

# **Butterflies Taking Down Giants: The Impact of Social Media on the Regime Transformation in Sri Lanka**

By

Samal Vimukthi Hemachandra

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Supervisor: Professor András Bozóki

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## Abstract

This study examines the impact of social media on the regime transformation in Sri Lanka that happened in the 2015 presidential election with the defeat of President Rajapaksa. In order to study it, the research revolves around the question, *how individuals who belong to different social strata collectively used the idea of dystopia in social media as a positive tool to overthrow the Rajapaksa regime*. In this regard, this research aims to combine three main fields in political science: radical politics, social media as a political tool and dystopia. No such effort has been made in a field of social sciences so far. I used Foucauldian discourse analysis to analyze the anti-Rajapaksa discourse on Facebook, examining posts, videos, pictures and comments. As the study points out, people who had no power under the Rajapaksa regime understood the Rajapaksa regime as a dystopia. They expressed their frustration of living in a dystopia on Facebook, and used Facebook as a tool to escape from that dystopia by urging and convincing people to vote against President Rajapaksa in the 2015 presidential election. Therefore, this is a story of butterflies who took down giants by using Facebook.

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*In memory of Maduluwawe Sobitha Thero*

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## Introduction

“Social media is to have fun, not to discuss serious stuff”, a woman in her early 20s, advises the Sri Lankan youth in a political advertisement of President Rajapaksa’s campaign. This advertisement first appeared in the latter part of the 2015 Presidential election of Sri Lanka. This was the first time that social media received attention from Sri Lankan politicians. Most importantly, amidst all the chaos President Rajapaksa was experiencing during the election, it is fascinating to analyze what forced President Rajapaksa’s campaign to focus its attention on social media. As I will elaborate in the following chapters, it was the pressure which was generated by ordinary people’s volunteer activism that made Rajapaksa turn his attention to social media. In this regard, as the title of the research suggests, this is a story of butterflies who took down giants<sup>1</sup> by using Facebook.

In this research, I will discuss the role played by the social media in the regime transformation of Sri Lanka, which was a result of the presidential election held on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Here, I will use social media activism in Sri Lanka from 2010 to 2015 as a case study to analyze the importance of social media as a vital aspect of radical politics. Also, I will apply the concept of dystopia to understand the social media politics. As I will argue, Sri Lanka is a perfect example for political activists to understand how to use social media to topple an illiberal democratic regime.

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<sup>1</sup> This title was taken from a title of a blog post, “Presidential election advertising battle where giants were brought down by small butterflies,” where the writer observed the significant pressure created by social media on the Rajapaksa regime during the election period (Jayasinghe 2015).

## ***Background***

Mahinda Rajapaksa became the fifth executive president of Sri Lanka in 2005 through a controversial presidential election where he won by 50.29% of votes (Department of Elections n.d). After a few months in office, he launched a military operation against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). By strengthening the military power, he was able to annihilate the LTTE in 2009 which ended the 30 years' war. Eight months after the war President Rajapaksa called another presidential election, one year ahead of its proposed time. Unlike in the previous election, this time he received 58% of votes. Three months after the election, he received a clear majority in the 2010 parliamentary election. Through opposition parliamentarians who crossed over to 'strengthen the president's hands'<sup>2</sup>, President Rajapaksa was able to create an artificial 2/3 majority. Therefore, during this time, he seemed invincible due to his popularity with people. For example, some Rajapaksa devotees tattooed the president's face on their body to show their love for their leader (Appendix 1).

It was clearly evident that there was no strong opposition to President Rajapaksa. However, all this changed when he called a presidential election to be president for the third consecutive time. As an answer to this, the secretary of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)<sup>3</sup>, Maithripala Sirisena, crossed over to the opposition, and major opposition parties and other civil organizations nominated him as the common candidate. Apart from political parties, many civil activists and organizations supported him. However, the most important element in his campaign was the voluntarism of ordinary people on social media. As a result of all these factors, the common candidate, won the election, defeating President Rajapaksa in a narrow margin.

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<sup>2</sup> This phrase was popularly used for switching political camps to support the president.

<sup>3</sup> This was the main party of the ruling coalition and President Rajapaksa was the leader of this party.

## ***Research Question***

Responses of the Rajapaksa camp strongly suggested that Facebook and social media played a key role in their defeat. For example, as mentioned above, during the end of the 2015 Presidential campaign, an advertisement from President Rajapaksa's side stated that Facebook is only for fun and not for serious things<sup>4</sup>. The purpose of this advertisement was to undermine the importance of social media activism among youth. This is a clear indication of the realization of the negative impact of Facebook on their political campaign by the Rajapaksa camp. Even the mainstream media discussed the importance of Facebook for the first time in Sri Lankan politics (Lankadeepa 2015). One newspaper headline during the election was "A Cyber War in The Presidential Election", referring to the fight of the ownership of one of the most popular common candidate's Facebook pages, UPFA-A Brighter Future (UPFA-A Brighter Future 2015a). Apart from that, a main politician of the Rajapaksa campaign, after the election, sarcastically stated in a political meeting, "the Facebook miracles and good governance has shattered" under the present government (Siripala 2015). He referred 'Facebook miracles' to the anti-Rajapaksa discourse on Facebook. As he explicitly suggested, he too believed that Facebook discourse of anti-Rajapaksa was vital in their defeat.

However, the most important aspect of Facebook politics is its potential to help individuals to voice their concerns and grievances without being a part of a collective (Bennett 2012, Loader and Mercea 2011). Similarly, the Sri Lankan individual volunteerism played a key role in the common candidate campaign. In this context, there are different interpretations of what happened on January 8. For ardent supporters of the present government, it was a 'revolution' (Wijewardena 2015), while for Rajapaksa devotees, it was a "fool's rebellion" (Pathirana 2015).

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<sup>4</sup> This advertisement was discussed in the beginning of the chapter. However, there is no source to refer to this.

The extreme leftists argue that this regime transformation was a change of elites (Chaminda 2015). In addition to these, the regime transformation has been alleged to have occurred because of a conspiracy of India and Western countries against President Rajapaksa (Kasthurirathna 2016). Nevertheless, all these interpretations have a common characteristic in neglecting the voluntary actions of *people*.

This leads me to the question: *how did individuals who belong to different social strata collectively use the idea of dystopia on social media as a positive tool to overthrow the Rajapaksa regime?* In order to investigate this question, I would like to examine the features of the anti-Rajapaksa discourse on Facebook. Moreover, I will argue that there was an immense voluntary participation of *people* on Facebook but it did not result in a revolution due to the involvement of political elites who became the mediator, between the people and the Rajapaksa regime. Yet, within the limits of the Facebook world, this was a revolution.

### ***Analytical and Theoretical Framework***

Throughout this research, I use Jacques Ranciere's concepts of *politics* and *people*. Ranciere argues that there are two processes in every political context. One process is based on "governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions" (Ranciere 1992: 58). According to this definition, the popular components, which we understand as politics, including the exercise of power or state-based practices such as elections, subsidies and implementation of law and order, do not necessarily belong to 'politics'. He uses the term 'the police' to describe these activities. As he points out, the police is an order of bodies where every 'body' has an exact name and a role in the community. This order is hierarchical that is, it is based on inequality.

Political activity, on the other hand, “shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination” (Ranciere 1999: 30). Differently put, the police is a process of governing through hierarchy, and politics is a process of equality which presupposes that everyone is equal and acts according to this presupposition. As Ranciere illustrates, the subject of the political process makes “it possible to identify ‘the count of the uncounted’ with the whole of the community” (Ranciere 2012: 33) by its encounter with the police. According to Ranciere, when a body changes its assigned place and takes a place which belongs to a different body, it contradicts the police. When these two processes encounter each other, a revolutionary event occurs. The term *people*, in this research, will be used to understand the activities of ‘the count of the uncounted’, or in other words, the people who contradict the police order by shifting from one assigned place to a different place.

As I will argue, the impact of social media on the regime transformation in Sri Lanka cannot be understood by using traditional Marxist terms, such as class. The *people* who acted against the regime did not belong to a particular class. For example, there were doctors, software engineers, and university lecturers, as well as radical artists, unemployed youth, workers and peasants. Drawing from Ranciere, what created a common goal among these different groups was the idea of equality. In other words, all these *people* irrespective of their social status, under the Rajapaksa regime, were not ‘counted’. To be ‘counted’ between 2005 and 2015, a person had to follow the nationalistic ideology of the Rajapaksa regime<sup>5</sup>. As it was evident in the anti-Rajapaksa campaigns, specifically in Facebook campaigns, these people were practicing equality with each other by considering themselves equals, regardless of their social status.

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<sup>5</sup> Even people who were Sinhala Buddhist nationalistic but accepted rights of the minorities were ‘uncounted’ in this social hierarchy.

During the Rajapaksa regime, the media, both state and private, became immensely biased in favor of the regime. As a result, Facebook became *the* space for radical politics. According to Internet World Stats, there were 121,500 internet users in Sri Lanka in 2000, increasing to 5.7 million by November 2015, making of the total population of 20 million. The total Facebook users numbered approximately 3.4 million (Internet World Stats 2015).

I will use the concepts of dystopia to understand the anti-Rajapaksa discourse. As Fatima Vieira (2010) points out, in Thomas More's classic, *Utopia* - the first use of the term - the word 'utopia' was attributed both the meanings of 'non-place' and 'good place'. In the beginning, this was used to describe an alternative space to the reality. Due to the two World Wars and the fascist utopia of pure human race, the idea of dystopia became popular. In this regard, dystopia has been referred to as "imaginary places that were worse than real places" (Vieira 2010:17). I will use the concept of dystopia to examine how the anti-Rajapaksa discourse represented living under the Rajapaksa regime and the way the people used the concept of dystopia to defeat the Rajapaksa regime in the 2015 election.

### ***Methodology***

Though this research is about the impact of social media, my main focus will be on Facebook, including YouTube and blogs because of their strong presence on Facebook. The reason for selecting Facebook as the main terrain is due to its dynamic nature compared to the other social media in Sri Lanka. According to my personal observation, the public participation on topics on Facebook is higher than other social media. In this regard, I am using Facebook posts, videos, pictures, comments and the number of shares received, with the aim of analyzing the anti-Rajapaksa discourse. However, I have only used the number of likes to understand the general

popularity of a certain Facebook activity. The main reason for this is that there is no Facebook tool to know how many likes a certain Facebook activity received before January 8, the day of the presidential election.

As described earlier, the time span of the research is 2010 to 2015. Nevertheless, due to practical reasons, my main focus will be given to Facebook activities between 20<sup>th</sup> November 2014, the day the presidential election was announced and 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2015, the day of the election. During the election campaign, incidents which happened under the Rajapaksa regime started to circulate on Facebook in a massive volume. However, to cover a wide range of political activities on Facebook, I have used several debates, discussions and posts which occurred before the calling of the election. Since there has been no substantial research done on the Facebook politics of Sri Lanka, I have to rely on my own observations through my own Facebook activism.

