

“SAHABHAGITHWAYAI WADAGATH”: SOCIAL MEDIA MEMES IN THE WAKE OF A POLITICAL CRISIS

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Abstract

The sudden sacking of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the swearing in of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa by President Maithripala Sirisena in October 2018 precipitated a major political and Constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka. As news of the event broke, a profusion of memes and jokes quickly started to circulate on social media pages, a phenomenon that appeared to be at odds with the fairly serious political situation that was unfolding. The seemingly widespread use of the comic meme as a tool of political commentary in the midst of a serious political crisis raises questions about the work of humour as a form of political commentary. It also demonstrates the possibility of extending the ongoing scholarly conversation around the political function of memes by analysing the role that memes play beyond election cycles. This paper presents a selection of memes from more than 100 memes that were circulated on Facebook in the immediate aftermath of the sacking of Mr. Wickremesinghe. It analyses these memes using the methodological tools of cultural studies and discourse analysis, drawing in particular from theorizations of the social and political function of humour. Through such an analysis this paper aims to document and analyse the political and social commentary that emerged through these memes. Although memes are often ignored and dismissed as peripheral to ‘serious’ and mainstream political discourse due to its deployment of humour, this paper asserts the need to recognize memes as a form of critically valuable social and political commentary.

Keywords

Meme, Social Media, Humor, Politics, Sri Lanka

There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

The importance of political humor in times of crisis and conflict is increasingly recognized in academic scholarship. Scholars have examined the function of humor across a range of difficult contexts such as Franco’s Spain (Pi-Sunyer, 1977) to Jordan prior to and during the Arab Spring (Al-Momani, Badarneh, & Migdadi, 2017), and from the Gezi Park resistance in Turkey (Görkem, 2015) to Eritrea under the dictatorship of Isaias Afewerki (Bernal, 2013). Others have examined the function of humor as a range of responses such as dissent in times of authoritarianism (Pearce & Hajizada, 2014) or to advocate for its use as a strategy of non-violent resistance (Sorensen, 2008). While there was early recognition of the important social function of political humor (Nilsen, 1990), there appears to be very little consensus among academics about the political value of humor (Baumgartner, 2007; Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009). These studies¹ indicate that the analysis of political humor can provide important insights into the

¹ Which are not even representative of the larger body of work on political humor initiated by Charles M Schultz (Schultz, 1977).

social and political dynamics at work during times of political crisis and confrontation like in the immediate aftermath of the sudden sacking of the sitting Prime Minister and subsequent dissolution of the Parliament of Sri Lanka.

This paper takes its cue from Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa's argument that political humor "does not transmit political information" but plays an important "interactive" role (Tsakona & Popa, 2011: 9). Although Tsakona & Popa's formulation of this role is as "establishing the boundaries between the different political parties and groups and between those who can communicate through it and those who cannot" (Ibid). However, their understanding can be developed by reading it in line with the important work of Samuel Schmidt who offers a far more sophisticated understanding of the 'interactive' role of political humor. In *Seriously Funny: Mexican Political Jokes as Social Resistance* (2014) Schmidt argues that political humor is significant aspect of political communication because it provides an entry point for "comprehend[ing] the relationship between society and the State" (Ibid: 3). Schmidt goes on to argue that "political jokes help us to understand the way in which society receives and reacts to political phenomena... allowing us to reflect on different forms of political participation" (2014: 8). This paper develops on Schmidt's insights to examine the many memes, jokes, and humorous videos that circulated on social media in the immediate aftermath of the political and Constitutional crisis that was precipitated by the sacking of Ranil Wickremesinghe by President Maithripala Sirisena on the 26th of October 2018. Through this analysis, I hope to move beyond simplistic assertions about the Constitutional interpretations or political praxis that have dominated more formal and visible modes of political commentary such as mainstream media or legal battles. Instead, this paper (pace Schmidt) aims to lay the foundation for an extended discussion on the important role that political humor can play in analyzing facets of political participation and how these understandings of participation structure the relationship between the State and society in Sri Lanka today.

This paper therefore initially sketches out the political and Constitutional crisis that emerged in Sri Lanka between the 26th of October and the 14th of November, 2018 in order to highlight the apparent incongruity of humor as a response to 'serious' political events. I then provide a brief discussion on the meme as a genre of political commentary particularly given the novelty of the medium as an object of academic discourse. Next, using a few of the memes that circulated during the period in question I analyze the commentary on governance and participation, gender and class. This analysis helps me to explore the nature of the political commentary around participation and the ways in which they can shape understandings of the relationship between State and society in Sri Lanka. Finally, I end by locating this analysis in relation to philosophical theorizations of the function of humor as a form of ideology critique to underscore the importance and contribution of humor to understanding the social and political relationships that undergird political participation in Sri Lanka today.

