

# Sri Lanka in the Classroom

Editor's Introduction: *A Virgin Vote*, a short film by director Udan Fernando, follows a Sri Lankan citizen voting for the first time in the country's 2020 parliamentary elections after becoming stranded due to Sri Lanka's COVID-19 lockdown. In the essay and short interview that follow, Fernando discusses *A Virgin Vote* and its production, as well as the ongoing political crisis in Sri Lanka. The basic information below provides context for readers unfamiliar with Sri Lanka and the civil war that engulfed the country for over twenty-five years.

## Sri Lanka: Background and Statistics

### Background

The first Sinhalese arrived in Sri Lanka late in the sixth century BC, probably from northern India. Buddhism was introduced circa 250 BC, and the first kingdoms developed at the cities of Anuradhapura (from circa 200 BC to circa AD 1000) and Polonnaruwa (from about 1070 to 1200). In the fourteenth century, a south Indian dynasty established a Tamil kingdom in northern Sri Lanka. The Portuguese controlled the coastal areas of the island in the sixteenth century, followed by the Dutch in the seventeenth century. The island was ceded to the British in 1796, became a crown colony in 1802, and was formally united under British rule by 1815. As Ceylon, it became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Prevailing tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists erupted into war in July 1983. Fighting between the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continued for over a quarter century. Although Norway brokered peace negotiations that led to a ceasefire in 2002, the fighting slowly resumed and was again in full force by 2006. The government defeated the LTTE in May 2009.

During the postconflict years under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the government initiated infrastructure development projects, many of which were financed by loans from China. His regime faced significant allegations of human rights violations and a shrinking democratic space for civil society. In 2015, a new coalition government headed by President Maithripala Sirisena of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party came to power with pledges to advance economic, governance, anticorruption, reconciliation, justice, and accountability reforms. However, implementation of these reforms has been uneven. In October 2018, President Sirisena attempted to oust Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, swearing in former President Rajapaksa as the new prime minister and issuing an order to dissolve the parliament and hold elections. This sparked a seven-week constitutional crisis that ended when the Supreme Court ruled Sirisena's actions unconstitutional, Rajapaksa resigned, and Wickremesinghe was reinstated. In November 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the presidential election and appointed his brother, Mahinda, prime minister. In 2020, the Rajapaksas' Freedom Party won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections.

### Statistics

**Area:** 65,610 sq km (slightly larger than West Virginia)

**Population:** 23,044,123 (July 2021 est., 58th largest in the world)

**Ethnic Groups:** Sinhalese 74.9%, Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2%, Sri Lankan Moors 9.2%, Indian Tamil 4.2%, other 0.5% (2012 est.)

**Languages:** Sinhala (official and national language) 87%, Tamil (official and national language) 28.5%, English 23.8% (2012 est.)

**Religions:** Buddhist (official) 70.2%, Hindu 12.6%, Muslim 9.7%, Roman Catholic 6.1%, other Christian 1.3%, other 0.05% (2012 est.)

**Government:** Presidential Republic with three branches. Executive: An elected president is head of state and government, and commander-in-chief of military. Legislative: 225-member unicameral parliamentary with 196 elected officials and twenty-nine elected by proportional representation. The president has the authority to summon, suspend, or end legislative sessions at will. Judicial: Supreme Court, a Court of Appeal, High Courts, and other subordinate courts.

Elections are held every five years for the presidency (last election in 2019) and parliament (last election in 2020) with no term limits.

**Literacy:** 91.9% of the total population over fifteen years old can read and write

**Tertiary Education:** 21.3% of population enrolled, 11% with a bachelor's degree or higher (2019 est.). In 2020, the Sri Lankan government announced plans to convert more higher educational institutions into universities and increase numbers of international students studying in the country.

**Active terrorist groups:** Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS); Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 2019, ISIS committed the deadliest terror attack in the history of Sri Lanka with a series of coordinated suicide bombings at churches and hotels on Easter Sunday, killing 266 people and injuring at least 500.

**Trafficking in persons:** Sri Lanka is primarily a source and, to a much lesser extent, a destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking; the majority of trafficking cases involve traffickers forcing Sri Lankan workers into labor overseas; men, women, and children are subjected to forced labor in the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the United States in construction, garment manufacturing, and domestic service; authorities have identified labor trafficking victims among Sri Lankan female migrant workers who seek employment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Japan, and South Korea; traffickers force children, individuals with physical deformities, and those from socially vulnerable groups to beg or engage in criminal activity in Sri Lanka's largest cities.

Sources: CIA, "Sri Lanka," *The World Factbook*, <https://tinyurl.com/hdbpn3ur>; "The World Bank in Sri Lanka," *The World Bank*, <https://tinyurl.com/33yf96x8>; Ellie Bothwell, "Study in Sri Lanka?" *Inside Higher Ed*, February 27, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/3eaujfw>; *Vision of Humanity*, "Global Terrorism Index 2020," <https://tinyurl.com/4z4e35v8>. Map: *World Atlas* at <https://tinyurl.com/3h866n6f>.