Moreover, I am applying Michel Foucault's concepts of power and discourse in order to understand the nature and the functionality of anti-Rajapaksa discourse. As Young (In Hook 2001) points out, for Foucault, a discourse is "the rules, systems and procedures that constitute, and are constituted by, our 'will to knowledge'" (In Hook 2001: 522). As Young points out, "all the discursive rules and categories that were a priori, assumed as a constituent part of discourse and therefore of knowledge" (In Hook 2001: 522). In order to analyze the Foucauldian discourse, I will use five steps introduced by Gavin Kendall and Gary Wickham (1999). They are:

1. the recognition of a discourse as a corpus of 'statements' whose organization is regular and systematic.
2. the identification of rules of the production of statements;

3. the identification of rules that delimit the sayable (which of course are never rules of closure);
4. the identification of rules that create the spaces in which new statements can be made;
5. the identification of rules that ensure that a practice is material and discursive at the same time (Kendall and Wickham 1999: 42).

By using this method, I would examine the dystopian nature of the anti-Rajapaksa discourse and how it was applied to defeat President Rajapaksa in the 2015 presidential election.

These discursive rules are strongly connected to the use of power. Traditionally, power is seen as something that can be possessed by an individual or a group of individuals. The reason for this traditional conception is that it assumes that power is connected with the state or, more particularly, with the law. Opposed to this, Foucault argues that “power is never something that someone possesses, any more than it is something that emanates from someone. Power does not belong to anyone or even to a group” (Foucault 2006: 04). Moreover, according to Foucault, power is considered to be anonymous. Power can start to function only in a ‘system of differences’ such as dispersion, relays, networks, reciprocal supports, differences of potential and discrepancies (Foucault 2006: 04).

Also, in order to make the people on social media visible in this research, I experiment with Ranciere’s method of writing, termed ‘Ventriloquism’ (Davis 2010: 28). According to *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*, it is “the art of speaking without moving your lips and of making it look as if your voice is coming from another person” (2016). In this method, what Ranciere does is to lend his voice to the voiceless in order to make them visible. But Ranciere does not take the subject out of its place and transpose it to a different place by giving his own interpretations.

Instead, Ranciere lets the voiceless use Ranciere's voice to speak for themselves. Following Ranciere, I will avoid providing my own observations. Instead I will allow these people to represent themselves through me.

### ***Contribution***

The main strength of this research is my active involvement in Facebook politics and other political activism against President Rajapaksa. I consider this as a strength because I have been able to witness the dynamism of Facebook politics that an outside observer would have difficulties to grasp. For instance, because of my active participation, it has been extremely helpful for me to trace the decline of pro-Rajapaksa discourse and the emergence of the anti-Rajapaksa discourse. Although I was not a key social media activist, I too have experimented with creating posts and observing the way these posts have been shared among Facebook users. All these factors have led me to achieve a strong understanding of the practicality of Facebook politics.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

As described in the previous chapter, this research attempts to combine two important themes in political science. One is social media and the other is the political usage of the concept of dystopia. The main aim of the research is to understand the impact of social media in the regime transformation of Sri Lanka. Along with this, the concept of dystopia has been used to analyze the anti-Rajapaksa discourse in social media prior to the 2015 presidential election. In this chapter, I will provide a literature review with regard to the research. First, I will start with the recent literature on social media and then discuss the concepts of utopia. As I will point out, the literature on social media is mostly based on western states and the Middle East and the literature on utopia is predominantly concentrated on Western societies. Also, I will argue that dystopia is still an emerging concept and as a result, there are certain elements that have to be addressed thoroughly. Finally, this literature review will claim that no such research combining these two themes has been done in social sciences and will broaden the horizon of radical politics in South Asia.

### **1.1 Social Media**

In today's world, cyber space has penetrated human life as one of the most important aspects of the individual's daily routine. The number of internet users in general and Facebook users in particular, has increased dramatically. The total number of internet users of the world increased from 16 million in December 1995 to 513 million in August 2001 (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002: 13). In 2016, it increased approximately to 3.5 billion (internet live stats 2016). The number of active Facebook accounts was approximately 1.5 billion in April 2016 (Statista 2016). This development of the cyber space has served as a mechanism in shaping our daily

lifestyle. For example, it has been used to communicate with each other, receive the latest global and local news and information and obtain entertainment. Interestingly, these activities can be done without engagement in the material reality. Apart from that, technological advancements such as smart phones, tablets and kindles, apart from more advanced computers and laptops, have made it extremely easy to access the internet and social media. As a result, this new space has become inseparable from the daily life of individuals. As described in the previous chapter, there had been a rapid development of social media in Sri Lanka since 2000.

The literature on social media started in the late 90s. However, it became a highly debated topic after the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements in the USA and European countries. As Loader and Mercea (2011) point out, the first wave of cyber space literature which predicted the creation of “virtual public spheres”, dominated the literature of the 1990s. This literature suggested that democratic governance “could be significantly improved through the open and equal deliberation between citizens, representatives and policy makers, afforded by the new information and communication technologies” (2011: 757). The second wave of the cyber space literature which dominated the 2000s, displaced “the public sphere model with that of a networked citizen-centered perspective” (2011: 758). This wave of literature explains the rise of individualization of politics.

In their article, Loader and Mercea argue that the politics in public sphere has shifted to “a more personalized and self-actualizing citizenship” due to social media activism (2011: 7). In other words, nowadays, people can participate in campaigns on social media while simultaneously enjoying television in the private sphere (2011:7). Bennett claims that we live in “an era of personalized politics” (2012: 20) where “individuals increasingly code their personal politics through personal lifestyle values” (2012: 22). For example, questions like how environmental or

worker friendly are my personal belongings such as vehicles and clothes, have dominated social media activism.

However, these personalization or individualization of politics do not reject collective political action. What these writers argue is that this collectivization cannot be understood from a traditional perspective. Loader and Mercea use the term “networked individualism” and Bennett “individualized collective action” to describe this new collective activism. As Wellman (2001) describes, networked individualism is the transformation of communication from ‘place to place’ to ‘person to person’. This means that previously ‘place’ (as a special context) was a major element in collective action. But with the rise of social media, the importance of ‘place’ has been transformed to the person. In other words, ‘place’ is no longer a factor for activism because through social media, individuals can be a part of a collective action without physically *being* in the place. Bennett describes individualized collective action where “large numbers of people join in loosely coordinated activities centered on more personal emotional identifications and rationales” (2001: 26).

The above discussion is important when analyzing social media activism in Sri Lanka. As I have described in the previous chapter, the regime transformation happened through an election instead of mass demonstrations and protests as we have witnessed in the Arab Spring. In other words, the only political activity in the material context of most of the social media activists in Sri Lanka did was to vote for the common candidate in a polling booth. Therefore, these conceptualizations have been extremely helpful to understanding the political nature of social media activism in Sri Lanka.

Apart from these, there is much of literature on social media describing the new phenomena that occurred due to social media activism which is termed as ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ (Karpf 2010, Morozov 2009). Both these terms are used pessimistically to describe social media activisms such as online petitions, Facebook activities and web messages “as nothing more than feel-good measures that purport to support some kind of issue or social cause but really have little practical effect” (Moore 2012). Although, these social media activisms such as online petitions, Facebook posts’ sharing and liking and web messages can be useless, as I will argue in following chapters, these activities had an enormous positive impact on the regime transformation of Sri Lanka.

Since the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movements, authoritative regimes have been able to successfully counter the threat from social media by restricting and manipulating social media (Bremmer 2010). However, against this skepticism, I will follow Clay Shirky’s analysis of the importance of social media (Shirky 2011). Here, Shirky points out two positive factors created by cyber space. One is that it has become a source of information. For example, videos and posts on current issues circulated and recirculated among Facebook users. As a result, television channels, to popularize their channels, post more videos and posts on their official Facebook pages. Moreover, Facebook has become the quickest way to obtain news due to people’s activities such as posting and video uploading. The other factor is that Facebook allows people to express their thoughts. In other words, it has become a platform to discuss, debate and express ideas on different topics which have been suppressed in mainstream media. Between 2010 and 2015, there was no space in Sri Lankan mainstream media for *peoples’* grievances. For example, In Freedom House (2014) rankings Sri Lanka has been categorized as ‘Not Free’ under freedom of the press category for the year 2013. Therefore, during the electoral campaign (and even

before that), *people* used this space to show their displeasure by commenting or sharing humorous posts. So Facebook became an excellent mechanism for connecting public grievances in Sri Lanka.

However, there is a significant gap in the literature on social media activism in South Asia. So far, the literature has given more emphasis to the Arab Spring, social media politics in Western world and the social media activism and restrictions in South East and East Asia. In South Asia, social media politics is still in the process of exerting its importance on politics. Basically, the 2015 presidential election in Sri Lanka can be considered as a turning point in social media activism in South Asia.

## **1.2 Utopia**

Apart from social media, I use dystopia, a negative version of utopia which has become an important concept in political science. Utopia has been popularly believed as a western concept that cannot be applied universally (Kumar 1987). However, this idea has been criticized and the concept of utopia has recently been applied to understand South Asian society by non-western scholars (Bagchi 2012, Nigam 2010). However, as I will argue below, there are significant gaps that have to be covered in future research. In this research, I will be concentrating on the political effects of dystopia.

Generally, dystopia “bears the aspect of lived *experience*” (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2010: 2). In other words, dystopia is mostly understood as a past experience. The brutality of totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany and Stalinist’s Soviet Russia has given a real example of how a dystopia looks like. As a result, the popular understanding of dystopia refers to the past. However, in this research, dystopia has not been used as a past but rather as a present situation.

In other words, dystopia has been used to describe “here and now” (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2010: 2).

In order to understand the application of dystopia in this research, I will follow Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopia’ (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986). According to Foucault, heterotopias are real places. Here he uses the mirror as an example. He points out that mirror is at the same time a utopia – ‘sites with no real place’ - and a heterotopia. For example, the reflection of an object in the mirror is utopian because that reflection has ‘no real place’. Therefore, the reflection in a mirror is unreal or placeless. At the same time, it is heterotopia because the mirror and the object of the reflection are real. In relation to this, I refer dystopia in this research to a real situation rather than an imaginary situation.

## Chapter 2: The Burning House

After seeing a video of the Sri Lankan police brutally beating up unarmed university students in a protest, one young person shared the video on his Facebook page, with the caption, “hate this present fucking situation” (Annon 2014). He was fed up with the brutal treatment of his fellow citizens and was unable to act against it in the real world because he would be subjected to the same brutal treatment. Therefore, he expressed his frustration and anger on Facebook for being impotent to fight against this injustice. This expression about the ‘present’ situation he was living in was not only a personal expression of an individual but it was more of a representation of people’s understanding of the period. In other words, they expressed that they were living in a dystopia. This understanding of the present was cleverly captured in the burning house metaphor, which was extracted from a poem of Bertolt Brecht<sup>6</sup> and used during a television debate by a civil activist who campaigned for the common candidate.

In this chapter, I will comprehensively examine people’s understanding of Rajapaksa regime as a dystopia. I will use Facebook posts and videos which had been widely circulated during the election period as well as comments these posts and videos received to support this argument. This will illustrate how critical common people were about their present under Rajapaksa regime. In general, the dystopian idea revolved around two aspects: corruption and state violence. Therefore, the first section of this chapter focuses on corruption and the second on state violence. Finally, the Rajapaksa dystopia will be illustrated by combining these elements.