It is also important to note that this paper does not claim that the humor shared during this period provides the final or definitive perspective on Sri Lanka's State-Society relationship. Given the constraints of time and space, I also limit my analysis to a selection of a few memes and jokes that were shared during this period. To make definitive claims on this basis would not only be ingenuous, it would also be patently ridiculous given the large body of work that already exists on the State Society relationship in Sri Lanka. However, like Schmidt points out, the analysis of political humor helps to provide another perspective on the State-Society relationship in the same way that the blind men attempted to describe the elephant, i.e. by describing the part of its body that was most apparent to them. Therefore, this paper's turn to humor is an attempt to provide just one more view of the way Sri Lanka's political and social relationships are structured and function.

Surprise! The Context of a Political Crisis

On October 26th, 2018 a series of tweets quickly alerted citizens around the country that a major political upheaval was taking shape in Sri Lanka. In quick succession the news spread that the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), a constituent member of the coalition government that had come to power in 2015 had decided to withdraw from the government without any prior warning. Furthermore, the public learnt that President Maithripala Sirisena had unilaterally sacked his Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe and was in the process of swearing in his predecessor, Mahinda Rajapaksa, as the new Prime Minister of the country. The swearing in of former President Rajapaksa as Prime Minister precipitated what many observers view as a Constitutional crisis which was only deepened by the President's decision to prorogue (suspend) Parliament for three weeks even as Wickremesinghe called for an emergency session of Parliament to establish his majority. The swearing in of Rajapaksa as Prime Minister bookended a remarkable three years in Sri Lankan politics given that President Sirisena had defected from Rajapaksa to become the joint Opposition candidate of Wickremesinghe's United National Party and a coalition of other Opposition parties for the country's 2015 Presidential election.

Vigorous attempts were made by the President as well as the new Prime Minister to obtain a Parliamentary majority to consolidate control over the State. In the interim large scale shows of strength were organized by the former government at the Lipton Circus and the new government near Parliament. In addition, citizens' protests took place daily in Kollupitiya which brought together a wide cross-section of citizens from various walks of life and backgrounds. Although there were a few crossovers and threats of crossovers, it soon became clear that the new Prime Minister was unable to muster a Parliamentary majority even as the Speaker threatened to reconvene Parliament to conduct a floor test to ascertain which party possessed a majority. It was in this backdrop, that President Sirisena decided to take a step further and dissolve Parliament altogether. This move further deepened the crisis as Wickremesinghe and other Opposition political parties pointed out that following the amendment of the Constitution in 2015, the President no longer had the power to dissolve Parliament until four and a half years of its term had been completed. These political parties along with a range of civil society organizations, private citizens and even a sitting Elections commissioner went to the Supreme Court to challenge the dissolution of Parliament by the President. On the 13th of November, the Supreme Court handed down an injunction staying the Presidential Gazette dissolving Parliament. Parliament was reconvened by the Speaker on the 14th of November, 2018 and in the midst of confusion and protests by MPs supporting Rajapaksa, a vote of no confidence against the new Prime Minister was passed in Parliament. Subsequent Parliamentary sittings were marred by violence and fisticuffs and the President as well as his new Government repeatedly rejected the passage of a Motion of No Confidence against the government. While the fallout from these events continue to play out, it should be clear to the reader that this constitutes a serious political and Constitutional crisis for the country and its democratic future.

This is why it was perhaps so surprising to observe the proliferation of memes, jokes, videos and songs poking fun at the political situation in the country that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the sacking. Facebook for example was inundated with humorous posts and comments from a wide variety of sources, political commitments and social backgrounds. Many of these posts had no clear political agenda or persuasion but served as a form of commentary on the events that were taking shape such as the loss of a cricket match or the erection of a billboard hailing Rajapaksa as President (rather than Prime Minister). This response stood in stark contrast with commentaries available in more formal modes of political engagement such

as newspaper columns or blog posts discussing the economic imperatives at work,² the Constitutional provisions that should be followed³ or even highlighting the threat to democracy the country faced.⁴ However, I hope to demonstrate through this paper that the turn to humor in a time of such serious political and Constitutional crisis requires just as much analytical attention as the attempts made to theorize the crisis through more formal spheres such as the economy or the Constitution.

