



Sri Lanka — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[formerly known as Ceylon]

03/25/1802 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom]: Ceylon became a British crown colony signing of the Treaty of Amiens on 03/25/1802 (Schrikker 2007). It was administered by British governors with advisory councils that had limited influence. The indigenous population had minimal political representation. According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held until 1910. From 1911 onward, only multiparty legislative elections were held. No executive elections were present. The Legislative Council elections in Ceylon were undemocratic due to its restrictive structure and limited voter representation. Only four unofficial members were elected, with the majority of the council appointed by the Governor. Two of the elected seats for Europeans were uncontested, leaving no actual voting process. The electorate was highly restricted, with seats divided along racial lines (Europeans, Burghers, and "educated" Ceylonese), severely limiting political participation and excluding the majority of the population. This arrangement lacked the foundational principles of equal suffrage, broad representation, and competitive elections, hallmarks of a democratic process.^{128F¹} Political liberties were absent according to LIED. V-Dem's PCLI indicates political liberties as somewhat present until 1919 and again in 1930. For the rest of the years, we interpret the PCLI as indicating the presence of political liberties. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

04/25/1931 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: In 1931 the Donoughmore Constitution introduced universal adult suffrage for all irrespective of race, ethnicity, language, and established the State Council^{129F²} The parliament had significant influence over domestic affairs, though the British governor retained control over defense and foreign policy. The parliament was effective in advancing the interests of the indigenous population, leading to independence on 02/04/1948. LIED confirms the presence of legislative and multiparty elections and the presence of female and male suffrage. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and present according to V-Dem's PCLI. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

08/23/1947[-09/20/1947] End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy [as Protectorate of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: Between these dates the first national Ceylonese parliamentary elections took place, which were won by the United National Party (UNP) and Ceylon became a self-governing nation as a British Dominion^{130F³} The Ceylon Independence Act came into effect on 12/10/1947^{131F⁴} For the specified period, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are present. On 02/04/1948 Ceylon gained its official independence within the Commonwealth (Ratnapalan 2016). On 05/22/1972 the name of the country was changed to Republic of Sri Lanka. The constitution of 05/22/1972 created a weak president appointed by the prime minister (Warnapala 1973). Based on our observations,

multiparty, executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Up to 1976 the elections remained competitive according to LIED. V-Dem's CEI reflects clean election from 1948 to 1951. Between 1951 and 1978 the elections decrease to a somewhat cleanliness level. According to V-Dem's EF&FI, the overall conditions are free and fair until 1976. The following year, they fall to somewhat free and fair. According to FH, for the years 1972 to 1974, the country is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. As classified by FH for 1975, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. As per FH's classification for 1976, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. According to FH, for 1977, the country is categorized as free with a score between 2 and 4, which corresponds to our interpretation of free. As per FH's classification for 1978, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. Besides, the political liberties were present until 1969 according to LIED. The remaining years no political liberties were achieved according to LIED. Our interpretation of V-Dem's PCLI confirms the presence of political liberties until 1970. Since 1971 somewhat political liberties were achieved. The LDI shows a constantly ambiguous score, thus referring to an electoral democracy in this time interval. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. From 1948 to 1971, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. From 1972 onwards, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating that robust constraints on the executive. While in doubt we follow the classification of BMR, CGV, GWF and PRC as democratic for this period.

