the latter's policy was pro-Sinhalese-Buddhist, thus widening the rift between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. This tension came to a head with the controversial Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which was supposed to establish Sinhala as the only official language, in effect sidelining the speakers of Tamil, but both Tamils and Muslims inhabiting this country speak the Tamil language. Thus, the minorities asked for their rights. The demand for a federal system by Tamil leaders at this time met with staunch opposition from the Sinhala-majority parties, further polarizing ethnic relations. This period saw the seeds of conflict being sown as political decisions increasingly favored the majority at the expense of minority rights and representation.

### **Constitutional Changes and Ethnic Conflict**

The 1972 constitution marked a significant transfer in Sri Lanka's governance structure. It redefined the country as a republic with a unicameral legislature, concentrating power and declaring Buddhism the state religion (Withanawasm, 2007). These reforms further marginalized other religious groups. In response to perceived favoritism towards Sinhala-Buddhism, Tamil political parties rallied around the demand for a separate Tamil state known as "Tamil Eelam." This period saw the rise of militant movements like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which transitioned from seeking autonomy to armed struggle, furthermore, The introduction of an executive presidency in 1978 under President J.R. Jayewardene consolidated significant powers within the presidency, extremely influencing Sri Lankan politics for decades to come. This would ensure a shift towards a more centralized power structure that would long last in consequence on the democratic processes of the country.

### **Civil War and Its Aftermath**

Due to some wrong political decisions by the Sinhala leaders, the civil war between the government and LTTE broke out in 1983 and lasted up to 2009 with immense human and economic losses along with severely disrupting democratic processes. During this time, emergency regulations became the norm, where special powers were given to the state in curbing civil liberties by means of media censorship. After the post-war period, Sri Lanka had a chance to implement reforms after the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 (Peris and Nelson, 2010). Initial governance in this period was characterized by highly centralized power and allegations of human rights abuses. The 19th Amendment of 2015 had the object of reducing executive powers, providing more transparency through independent commissions; but there was limited success. Then the 20th Amendment of 2020 reversed most reforms and increased broad executive powers of the president influencing democracy.

### **Recent Developments and Future Prospects**

The unmatched economic crisis that struck in 2022 brought about mass protests for political reform and accountability, reflecting dissatisfaction with intensive power and unsuccessful governance. These protests underscored the deepest desire for change among Sri Lankan citizens and their commitment to democratic principles. However, these protests resulted in calls for constitutional reforms focusing on the devolution of power, independence of the judiciary, and the role of civil society in governance. Solving ethnic representation and regional self-governance is, therefore, key to long-term democratic stability in Sri Lanka.

### **Problem Statement**

The democratic framework in Sri Lanka, once famed for being inclusive and appealing to progressive ideas, now faces an unprecedented crisis that can shake its very foundations. The crises were further exacerbated through systemic corruption, executive overreach, and general weaknesses of political institutions—that undermined the basic structures and cornerstones of democratic government. The 2022 economic collapse, after years of mismanagement and structural weaknesses, amplified existing fractures in the country's political system, triggering public unrest and demands for urgent reforms. Even with constitutional amendments like the 19th and 20th

Amendments, which were meant to fix some of these challenges, the country continues to struggle with governance issues that erode public trust and further marginalize ethnic minorities. These challenges bring to light the deep-seated flaws of the system and the very relevant question of the ways Sri Lanka can overcome political instability. This paper, therefore, tries to explore how systemic corruption, coupled with weak political institutions, executive overreach, and ethnic marginalization, contributes to the erosion of democratic stability in Sri Lanka. It also discusses possible ways of restoration of a resilient democratic order that would be resistant to future crises and guarantee a more inclusive and accountable governance structure.

### **Objectives**

The historical evolution of democracy in Sri Lanka and the analysis of the current challenges it faces.

Assess the impact of constitutional amendments, particularly the 19th and 20th Amendments, on governance structures and democratic stability.

The role of public protests and civil society movements in shaping political reforms in the post-2022 economic crisis.

To proffer actionable recommendations that would help improve judicial independence, reduce corruption, and engender a more inclusive governance structure.

### **Literature Review**

The literature on democracy, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka, is both vast and multifaceted. The foundational text *The Challenge of Democracy: Government in America* by Janda, Berry, and others (1995) provides a comprehensive definition of democracy and outlines its key features. Complementing this foundational understanding, Cincotta (2024) delves into the interrelated concepts of judicial independence and civil society as essential safeguards for democracy.