Memes and Political Humor

The analysis of social media memes is a relatively new phenomena and has only recently gained significant scholarly attention. Limor Shifman defines memes as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process.” (Shifman, *Memes in a Digital World*, 2013: 367).⁵ The role of memes in politics (Shifman, 2014) and political education (Wells, 2018) has received some attention. However, some writers such as Shifman criticize political memes if they aim at “pure playful amusement” (Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 2014, p. 138). However, other research has shown the importance of paying attention to the role that memes play in shaping political participation (Burroughs, 2013; Howley, 2016). Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, I will define memes as a piece of culture (such as pictograms, jokes, and videos) that is shared and consumed online and provides some form of political commentary on the current political and Constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka.

The data for this paper is drawn from a collection of over 400 memes that circulated on social media during this period. The majority of these memes are pictograms (images that include words), that are also marked by many of the more popular meme markers such as the Yao Ming face/ Bitch Please image,⁶ the Trollface image,⁷ the All the Things image,⁸ and the Derpina image.⁹ Some of these memes remix an image using photoshop to offer a commentary on what was taking place such as the depiction of President Sirisena as Thanos from the popular film, *Avengers: Infinity War* (Figure 1). It was also noticeable that photographs of the key actors (Sirisena, Rajapaksa, and Wickremesinghe) in which they are making particular faces such as the image of Sirisena’s finger-wagging speech at a rally or stepping out of a car with a smile on

² See this Op-Ed by Ahilan Kadirgamar in *The Hindu* <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/see-sri-lankas-national-crisis-for-what-it-is/article25487961.ece>.

³ See Dr Asanga Welikala’s commentary on the Constitutional provisions on *Groundviews* - <https://groundviews.org/2018/10/27/paradise-lost-preliminary-notes-on-a-constitutional-coup/> as well as <https://groundviews.org/2018/11/12/the-dissolution-of-parliament-in-the-constitution-of-sri-lanka/>. See also the commentary by Constitutional Lawyer and Parliamentarian, Dr Jayampathy Wickramaratne <https://groundviews.org/2018/11/09/on-dissolution-of-parliament/>.

⁴ See this essay by Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda in *The Hindu* - <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/from-uncertainty-to-crisis/article25363794.ece>.

⁵ As this paper focuses on the function of political humor, I will not spend too much time attempting to conceptually define the function of the meme. This task has been taken up by a number of other scholars and their work does provide some useful insights for those interested in the conceptual questions surrounding the definition of memes (Shifman, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Davidson, 2012).

⁶ See “Yao Ming face/ Bitch Please” entry on [knowyourmeme.com](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/yao-ming-face-bitch-please) - <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/yao-ming-face-bitch-please>.

⁷ See “Trollface” entry on [knowyourmeme.com](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trollface) - <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trollface>.

⁸ See “All the Things” entry on [knowyourmeme.com](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/all-the-things) - <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/all-the-things>.

⁹ See “Derpina” entry on [knowyourmeme.com](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/derpina) - <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/derpina>.

his face were constantly re-used as the basis for commentary. In addition, I also select my material from a pool of humorous videos that circulated on social media that commented on the political crisis which included remixed songs, redubbed videos overlaying footage from Parliament over children's cartoons such as Soora Pappa (Asterix), as well as parody videos of news surrounding the event.

Parana Plastic Walata Aluth Basam: Political Participation & The Politics of Humor

In one of Rajapaksa's first public appearances after his swearing in, he uses a bull horn to make an impromptu speech from the balcony of his residence. In this speech, he promises to restore democracy, hold Provincial Council elections as quickly as possible and also reaches out to supporters of the United National Party (UNP) to ask them to respect both democracy and the law. However, a few hours after this footage was shown on local television channels, a remix of this video started to circulate on social media. The newer video overlaid a recording from vans offering to exchange old plastic chairs and discarded aluminum saucepans for plastic basins that are increasingly ubiquitous in urban areas in the country over Rajapaksa's comments about democracy and the law. In the original footage, Rajapaksa's supporters cheer raucously towards the end of his comments and as he waves to the crowd. The remixed video does not edit out this cheering but instead humorously retains it at the end of the video, creating the impression that people were cheering raucously for these vans that collected household junk. What are we to make of this humorous video that lasts barely thirty seconds? On the one hand, the video can be easily dismissed as a (or, yet another) frivolous distraction in the midst of a serious political and constitutional crisis with serious ramifications for the future of the country. On the other hand, however, it can also be read as a significant social and political commentary. I take this opportunity to attempt a reading along the lines of the latter.

