

## **People Triumph over King**

### *Power of Youth Media in Social Transformation*

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### **Abstract**

Youth have become the leading force of democratic social change in 21st century by transforming social and mobile networks to a vital space for digital democracy. Social Media created and shared by youth to express their voices on social realities, political and economic issues brings public attention to influence critical political transformations.

In 2011 people of Egypt won against Military Dictatorship where at least 846 people were killed. Political Dynasty of Gandhi family brought to its knees by youth volunteers using social media for a New India. People of Sri Lanka defeated powerful Rajapaksa regime democratically when media freedom was critically deprived. Civil society, alternative media and opposition transcended to social media networks creating digital audience for democracy. Thousands of youth inspired by opinion leaders volunteered in creation and sharing of digital media on social networks to counter misinformation and propaganda on mainstream media Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka in the presidential election in 2015.. The youth media in large numbers and volume, shared online and offline with peers and friends, reached grass root communities across cities and villages creating a strong common opposition momentum to defeat the powerful Rajapaksa regime. This paper studies the decisive role played by social media in crucial 2015 Sri Lanka Presidential Election to emphasize the power of youth media in democratic political transformation, to urge the need for democracy awareness, media literacy and support mechanisms for empowering youth to nature democratic political transformations in stressed democracies of the world.

## **Introduction**

2015 Presidential Election in Sri Lanka demonstrates a unique example of youth media influence for democracy. The people of Sri Lanka were able to change an authoritarian regime democratically and peacefully. Youth created media campaigning for political change increased democracy awareness, media literacy developing civil society leadership for a historic change in democracy in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka people recovering from civil war ended in 2009, were challenged with military and executive power, severe abuse of state resources and control over mainstream media by Rajapaksa regime at 2015 Presidential election. Youth became frontrunners of the social change exposed the regime, creating a democratic dialog on social networks using social media.

The significance of Sri Lankan regime change is that it was done democratically and Sri Lankan youth with access to information over social and mobile networks developed a better understanding of political propaganda on regime controlled media. Their ability to access wide variety of media sources, opinions on digital networks helped assessing, monitoring, forming and pursuing of their political opinions through democratic dialog on a least controlled digital space. The social media and networks enabled their participation in digital democracy. The online media freedom resulted emergence of a social momentum to form a strong common opposition to defeat the powerful and fearful Rajapaksa regime.

## **Methods**

A mixed methods approach used involving a comprehensive online literature review, case studies, and discussion groups, informal and structured interviews used.

## **Results and Discussion**

In this section right to freedom of opinion and expression, media literacy for democracy, social networks, civil society, youth media and rise and fall of Rajapaksa regime are described, discussed and analyzed with an account of political transformations in Sri Lanka.

### **Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression**

The UN Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasizes that "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers", hence it is necessary to enable access to quality media and information and participation in communication networks to realize freedom of opinion and expression which underpins all other rights. 1982 Grünwald Declaration of UNESCO recognizes the need for political and educational systems to promote citizens' critical understanding of media literacy. [un.org]

### **Media Literacy for Democracy**

Media Literacy [48] empowers citizens with knowledge, skills and attitudes to understand the role of media in democratic societies. It develops critical evaluation of media content and enables engaging of citizens with media for self-expression and democratic participation.

Awareness in democracy, training in ICT and digital media skills and access to internet are critical needs in 21st century media literacy.

### **Social Networks**

Spectrum of cross domain developments in information and communication technologies (ICT), smart phones and broadband has increased social media outreach into rural areas of Sri Lanka. ICT Development initiatives (ICT4D) during last decade has resulted a widely spread ICT infrastructure and digitally skilled youth communities in Sri Lanka. Local language technology innovations have enabled inclusion of rural communities in social networks. Mobile networks, Telecentres, school labs and cyber cafes have increased access to internet, bridging the urban-rural digital divide. Emergence of Open Graph and open ID protocols integrated with Web 2.0 architecture [49] has enabled seamless interactions and collaborations on social networks forming virtual digital communities. User-generated content, seamless sharing and mobile delivery mechanisms have largely increased the proactive participation of citizens in society. Facebook started off as a place for college students[68], evolved in Sri Lanka as a vital space for digital democracy for citizens to exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression during presidential election 2015.