In the Sri Lankan context, numerous scholars have examined the country's democratic institutions and their evolution. Amarasinghe, A.R.B. (1986) offers

an in-depth analysis of the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, highlighting its pivotal role in upholding the rule of law. Similarly, Cooray, M.J.A. explores the judiciary's function under the Constitution of Ceylon, providing valuable insights into its historical and constitutional significance. Silva, C.R. (1979) critically evaluates the fundamental democratic features of representation and the electoral system in Sri Lanka, shedding light on their impact on the nation's political landscape. Further contributions by Wilson (1954) and Abeysinghe (1992) trace the country's journey from colonial governance to post-independence democracy. These works underscore the introduction of universal suffrage by the Donoughmore Commission as a landmark development, albeit one that inadvertently sowed the seeds for ethnic tensions through majoritarian politics.

Scholars such as Withanawasam (2007), Abeysinghe (1992), Wilson, A.J. (1973), and L. Fernando (1974) examine the constitutional evolution of Sri Lanka from the British colonial period to the adoption of the 1978 Constitution. Their analyses highlight the concentration of power within the executive authority and the orientation of state policies towards Sinhala-Buddhism, often marginalizing minority groups. Recent critiques of the 19th and 20th Amendments to the current constitution underscore their contradictory implications. While these amendments have bolstered executive authority, they have simultaneously weakened indispensable checks and balances, raising concerns about the erosion of democratic principles.

Warnapala (2004) shifts the focus to the role of Parliament and public accountability in Sri Lankan politics. His work underscores the challenges of ensuring transparency and effective governance within a democratic framework. Graham (1986) and Wolheim (1962) emphasize the role of economic mismanagement in fueling political unrest. They illustrate how economic failures, such as those witnessed during the 2022 economic crisis, exacerbate governance problems, leading to widespread disillusionment with democratic institutions. This contemporary case study serves as a poignant reminder of the interdependence between economic stability and democratic governance. In conclusion, the literature highlights both the historical evolution and the current challenges facing Sri Lanka's democratic institutions. The interplay between constitutional developments, economic

management, and the safeguarding of minority rights remains central to understanding the trajectory of Sri Lankan democracy. While significant progress has been made, persistent issues such as political manipulation, concentration of executive power, and inadequate checks and balances continue to inhibit the full realization of democratic principles.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will, therefore, present an in-depth analysis into the systemic challenges of democracy in Sri Lanka and shall provide concrete lessons from the complex interplay of issues threatening democratic stability in the nation. It will analyze how corruption, executive overreach, ethnic marginalization, and erosion of public trust have combined to bring about the current political crisis facing the country. This study underlines how these related issues need to be addressed for the restoration of democracy's core values. Findings of this report are of real importance to the thinkers of policy in that evidence-based recommendations with regard to what reforms are urgently needed to bring about changes required in the governance structure of Sri Lanka are provided. It is actually a toolkit for the policymakers to reassess the political framework of the country and take such steps as reforming institutions, insuring accountability, and restoring the people's confidence in democratic governance.

This offers civil society actors an interaction with the deeper comprehension of the general political landscape and ways in which issues of governance impact the lives of ordinary citizens. By pointing to the importance of public protests and civil society movements in holding politicians accountable for the proper management of the public service, this study inspires the people to continuously participate in their active call for a more open and equitable political society.

Finally, this study feeds into the larger debate on democracy in post-conflict and developing countries. Valuable lessons are brought forth by this study for Sri Lanka and other countries beset by similar concerns of governance. These findings and recommendations are to be used in further discussion on democratic reforms and a dire need for the rebuilding of citizens' trust in institutions within a stable and fair political order.



### **Limitations of the Study**

Accessibility to primary data, especially from governmental sources, may be restricted due to the political sensitivity of the issue coupled with resource constraints.

This has generally kept the scope of the current study confined to political and governance dimensions of the democratic crisis in Sri Lanka, without adequately covering larger socio-economic dimensions of how the crisis affects education, health, or social welfare.

### **Methodology**

This research employs a mixed-method approach, utilizing both primary and secondary data. Primary data is collected through Expert interviews with civil society, political analysts, legal experts, and other key players involved in the operations of governance and political reform, while secondary data is gathered from Review of constitutional amendments, government reports, legislative documents, academic studies.