The video creatively juxtaposes Rajapaksa's emergence as the newly appointed Prime Minister with the recycling of condemned household items. This framing arguably works to (re)present the Prime Minister as a modern-day version of the *bothal paththara karaya*.¹⁰ This representation arguably also stands as an ironic critique of a man who had once been feted as *Maha Rajaneni* (great king).¹¹ In doing so, the video also forces us to confront the reality of Rajapaksa's second emergence not as a victorious, popularly elected leader but as a caricature of his former self. This framing is also emphasized through the informality of Rajapaksa's address through a bullhorn rather than at a podium. Furthermore, this (re)framing of Rajapaksa also appears to have been a testy subject for Rajapaksa himself as was evident in his off the cuff retort to Opposition Parliamentarians during his first speech in Parliament after the event. Rajapaksa's retort that the Premiership was not a big deal for him was soon also recycled and made into other commentaries that further served to highlight Rajapaksa's predicament. For example, the meme in Figure 2¹² uses Rajapaksa's testy resort to poke fun at the results of the GCE Advanced Level exam which happened to be released during this period. Therefore, it could be argued that this humor works to highlight Rajapaksa's new status as a fragile Prime Minister rather than a strong President by emphasizing a post-facto justification for an undesirable result.

¹⁰ A person who goes door to door buying old newspapers and glass bottles for recycling purposes. A ubiquitous presence in most Sri Lankan urban settings for many years.

¹¹ See Saheli Gamage's laudatory song and video following the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6CMv7zqaxc>.

¹² Translation: whether you got 3 As, 3Bs or just 3 Ss, the result is the result. You better remember that. This is not a big deal to me. It may be a big deal for them. I've been writing exam papers since I was a child.

The status of MPs is another important commentary emanating from the framing of this video. When Parliament was prorogued the day after the sacking of Wickremesinghe it was assumed that the new Prime Minister would expend his energies to woo defectors from the Wickremesinghe camp. Allegations soon started circulating that immense sums of money as well as Cabinet position were being offered to MPs to induce crossovers so that the new government could secure a majority.¹³ It is in this context, that the video also affords a particularly hard-hitting commentary on the commodification of representation in Sri Lanka today. Read in this way, the video presents MPs not as “promissory” representatives of the people (Mansbridge, 2003), i.e. as being accountable to voters but rather as commodities that can be bought and sold within a politico-economic system.¹⁴ Understood in this way, the video ironically juxtaposes the changing culture of consumption that is increasingly shaping urban environments with the realities of Parliamentary politics in Sri Lanka today. This move reframes representative democracy as a system in which you barter an old broken good for a new, cheap and potentially useless one. It is also worth remembering that at least seven of the candidates who lost their seats at the 2015 General Elections were brought back into Parliament through the National List by the President to help secure a Parliamentary majority.¹⁵ Therefore, the offer made by the Prime Minister to trade old commodities for new cheap ones arguably highlights the function of representation in a political system where the will of the people has been sacrificed to the expediency of Parliamentary power struggles.

Finally, the cheering of the crowd at the end of the video is also an important aspect of the humor generated through this video. In the video, the crowd cheers raucously in response to the offer of new, cheap, commodities. Had the video ended with Rajapaksa’s exit, it would have still been both a humorous as well as politically astute commentary. However, it is the cutback to the cheering crowd at the end of the video that arguably makes this video a sophisticated political commentary on the way that political participation is conceptualized in Sri Lanka today. The cheering starkly emphasizes the role that the wider population plays in buttressing a political system that only recognizes them as political voters and supporters rather than as active citizens in a vibrant democracy (Peiris, 2014). In other words, by ending with the cheering crowd, the video emphasizes the acquiescence of and support for a political system that values expediency over representation. Therefore, in spite of its humorous commentary, this video provides a sophisticated political critique of the State-Society relationship in Sri Lanka today.

