

“Distant Yet Decisive”: Influence of the Sinhalese Diaspora in Sri Lanka’s Democracy

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Featured Image Credit: Daily FT Photo Caption- Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, then NPP MP, speaking at the inaugural International Women’s Summit organized by the NPP in London, 2024.

Introduction

In recent years, Sri Lanka has experienced a hike in outward migration, driven by long standing governance inefficiencies that were exacerbated by the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 health crisis, severe shortages of essential goods and the political and economic crisis of 2022. The fragile socio-economic and political context of the country compelled many to leave the country seeking better prospects and “stability” in life. The Department of Immigration & Emigration reports that it has issued 911,689 passports in 2022, which is the highest number recorded in a single year, marking a 138.3% increase

compared to 2021. With these dynamic transnational engagements and the growing bargaining power of the Sri Lankan diaspora, many political candidates/parties of the country have recalibrated their outreach efforts with the diaspora communities. In fact former President Ranil Wickremesinghe's engagements with the Sri Lanka's diaspora community in Perth in early 2024 and the National People's Power (NPP) alliance's global outreach with diaspora communities with diaspora focal representatives, shed light on this shift. Furthermore, the then-presidential candidate and now President Anura Kumara Disanayake actively engaged with the Sri Lankans overseas during his 2024 presidential campaign, visiting countries such as South Korea, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, among others. Sinhalese diaspora members returning to cast the vote in the last two national elections further show how migration has translated into a transnational political force. This trend warrants further clarity and a shift in policy-making, as overlooking the diaspora's soft power on home country politics is to misunderstand the geopolitical ecosystem of globalized democracy.

Budding Voices: The Sinhalese Diaspora

Even though the global Tamil diaspora's influence and activism are more solid and well-mobilized than the Sinhalese diaspora, it has emerged as a major force to be reckoned with in shaping Sri Lanka's democratic electoral processes. For instance, during the 2019 presidential election, majority of the Sinhalese, residing both in Sri Lanka and overseas believed that the political abyssus of the country after the Easter Sunday attacks demanded a "strong, powerful and authoritarian" (especially a Sinhala-Buddhist) ruler to preserve the perceived erosion of the Sinhala Buddhist ethos of the country. Hence, many Sinhalese diaspora members returned to cast votes in the 2019 and 2020 elections. In a comparable vein, many Sinhalese diaspora members returned to Sri Lanka to cast their vote for the NPP in the 2024 presidential election, stressing it as the final opportunity to "safeguard" the country from deep-rooted political corruption and to advocate for an alternative political alliance. Yet, critics also raise normative concerns on these transnational engagements. During the 2019 and 2020 elections, Sinhalese diaspora-driven advocacy helped magnify support for former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his policies such as sweeping tax cuts and the sudden ban on the import and use of chemical fertilizers. These policies paved the way for Sri Lanka's 2022 economic collapse. Critics argue that while the diaspora engagements shaped electoral outcomes, it was the domestic population that went through the immediate and first-hand challenges, waiting in queues for essentials, highlighting a key concern about unaccountable external influence. In fact, post 2024 parliamentary election, former minister Ali Sabry recently flagged concerns over sections of the diaspora who are often removed from the ground realities in Sri Lanka who continue to polarize communities along lines of race, religion and ethnicity. He further noted that these divisive narratives are in stark contrast to the core of the Sri Lankans at home.

Channels of Sinhalese Diaspora Influence and the Implications on Home-Country Governance

The key conduit of transnationalism is the advancement of technologies, which have made transportation and communication more accessible, affordable and inclusive. In the hyper-globalized system, traditional boundaries, demarcations and curtailment have become porous and much is possible without tactile engagement. The nativist prejudice, purist notions and locality sentimentality have been increasingly diluted. Arjun Appadurai's concept of "scapes" (flows) provides further explanation for the interconnected dimensions of globalization: ethnoscaping (people's movements), financescaping (the movement of money), ideoscaping (the flow of ideas), mediascaping (the flow of media) and technoscaping (the movement of technology). Hence, the immigrants maintain more frequent and sustained contacts with their home countries than we reimagined ever before.