According to internetlivestats.com Sri Lanka has 4.2 Million internet users, a penetration of 19.9% of the total population, is the highest percentage in the South Asian region. According 2014 survey by readme.lk Sri Lanka has 2.3 Million active facebook users . 11.5% of total population is on facebook where age group 18-34 accounts for estimated 75-80% users. The 1.3 Million smart phones, shows spread, penetration and social power of socially connected youth influencing change. Anonymously in internet helped Youth to campaign against Rajapaksa regime without fear of abduction. Vishwa Kumara, a youth who created a popular Facebook page protesting the increase of electricity tariff in 2013, was threatened by

President Security Division (PSD). Since then he made his voice anonymously.

### **Political Transformations in Sri Lanka**

In order to assess the significance of Sri Lanka Presidential Election in 2015, understanding of the country's political transformations is important.

#### **The Monarchy**

The Sinhalese Monarchy known to have begun in 6th century in Anuradhapura.[Mahawansa], largely influenced by Buddhist principles of "Dasa Raja Dharma" (generosity, morality, sacrifice, integrity, kindness, control of senses, non-hatred, non - violence, tolerance, following the will of the people)[4][5][6], however there had been eras of power abuse by kings as well as citizen actions to expel them.[Mahawansa]

#### **Colonial rule and democracy**

Colonial rule of Portuguese, Dutch and British developed state administration, education and economy resulting of an educated transcending society. Democracy was introduced in 1931 gave voting rights every citizen above 18 years of age. D.S. Senanayake, a statesman from 1921, founded of United National Party (UNP) became the first Prime Minister in 1947. Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, yet remained a Dominion of the British Empire. S.W.R.D Bandaranayake breaking away from UNP came to power in 1956 founding Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), brought pro-poor policies into developments. Tamil and Muslim minorities demanded devolution of power on language and administrative rights. The Sinhala only act of 1958 resulted first island wide Sinhala-Tamil riots and [12] S.W.R.D Bandaranayake was assassinated in 1959.

#### **Emergence of Democracy challenges**

The unsuccessful uprising by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1971 against Sirimavo Bandaranaike government claimed more than 15,000 youth lives. [11] Her 1972 constitution made Sri Lanka an independent republic establishing National State Assembly with a President as nominal head and a Cabinet of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister responsible to the National State Assembly. Abuse of power and corruption, economic restrictions, family rule and suppression of media freedom caused her downfall and J. R. Jayawardene[14] swept to power winning 140 of 168 seats making powerful government.

#### **Introduction of Executive Presidency**

J.R. Jayawardene introduced a new constitution in 1978 with a powerful Executive Presidency with legal impunity and free market economy. [26] The President had power to appoint the prime minister, cabinet ministers and top state officials. He extended the life of parliament by another 6 years holding the controversial 1982 referendum, won with 54.66% with grave allegations of vote rigging. The 1978 constitution largely criticized for enabling immunity from corruption and abuse of power by executive presidency, making state officials to bow down to politicians. "Executive Presidency, when considered as a system of power lacks collective leadership needed to deal with the problems of a multicultural nation" [76] like Sri Lanka. Abolishing of executive presidency was decisive but a failed promise at 1994, 2000, 2005 and 2010 Presidential elections.

#### **The Civil War**

Ethnic tensions were manifested by insurgency against the government in July 1983 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who demanded a separate state called "Eelam". Over

150,000 Tamil citizens fled country after blood-soaked 1983 riots.[13] India backed peace talks failed and war continued over 25 years, claimed 80000-100000 lives causing significant hardships to the society, environment and the economy.

### **Failed Peace**

Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe coming to power in 2002 signed a Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) with LTTE [63] helped some reconciliation but LTTE withdrew from the negotiation table in 2003. [15][63] Mahinda Rajapaksa was appointed as Prime Minister., although he was alleged 83 million rupees fraud from Tsunami funds.

### **17th Amendment**

Sri Lanka learned that Executive president system centered on one person had no true provision for democracy of the citizens. Hence 17th amendment of was “considered a significant step towards establishing a culture of good governance and accountability” [34] which had provisions for the establishment of the Constitutional Council and Independent Commissions for public services, police, elections, bribery and corruption, judiciary, finance, human rights and delimitation.