Sumana Akkage Bahutharaya: Gender & the Politics of Humor

The imbrication of gender and politics was another topic that generated a significant amount of conversation during this period. For example, posters highlighting the need to elect women as a response to the current crisis generated debate on Twitter when it was shared with the commentary that a 100% quota for women was required for Sri Lankan politics.¹⁶ This poster was a commentary on the struggle by women’s groups to establish a quota for women in order to address the consistently low levels of women’s representation in politics (Kodikara, *The Struggle for Equal Political Representation of Women in Sri Lanka: A Stock Taking Report for the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment and the United Nations*

¹³ See https://economynext.com/Sri_Lanka_legislator_says_offered_Rs500mn_to_crossover-3-12455.html.

¹⁴ See also the important contribution made by Dr Pradeep Peiris (2014) to the empirical understanding of the relationship between the politician and the citizen in Sri Lanka.

¹⁵ See <http://www.ft.lk/front-page/upfa-appoints-7-defeated-candidates-on-national-list/44-461057>.

¹⁶ See <https://twitter.com/iromip/status/1063130650973097985>.

Development Programme (UNDP), 2009). While the function of patriarchy in politics has been discussed in relation to the political participation and representation of women (Wickramasinghe & Kodikara, 2012; Kodikara, 2014; Jayawardena & Kodikara, 2003; Perera & Chandrasekera, 2005), the analysis of political humor provides additional perspective to discussions on the function of patriarchy and gender in Sri Lanka's politics.

The fact that the personal is political is now a well-accepted tenet of women's studies. However, an interesting feature of some of the memes circulating on social media was the way in which it used the personal as a means of commenting on the political. For example, memes such as Figure 3 in which a woman uses her executive power to declare another husband highlight how personal relationships can be used to ridicule the arbitrariness of the President's actions. Another example of this tendency is visible in Figure 4 which equates Wickremesinghe's refusal to concede the Premiership with the search for a supremely loyal (or excessively clingy) kind of love. On one level, both memes underscore an important political critique – Figure 3 as a commentary on the unilateral nature of Sirisena's actions and Figure 4 as one that draws attention to the intractability of the former Prime Minister and the role that both of them continue to play in deepening the crisis. However, at another level, it is important to recognize the role that gender plays in shaping this commentary. The humor in these memes is inseparable from the commentary on personal relations, whether it be the executive power the wife 'wields' in the home or the tongue-in-cheek critique of an overly attached lover. Therefore, in contrast to the absence of women in formal spaces of representation, these memes highlight the ways in which gender can emerge in political discourse, particularly as a vehicle for the critique of political action.

A significant critique of the function of masculinity is also subtly encoded in some of the memes that were shared during this period. Masculinity plays a significant role in Sri Lankan politics and political participation foregrounding particular modes of engagement with the State. Prominent political figures like Rajapaksa also carefully curate their image as a particular kind of masculine leader in order to present themselves as suitable candidates for office. However, some of the memes actively make fun of the fatherly form of masculinity privileged by Rajapaksa. For example, Figure 5 uses images and text to poke fun at Rajapaksa's status as a father figure. The image shows Rajapaksa returning home to an irate wife following the attack on policemen with chili powder by Rajapaksa's supporters. By ridiculing Rajapaksa as an average hen-pecked husband, it could be argued that the humor in this image serves to humanize Rajapaksa further. However, such a claim does not take into account the effort that is exerted to cultivate a masculine persona such as the privileging of children in his 2010 election campaign. In other words, by framing Rajapaksa as a hen-pecked husband the meme foregrounds a nuanced political commentary on Rajapaksa's capacity to lead the country. A similar perspective is also visible in the meme making fun of Palitha Thewarapperuma who was caught on camera brandishing either a butter knife or a letter opener during one particularly acrimonious fight in Parliament. In this particular variation of the meme (Figure 6), Thewarapperuma's wife chastises him over the phone for taking the knife for cutting bread to Parliament and warns him of the challenge he will face when he gets home. This commentary must be read against the widely held view of Thewarapperuma as one of the ring leaders of the violence from Wickremesinghe's party. Like the critique foregrounded in Figure 5, this image also serves to undercut the publicly cultivated image of masculinity of the subject. Therefore, humor also provides a useful critique of the function of political masculinity in politics in Sri Lanka today.