The Sinhalese diaspora, like any other diaspora community, makes use of various channels including social media, family ties and diaspora organizations to engage with Sri Lankan politics. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities", the diaspora can be viewed as individuals, though geographically distant, continue to feel a strong emotional and political connection to the homeland. For many in the Sinhalese diaspora, this imagined bond is manifested in the form of active participation in domestic electoral politics, political advocacy and even returning to vote. In interviews with members of the Sinhalese diaspora, many noted that platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook groups ("*Dubai Api*," "*Ethera Api*," "*Rata Viruvo*") serve as informal transnational political hubs where they share opinions. Another Sinhalese female residing abroad explained how she engaged in creating content and handled communications of a major political alliance in Sri Lanka. Moreover, given the rising cost to organize campaigning and murky areas in the regulation of election expenditure in Sri Lanka, the financial contributions of the diaspora members do impact on the campaign reach.

Sustained and frequent family ties also drive political advocacy and mobilization at home, a dynamic captured in Peggy Levitt's concept of "social remittances." In fact, a Sinhalese activist in Australia shared how she encouraged her relatives in Sri Lanka to vote for her preferred party and that she engaged in election campaigns when she visited Sri Lanka. Michael Ahn Paarlberg's concept of "transnational militancy" further elucidates this trend where diaspora actors influence not just through casting votes, but also "higher-order political behaviors such as party activism and candidate advocacy. As per the insights of a Sinhalese family in Australia, religious leaders and institutions often act as informal goodwill ambassadors, exerting greater influence in mobilizing diaspora communities for home-country politics, than official embassies and ambassadors, whose engagements are limited by protocol and diplomatic scope.

The diaspora organizations have also evolved with time. One diaspora member residing in New Zealand recounted that the diaspora organizations were initially apolitical and issue-specific such as rebuilding the country after the Tsunami and war. But this interviewee notes that these organizations have become rigorously politicized along the lines of party-based politics since 2019. However, it is important to stress that external variables such as the immigration and integration policies and the form of governance of the host countries do impact in the scope and nature of the diasporic interventions. As two interviewees in Dubai shared, countries advocating for strong civic rights (e.g., Canada, Australia) tend to provide more leeway for vigorous diaspora activism, while restrictive regimes (e.g., UAE) make them more passive, despite ad hoc and more individualized interventions.

A Call for Mediating Powers and Policy Recommendations

Optimizing the transnational power and influence of diaspora communities on domestic affairs such as electoral politics and governance is a delicate task that must be approached judiciously. When the old rules of the game are no longer in execution, or rather, have been adjusted by those who once created them, no nation can afford to engage with non-state actors in a simplistic, traditional or linear manner. Failing to notice the reckoning force of the diaspora, particularly the Sinhalese diaspora, would be a missed opportunity. In fact, it is noteworthy how many political leaders in Sri Lanka have now recalibrated their engagements with diaspora communities, altering their ideological lens from viewing them as "adversaries" to recognizing them as indispensable transnational actors in the domestic political landscape.

Diaspora influence is neither intrinsically adverse or naturally good-willed, yet heterogeneous, fluid and context-driven. Hence it requires institutional and multi-stakeholder mediation via inclusive and participatory policy design, without framing our migrants and the “state” as actors riddled in a zero-sum competition; rather, two forces that are often interdependent. To that end, scholars like Alvaro Lima advocate using a transnational policy framework grounded in five key principles in re-looking at the diaspora interventions.

- Portability of benefits, rights and entitlements across borders;
- Transferability of skills, capabilities and qualifications such as political participation, and institutional access between home and host states;
- Visibility of diaspora contributions,
- Hybridity in identity recognition, having dual belonging across cultural and political spaces;
- Translocality, which redefines local development, was influenced by global flows and diasporic influence.

Conclusion

The Sinhalese diaspora is no longer a peripheral or a passive observer in Sri Lanka’s electoral landscape and it is an increasingly active actor in shaping democratic trajectories. Its influence is contentious- both constructive and potentially polarizing. Effective diaspora governance demands not only policy alignment but political maturity, being receptive to welcoming transnational voices without compromising domestic integrity to build inclusive and sustainable democratic systems that reflect the interconnected and global citizenry.

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