

Land Grabs and Trends in Dispossession in Sri Lanka: Contradictions of Land Policies Leading to and in Response to ‘Crisis’

H. B. Dassanayake¹, R. N. Gamage^{2*}

¹*One Text Initiative, Colombo, 00500, Sri Lanka*

²*Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 119620, Singapore*

**r.gamage@nus.edu.sg*

The Gotabaya Rajapaksa government came into power in 2019 on a populist Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist mandate to restore national security and deliver economic prosperity. One of the key campaign platforms and initiatives of the government was rural upliftment and revitalisation. Once in power, acting contrary to its commitment to sustainable development and environmental protection, the government removed protections to non-reserve forest cover extending over 500,000 hectares by way of cancelling circulars No. 05/98, 05/2001, and 02/2006. This came at a time when the national forest cover has an ambitious 32% target to achieve by increasing its current official forest cover of 29%. This move effectively enabled highly politicised, and ad hoc land grabs by patrons of the regime. We argue that this land grab drive was an expansion or acceleration of the patron-clientelism all governments had pursued to increased extraction of environmental resources to maintain a racialised, patronage-based political system as available resources to maintain political clientelism became increasingly scarce at a time of national economic slowdown. This paper focuses on two localities where most of the land grabs happened during this period in the south of the country, and where certain forms of farmer-led resistance emerged subsequently: Ampara and Monaragala districts. Our objective is to document the patronage politics which enabled this type and scale of land grabbing. These land rent schemes also dispossessed affected rural communities of their already limited access to these forest areas, for seasonal and marginal agriculture, cattle-rearing, etc. The impact and dynamics of rural dispossession will also be critically analysed. The methodology used in this paper include analysis of secondary sources on land policies and land grabs in Sri Lanka (including media articles, government documents and statements, academic scholarship) and primary data collected through interviews with officials and affected individuals/communities in the localities studied in this paper. The theoretical framework employed in this paper is one which captures dynamics of land grabs linked to elite contestations and democratization struggles (Klopp, 2012). This approach involves an analysis of patronage politics and how linkages with elites in power grant preferential access to lands and land resources for supporters. In cases where governments are less democratic, the opportunity and incentive to use lands as political resources are higher. Lands then become subject to different pressures depending on the elite contestations that impact these patronage networks.

Keywords: Land Policy, Land Grabs, Sri Lankan Crisis, Patronage, Rural Poverty