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<sup>6</sup> This will be examined thoroughly in this chapter and the following chapter.

## **2.1 Corruption**

There was a strong public belief that the Rajapaksa regime was the most corrupted government in post-colonial Sri Lankan history. The members of the Rajapaksa family were the main symbols of this. For instance, since his first term in 2005, Basil Rajapaksa, a brother of President Rajapaksa, had been the minister of Economic Development. All the economically important projects had to go through this ministry. Among people, he was known as ‘Mr. Ten Percent’ because of demanding 10 percent of every project (Colombo Telegraph 2012). Apart from Basil Rajapaksa, wife and sons of President Rajapaksa as well as his other relatives were given key positions in the government without a proper justification to the public. Also an enormous number of politicians of President Rajapaksa were widely believed to be corrupted.

All the wrongdoings of these Rajapaksa supporters had been widely (re)circulating on Facebook and as a result, the corruption of the government was no secret to the Facebook community. During the election (or even one year before that), the government launched a massive election campaign under the leadership of Basil Rajapaksa. Most of the country was covered in blue<sup>7</sup> flags, posters and cutouts of President Rajapaksa. Interestingly, the common candidate’s campaign realized that they could not compete in poster and cutout campaigns. As a result, common candidate Maithripala Sirisena stated “he would launch an eco-friendly election campaign by not encouraging the use of polythene, posters and cutouts” and all the funds he received for those activities would be redirected to the benefit of kidney patients (Asian Mirror 2014). Therefore, in the material reality, the election campaign was like a one-horse race.

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<sup>7</sup> Blue is the official color of SLFP.

However, this tactic of the common candidate was a huge success because all the posters and cutouts were a reminder to the Facebook community about how corrupted the Rajapaksa regime was. People knew that these politicians could not afford this type of a massive campaign only through their personal savings. Therefore, there were a number of pages, posts and comments always reminding of the corruption of the Rajapaksa regime. Especially, there was a Facebook page, named “Honorable President of Lamp Posts”<sup>8</sup>, which was basically making fun of the extensive use of public money on posters and cutouts. As mentioned earlier, there were cutouts of President Rajapaksa on lamp posts. Therefore, this Facebook page title mocked the president by stating he had become the president only for lamp posts, not for the people of Sri Lanka. Also, there were a number of large cutouts on high-tension pillars in the middle of paddy fields and this was mocked by a picture post, which stated, “now farmers don’t need strawmen... that’s because Mahinda [Rajapaksa] is in every high-tension pillar” (Noaddress 2014). This post received 600 shares in three days. Ruwan Bandara shared this with a caption – “the great king of cut out as the strawman in padifield [paddy field]!” (Bandara 2014) – which reflected the common mentality towards these posters and cutout campaigns.

Another important factor about corruption was the abuse of public property in the election. For example, there was a video with a worker of Road Development Authority of Sri Lanka sticking posters of President Rajapaksa on walls; the video became viral on Facebook (Newsfirst.lk 2014a). Initially, it was broadcast in a television news segment and immediately posted on Facebook. Within six days, this video reached around 5500 shares. What made this video viral on Facebook was his displeasure on what he was doing [sticking posters]. He was directly

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<sup>8</sup> This page has been deleted by the admins.

talking to the camera<sup>9</sup> and saying, “we are only working for our salary. We work in roads...there are thousands of posters left to stick. If someone can remove this [posters], it is a big help to me. When you give me money, I have to do whatever you say right? This is a huge pain [...] If we say no [to this], we will lose our jobs and our salary” [the translation is mine]. The title of this video which is ‘a worker of Road Development Authority, sticking poster to save his job’, became the popular caption in shares. This video illustrates how difficult it is to be poor in this Rajapaksa government. He had been forced to do things he did not like in order to save his job which was his only income for his survival.

Generally, this was a common story of most people during this period. Therefore, when they shared this video on their timeline they wanted to show that they exactly felt his pain because they too had experienced it. They were angry not only because of this worker’s hard life but also because it represented their own lives. One stated ““when we say no, we lose the job and the salary’... shame on you [Rajapaksa], this is how you hang in walls and lamp posts in the whole Sri Lanka” [the translation is mine] (Sachindra 2014). Another sighed “it is the poor who suffers from everything” [the translation is mine] (Jayasooriya 2014). Sumithraarachchi, who was extremely frustrated about this injustice did not allow his lack of English to stop from expressing his thoughts on this present: “This is how they treat for the inacent pour [innocent poor] people..... They dont want to du [do] this job... but they have to.....camand [command] from Rajapaksa rajimi [regime]..... this is [a] true storey [story]..” (Sumithraarachchi 2014). In contrast to these people, Faleel Marikkar who was a CEO of a hotel network and living in the United Kingdom, also shared the video stating “How people are forced to work for President!!!!” (2014). His caption illustrated the paradox of the backwardness of the country and

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<sup>9</sup> His face was blurred in order to conceal his identity.

technologically developed era we are living in. The same expression with much more anger was illustrated in Keerthisinghe's post: "Fuck you Mahinda [Rajapaksa] why [are] you using this [these] poor people for your campaign by force?" (2014).

This video of the worker of Road Development Authority also reminded most people how miserable their lives were under the Rajapaksa regime. Gayanath Pradeep pointed out to everyone that regardless of whether you were pro- or anti-Rajapaksa, no one was safe under the Rajapaksa regime. He stated "today the majority of public and private sector workers as well as people who vehemently defend MaRa's<sup>10</sup> dictatorial system have to please MaRa to save their jobs" [the translation is mine] (2014). This video reminded Jagath Koswatta that "[they] have to live in a country like this" (2014). Finally, Nabeel Nawshad, a youth, was clearly unsatisfied with being unable to do anything against this injustice, stated while sharing "Feeling guilty on the Present situation of our country Mr....Mahinda Rajapaksa" (2014). He tagged President Rajapaksa's official page in order to show his displeasure. Interestingly, he had used 'Mr.' to address the president, challenging the president's image of the great father by addressing him the way he addressed any ordinary person. In other words, he challenged the hegemony of Rajapaksa by considering President Rajapaksa not a special person but another citizen of the country. Also he used dots in between Mr. and Mahinda Rajapaksa indicating that there is a gap between a character of an honest man and the corrupted character of the president. From a Rancierean point of view, this is a good example of challenging the hierarchical order of the Rajapaksa regime.

Another aspect of abuse of public property which became viral on Facebook was the use of public buses which belong to Sri Lanka Transport Board (commonly known as CTB). Since the

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<sup>10</sup> MaRa is the shorter version of *Mahinda Rajapaksa*. People used this word to humiliate the president by not addressing him with his full name. Also *mara* in Sinhala refers to murdering. So by using it, people try to reflect the brutality of his rule as well.

president did not receive considerable support from the people, he had to transport his supporters from all over the country to fill his every main political rally with a massive crowd. As a result, when there was a rally in a city, approximately 500 buses came to it. Because of that, the rally of buses on main roads and a chain of buses parked on the sides of roads were a common sight during that period. Most people knew that these buses were taken for free and it was a waste of public money. In order to expose this abuse of public property for personal gains, people voluntarily started to send photos and videos of these CTB buses, taken with their personal mobile phones, to anti-Rajapaksa Facebook pages (Malshan Live Show 2014, UPFA- A Brighter Future 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). Then others circulated these videos and photos on Facebook by liking, commenting and sharing. These videos and photos were circulated and recirculated on Facebook with a catchy title, “come, let’s count CTB buses”, which was a distortion of the slogan of Rajapaksa campaign, “come, let’s work for the country”. Importantly, these videos and photos receiving thousands of shares within a few days became a general trend on Facebook.

People also began to mock this extensive misuse of public property. For example, they took the literal meaning of “come, let’s count CTB buses” and commented on the link how many buses they saw in those videos. In one video, people agreed that there were 35-37 buses. (Malshan Live Show 2014). This became a common practice with these types of videos. State television channels always showed the gigantic size of President Rajapaksa’s meetings. The idea these state media transmitted to their audience was that when President Rajapaksa came to an area, everybody around that area would turn up to see their beloved ‘father’. What they did not show, though, was how President Rajapaksa used public buses to transport people from all over the country; while on the other hand, this was a well-known fact on Facebook. People made

humorous posts to show this paradox. For instance, in a picture post, President Rajapaksa goes to a meeting in Kurunegala, an agricultural area in the middle of the country, and asks the audience, “what do you want?”. Then the whole crowd screams “fishing ne.....ts...!”. President gets really confused and asks, “why the hell do you need fishing nets since there is no single muddy pothole here”. Then the crowd replies, “sir, we belong to the buses which came from Matara” (appendix 2). Matara is a town in the coastal area where fishery is one of the main occupations. Also, the shortest distance between Matara and Kurunegala is 171 km. Therefore, the Facebook community clearly understood the state media propaganda. Actually, they were mocking the whole state apparatus. A young girl named Sulakkana when commenting on this post recreated this joke in another way. Now Rajapaksa is in a meeting in Anuradhapura. He asks the same question from the crowd and this time the crowd replies, “we want our Soysa flat<sup>11</sup> to be painted!” [translation is mine] (Game Bayya 2014). This time the distance between the two places is even longer than in the original post.

People were extremely disappointed about the unbearable nature of corruption. Sometimes they were extremely angry about it, and other times they were making fun of their own miserable present. However, when it comes to excessive use of violence on innocent civilians, everyone was extremely angry.

## **2.2 Violence**

From the perspective of oppression, the Rajapaksa regime received enormous criticism for its abuse of power. The president’s youngest brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was appointed in 2005 as the secretary of the Ministry of Defence. Although he was a secretary, in terms of power, he

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<sup>11</sup> Soysa flat is a housing scheme which is located in Colombo.

was second only to the president. It was widely believed that he was the main architect behind murders and abductions of anti-Rajapaksa activists. These forceful abductions were termed as ‘White Van incidents’ because the abductors most of the time used white vans. The oppression came to its peak during this period. Even members of SLFP were murdered or abducted not because of opposing Rajapaksas, but because of making Rajapaksas’ friends unhappy. The main example for this is, in 2011, the trade union adviser to the President was killed in a shooting and the man accused of this was another SLFP parliamentarian who was a close friend of Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Moreover, the government received heavy criticism from the public due to the extensive use of state violence on anti-Rajapaksa protests. The displeasure of people, in this regard, was clearly evident on social media when the state violence was used to disperse the protests in Katunayaka, Chilaw and Rathupaswala, resulting in deaths of unarmed civilians.

However, two incidents during the latter part of the election campaign captured the heart of anti-Rajapaksa Facebook campaigns. One incident was the brutal police attack on a protest of students of Higher National Diploma on Accountancy (HNDA). Police had been using extensive violence against protests that threatened the government during the Rajapaksa period. The police beating of students was very brutal because policemen were beating with batons both male and female HNDA students who were fleeing from the scene. Since this happened two weeks prior to the election, this received massive attention from the Facebook community. It got more than 2000 shares in a short time. The title of this video was “how thugs of Rajapaksa assault HNDA students brutally [...] Hey king you are definitely going to suffer for this” [translation is mine] (LankaFocusNews 2014).