To underscore my argument about the function of gender in relation to politics, I would like to finally turn my attention to Figure 7. The commentary here is on a popular Sinhala (soft) pornographic film series, *Aggey Vairaya* (Her Revenge) and the actress, Sumana Gomez who

starred in three of the four films in the series.¹⁷ Prior to the Supreme Court's stay order, Sirisena and Rajapaksa repeatedly asserted that they had the numbers to demonstrate their majority in Parliament. However, since Parliament was prorogued, it was not possible to demonstrate this majority to the country. The meme pokes fun at this situation by equating the wait for President Sirisena to demonstrate his majority with the expectation of seeing Sumana Gomez' nude in the *Aggey Vairaya* films. The humor here emanates from the fact that the film notoriously promised lascivious displays of nudity but eventually, only provided fleeting glimpses of Gomez' body. The indexing of the male gaze on Gomez' body as a way of commenting on the political situation is no doubt an extremely patriarchal move.

More importantly, however, it is worth remembering that the original film (in which Gomez did not perform) generated significant controversy due to the fact that Chandi Rasika, the main actress in the film, filed a case against the producers on the grounds that she was not informed that the film was included pornographic content (a body double was allegedly used for the pornographic scenes).¹⁸ Seen in this light, the meme operates within the subtext of underhand dealings and exploitation for personal gain. This subtext thereby functions as a more pointed form of commentary on Sirisena's underhand actions, a particularly emphatic aspect of the commentary on the President's decision to appoint a new Prime Minister with almost no prior notice.¹⁹ Furthermore, this reading returns us to a point of major controversy that undergird both the *Aggey Vairaya* films as well as the actions of Sirisena - the question of consent. In the immediate aftermath of the sacking of the Prime Minister, a major point of political and Constitutional contention was whether the President possessed the power to sack the Prime Minister unilaterally, particularly in the event that the sitting Prime Minister neither resigns nor ceases to be a member of Parliament as set out in Article 46 (2) of the Constitution. In other words, as some commentators point out,²⁰ it would appear that the President is unable to sack the Prime Minister without his or her consent. Understood in this way, this particular meme indexes a much larger conversation about politics and political action, going far beyond the narrow confines of humorous commentary. Furthermore, if democratic politics is recognized as governance by the consent of the citizen, the framing of this meme raises far deeper questions about the function of consent within the confines of democratic politics. To what extent does the will of the people matter in shaping agendas and imperatives for governance? How do we assess the trade-off between democratic participation and effective governance in determining State priorities? Can democracy deliver on its promise of government by the people, for the people and from the people? Therefore, by using humor as a means of foregrounding much deeper questions about political participation and governance, memes such as this raise far deeper questions of the nature of consent within the space of democratic representation, and the role that consent plays in shaping priorities for governance in a country like Sri Lanka.

Ah Nangi!: Language, Class, & Political Humor

The imbrication of class and politics is most starkly visible during the colonial period and as a result many commentators have tended to discuss this relationship in relation to elite politics in Sri Lanka (Jayawardena K. , 2007; Roberts, 1977). Though interventions such as Deborah

¹⁷ See the Sumana Gomez IMDB page - <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm5551944/>.

¹⁸ See this recent interview with Chandi Rasika - <https://mirrorarts.lk/chat/802-chandi-rasika>.

¹⁹ It should also be noted that some memes criticized Sirisena as a *yatikuttuwa* (or person with underhand dealings).

²⁰ See for example, this commentary by Sanjit Dias - <https://groundviews.org/2018/10/29/of-constitutions-cabinets-and-coups/> as well as this essay by Dr Asanga Welikala - <https://groundviews.org/2018/10/27/paradise-lost-preliminary-notes-on-a-constitutional-coup/>.

Winslow and Michael Woost's *Economy, Culture, and Civil War* attempt to address this apparent imbalance (2004), discussions of politics have tended to be 'overdetermined' by ethnicity (Gunasinghe, 2011). However, language is one arena in which the analysis of class has continued to dominate following in the tradition of Thiru Kandiah's groundbreaking essay, "Kaduwa: Power and the English Language Weapon in Sri Lanka" (1984). Kandiah's essay is significant because it demonstrates the fundamental link that exists between language and class in Sri Lanka and this intervention continues to shape more recent discussions on the English language and its role in shaping class relationships in Sri Lanka (Gunasekera, 2005; Medawattegedera, 2015). The relationship between class and education is another dimension class that has received some attention from Sri Lanka scholars (Uyangoda, 2003). Many of these dynamics of class were prominent and visible in conversations surrounding the events precipitated by Wickremesinghe's sacking on October 26th 2018.