### **Findings**

**Weak Political Institutions** - The political system of Sri Lanka has been characterized by a heavy concentration of powers in the hands of the executive, thus undermining the efficacy of checks and balances. The consequence of such a concentration is that other branches of government, like the judiciary and legislature, have lost their autonomy and, consequently, the ability to work independently and exercise accountability over the executive. This, in turn, makes governance over-centralized, leaving little or no room for diversified political voices, and the accountability of elected representatives is weakened. The lack of strong checks and balances also creates a self-reinforcing circle of bad decisions and inept policy implementation that makes it hard for democratic processes to flourish.

**Corruption and Economic Mismanagement** - Corruption permeates every pore of Sri Lanka's political and economic apparatus, with active participation from both public officials and private actors for personal benefits at the cost of national interest. The same deep-seated corruption has contributed a lot to its economic mismanagement that reached a boiling point in 2022. It is caused

by misallocated resources, a lack of transparency, and the failure to put sound economic policies in place. In effect, this degree of economic instability has only served to further solidify public discontent as citizens firsthand witness how corruption and mismanagement harm their lives. It has also been compounded by the deepening economic crisis, where the people began to perceive the government as inept or indifferent to their needs.

**Ethnic Marginalization** - Governance in Sri Lanka has been marked traditionally by policies tilted toward the interests of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority at the expense of the country's ethnic and religious minorities, including Tamils and Muslims. This has also led to the concentration of power in the hands of the majority, which implements policies that further widen the ethnic divisions and exclude the minority communities from political, economic, and social spheres. The exclusionist policies thus formulated have led to alienation among these groups, who feel that they have been excluded from the political process and deprived of their due rights and opportunities. This marginalization has increased ethnic tensions and blocked the way for national reconciliation and social cohesion. The continued predominance in governance by the Sinhala-Buddhist majority further perpetuates these divisions, undermining the unity and inclusivity that are essential for a healthy democracy.

**Judicial Independence** - For a long period of time, the judiciary in Sri Lanka has been susceptible to political influence, which undermines its potential role as an effective check on executive power in an impartial way. The political interference in the appointments and decisions of the judiciary has taken away the independence of the judiciary and made it susceptible to manipulation by the ruling government. Without judicial independence, the effectiveness of the judiciary in protecting democratic principles such as the rule of law, fairness, and justice is weakened. This has, in turn, led to the judiciary not being able to hold the executive accountable for various actions that have resulted in the failure of democratic norms and principles in Sri Lanka's democratic institutions.

**Discussion**

Findings from this study brought into focus a number of contributory factors in relation to each other for weakening the democratic framework in Sri Lanka. Poor political institutions, deeply entrenched corruption, mismanagement of the economy, ethnic marginalization, and lack of judicial independence create an interlinked circle that fosters political instability and dissatisfaction among the populace. Concentration of power in the executive prevents meaningful political reform and perpetuates a system of governance unresponsive to the needs of the people. Corruption and economic mismanagement have been exacerbating this situation, leading to general disillusionment in the public as well as erosion of confidence in democratic processes.

The 2022 protests very strongly reflect the increased dissatisfaction with the current political setup. These protests really reflect the frustration of the people of Sri Lanka, who have themselves faced the ill effects of the poor governance system, economic instability, and no structural reforms in place. It is not only a protest against the economic crisis but also for the structural change in the way the country is being governed. They reflect deep-seated popular aspirations for a more open, accountable, and participatory political order.

Even considering their prominence, however, it is no less true that lack of structural modifications to Sri Lanka's political landscape creates a challenge of its own. Lack of reform toward key drivers of instability, from executive overreach and corruption down to ethnic marginalization, might keep the Sri Lankan polity further down in its democratic decline. Thus, their non implementation threatens Sri Lanka's stability in the foreseeable future as a democratically viable means to ensure inclusive accountability in state affairs. It is further underlined by the findings that comprehensive reforms need to be done with a view to restoring public confidence in democratic institutions. Strengthening of political institutions, curbing corruption, ethnic inclusivity, and judicial independence-all are indispensable steps toward rebuilding the democratic framework of Sri Lanka. Absence of these reforms will lead to the continuous confrontation of Sri Lankan democracy with serious challenges; accordingly, long-term stability and prosperity will be harder to achieve.

## Conclusion

Democracy in Sri Lanka is at a very critical juncture. The present study underlines the imperative need for comprehensive reforms to address the systemic issues that threaten the stability and resilience of the democratic order. The main recommendations, among others, are: a reduction of executive power, judicial independence, anti-corruption policy, and participatory governance. Without these serious steps forward, Sri Lanka will continue to further deteriorate democratic principles and put at risk a united, equitable society.

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\* Received: June, 2024| Accepted: September, 2024| Revised: December, 2024