In a democratic country, the police is generally seen as a state mechanism which is to maintain law and order of society. However, according to this title, the police is not a state mechanism that

protects citizens, but an unofficial group which assaults people who fight for their rights. As the video pointed out, the police was not the protector of people, but the ‘thugs’ of the regime who violated peoples’ rights.

One young person described the violence people received from the police, when asking for their rights, with the following words: “When people ask for water they get beaten up, when farmers ask for reliefs they get beaten up, when students ask for education they get beaten up. What the hell is this?” [translation is mine] (Favaz 2014). Another youth was more concerned about his children’s future than his: “Pls [please] take few secs [seconds] to listen to this... This can be our children’s future one day” (Jumly 2014). When Dhananjaya, another youth, saw the video when his (Facebook) friend shared it, he understood why these students got such a cruel beating: “These tears are worth a lot boys. You are poor... So suffer forever [...] give the vote to the great king” (2014). His statement “give the vote to the great king” should not be understood literally. It is rather asking from others if they still want to be treated like this by the Rajapaksa regime by voting for it. Jagath Samantha’s expression sums up the violence they have been experiencing. He sighed “Ohhh... when can we smile in this country” [translation is mine] (2014).

The other incident which grabbed the attention of Facebook during the election period was the physical attack on a group of radical artists and social activists named ‘Aluth Parapura’, (New Generation). When they were performing for the support of the common candidate, in a small town called Kumbukgete in Kurunegala district, Kamal Indika, a provincial councilor of the ruling party, with a group of Rajapaksa supporters physically assaulted this group. Since this group was mainly composed of youth who had been social media activists, they were able to generate massive support on Facebook against this brutal attack. However, before this incident,

the veteran artist, Jayathilaka Bandara, was subjected to two brutal physical assaults by President Rajapaksa's henchmen in Eppawala and Hambanthota, while campaigning for the common candidate. Therefore, the attack Aluth Parapura received was not uncommon for people who were campaigning against President Rajapaksa, but what was new this time was that Aluth Parapura managed to obtain massive support both in media and on social media. For example, the video which showed this assault obtained more than 2700 shares between 30<sup>th</sup> December 2014 and 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2015 (Newsfirst.lk 2014b).

Since this incident was extremely close to the election, people were creating an 'us vs them' dichotomy and categorizing and identifying others in relation to this. These artists who were beaten up by political 'thugs' were heralded as 'true artists' and artists who supported President Rajapaksa as 'buglers' (Ranathunga 2014). Another stated that "animals of Blue Brigade attacked artists" (Guruge 2014). Commenting on Guruge's post, a university lecturer, Daya Dissanayake, called these 'thugs' as "Blue Dogs' Brigade" (Dissanayake 2014). The dehumanization of supporters of Rajapaksa is an interesting element in the anti-Rajapaksa discourse. By dehumanizing the Rajapaksa supporters, anti-Rajapaksa discourse defined anti-Rajapaksa people as humans. Here animals symbolized irrational, barbaric and aggressive species while humans were presented as rational, civilized and peaceful. This brought another meaning to the anti-Rajapaksa discourse. That is during the Rajapaksa period, animals had been ruling humans. This rationalization illustrates how depressive the present they were living in was. Ashan Chaturanga summed up the whole situation in two words: "The reality" [translation is mine] (2014).

As illustrated, Rajapaksa regime tried to maintain, in Ranciere's terms, the hierarchical order of the society by using violence. For examples, when students, whose role in this hierarchy were to

study, demanded solutions for their problems and when artists, whose role were to support the Rajapaksa regime, campaigned against the injustice of the regime, reminded their place and the role in the hierarchy through violence. However, people challenged this hierarchy by opposing to the state violence on Facebook. As illustrated in the next section, the dissatisfaction about the present they were living was masterfully captured by campaigners of the common candidate and civil leaders.

### ***2.3 Living in a Dystopia***

The coherent picture of the dystopian present mainly emerged in two events. One was the song, “Aye aye noma iwasan” (Don’t tolerate again), which was one of the official songs of the common candidate campaign. This song became extremely popular in Facebook as well as other media, because it masterfully captured the dissatisfaction of the anti-Rajapaksa discourse with the Rajapaksa present. It had a nice melody and the lyrics perfectly addressed the frustration ordinary people had. Also the video of this song reminded of the dystopian reality. The translation of the song goes like this:

We were told lies,  
And we fall for it every time.  
We are in a middle of a desert, going nowhere.  
Time passes but no pride.  
Dreams are crushed.  
We have been wrong.  
Toleration...

Don’t ever, don’t ever tolerate [this again].  
Raise your heads who have courage.//

Toleration has finished...

Face shows frustration.  
Tiredness is in everyone’s face.  
When people who tolerate, suffer  
The whole world has gone forward.

Don't ever tolerate this again.  
Raise your heads who have hearts// (translation is mine)

This song claims that, under this regime, people have no dignity, no happiness but only helplessness, frustration and never ending tolerance of injustice. The reality they were facing was named as a desert, a place where no life is permitted. When you consider Sri Lanka, an island with beautiful rivers, waterfalls and vegetation, as a desert, it is what has happened to their lives under this regime. Also the lyrics combined past, present and future and illustrated the Rajapaksa regime an ahistorical entity. In other words, under the Rajapaksa regime, time became static. The past, the present and the future became one temporal context. For example, in the past, people were deceived by lies of a better future and what they experienced was misery. Therefore, the present remains hopeless. The misery was the same in the present as it was in the past. Nothing has changed. Also, the future would be the same as the past and the present because all the dreams have been crushed. As Marge Piercy points out, “[d]reams are the fire in us” (in Sargent 1994: 2). Politically speaking, dreams will, either individually or collectively, envision a better future with regard to a bad present. In other words, “[i]f we are frustrated by something in our society, we dream of a society in which it is corrected” (Sargent 1994: 4). And even though our dreams are fulfilled, “[w]e still dream at least in part because, content, we are capable of recognizing that others are not and feel that others should also be fulfilled” (Sargent 1994: 4). However, the song reminded people that they did not have dreams of a better future and as a result, they were stuck in this dystopian present.

The videos<sup>12</sup> of this song captured the meaning of this dystopia and forwarded a visual representation of that dystopia. Generally, there are two official versions of this. One is a shorter version of the original song which is used as a television advertisement (Young Generation Sri Lanka 2014). The shorter video was a choreographed version. It reconstructed four main incidents that happened in the last decade. They were the throwing stones by the Rajapaksa supporters at a peaceful protest of fishermen, the state violence on the protest in Rathupaswala, farmers protesting for a better price for their products and brutal attacks on university students. It resembled state brutality and oppression on non-violent protests of civilians. In the full version, the complete video is created through actual footages of government brutality available on YouTube (UPFA - A Brighter Future 2014e). In the beginning of the song, it reminded people that the video was based on true events and footages. It also stated that all the rights of these footages remained with the people who uploaded them to YouTube. In other words, the music video portrayed life under the Rajapaksa regime through the perspective of peoples' experiences. Unlike in the shorter version, the longer version managed to cover most of the important incidents which reflected the brutality of the Rajapaksa regime. For instance, it consisted of video clips of the families of forcefully disappeared people, deaths of unarmed protestors, the Rathupaswala incident, farmers' protests, brutal police attacks on university students, university lecturers' strike for allocation of 6% of GDP for education, the state sponsored violence on Muslims in Aluthgama and policemen ruthlessly attacking a mentally disabled person. This video became extremely popular on Facebook.

These versions, mainly the longer version, have been circulated and recirculated on official Facebook pages of the common candidate as well as on personal accounts of Facebook users

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<sup>12</sup> There are a number of unofficial videos done by ordinary people. This fact will be discussed thoroughly in the next chapter.

(UPFA - A Brighter Future 2014e, 2014f). One concurred with the recreation of the video by stating “True Stories” (Vanarkadie 2014) and another, “REAL VEDIO [Video]” (Kumarawardana 2014). Dikkumbura, a youth, who attached himself to the pain, experienced by the people in the video, stated while sharing it on his timeline, “Sorry to say [that] this is my country” (Dikkumbura 2014).

However, the most accurate metaphor to describe the dystopian nature of the Rajapaksa present was introduced by a prominent political activist and a civil leader, Gamini Viyangoda. In a television debate, he used the Sinhala translation of the poem, ‘The Buddha’s Parable of the Burning House’, written by Bertolt Brecht, and this became viral in cyber space (We Are Ready 2014a). Since it was a story of Buddha, this reached a wider population in Sri Lanka. For example, within a week, it received approximately 4000 shares on Facebook. The poem began like this:

Lately I saw a house. It was burning. The flames  
Licked at its roof. I went up close and observed  
That there were people still inside. I opened the door and  
called  
Out to them that the roof was ablaze, so exhorting them  
To leave at once. But those people  
Seemed in no hurry. One of them,  
When the heat was already scorching his eyebrows,  
Asked me what it was like outside, whether it wasn’t raining  
Whether the wind wasn’t blowing perhaps, Whether there  
was  
Another house for them, and more of this kind (Brecht 2011)

Here Viyangoda compared the Rajapaksha regime to a burning house. There are people inside this burning house and they are almost about to burn, yet do nothing to survive. When Buddha opens the door and screams to them to come out, they stay emotionlessly and inquire about the positives and negatives of their alternatives. This showed how numb people had been under the Rajapaksa regime. They had no hope for a better future and were waiting to be burnt by the

flames. As illustrated above, the past, the present and the future had become a static entity where even a small change was impossible to imagine. Since the poem is written from Buddha's point of view or, in other words, from a point of view of an outsider who sees the burning house and what is about to happen to the people inside, Viyangoda attempted to point out the way an outsider of the Rajapaksa discourse sees the reality of their present. Akila Rupasingha, a youth, explained his expression to this video while sharing it on his timeline which recollected the general attitude about this video: "Just WOW.....The perfect explanation....." (Rupasingha 2014).

This is how the anti-Rajapaksa discourse understood and represented the experience of living under the Rajapaksa regime. It was living like senseless humans while everything around them was burning (or falling apart). And if they stayed doing nothing as they had been throughout the Rajapaksa regime, all of them would be destroyed. As I argued, this was a dystopian present which was not just an imaginary entity but a real phenomenon. In other word, this dystopia was, as Foucault pointed out, a heterotopia.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter described how people envisioned the present they were living in. As pointed out, they were extremely frustrated about their lives and others' lives. There was unimaginable corruption of public funding and properties as well as brutal violence against innocent citizens in the country. Therefore, what they were experiencing was dystopia. The first part of the chapter was concentrated on corruption and how it was represented on Facebook. The second part illustrated how people reacted on Facebook to violence they saw their fellow citizens were experiencing. The final section attempted to recollect these expressions and represent them in a

coherent picture. To do that, the official videos of the common candidate's campaign and the statement of a civil leader were analyzed. These examples were viral incidents on Facebook because they represented peoples' feelings.