The class differences between Sirisena who hails from an agricultural (yet land owning) background in Polonnaruwa and Wickremesinghe who is from a politically and socially privileged background in Colombo was repeatedly indexed in conversations about the crisis. For example, numerous comparisons were made between Sirisena and the village Gramasevaka, the lowest rung of Sri Lanka's sprawling administrative service (see Figure 8 for example). However, one of the most sophisticated analyses of the function of class in Sri Lanka's politics was visible in a commentary on the letters exchanged by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe in the immediate aftermath of the sacking. In Figure 9, we have a juxtaposition of Sirisena's letter to Wickremesinghe informing him that he is being sacked as Prime Minister as well as Wickremesinghe's response to Sirisena. As the reader will notice, Sirisena's letter is written in Sinhala while Wickremesinghe's response is in English. The commentary at the bottom reframes these two letters with a comment about catcalling a woman in Sinhala but getting a response in English. Most obviously, the meme works to identify the class identities of the Sinhala speaking Sirisena and the English speaking Wickremesinghe. A closer analysis of this meme however, demonstrates how subtly it uses this class dynamic to reinforce a particular view of Sirisena as lacking culture and finesse (as evinced from his catcalling in Sinhala) while establishing Wickremesinghe's position as an upper-class, English speaking person. Furthermore, the analysis of the intersection between gender and class through this meme highlights the framing of Sirisena as masculine (the caller) and Wickremesinghe (the *nangi*, or younger sister) as feminine. This framing takes on particular salience in light of Sirisena's attempt to defend his decision to sack Wickremesinghe on the grounds of Wickremesinghe's alleged homosexuality.²¹ Understood in this way, this meme provides a glimpse of how class and gender can function together to structure perspectives on leadership and governance in Sri Lanka today. Therefore, this meme provides a sophisticated insight into how expectations of both class, language and masculinity shape perspectives on governance and political leadership.

The humor that was shared was also quite regularly ribald, a feature that is not unusual in most discussions on humor. The indexing of sex and sexual relationship is also hardly surprising given that Sri Lanka has often topped the list of countries performing google searches for sex.²² However, a comparison of these two particular memes are interesting because they provide an insight into the way that class can function in shaping perspectives on political leadership in Sri Lanka. Figure 10, is an English language meme in which the image of Sirisena swearing in

²¹ For example, in his first public rally with Rajapaksa, Sirisena accuses the former Prime Minister of pursuing a "butterfly life", a cultural reference to being a gay man in colloquial Sinhalese. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JW84UmxGO5o>.

²² See <http://www.dailynews.lk/2016/12/08/local/101467>.

Chief Justice Nalin Perera is rendered as a still from the popular pornographic website, PornHub. If we move past the explicit language what is of interest is the framing of Sirisena as ‘a farmer’ who is responsible for the predicament of the country. The tongue-in-cheek reference to Sirisena as a farmer, particularly in English can be read as another representation of the class dynamics that were commented on above. The humor in this meme is premised in part on the capacity of a lowly rural farmer to gain the kind of power that makes it possible to determine the trajectory of an entire country. It is worth remembering that the idea of the rural peasant has deep ideological and political resonance in Sinhala society (Moore, 1989; Rambukwella, 2018). As a result, it is unlikely that Sinhala version of the assertion in this meme would have gained much traction. However, the meme arguably went viral among English speaking Facebook users in part because it indexed an understanding of class relationships that relegated the farmer to working class status and therefore, as an unfit leader for democratic governance.²³ Therefore, even though the meme presents itself as a commentary on pornography, a closer analysis draws our attention to the function of class in structuring perspectives on the ideal kind of leader for a particular (elite) segment of society.

Conclusion: Gonaraballas & Honaraballas – The Politics of Humor

This paper has attempted to draw attention to the function of humor as a ‘serious’ mode of political commentary and engagement during times of crisis and conflict. It has discussed the function of humor in relation to political participation, the function of gender, as well as the function of class in Sri Lanka’s politics today. I have attempted to demonstrate the importance of recognizing political humor as a form of sophisticated political commentary, particularly in times of grave political and Constitutional crisis. In doing so, I have attempted to argue that political humor can provide important insights into the relationship between the State and Society.

There is however a significant politics to making this claim. Humor is often viewed as at best a diversion from the seriousness of the crisis and more often than not as a poor placeholder for direct political action. However, understanding the function of humor in this way does not help to come to terms with the profusion of memes that emerged and continued to circulate on social media even as the crisis unfolded. I want to end therefore, by arguing that humor has a valuable role to play in times of political crisis not simply as a form of dissent or even as a coping mechanism. Instead, humor plays a far more significant role – as a form of ideological critique that is crucial to forming the basis for political action in the aftermath of crisis and conflict such as the one currently taking shape in Sri Lanka today.