09/07/1978 End Electoral Democracy/Start Electoral Hybrid Regime: The regime change in Sri Lanka is classified as an incremental self-coup, marked by the adoption of a new constitution on 09/07/1978. This constitutional reform fundamentally transformed the institutional structure of the regime by replacing the previous parliamentary system with a powerful executive presidency. In contrast to the earlier framework, the new constitution granted the president sweeping powers, including the authority to override, amend, or suspend laws passed by parliament, dissolve the legislature, and expel members of parliament (Edrisinha 2000: 106).⁵ Although formal multiparty elections continued to be held, the introduction of such far-reaching executive dominance effectively dismantled horizontal accountability and shifted the regime away from democratic standards. The accumulation of power in the presidency—deemed by some observers to amount to quasi-dictatorial rule.⁶ Accordingly, this moment marks the transition to an electoral hybrid regime, characterized by competitive elections under conditions of severely weakened checks and balances. The government used UNP militants to harass and beat supporters of opposition parties with collusion from the police (DeVotta 2004: 143-46, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 95). According to GWF the Jayawardene government crossed the line to dictatorship (DeVotta 2002: 91, DeVotta 2004: 143-46, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 95). This is disputed by MCM. We agree with MCM that there was a gradual shift from democracy to autocracy between 1978 and 1983 (Magaloni/Chu/Min 2013: 28). In 10/1980 the political rights of the main opposition leader were cancelled (Blood 1988, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 95). On 12/22/1982 a rigged referendum extended the UNP's 2/3 majority in Parliament instead of holding the required election (DeVotta 2001: 91, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 95). Based on our observations, multiparty, executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. For the entire time the elections were not competitive following LIED's data. The elections remained somewhat clean until 1982. Since 1983 V-Dem's CEI switched to ambiguous cleanliness. V-Dem's EF&FI outcomes show somewhat free and fair election conditions. The LDI reflects a not really score which points more into the direction of an electoral autocracy. A pogrom against Tamil civilians in 1983 escalated the low-level violence into a full-blown civil war (until 2009) with Tamil separatists in the northeastern regions fighting for independence^{134F7} Because of the progressive autocratization, we classify the regime as an electoral hybrid regime despite the fact that the UNP under Jayewardene came to power in democratic elections. The new

constitution was not an illegitimate act per se either. It did not change the guarantee of fundamental rights and an independent judiciary^{135F}⁸ However, the developments described above constitute severe restrictions on political and civil liberties as well as deficits in the institutional restrictions on the executive. While according to LIED political liberties were not present for this entire period, V-Dem's PCLI finds somewhat political liberties until 1982, from 1994 to 1999, from 2002 to 2004, in 2015 and since 2019. V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as ambiguous from 1983 to 1993, from 2000 to 2001 and from 2005 to 2014 regarding the state of political liberties. For the period 2016 to 2018, V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as showing that political liberties are present. According to the Polity5 indicator, during this period, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. On 05/18/1983 President Jayawardene declared a state of emergency and exploited his parliamentary supermajority to extend the life of the sitting parliament without elections (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 59-60, Samarasinghe 1984). Based on our observations, multiparty, executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Following LIED the elections were not competitive during this period. V-Dem's CEI reflects an ambiguous cleanliness for the elections retains between 1983 and 1988. The LDI indicates a not really score. Whereas V-Dem's EF&FI indicates somewhat free and fair conditions between 1983 and 1988. Per FH's scoring for 1978 to 1982, the country is classified as free with a score of 5, which falls into our interpretation of the rather free category. As classified by FH for the rest of this regime period, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. According to the Polity5 indicator, during this period, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. From 1978 to 2004, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. Between 2005 and 2014 V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. Since 2015 JCE and LCE fluctuate. From 2015 to 2016, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate and JCE is interpreted as comprehensive and LCE as robust from 2017 to 2019 and in 2021. For the remaining years, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. We classify the country in this period still as an electoral hybrid regime. For instance, the incumbent party successfully banned the leader of the opposition from politics (Gastil 1984: 25). FH observed a decline from a free to a partly free regime in 1983. On 12/19/1988 presidential elections were won by Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa of the governing United National Party. However, the victory was narrow. On 02/15/1989 parliamentary elections took place (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 59-60). On 11/09/1994 presidential elections were won by opposition (DeVotta 2002: 92, Samarsinghe/Samarsinghe 1998: 112). According to GWF this returned the country to democracy (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 95). Between 2010 and 2015 according to HTW and LIED Sri Lanka turned into a democracy. For example, the 2015 presidential elections were still characterized by deficits, violation of electoral laws and violent incidents.^{136F}⁹ In contrast, the 2019 presidential elections were classified by the EU as peaceful and upholding democratic institutions.^{137F}¹⁰ However, Nandasena Gotabaya Rajapaksa, winner of the 2019 presidential election, expanded presidential power and began to appoint family members to positions of power. In combination with an economic crisis, popular upheaval forced him out of office in 2022.^{138F}¹¹ Throughout the period, however, there have been severe limitations on democracy. According to our observations Sri Lanka is a borderline case between an electoral democracy and an electoral hybrid regime. Based on our observations, multiparty, executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Between 1989 and 2009 the elections were classified as competitive by LIED, for the following five years as not competitive. Since 2015 LIED scores elections as competitive. Since 1988 V-Dem's CEI declares multiple changes between an ambiguous and a somewhat cleanliness. Between 1988 and 1994 the elections score an ambiguous cleanliness before entering five years of a somewhat cleanliness. From 2000 to 2001 the elections switched