This chapter discussed how dystopia was represented in the anti-Rajapaksa discourse, in relation to the research question of 'how individuals who belong to different social strata collectively used the idea of dystopia as a positive tool to overthrow the Rajapaksa regime in social media'. As I pointed out, I attempted to deviate from the common understanding of dystopia as an imaginary entity by placing the concept of dystopia in a real context. This understanding of the present as a dystopia was extremely important in this research because people envisioned their future and what they should do to achieve that future was basically based on this understanding. Therefore, dystopia played a positive role in this regime transformation. This will be thoroughly examined in the next chapter.

### Chapter 3: Maithri Palanayak

“For common [people like] us, *Maithri palanayak* (a rule of benevolence). A new country in a hundred days!” This was how the official song<sup>13</sup> of the common candidate ended. Also, this was one of the main slogans they used in electronic advertisements. The word *Maithri*, the name of the governance of the common candidate if he had won, was the shorter form of the common candidate’s full name, *Maithripala Sirisena*. As discussed in the previous chapter, people expressed their frustration of living in a dystopia on Facebook, or *a burning house* as described by Gamini Viyangoda. Therefore, as the common candidate’s campaign advertised, the common candidate’s rule would be benevolent (as his name suggested) for ordinary people (and merciless for anyone who did wrong).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the common candidate was not imposing his ideas on people, instead he was going with people’s anger and frustration for being treated unjustly by the Rajapaksa regime. In other words, as I will argue in this chapter, the common candidate was used as a tool to escape from the Rajapaksa dystopia. In order to do that, I will thoroughly analyze the debates that occurred on Facebook as well as posts, videos, and photos which were widely circulated on Facebook. This chapter begins by discussing how the common candidate brought hope to the anti-Rajapaksa discourse of defeating the Rajapaksa regime. Then the chapter discusses how people critically evaluated their future if the common candidate would win. The final part of the chapter focuses on what people did on Facebook to defeat the Rajapaksa regime.

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<sup>13</sup> This song was thoroughly examined in the previous chapter.

### 3.1 Hope

As discussed in the previous chapter, people were numb in the Rajapaksa regime. There was no hope about theirs and their children's future. If you attempted to show any discontent in the real world, you were beaten up by a state mechanism or the Rajapaksa henchmen. Therefore, the general attitude of President Rajapaksa's rule was that though his rule was extremely corrupt and oppressive, there was no possible alternative to replace Rajapaksa. As a result, people were basically prepared for a long reign of President Rajapaksa.

However, this atmosphere of impotence changed dramatically when President Rajapaksa called the presidential election on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015. When the presidential election was announced, the general secretary of SLFP, Maithripala Sirisena along with a few key cabinet ministers, crossed over from the ruling alliance to the opposition and the main opposition political parties named him as the common candidate of the opposition<sup>14</sup>. Unlike other politicians in the ruling alliance, Sirisena had a low profile though he was the general secretary of SLFP because it was the Rajapaksas who had the limelight during the Rajapaksa period. He also had a relatively clean

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<sup>14</sup> The idea of a common candidate also did not originate from political parties. Civil leaders including veteran Buddhist monk, late venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha thero, former president of the Federation of University Teachers' Association, Dr. Nirmal Dewasiri, prominent lecturer, Prof. Sarath Wijesinghe, constitution specialist, Dr. Jayampathi Wickramaratne and trade union leader, Saman Rathnapriya were the main architects of this idea. What these civil leaders understood was that no single opposition party would be able to defeat President Rajapaksa alone. The solution they proposed for this problem was the idea of the common candidate who was a non-political party person supported at least by the United National Party (UNP), People's Liberation Party (JVP), Tamil National Alliance and a few regional ethnic minority parties. In order to gain the support of these parties, ideals such as good governance, democracy and rule of law were emphasized. The main tasks of the common candidate were to abolish the executive presidency and the proportional electoral system and to reestablish the independent commissions introduced by the seventeenth amendment to the constitution to appoint key government servants. These civil leaders organized these ideas under the name of The National Movement for a Just Society. This movement was able to attract public attention. Even Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha thero went as far as naming himself as the common candidate if these political parties were unable to agree on ideals and policies and tried to contest in the election by themselves. As a result of this pressure, opposition parties could not carry out their own political agendas. Therefore, when Sirisena crossed over, the political ground was already prepared for him to be the common candidate by this civil movement. Since Sirisena crossed over from the ruling alliance, practically he was a party-less person.

record on corruption and misuse of state power. Therefore, Sirisena seemed in the public eye a relatively *good* politician to replace President Rajapaksa.

Apart from that, the main opposition political parties, ethnic minority parties, a considerable fraction of the ruling alliance including Sinhala Buddhist nationalist groups as well as leftist groups, the civil society and most importantly, ethnic minority groups united around the common candidate. Ideologically there were significant differences among these groups, yet they rallied around policies such as the abolition of the presidential system and empowering the seventeenth amendment of the constitution. With this alliance, statistically, the common candidate was not far behind President Rajapaksa in terms of votes, at the beginning of the election campaign. In fact, most people started to believe that in terms of votes, the common candidate was ahead of the president.

Maduluwawe Sobitha thero, in a newspaper interview, done in March 2014, stated the goals of The National Movement for a Just Society, which consisted of civil leaders who were demanding a just society from the Rajapaksa regime (Sobitha 2014). Under the title, “Democracy is over”, Sobitha thero discussed how the presidential system in Sri Lanka had diminished the power of parliament and the judiciary system.<sup>15</sup> This erosion of democracy, according to Sobitha thero, rapidly increased under the Rajapaksa regime, which finally came to its end. Therefore, the most important task of the common candidate was to abolish the presidential system and design a new constitution for a parliamentary system. The other task was to re-establish the constitutional council and independent commissions for the police, election, judicial services, human rights and public services. The purpose of these institutions which were established under the seventeenth amendment was to strengthen the democracy of Sri Lanka by protecting these institutions from

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<sup>15</sup> This was discussed thoroughly in the previous chapter.

political influence and make them as independent as possible. The seventeenth amendment had been implemented in 2001 and was dismantled under the first term of President Rajapaksa. After his landslide victory in the 2010 parliamentary election, he demolished the independence of these commissions by bringing them under his authority.

The goals of The National Movement for a Just Society represented the general attitude to the Rajapaksa regime. When proposing these goals and tasks to people and demanding these ideals from the politicians, civil leaders always based on ideals like good governance, democracy and rule of law. As a result, the way civil leaders discussed a future without Rajapaksa looked like a utopian society without violence and corruption, where justice could be achieved regardless of your social status. As a result, solutions this movement proposed were widely approved both in and out of Facebook. By proposing a utopian society, civil leaders were not simply suggesting some type of an imaginary place impossible to achieve. What they successfully did was to inject hope into people. Ruwan Nelu, a prominent youth who spoke up against the injustice of the Rajapaksas on Facebook, stated masterfully how hopeful he was: “Yes [we are] afraid! We are also not heroes! But we also can do [it] [...] Yes, we are afraid you demon! But not [as afraid as] to stop doing this task [of defeating Rajapaksa]! Come on boss [Rajapaksa], we’ll see who wins” (Nelu 2014a)<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, when Sirisena accepted the proposals forwarded by civil leaders, hope of a better future started to emerge. People started to use ‘My3’ rather than ‘Maithri’ (the first name of Sirisena) to address Sirisena, which indicated that this candidate was closer to them than the president Rajapaksa. This optimism of defeating President Rajapaksa was clearly visible on Facebook. However, Ruwan Nelu saw the danger of a complacent anti-Rajapaksa campaign due

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<sup>16</sup> Nelu posted this on timeline two months before the election when there was no sign of Sirisena’s crossover.

to the common candidate phenomena. Under the title, ‘this is a moment to stop love stories’, he stated,

The opposition won the common candidate ‘game’. Some act as they have won the whole presidential election. To bring a person no one expected as the common candidate is a significant step. But this is not a duel as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of two duelists, there are the spectators who have to vote to win or lose. Also the people who win in a game are the players, not the spectators who watched it. In order to maintain fun [*athal nokedimata*] even after the party, there has to be a people’s action for people’s expectations in this fight [translation is mine] (Nelu 2014b).

He made an interesting observation about the voters, whom he described as spectators who watched politics from a distance rather than actors who critically and dynamically engaged in it. While sharing Nelu’s post on his timeline, Sameera Samarasinghe stated: “Actually this was the time for these people to be upgraded from followers to ‘citizens’” [translation is mine] (Samarasinghe 2014). Nelu and Samarasinghe both agreed that this was not the time for people to wait for others to fulfill their dream of a better future; instead they should act for themselves to achieve their own dreams.

The idea of the common candidate came to the forefront in the Sri Lankan political space due to the efforts of several individuals committed to finding a way to overthrow the Rajapaksa regime. Due to the campaign of the idea of the common candidate in the material reality by these prominent civil leaders, the idea of a common candidate became also popular on Facebook. When Maithripala Sirisena crossed over, he generated significant hope among anti-Rajapaksa people that there was a possibility of defeating Rajapaksa. But did people follow him blindly or were they critical of him? This was an important aspect of this regime change.

### **3.2 Was My3 The Savior or The Villain?**

When Sirisena became the common candidate, people discussed on Facebook his credibility to represent people because he held a prominent place in the government, yet he did not take any substantive action against wrongdoings of the regime. Many expressed how they felt about Sirisena on Facebook. Chameera Dedduwage, a well-known figure on Facebook, described Sirisena, in one of his comments to his own post, as “a muddy pothole in the middle of a desert”. He further stated, “in this moment, he [Sirisena] is not the best solution...but the [only] alternative [we have] is him” [translation is mine] (Dedduwage 2014a). Nuwan Malaka put this idea bluntly: “I do not say that Maithripala Yapa Sirisena is a lotus of this political mire [or] the Bosath<sup>17</sup> from [the heaven named] Tauthisa. It is a joke to find a virgin in the brothel called Sri Lankan politics” [translation is mine] (Malaka 2014).

Therefore, it was evident that people were not committing their effort to replace Rajapaksa with Sirisena but to have policies that he agreed to implement. Dhanushka Premarathna commented to a post on a Facebook group which stated that Rajapaksa and Sirisena were the same, “my 3 should be given power to achieve essential political reforms for the country. If he did not do them, he would fall into the bin of history. Even if he does not do these [policies], still that ideology would win because people gave him the power in order to do those things” [the translation is mine] (Premarathna 2014). Commenting to the same post, Weeraparakrama Narendrasinghe described these essential reforms as a wish “to overthrow the bandit king, to abolish the executive system [and] establish independent commissions...” [translation is mine] (Narendrasinghe 2014).

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<sup>17</sup> A person who will be Buddha in a future birth.

Kasun Pathirana, a young radical, articulated these ideas in an intellectual fashion in one of his Facebook posts. He rightly pointed out that the cult of personalities had been a fundamental factor in Sri Lanka politics. Therefore, rather than following personalities, he stated “the common candidate is not an individual person but a series of political principles which originated after the common consent of antagonistic political parties, groups [and] organizations. As a result, [we] have to agree not on political characters but on principles” [the translation is mine] (Pathirana 2014).