### **Rajapaksa becomes War Hero**

Mahinda Rajapaksa, backed by Marxist and nationalist parties won 2005 Presidential Election, began a fresh offensive against LTTE engaging in bloodiest battles of war history and LTTE leaders were killed.[28] LTTE admitted defeat on 17 May 2009 making President Mahinda Rajapaksa a war hero [29].

### **Mahinda Rajapaksa Regime**

When the war ended, people of Sri Lanka hoped for reconciliation, peace, democracy and economic relief. Instead extrajudicial executions, disappearances, internally displaced persons, arbitrary detentions and torture continued. Abuse of power, massive corruption, family rule, suppression of media and severe economic burdens transformed Rajapaksa government to a family ruled regime. The democracy got critically stressed after Mahinda Rajapaksa won his second term on 26 January 2010 in a most violated election.

### **18th Amendment**

President Mahindra Rajapaksa in his period of 10 years, failed to appoint the Constitutional Council, hence failed to realize objectives of the 17th amendment which became piece of legislation only. Soon after winning in 2010, he introduced 18th Amendment to the Constitution in place of the 17th Amendment, politicizing of the public service and enabled his election for “any subsequent term of office to which he may be so elected” [77] . Rajapaksa government secured two third majority to pass the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment with the support of 9 nine dissident members from opposition. “There is no way that the 18th Amendment can be made to work. It must be repealed,” said Jayampathi Wickremaratne PC – expert in constitutional law. The 18th

Amendment created a monarchic Executive Presidency to be managed by one political family holding the reins of government and finances of the country.

### **Abuse of Power and Corruption**

Corruption in large infrastructure development projects made Rajapaksa regime probably the richest family in Asia. The budget deficit -5.9% of the GDP was covered from high taxes and high interest loans. Abuse of state resources by Rajapaksa family members, military integration in governance and lawlessness became a national problem. The regime weakened the opposition by making their members crossover for ministerial posts. Rajapaksa cabinet had 126 ministers and deputies and provincial ministers. President Rajapaksa held the Defense, Urban Development, Finance & Planning, Ports & Highways and Law and Order ministerial portfolios. He appointed his brothers as speaker of parliament, minister of economic development and defense secretary. His son was elected to parliament in 2010; built an island wide civil force named "Blue Brigade" who engaged in state and election violence. [37] "Rajapaksa's main trait has been his reliance on close family members". [74] "Government revenue or major spending sources are controlled by Rajapaksa family accounts for 56% of the government expenditure said Eran Wickremaratne an opposition MP. The Food inflation rate of became 7.0 with general inflation at 2.1 (tradingeconomics.com) made a significant economic burden on people. Large losses occurred in state banks, national airlines and public and statutory bodies due to corruption.[38] Rajapaksa regime obtained high interest foreign loans and imposed heavy to maintain the economy afloat.

### **Decline of Media Freedom**

Freedom of the press in Sri Lanka is guaranteed by Article 14(1) (a) of the 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka which gives every citizen "the freedom of speech and expression including publication".[100] Until Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranayake government took over Associated Newspapers of Ceylon under Special Provisions Act No.1973, and sealed "Dawasa" news paper. Richard de Zoysa a leading author, journalist was abducted and killed in 1989 [75]. As civil war escalated, democracy, human rights and media freedom declined, yet people enjoyed satisfactory press freedom until Rajapaksa coming to power. The regime intimidated and silenced the media and other critics using a variety of threats and violent actions and calling any opposition to its policies and actions are "unpatriotic".

According to Reporters Without Borders (RWB), "murders, physical attacks, kidnappings, threats to media professionals and censorship increased [78] and senior government officials of Rajapaksa regime are directly implicated".[79] RWB Sri Lanka press freedom ranking of 51 in 2002 dropping to 165 by 2014, shows significant decline of media freedom during Rajapaksa regime. The state Television, radio and newspapers were misused by regime to promote their esteem and to denounce the opposition leaders. Several news websites criticized Rajapaksa regime were blocked [39] paving the way to alternative news and media on social networks. 2007 - 2014 was the most noted for suppression of media freedom since independence in Sri Lanka.

Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of pro-opposition newspaper, highly critical of the government, was shot dead on 8 January 2009,[81][82] predicted his own murder stating that "it will be the government that kills me".[83] He had been assaulted twice before and his house had been sprayed with machine-gun fire.[85] Prageeth Eknaligoda, a political analyst of Lankanews.com went missing on January 24, 2010.[87], includes many media personals killed during Rajapaksa

regime, no justice was done. The office of news website Lankaenews was set ablaze by an unidentified gang [88] in 2011. The editor Sandruwan Senadheera fled the country. [89]. Sirasa TV, a mainstream Television channel was burned in 2011. [40] "Media houses were controlled by the state or they practiced self-censorship"[53] Media freedom became a key issue in society with many media persons had to exile the country for safety [41].

### **Rise of youth media**

Rajapaksa regime controlling state and private media, gave rise to youth media facebook uses created a negative perspective on civil society "government officials publicly threatened civil society activists and initiated violence against them"[90] Free Media Movement, a non-partisan independent group of journalists and "Vidiye Wirodhaya" a street protest group lead by senior artist Jayathilaka Bandara was attacked by Rajapaksa regime.

The need for regime change felt in society most when Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake was wrongfully impeached by Rajapaksa Regime. Constitutional lawyer J.C. Weliamuna and constitutional law expert Jayampathy Wickramaratne emerged key civil society voices "sought to give form to the simmering anger in the country, targeting a regime change as the only way out." [53] While local economic and international human rights pressure was mounting on Rajapakasa regime, the activist-layers connected with dissenting sections against regime collaborated with National Movement for Social Justice (NMSJ) chaired by Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha Thero to jointly campaign for the abolition of the executive presidency. The collective of artists, academics, and activists joined the civil society's "rainbow coalition" creating a platform for a common opposition to defeat Rajapaksa regime.

Since 2004, social technologists, bloggers, blog syndicators and activists created an online environment for the emergence of a new generation of digital civil society using local languages. The digital space helped civil society to gain media freedom to expose massive corruption by Rajapaksa regime. The information, opinions, dialog and interactions helped citizens to engage in digital democracy. Digital citizens virtually followed opinion leaders, created and shared ideas, influenced peers to realize a critical political change. "It was a collective effort. No one person can take credit"[53] where Civil society actors lead the change from forefront, over the years, risking their lives for democracy and freedom.

## **Youth Media - Storytelling for Change**

Youth media created through the collaboration of young people guided by media educators in order to express youth voices on issues that matters to them. Youth media brings public attention to critical social issues to influence change of perspectives, behaviors, practices and everything about life. Youth media programs implemented globally. They facilitate youth to learn about themselves and the society around them by inquiring “why things are the way they are?” to create media expressing their ideas. In China, Little Masters magazine produced by young people under the age of 15. Pittsburgh Filmmakers Youth Media program provides comprehensive media literacy education to young people. Adobe Youth Voices (AYV) program ignites young people’s Creative Confidence—the ability to harness creative skills to solve problems—thereby empowering them to find their voice and make it heard” [youthvoices.adobe.com]. Youth media are “example of young people’s passion, creativity, and engagement in the broader society” [50] and they are “most likely to impact people when well crafted aesthetically, tells a compelling story, has a strong social justice component” [50].

Simplest youth media used in the election were Internet Memes which is an idea or an opinion generated online using “an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users”. [Oxperd Dictionary]. Politically ignited youth created and shared local language “internet memes” in larger numbers and volumes on corruption, election violence, candidates and manifestos during 2015 Presidential elections than at any previous elections.” [46] Youth lead "Social media, played a huge role" [94] in change. During the last weeks of the elections, Youth set the country’s social media and mobile networks on fire with their posts, memes, and interactions on Facebook, Twitter, blogger and websites. Multi user chat messages flowed through mobile messaging applications (WhatsApp, Viber and Hike) where “Sri Lankan wit, sarcasm and satirical talent” [43] produced a viral effect which, Rajapaksa regime was not prepared for. The regime had no mechanism to counter youth at large operating anonymously on social networks. Some youth didn’t even have voting rights. Youth media and social networks now have become an important player in democracy of Sri Lanka.