back to ambiguity. For the following three years the elections are somewhat clean again. 2005 and 2014 marks a change to an ambiguous cleanliness. Since 2015, the country's elections are classified as somewhat clean. In addition, V-Dem's EF&FI also indicates multiple changes regarding the freedom and fairness of the elections. Until 1993 the scores remain at a somewhat free and fair level. For the following five years, the outcome is acknowledging overall free and fair conditions. Between 1999 and 2018 the electoral standards decrease to a somewhat level. Since 2019, freedom and fairness for the elections were given. Per FH, for 1988, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. As classified by FH for 1989-1995, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. Per FH's scoring for 1996, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. According to FH, a score of 6 to 7 for 1997-2005 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. Per FH's scoring for 2006 to 2009, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. As classified by FH for 2010 to 2014, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. Per FH's scoring for 2015, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. Per FH, for the years 2016 to 2018, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. According to FH, in the period 2019-2023, the country is partly free with a score of 8, which we interpret as rather not free. Until 2000, according to the Polity5 indicator, during this period, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. In 2001 and 2002, based on Polity5's evaluation, the executive's power was limited to a degree between substantial constraints and parity with other institutions, fitting Intermediate Category 3. Between 2003 and 2009, the executive's authority was significantly constrained by institutional checks during this time. From 2010 to 2014, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive's power was noticeably limited but not substantial, fitting Intermediate Category 2. Since 2015, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 3, between substantial limitations and executive parity or subordination. Overall, given the persistent pattern of fluctuating democratic quality, recurring violations of electoral standards, and substantial constraints on political liberties at various points, the category of an "electoral hybrid regime" appears more fitting. While there were certain periods that suggested movement toward an electoral democracy, these phases did not solidify into a sustained, stable democratic order. Instead, long stretches of restricted freedoms, uncertain electoral fairness, and concentration of power point toward a regime type that is neither fully democratic nor completely authoritarian, one that is best described as an electoral hybrid.

09/21/2024 End Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: The presidential election on 09/21/2024 marked the first time in Sri Lankan history that a long-dominant political establishment was peacefully ousted through the ballot box. The victory of Anura Kumara Disanayake, a candidate from a party previously considered a fringe player, was a clear signal that the electoral system could produce genuine change and accountability. This proved the elections were not merely a facade for an entrenched power elite. Following this, Disanayake's party, the National People's Power (NPP), secured a supermajority in the parliamentary elections on 11/14/2024. This cemented the public's rejection of the political status quo and gave the new government a strong mandate for reform. These events were a culmination of widespread public protests against corruption and economic mismanagement that had plagued the country for years. The new administration immediately began to fulfill its campaign promises by focusing on anti-corruption measures and strengthening the rule of law.¹² This revitalization of the electoral process and the subsequent steps towards institutional reform elevate Sri Lanka from a hybrid regime, where democratic elements are weak or co-opted, to an electoral democracy. While the country still faces significant challenges, such as deep-seated corruption and ethnic tensions, the recent events have established a crucial foundation for a more transparent and accountable system of governance. As classified by FH the country is scored with 7 as partly free, which corresponds to our interpretation of rather free.

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1911_Ceylonese_Legislative_Council_election
- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donoughmore_Constitution
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1947_Ceylonese_parliamentary_election
- ⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/11-12/7/enacted>
- ⁵ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Sri_Lanka_2015?lang=en
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_Civil_War
- ⁷ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka; <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LKA>
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Sri_Lanka
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Sri_Lankan_presidential_election#Conduct
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Sri_Lankan_presidential_election#International_reactions
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotabaya_Rajapaksa#
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Sri_Lanka

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