Supporting principles rather than political individuals was not the only critical rationalization of supporting Sirisena. Chameera Dedduwage had a very simple reason to support Sirisena. He stated, after posting a long list of wrongdoings under the Rajapaksa regime, “yes.. I support [Sirisena].. That is, not because I gain any personal benefit [from Sirisena], but because I do not want this [vote] to be my last vote” [translation is mine] (Dedduwage 2014b). In a short period of time, 89 people shared this post<sup>18</sup> and many had the caption, “not to be the last vote”. These people were extremely confident that the country would witness an undemocratic dictatorship if President Rajapaksa was reelected.

When Viyangoda recited Brecht’s ‘The Buddha’s Parable of the Burning House’, he had a similar idea to Dedduwage’s. As the latter part of the poem goes:

Without answering  
I went out again. These people here, I thought,  
Must burn to death before they stop asking questions.

Truly, friends,  
Unless a man feels the ground so hot underfoot that he’d gladly  
Exchange it for any other, sooner than stay, to him  
I have nothing to stay... (Brecht 2011)

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<sup>18</sup> According to my observation, to have that number of shares for a personal post is significant in the Sri Lankan social media context.

In this poem, Buddha says to the people who were half burnt in this burning house that ‘you are all going to die soon. Therefore, there is no point in inquiring about the negatives and positives of your only possible alternative. You can worry about the consequences of your actions later. When you apply this idea to the Sri Lankan political context, Viyangoda was simply pointing out the uselessness of evaluating Sirisena’s credentials as a politician because he was the only possible option to defeat Rajapaksa.

Because of the uncertainty of how Sirisena would act after obtaining power, many Facebook activists did not bank their goals on him. As a result, *Maithri Palanaya* (a rule of benevolence) cannot be understood as a utopia. The best way to understand the Sirisena phenomena is that people used Sirisena as a tool to escape from the Rajapaksa dystopia. Therefore, as Nirmal Dewasiri, a university lecturer and a prominent civil leader, once stated, defeating Rajapaksa and his regime was most important. If Sirisena fulfill at least some of his promises, then it would be a bonus.<sup>19</sup> Ravisha Thilakawardana, another prominent Facebook activist, posted a quotation on his timeline that was taken from the blog of Chinthana Dharmadasa<sup>20</sup> and which excellently articulated the dynamism of the common candidate movement.

This is why I like the common candidate movement. It is again a hope. It is an anonymous revolution. Who is the common candidate, will he win or will Mahinda be defeated are not most important. The most important thing is that there is at least a small number of people who can think, question and oppose. That change is enough for us to celebrate. [translation is mine] (Thilakawardana 2014).

Therefore, was Sirisena the savior or the villain? As described in this section, the answer was neither. People knew how corrupt Sri Lankan politics was from their own experiences. Therefore, unlike in previous elections, people were promoting principles. Since Facebook allowed a large number of people to express their opinions, promoting principles became

<sup>19</sup> Through a personal correspondence with Nirmal Dewasiri.

<sup>20</sup> He was a well-known figure of *Aluth Parapura*.

immensely popular among the Facebook community. As a result, the common candidate movement did not revolve around individuals but around principles and Sirisena was considered as a tool to achieve these principle.

### ***3.3 Social Media As a Space for Information and Discussion***

As discussed above, people did not rally around Sirisena, instead they took the responsibility for overthrowing President Rajapaksa into their own hands. By forming loose collectivities, individuals debated, discussed, shared information as well as their opinions and pressurized others, who were undecided in whom to vote, to vote for Sirisena. This volunteer activism flourished on Facebook, and interestingly, it was highly independent from Sirisena's official campaign. The dynamism of this activism surprised not only the organizers of Sirisena's campaign but also the organizers of the Rajapaksa campaign. For example, one of the leading Rajapaksa campaigners who wanted to be anonymous, stated "[w]e could not even match the scale of social media campaigns of Maithree" (Kalansooriya 2014). Also, Karu Paranawithana, now a deputy minister of the Sirisena government, stated during the election campaign, "[i]t [social media campaign] is entirely a social mobilization and we have nothing to do with these social media campaigners" (Kalansooriya 2014).

It is important to keep in mind that there is no particular moment for the beginning of Facebook activism against Rajapaksa. Some had started this mission way before Sirisena's crossover, and some joined these Facebook campaigns after Sirisena's crossover. Also, this Facebook activism happened in different spaces and in different forms and sometimes these different spaces and forms were independent of each other. This gave the whole Facebook activism an anarchistic

flavor where no one was in charge of these Facebook campaigns. The following sections will discuss different spheres and tactics people used in order to defeat the Rajapaksa regime.

### **3.3.1 Intellectual Space**

Due to the ultra-nationalistic tendency of the Rajapaksa regime, it did not allow people to discuss the issues faced by Tamils, the largest minority of the country. People who were raising concerns for Tamils were labeled as ‘betrayers’ or ‘people who do not love their motherland’. From a Rancierean point of view, in the hierarchy of the Rajapaksa regime, this topic had not been assigned for ordinary people to discuss. However, Nirmal Dewasiri started publishing a series of highly radical and intellectual articles on the Tamil issue simultaneously in a blog and a radical newspaper. Also, he posted them in a group called ‘Jathika Chinthanaya’ (National Thinking), which was created to discuss and justify Sinhala Buddhist nationalistic thinking, the official ideology of the Rajapaksa regime. In this regard, Dewasiri’s aim was to discuss and debate with Sinhala Buddhist nationalists about the Sinhala Buddhist discourse on the Tamil issue from the viewpoint of a Tamil. In contrast to his newspaper publications, those same articles received tremendous attention from the Facebook community. To his first couple of articles, there were somewhere around 20 to 30 comments. But participation rose rapidly. For instance, his 8<sup>th</sup> article received 200 comments (Dewasiri 2013a) and the next one 115 comments (Dewasiri 2013b). Apart from that, he posted his opinions with regard to these debates and some of them received 200 comments. Moreover, sympathizers and critics to Dewasiri’s position posted lengthy comments or articles on the same Facebook group.

Though the majority of comments, posts and articles were highly intellectual, most of the commentators from both sides were not academics but ordinary people who did not have time to

participate in a political discussion, yet, they voiced their opinion. Apart from that, most of them possessed a bachelor's degree and most of these degrees were not in social sciences but in natural sciences<sup>21</sup>. This shows the diversity of the actors in this debate. As mentioned above, social media became a good platform to discuss this controversial topic.

### **3.3.2 Space for Information**

On Facebook, censored subjects such as the Rajapaksa family and the Rajapaksa administration have been heavily criticized. In the mainstream media, there was news on the Rajapaksa family's wrongdoings. However, no media criticized Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the youngest brother of the President Rajapaksa, due to the fear of life. It was a popular secret that he was controlling the repressive machinery of the state. For example, Nirmal Dewasiri, who was also one of the early critics of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was informally informed by the management of a mainstream newspaper that it cannot publish his weekly column due to its heavy criticism of Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Dewasiri 2012). This self-censorship of mainstream media on Gotabaya Rajapaksa was exposed to the public, when the Tamil parliamentarian, M.A Sumanthiran, famously, asked in a panel discussion and an interactive session organized by the Sri Lanka Journalists' Trade Union (SLJTU), "why aren't there cartoons on Gotabaya?" (Lanka News Web 2013). This was an excellent observation because during the Rajapaksa era, the most critical and the uncensored segment in a newspaper was cartoons. Even in TV segments of newspaper readings in the morning, cartoons were given a prominent place. However, as Sumanthiran rightly pointed out, there were cartoons of the president, his relatives, ministers and other people, but not of Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

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<sup>21</sup> Since I was also an active participant in these debates, these are my observations.

Conversely, this was not the case in Facebook, where a number of incidents regarding Gotabaya Rajapaksa were circulated, discussed and debated. For example, no media channel or newspaper attended the District Court of Mount Lavinia, Colombo to cover Gotabaya Rajapaksa's testifying. However, there was only one reporter brave enough to cover the event and the police did not allow him to video Gotabaya Rajapaksa. However, he managed to record all these police interventions. Later, this video was posted on Facebook (Alokaya 2014) and had 675 shares. Some Facebook users added a caption when sharing this video, which shows how critical they are. For instance, there were captions like "is Gota<sup>22</sup> the almighty god?", "Don't get into trouble later after recording Gota" and "They say people who have brains don't record Gota". It is also important to note that this news was not mentioned in any mainstream media. There was another popular video, where he threatens via mobile phone to a senior police officer to withdraw all the police from protecting the UN head office from a pro government rally (UPFA-A Brighter Future 2014). This video shows to what extent the police had been politicized. This video was immensely popular on Facebook and received approximately 270,000 views, 2500 likes and 18,000 shares. Also there were another 150 comments, most of them showing their discontent with this incident. These people were criticizing Gotabaya Rajapaksa's place in the Rajapaksa hierarchy which had been forbidden for ordinary people.

Apart from being a platform to voice one's opinion, Facebook, as discussed above, became a space to share and receive the latest political news which have been censored in mainstream media. Mostly, these news were circulated on Facebook as gossip because, due to the censorship, it was extremely difficult to verify the reliability. However, this gossip was much more reliable than news received from mainstream media. For example, a parliamentarian of the ruling party

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<sup>22</sup> Gota is the nick name for Gotabaya Rajapaksha.

who was extremely close to the Rajapaksa family physically assaulted the Sri Lankan high commissioner in the United Kingdom in 2014. This parliamentarian was well known for his involvement in corruption and the high commissioner was a respectable official. This incident first appeared on Facebook as a gossip. However, later on, it was verified and was even debated in parliament (Ape Media Social Media 2014a).

### **3.3.3 Humor as a Political Tool**

Humor played a key role in establishing and reminding people of the idea of living in dystopia. According to Henri Bergson, “however spontaneous it [the comic] seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary” (Wedeen 2013: 870). During the election campaign, activists distorted audios or videos of President Rajapaksa’s speeches or his campaign advertisements. In one Facebook poster, President Rajapaksa says very seriously, “My dear venerable thero<sup>23</sup>, I will never let any power to destroy, betray for dollars or destabilize the country. I will do all these by myself” (Maithree Dinawamu 2014). This humorously illustrates how destructive his regime was. Moreover, in an election advertisement, a young actress talks about why she prefers President Rajapaksa. She says, “Is there anyone who can take responsibility for our future better than him [President Rajapaksa]?” (Madyawediya 2014). However before she starts talking, we see a video of a man covered in blood, screaming “it was police who assaulted me”. This video of an actual incident replaced the original video which portrays a prosperous future under President Rajapaksa. As a result, it gives a contradictory but extremely funny reflection of police brutality and Rajapaksa promising a better future.