The momentum first gathered on facebook. "I didn't sleep some nights because I was creating media, posting and commenting" said Lahiru Abeyrathna a leader of a small youth media group. Youth "created imaginative civil society and advocacy groups" on facebook[400] and exposed Rajapaksa regime creating an ideology against extreme powers of executive presidency as the core cause of the prevailing democracy problems. They created shockwaves on the vote base of Rajapaksa regime with youth social media. The online and offline outreach by youth amplified the influence voters. An estimated 3 million smart phones was a critical multiplying factor of the viral effect created.

"Thun Parak Be" (No 3 terms) short film, "Sanda Hiru Kopaya" documentary video of flood victims that exposed corruption of the regime, The smart phone videos of Kurunegala Attack on artists, Wanduramba rally stage burning photos based on reality, dented the reputation of Rajapaksa regime. Media containing a “compelling story of reality delivering a strong premise helps social transformation” [Aristotle], influence change of opinion evident from “Politics in the Floods” documentary video series [Maithree Community] which were created by volunteer youth becoming the voice of the voiceless, helped forming new political perceptions. "This change is led by youth and technology" said President Maithripala Sirisena. “This election saw an unprecedented use of social media in Sri Lanka”[46] and “over 80% of our youth is computer literate – many have smartphones and regularly log in to social media. Political content they absorb from online sources spreads fast to (offline) communities in villages”. [46] The two cases studied AYV Digital Rainbow and Paint a Rainbow initiatives led by Youth Empowerment

Society (YES), provided democracy awareness and social media training to enable youth voices on civic issues, ranged from substance abuse, child soldiers, racism, cyber harassment, democracy and human rights with stories blended in empathy, they reached over 500,000 digital citizens. "We created stories for promoting democracy" they said. Many unknown youth groups deserve a tribute for making democracy prevail through dialog initiated through youth media.

### **2015 Sri Lanka Presidential Election**

President Rajapaksa called a snap Presidential election in November 2014 two years before its scheduled [41] giving only 5 weeks campaigning space for Opposition. It seemed no easy task to challenge Mahinda Rajapaksa, "who, to a sizeable majority of the Sinhalese electorate, was a charismatic and invincible leader".[53] The opposition in a surprising strategic move selected Maithripala Sirisena, the secretary of ruling party SLFP and health minister of the Rajapaksa government as common opposition candidate. The campaign against Rajapaksa regime was led by Civil Society influenced a coalition between opposition parties. Tamil and Muslim minorities hurt with racism joined the "rainbow coalition" against Rajapaksa regime.

The opposition campaign promised freedom from Rajapaksa regime, media freedom and good governance. During the 5 weeks campaign local language became main stream on social networks with community participation from rural areas. Youth created social media to convey the need for a regime change. Social media countered state media abuses becoming a prime source of information. Rajapaksa regime highly abused state media and resources, disrupted opposition meetings and distributed goods and money to bribe voters revealed by Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE) reports.

On 8th January 2015 Maithripala Sirisena, the common opposition candidate defeated Mahinda Rajapaksa obtaining 51.28% [96] of votes in an intense 81.52% voter turnout. Political analysts described the change in Sri Lanka as "birth of new democratic era". The 2015 Presidential election was not free and fair as well as no one expected it to be. There is an allegation that "A coup is reportedly on the cards. Public servants refuse to bow down to the force of power." [44]. Despite massive election law violations and abuse of power Mahinda Rajapaksa was democratically voted out of power. [44][45]. This historic win by people of Sri Lanka can be described as, "The victims had the power; silent, unostentatious and anonymous power of voting" [44] which people used to win over the fearful ruler.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

2015 Sri Lankan democratic change could be a valuable lesson for nations experiencing democracy distress and media suppression, where social media and networks can help creating a "vital space for opinion leaders to network, collaborate, and disseminate political information"[26] to initiate democratic dialog for social change.

Youth media created in local language enables wider outreach and social media created with empathy addressing of social realities tend to have stronger effect in social transformation.

Social change is a collective effort where empowering of youth with democracy awareness, media literacy and support mechanisms largely help nurturing of democratic political transformations.

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