This important social and political function of humor is traced through Aristotle and Hegel by Richard A. Lee, Jr. (2016). Lee demonstrates how early Greek theorists of poetics such as Aristotle were troubled by the comic and its relationship to the social structure in place at the time. Lee demonstrates how this relationship is embedded in an ethical tension between the universal and the singular. As Lee explains it, “my action... depends on my ability to grasp the universal and to grasp the singular and then to relate the singular to the universal. One might say, therefore, that an action is good only to the extent that it places the singular in a proper relation to the universal” (2016, p. 58). Lee further stresses the importance of the singular in relation to the universal, noting that individual actions are only given validity in so far as they

²³ It is also worth remembering that Sirisena himself drew attention to the impact that Wickremesinghe’s economic policies had on the poorest segments of Sri Lankan society as another key plank of his justification for his decision to sack the former Prime Minister. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JW84UmXGO5o&t=673s>.

enable the individual to come to relate to the universal. The ethical relationship between the universal and the singular is critical to Aristotle's analysis of the poetics of drama according to Lee.

Drama... works toward the resolution or reconciliation of the tension that emerges between individual and universal or general. From a schematic point of view, we can already see that this reconciliation can work in two directions: the individual can be overcome by the ethical whole and therefore be brought back into line with the ethical norms of a society or the individual can overcome those very ethical norms, achieve a break with the social whole, and thereby bring it to an end. (Lee Jr., 2016, p. 59)

Lee argues that within this schematic, it is tragedy and not comedy that works in the former direction. It is in doing so that Aristotle (according to Lee) comes to be troubled by comedy since "it might cross or, more powerfully, blur the borders between high and low, plebian and noble..." (ibid.).

Lee then turns to Hegel to examine how Aristotle's insights on tragedy and comedy are helpful in understanding the function of comedy in a society. Lee demonstrates that Hegel recognizes how important tragedy is to establishing and reinforcing the status quo. He notes, "the audience comes to see that the entire tragic situation arises from the individual's repudiation of the ethical norms of society and the proper resolution is a reaffirmation of those norms and that social whole" (Lee Jr., 2016, p. 60). To put it differently, for both Aristotle and Hegel, Lee argues, tragedy functions as ideology reinforcement. Comedy, in contrast, emphasizes the "very impossibility of subsuming an individual under the social whole, under the ethical norm, that gives rise to the need for resolution" (Ibid). Furthermore, Lee notes, "in the agent's impossibility to achieve an end, it is not the agent at whom we laugh, but rather... the social norm [that] is called into question through laughter" (Ibid.). By calling into question the social norm, comedy takes on the function of ideology critique or as Lee frames it, "comedy recognizes that the phenomenal appearance of substantial norms might be illusory, might be, in a word, false" (2016: 61). Therefore, if Hegel was one of the earliest to recognize the problem of ideology, he also demonstrated the possibility of comedy as a solution according to Lee. Comedy does this by "master[ing] the phenomenal presentation of the real, and therefore point[ing] out the difference between what is substantial and what appears to be substantial. Once again, comedy blurs borders and this is its power and its threat" (Ibid.). Understood through this framing, I would argue that comedy goes beyond critique to form the basis for an ethical response in a time of crisis and conflict.

I want to conclude therefore with a final meme (Figure 11). This meme which circulated as the political situation continues to starkly polarize Sri Lankan society makes the point that while the *honaraballas* (MPs, also note that *balla* is the Sinhalese term for dog) are living happily, the *gonaraballas* (a play on the word for cow or stupid person) are killing themselves over the political situation. However, pace Lee Jr. we may observe that such a commentary lays the groundwork for a far less divisive, far more accountable, much deeper and ultimately more ethically grounded form of political engagement for the future. This seems to me as good a starting point as any to begin the long climb out of the morass of Sri Lanka's current political and Constitutional crisis.

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Appendix: Figures



Figure 1: Sirisena as Thanos; Figure 2: A/L Results



Figure 3: Wife's Executive Power; Figure 4: A Love Like Ranil



Figure 5: Mahinda and the Chili; Figure 6: Thewarapperuma and the Bread Knife.



Figure 7: Sumana Gomez and Sirisena’s Majority; Figure 8: Sirisena the Gramasewaka.

