

A Brief Interview with Udan Fernando



*Udan Fernando obtained his PhD from the University of Amsterdam. He currently functions as an Independent Researcher from Sri Lanka and Singapore. Until March 2020, he was Executive Director of the Center for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), a Sri Lankan think-tank. Throughout his career, as Head of the Development Commission of the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (1989–1995), Executive Director of Paltra (gte) Ltd (1996–2001), Guest Researcher at University of Amsterdam (2002–2007), and Senior Consultant of Context International, Netherlands (2008–2012), Fernando has focused on development cooperation and aid policy in Sri Lanka, Europe, East and West Africa, and Southeast Asia. He has produced several documentaries and short films on Sri Lanka, including *A Tale of Two Rebels* and, most recently, *A Virgin Vote*.*

Lucien Ellington: *Udan, thank you for making a short but illuminating documentary that is not only a contribution for those unfamiliar with Sri Lanka learning a bit more about the country, but—although brief—a film that raises universal and profound questions about patriotism, transnationalism, and nationalism—questions that might not have any “right” answers but deserve to be openly discussed in free societies.*

Aravinda, a high-skilled, transnational, educated worker, is a self-described patriot who seems proud of his roots, the time with his mother, and his love of a rediscovered native land’s local history. He contrasts his patriotism with his opinion of nationalists, people he considers assume they are superior to other ethnic groups because of their racial grouping or religions. You and he both have the same ethnic and elite educational backgrounds that enable a transnational lifestyle. Please comment upon your reactions to your subject’s assertions regarding patriotism and nationalism.

Udan Fernando: It’s true, to some extent. There’s an overlap of backgrounds of our formative years as children and teenagers in the sense we went to the same school in Sri Lanka, which is considered a prestigious educational institution in the country where we were born. And then later in life, we studied and worked abroad in different academic disciplines, as well as in different countries. The length of study and work periods abroad of the subject is considerably longer than mine. I don’t think we consider these factors in a divisive sense, but to explain the stratification of Sri Lankan society. We came from different religious backgrounds—Buddhist and Christian. In Sri Lanka, religion plays a major role, depending on whether it’s a majority or minority religion, in our power positions in society. Notwithstanding these common roots we share, our take on patriotism and nationalism can be nuanced. I think that’s influenced by the way we interpret politics. Since my subject is very articulate and passionate on the subject, I was keen to let him tell his story, of which the content is compromised in the film only to maintain brevity and cinematic edits. As such, I would refrain from commenting.

Lucien: *One of the most interesting comments in the documentary was Aravinda’s assertion that he can’t walk by parliament without swearing because he thinks conditions could be better for everyone. The implication is that currently, given the existing government, voters have the potential power to effect positive change in Sri Lanka. Your comments?*

Udan: There is a general erosion of confidence on the parliament and parliamentarians. Many people, across political divides, hold a very low

opinion about the way in which eligibility for individuals to stand for elections to the parliament is obtained. People seem to be fed up with many parliamentarians with notorious and criminal backgrounds, and little or no basic educational qualifications. The current election laws have created situations where the one who spends the most for the campaign wins. The cost is borne by those with vested interests to reap benefits via the parliamentarian. A sizable number of such parliamentarians can be seen from across political parties. Some of them hold key ministerial positions. The fact that they are corrupt is widely known. The voters—at least the bulk of them—are also part of this problem, as they are dependent on the favors of politicians in a system where a politician’s recommendation or approval matters in important life opportunities, ranging from school admissions to secure jobs. The opposition to this system can be seen in the cynical views held by people on parliament and parliamentarians. But realizing the possibility of transforming these widespread low opinions of the political status quo into formidable opposition that directs toward a systemic change is yet to be seen.

Lucien: *Aravinda’s position reminds me of the relative secular patriotism of the pioneering social scientist Emile Durkheim; the Harvard scholar Karl Deutsch, who was involved in starting the United Nations; and the contemporary American scholar and educator E. D. Hirsch Jr. All three of these believers in liberal democracy asserted that nation-states are the most effective forms of government, given the impossibility of world government, and that the cohesion of a nation depends upon commonly shared centripetal knowledge and beliefs. Any comments on my assumption about your subject or, if I am accurate, the validity of the contentions described in this question?*

Udan: I cannot speak on behalf of my subject. Therefore, I would not try to reconcile the political thinking of the scholars you have mentioned and my subject’s views. But I do recognize the usefulness of the concept of the nation-state to unpack many observations and interpretations on Sri Lankan state and society. I think the practice of the nation-state, many decades after the concept had been promoted in the world as a key unit and model of governance, has gone through a great deal of transformations, deviations, and even aberrations, with some improvisations as well. This is due to change of conditions within and in between countries, particularly with the onset of globalization. Sri Lanka is no exception to this. I think a great deal of problems we face in relation to state and society are created by the internal contradictions of the notion of nation-state and our inability to adapt.

Lucien: *Udan, thank you for the interview!*