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<sup>23</sup> He was addressing Buddhist monks

There was another video which went as following: A young guy went to a boutique to buy a cigarette. When he bought one he saw an old man suffering from hunger. The young guy did not have money to buy food for this old man. Therefore he returned the cigarette, bought some food with the money and fed the old man. The video then requested its viewers, “come, let’s work for the country”. The main message was to point out how good these blue brigade youths were. However, someone had put humorous subtitles to this video giving a totally different meaning to the original. According to these subtitles, “a guy from Blue Brigade goes to a boutique to buy a cigarette. Though the youths in Blue Brigade smoke cigarettes, they are kind hearted [discouraging smoking and consuming alcohol was a main ideological component of the government]. After buying a cigarette, he sees an old man with no money to buy food. It indicates that during Mahinda’s government, there are people in hunger sitting in front of every boutique. The youth returns the cigarette and buys a bun for the old man. It states that even the price of a cigarette has sky rocketed so much that you can buy a meal from the price of a cigarette. It also illustrates that although we sacrifice our own needs for the wellbeing of the others, government does not do anything. [Finally it changes the request as] Come, let’s work for the [Rajapaksa] family” (We Are Ready 2014b).

### **3.3.4 Individual Volunteerism**

Facebook activism introduced a new type of collectivism to Sri Lankan politics. As described in the chapter 1, in this new collectivism, the importance of being in a place where the real action was happening decreased dramatically. For example, “[s]everal individuals in Europe had volunteered to keep the page [that is ‘Rajapaksa, We are Ready’ one of the most influential political pages during the election] alive when the Sri Lankan team goes to sleep” (Kalansooriya 2014). In other words, people who were keen to defeat the Rajapaksa regime did not have to be

in Sri Lanka to support the struggle. Instead, as Wellman (2001) points out, ‘place’ had become an insignificant factor due to the emergence of Facebook.

The origin of ‘Rajapaksa, We are Ready’ Facebook page, was a spontaneous decision among a few Facebook activists. Ravisha Thilakawardana, one of the founders of this page, described it in the following words: “We were a group of unknown individuals who used to chat on socio-political issues on Facebook. But a few of us gathered at a bar on the night of Maithri’s cross over and thought we should do something. When we finished a couple of beer bottles, the Facebook page was already up and running” (Kalansooriya 2014). When ‘Rajapaksa, We are Ready’ page became popular in a short time, Sirisena campaigners requested this group to join the official Facebook page of Sirisena, ‘UPFA-A Brighter Future’ and, due to this, this page became one of the most influential pages during the election period. In a post roughly one year after the calling of the presidential election, UPFA-A Brighter Future page stated that it received only 40000 likes during the period from 2010 to 21<sup>st</sup> November 2014. The number of likes had increased up to 357,000 during one year; and only in the night of January 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, the page received 18,000 likes. In some weeks during the election, the number of total post reach<sup>24</sup> went as high as 15 million<sup>25</sup> (UPFA-A Brighter Future 2015b).

Since there were no reliable election polls to predict the election result, Chameera Dedduwage took this matter in his own hands. On 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2014, while travelling from Bemmulla to Pettah by train, roughly a 30km distance, he listened to the political discussions among the passengers taking place on that journey and categorized to whom these passengers might vote. He assumed 4 passengers would vote for the president and more than 11 passengers for the

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<sup>24</sup> In Facebook terms, post reach indicates the number of views to all the posts of a particular Facebook page.

<sup>25</sup> This post does not explicitly state that this amount of post reach occurred during the presidential election.

common candidate. 4 passengers did not want to vote for no one or rejected these two candidates. Interestingly, 16 passengers did not participate in these discussions (Dedduwage 2014c). Commenting to this post, Nihal Priyashantha described the political composition of 50 people of his workplace as 62% for the common candidate, 29% for the president and other 9%. (Priyashantha 2014). On 21<sup>st</sup> December, 2014 approximately between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m., Dedduwage did 50 informal face-to-face interviews between Maharagama and Dehiwala, an area which traditionally understood as pro-Rajapaksa. The results were following:

Vote for Mahinda – 14 (reasons are below)

- No Chandrika [Kumaratunga]/Ranil [Wickramasinghe]<sup>26</sup> (5)
- Construction of roads and parks (5)
- Won the war/saved the country (3)
- No reason (1)

Vote for Maithri – 21 (reasons are below)

- No law in the country (6)
- The weight of loans are high/sold the country to China (6)
- Waste, corruption, fraud, nepotism (3)
- Buddhists were discriminated (3)
- Hard to live (1)
- The country is going in the wrong direction (1)
- Have to show the gratitude<sup>27</sup> (1)

People who refused to give their opinion – (15)

\*Important- [Rajapaksa will win by] tricks/ fraud/ violence [-] (10) [translation is mine] (Dedduwage 2014d).

One can argue that these surveys and polls were unreliable. However, the most important aspect here is the effort these individuals put to combine the reality in the grassroots level with Facebook. As described above, the mainstream media had been biased towards President Rajapaksa. Therefore, even though one sensed through one's daily interactions and observations that the momentum of the election was with Sirisena, one did not see that momentum in the

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<sup>26</sup> Chandrika Kumaratunga was the president before Mahinda Rajapaksa. Though they belong to the same political party, they had an intense political relationship due to their social status. Ranil Wickramasinghe had been the opposition leader as well as the leader of the main opposition party for nearly two decades.

<sup>27</sup> This was politically a sarcastic reason. Vote for Rajapaksa 'to show your gratitude' was a popular slogan in Rajapaksa campaign. In this regard, this person was going to show 'his gratitude' to Rajapaksa by voting for Sirisena.

mainstream media. Therefore, in these informal surveys and interviews, individuals were sharing their individual observations and perceptions to others on the political condition of the grassroots level by posting them on Facebook.

As discussed before, the Rajapaksa regime used violence to suppress the people's outrage against the regime in public places. However, the suppression of the anti-Rajapaksa camp was heavily challenged during a cricket match between Sri Lanka and England<sup>28</sup> on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2014. As illustrated in the previous chapter how President Rajapaksa used every opportunity to advertise himself, President Rajapaksa (or some of his campaigners) thought that this match was the best place to advertise the president due to the participation of a large crowd. But when the official slogan of Rajapaksa, "[wish you] a prosperous future!" (Suba Anagathayak), appeared on the giant electronic screen on the ground, people started to boo (Ape Media Social Media 2014b). A photo of a youth, named Minfak Ahamed, holding a placard which stated "We came here to watch cricket. Sorry to say guys, [d]on't telecast political [a]dvertisements on big [s]creen.....", was shared on UPFA-A Brighter Future page (2014h). This was considered as a brave act by the general Facebook community. By commenting to this video, Fazly Mowjood asked, "Is this guy still alive.... somebody please check [smiley emoticon]" (Mowjood 2014) and Ahamed had to reply to this comment to show that no harm had come so far by the Rajapaksa regime.

Though the crowd did not tolerate the regime's intervention of that moment, they embraced the creativity of some individuals who used the next and final match between Sri Lanka and England to advertise Sirisena. These individuals were holding banners and placards which said, "MY3 [:] Sanga, Mahela, Dilly" (appendix 3). In a non-political context, this would be read as 'my three [favorite players of the Sri Lankan cricket team] are Kumar Sangakkara, Mahela Jayawardene

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<sup>28</sup> England cricket team was touring Sri Lanka.

and Thilakaratne Dilshan<sup>29</sup>. Even the international sports broadcasters who had no idea about the Sri Lankan political context understood these banners and placards in that way and as a result, throughout the match these were broadcast as a sign of love of the Sri Lankan crowd for their three Sri Lankan legends. However, as mentioned earlier, My3 was the shorter version for Maithri. Therefore, what these individuals were creatively doing was advertising the common candidate without breaking any rules or the ethics of the sport. This creativity was highly appreciated on Facebook. Deshan Wijethunge commented: “this is 1000% more creative than putting [the slogan of] a prosperous future on the LED [screen]” [translation is mine] (Wijethunge 2014). Daham Harshana saw the politics behind this creativity: “this was the answer of the people to the advertisement put on the screen by the great king” (Harshana 2014).

This section points out how individuals conducted their support for the common candidate in general and common principles in particular, in different ways and different spaces. Some intellectuals were trying to demolish key elements of the Rajapaksa discourse such as the power of Sinhala Buddhist identity. Some were creating Facebook pages and groups in order to facilitate people to obtain information which they did not receive from the mainstream media and also to discuss and express their opinions, ideas and thoughts on the Sri Lankan politics. Here people used humor as a political tool to show their frustration towards the government and also to convey anti-Rajapaksa messages in a simple way to a broader Facebook community. Apart from these acts, individuals attempted to support the common candidate within the limitations of their personal lives. In this regard, they transformed their private activities like going to see a cricket match into a political one by finding creative ways to show their support for the common candidate.

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<sup>29</sup> These three players were highly recognized as best in the contemporary era not only in Sri Lanka but also in the cricketing world.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the complexity of the common candidate discourse and the volunteer activism of common people on Facebook. As described in the previous chapter, people, in general were numb in their dystopian present. However, when Maithripala Sirisena became the common candidate, a slight hope of defeating President Rajapaksa started to emerge. Since people were extremely aware of the Sri Lankan politics, they did not consider Sirisena as the savior who would bring a better future. Instead, they emphasized achieving political reforms based on principles. In that sense, they were using Sirisena as a tool to escape from their dystopian present. As evident in the election, the common candidate campaign did not have the material means to compete with the Rajapaksa campaign, which used significant wealth in its advertisement campaigns. However, people, through their capacity, worked to defeat the Rajapaksa regime.

In answers to the research question of ‘how individuals who belong to different social strata collectively used the idea of dystopia as a positive tool to overthrow the Rajapaksa regime in social media’, this chapter has pointed out how people, based on their realization of the dystopian present, used Facebook to escape from that dystopia. In order to achieve that goal, they shared various news items on Facebook which were (self) censored in mainstream media and also reinvented Facebook as a political space from a private space initially used to connect with friends. By using it as a political space, they discussed, debated and expressed their opinions about the present they were living, in order to change the Rajapaksa regime, the main cause for their dystopian present. However, when the president called the election, Facebook became a place to convince people to vote for the common candidate. During this whole period, the anti-Rajapaksa discourse used dystopia as a positive concept in order to encourage people to

overcome their oppressive present. Finally, in the morning of 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2015, people realized that their efforts had not been wasted after seeing a Facebook video where Rajapaksa was fleeing from the presidential residence back to his home town.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

How did butterflies take down giants? Or in more academic terms, how did people who had no power in the Rajapaksa regime took down the most oppressive regime the post-colonial Sri Lanka had ever witnessed. In this context, the thesis is organized in order to understand how people used social media as a platform to discuss, debate and express their opinion about the present they were living. To be more specific, the research question of the thesis was, ‘how individuals who belong to different social strata collectively used in social media the idea of dystopia as a positive tool to overthrow the Rajapaksa regime’. Through these discussions, debates and expressions, the Rajapaksa regime was commonly understood as a dystopia in social media. As I argued, people used the realization of them living in a dystopia to escape from that present. Therefore, in this political context, dystopia was used as a positive idea rather than a negative one. Since the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movements, the political impact of social media has been one of the most discussed topics in political science. This research has widened the literature on social media by bringing the concept of dystopia to the forefront of the discussion.

The main empirical findings have been discussed in Chapter 2, ‘The Burning House’, and chapter 3, ‘Maithri Palanayak’. In ‘The Burning House’, I presented how people expressed their displeasure with the oppression and the corruption of the Rajapaksa regime on Facebook. As I argued, peoples’ expressions illustrated how depressed they were about their present. In order to conceptualize this present, the concept of dystopia was used. The chapter “Maithri Palanayak” discussed the effort people made on Facebook to escape from their dystopic present. As pointed out, people did not consider the common candidate, Maithripala Sirisena, as the savior who

would guide them to a better future. Instead, people had already realized through their own experiences that it was better to promote principles rather than individuals. Therefore, people used Facebook to convince people to vote for the common candidate.

Since the general opinion, from the far right to the far left, of the regime transformation as an elite change, this research describes how people who were less concerned about elite politics, acted with other Facebook users regardless of their social status. For instance, the anti-Rajapaksa discourse was strengthened by people from all walks of life. Due to the fact that Facebook was accessible to anyone, people, regardless of their social statuses, engaged in lively debates and discussions. In other words, Facebook became a platform to share information of the Rajapaksa regime and discuss various political topics. Most importantly, these Facebook activities occurred without the surveillance of the regime and were not controlled by any type of a governmental or private group. Therefore, in general, the individuality (of different opinions) had become important on Facebook. These factors had led to the emergence of a large group of individuals who were independent from the influence of the mainstream politics. As I have illustrated, in this regime transformation, the influence of this group was significant. Even the officials of the Rajapaksa campaign as well as the Sirisena campaign concurred this factor.

The other most important element which has been discussed in this research is the massive difference in power between the Rajapaksa campaign and the Sirisena campaign. The Rajapaksa campaign was a well-organized campaign which used state mechanisms and state funding without any limit. Contrary to this, Facebook campaigns for Sirisena basically relied on the volunteerism of Facebook users. In other words, this campaign had no formal organization or structure, yet it was able to propel the momentum of the Sirisena campaign throughout the election period.

As analyzed in the research, people were not Sirisena followers. They were conscious about the untrustworthy nature of Sri Lankan politics. Therefore, rather than following an individual, they supported principles such as good governance, democracy and rule of law. Because of this, unlike in previous presidential elections, this presidential election was not understood as a struggle between two candidates, instead as a struggle between a dystopian present (represented by the Rajapaksa regime) and political principles (represented by the common candidate).

Moreover, as Shirky described that Facebook had become a space to obtain and discuss information, this regime transformation indicated that Facebook could be used as an effective tool in an election. Since the second term of President Rajapaksa, people had been sharing videos, photos and posts on news segments which had been censored in the mainstream media and there had been a number of discussions regarding topics which had not been discussed publicly due to the oppression of the regime. Therefore, Facebook had become a tool to link the material reality to the personal life of a Facebook user.

All these factors contradicted the understanding of the regime transformation as an elite change. As pointed out, politics on Facebook which was independent from the influence of elites, played a key role in this regime change. Therefore, it can be argued that what we witnessed here is a perfect example for a Facebook revolution.

When discussing the theoretical implications of this study, we should highlight that these *people* cannot be understood from the concept of class in traditional Marxism, because as I have described earlier, they did not belong to a homogenous entity. Instead, this group of individuals came from different social strata. However, what combined them all was their common understanding of how hard their present was and their common goal of working together to

change this present and achieve a relatively good future. As discussed thoroughly in “The Burning House”, there was a strong hierarchical order during the Rajapaksa regime. If you supported the regime, then you would be assigned a *place* in society. You would receive benefits and advantages in proportion to your place in the Rajapaksa hierarchy. If you attempted to contradict this hierarchical order by engaging in forbidden activities, you would be subjected to state oppression. For example, Gotabaya Rajapaksa who was considered as a ‘true patriot’, was exempted from the public criticism in this social hierarchy. But people on Facebook clearly ignored this and discussed Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s activities in an extremely critical way. In this regard, these individuals were contradicting the hierarchy of the Rajapaksa regime by engaging in activities that were supposed to belong to a different *place* in the Rajapaksa hierarchy. This analysis, as a result, agrees with Jacques Ranciere’s concepts on people and politics.

Also this research takes the side of literature which emphasizes the positive impact of social media on politics. In this regard, the research followed Clay Shirky’s analysis of Facebook as a space of discussion. According to Shirky, this element of Facebook has made it politically useful. However, this research does not intend to glorify Facebook as a revolution maker as western media conceived of the Arab Spring. Instead, this research points out how Facebook can be used effectively to bring a positive result in an election. Unlike in a revolution, the only activity you have to do in an election is to cast your vote. After you do that, you can go back to your personal life and wait till the next morning to know who wins. In this context, Facebook is a very useful tool because the person can vote after critically evaluating the credibility of certain individuals and principles, due to the enormous amount of political information one receives from Facebook and the number of discussions that a person can have regarding number of topics including politics.

As I have pointed out in this research, people were not blindly following the common candidate. Rather they were critical about his past record, especially his silence against the corruption under the Rajapaksa regime. Also people had a broader understanding of the political culture of Sri Lanka. Because of these reasons, people promoted ideas rather than individuals. This has been a great leap in the history of Sri Lankan radical politics. Therefore, I prefer to call the impact of Facebook as a revolution. Obviously, this event cannot be considered in the same terrain as the French Revolution or the Bolshevik Revolution. This was a revolution within the space of Facebook.

Another theoretical implication in this research was its use of dystopia. In general, the concept utopia has been assigned to an imaginary place. However, in order to give more dynamism to the concept, I used Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia which placed dystopia in reality. This allowed me to use dystopia which is considered, in general, a negative concept, in a positive way. For example, through 'the burning house' metaphor, I argued that people understood their present as dystopian. But this understanding resulted in a positive outcome because people used this realization of their present to defeat the Rajapaksa regime, in order to open up the way to escape from these dystopian present.

The above discussion clearly suggests that the research has been able to combine three major fields in political science- radical politics, social media and dystopia- in the analysis of the regime transformation in Sri Lanka. So far, no such research has been done in this way. Therefore, in terms of future research, this research opens up a new understanding of social media politics. However, since there is infinite data in social media, a number of different understandings in contrast to my arguments, are still possible. Also one can argue that the impact of social media on the regime transformation is still an ongoing phenomena because still it has

been less than two years since the regime transformation happened. Therefore, a more complete analysis is yet to come.

Finally, this is a story of butterflies who took down giants. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, three days after the election, after overcoming the initial shock of defeating the mighty Rajapaksa regime, one ‘butterfly’, under the title “it happened”, shared a picture of a quotation which is believed to be from Mao Zedong: “A dictator can implement laws to destroy all the roses. But [he] cannot stop the spring” (Dilanka 2015).

## Appendices

### Appendix 1

President Rajapaksa was meeting his supporters during a tour in Italy.



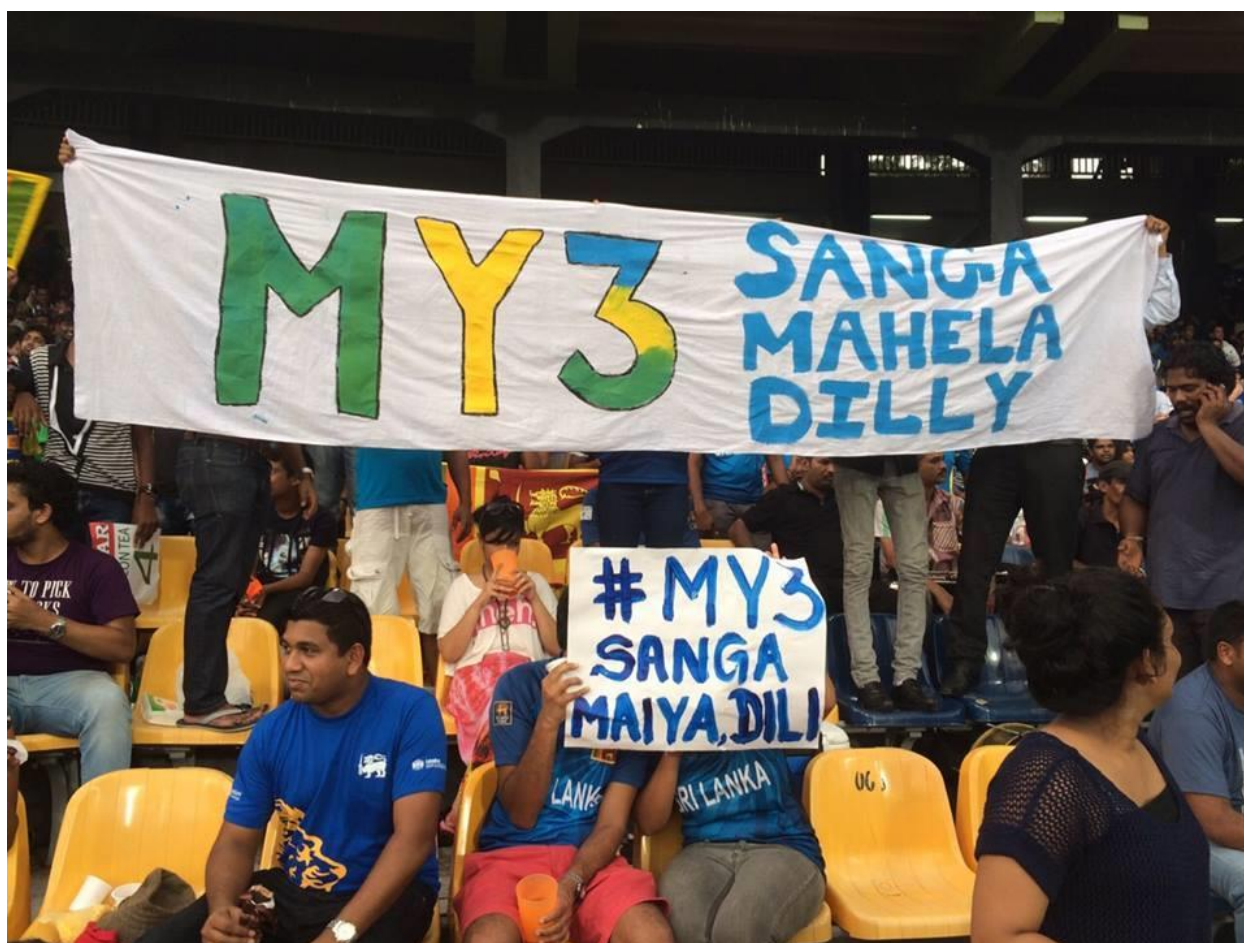
(Source: [http://www.gossip-lanka.com/2012/10/president-mahinda-rajapaksa-tattoo\\_23.html](http://www.gossip-lanka.com/2012/10/president-mahinda-rajapaksa-tattoo_23.html))



(Source: <https://www.facebook.com/572809886185271/photos/o.110468629077208/594544257345167/?type=3&theater>)

### Appendix 3

The banner held at the final match between Sri Lanka and England.



(Source: <https://www.facebook.com/slupfa/photos/a.313924076258.191436.310211301258/10152841086471259/?type=3&theater>)

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