

GLOBAL WORKER PROTESTS AND TOOLS OF AUTOCRATIZATION IN SRI LANKA

Rendering them silent

Sandya Hewamanne

In May 2011, global assembly line workers in and around the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) staged a massive political protest against a new pension scheme that sought to curtail their financial independence. The then government responded by ordering a police crackdown that resulted in one death and serious injuries to hundreds of workers (BBC 2011; Samaraweera 2011) It thereafter resorted to varied underhanded ways to silence political protests demanding justice. This chapter analyzes the 2011 protest and, utilizing follow up research conducted among female global factory workers in 2016 and in 2020, assesses how suppression of this protest affected subsequent collective organizing among FTZ workers. It argues that the apathy resulting from such silencing damaged workers' political voice just as much as physical violence and property destruction and influences more consolidation of state power. With the recent state response to the Covid-19 pandemic in mind, this chapter further showcases how the 2011 scenario affected the global worker political organizing in particular ways, and highlights how the increasing autocratization and strong man politics in Sri Lanka has been accentuated today.

Autocratization and means of suppressing discontent

According to Cassani and Tomini (2018), autocratization is a process of regimes' change toward autocracy. Such processes make the exercise of political power more arbitrary and restrict the space for public contestation, and political participation. These processes can manifest in many forms that are peculiar to social, economic, and cultural contexts where they unfold. Sometimes the strategies, tactics and tools of suppression work well with the social and cultural fabric of a given society, so that it becomes difficult for people to see that their democratic rights are being curtailed via these means. With the relative absence of appropriate conceptual and empirical tools to diagnose and compare these subtle processes, it is difficult even for academics to

discern them (Luhmann and Lindberg 2019). This difficulty is exacerbated by the context of the specific intermingling of liberal and illiberal elements that leads to ambiguity as to whether a regime is autocratic or not. The ambiguities are further complicated by liberal enclaves such as universities, or women and youth movements, which have been able to flourish under highly illiberal and autocratic governments. In this context it becomes crucial to closely study situations where already existing repressive measures, and new and craftier measures exist hand in hand to suppress political voices. This chapter will study such a case in Sri Lanka to show how the government and its agents used payments, threats, fractioning and co-optation, to render the protesting groups silent.

Throughout history varied forms of autocracy came to prominence and declined. According to Luhmann and Lindberg (2019), a third wave of autocratization has been unfolding for quite some time. Studying all autocratization episodes since 1900, they show the divergent ways autocratization unfolds, but also how it always entails the gradual regressing of democratic values within formally democratic parameters. Many countries today are experiencing subtypes of authoritarianism, such as hybrid regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010) or soft authoritarianism (DeVotta 2010; Kamaludeen and Turner 2013). Another concept that is often used in Asian contexts is competitive authoritarianism. Within this type, regimes retain formal features of democracy such as elections and party competition. However, in day to day politics they do not meet the standards of democracy (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). Croissant and Haynes (2020, p 4) note 'democratic decoupling,' whereby some aspects of democracy improve while others diminish. For example, some societies display highly improved elections, while civil and political rights diminish. Many of these concepts are easily applicable to South Asian countries in fluid combination of features. Sri Lanka, especially, had seen rapid ups and downs in democratic values during the last decade (DeVotta 2020) and displayed varied combinations of the features of the above subtypes. Paul Staniland (2020) contends that there is a marked ascendancy of the state within South Asian countries. Showing how by 2020 major insurgencies have been squashed or co-opted by South Asian regimes, Staniland notes the ingenious ways the governments have established greater control of previously contested territories. These creative ways include new technologies of surveillance, and new forms of state and non-state coercion, especially localized mob, militias and vigilante groups. Contesting voices have consistently been incorporated via state tools for controlling dissenting voices. However, Staniland still sees discontent emerging within these conventional and new forms of state power. In the last two decades Sri Lanka has seen similar co-optation and creative use of surveillance and coercion increasing especially during the two previous Rajapaksha regimes. The Sirisena–Wickramasinghe coalition which came to power in 2015 promised to reinstate democratic values, but unfortunately, they have not been that successful in fulfilling these promises. The current Ghotabaya Rajapaksha regime confronted the global pandemic decisively with the use of the military in maintaining curfew and lockdown and managing quarantine centres. The heavy use of the military has accelerated the re-autocratization process even as contesting voices ebbed and flowed.

In fact, the Covid-19 pandemic is accelerating the autocratization in Asia. Leaders of many countries have used the pandemic as a pretext to increase their power. Writing about Southeast Asia, Lorch and Sombatpoonsiri (2020) identify five trends emerging as a result of the pandemic. These include tougher government restrictions on civil society organizations, contentious civil society action, new mutual aid initiatives, organized relief efforts, and repurposed advocacy groups. These five trends are in fact apparent in different combinations in many South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka.

As Youngs (2020) notes, although at the outset the virus responses seem to also have galvanized big government and autocratic politics, they also sharpened and intensified the importance of organized civil society action. He contends that if civil society is to be able to block autocratization, politically organized civic groups will need to form alliances with welfare-based groups, which have organically grown within local communities and are focused only on improving community welfare.

At this time of the specific dynamics created by the global pandemic, why is it important to re-visit a global garment worker protest that happened in 2011? Because, as I show below, the way the then government suppressed the protest and the subsequent collective organizing has a bearing on how global garment workers are now responding to the pandemic related infringements on their individual human rights, and labour rights (Hewamanne 2021). After a discussion of research methods, I will focus on the 2011 garment worker protest to show the means of suppression and the long-term effects of that suppression.

Researching gendered protests and responses

Research for this chapter was based on three field work seasons, 2011, 2016, and 2020. I was fortunate to be in Sri Lanka within three days of the May 2011 global factory worker protests and thus was able to conduct a group interview with 12 workers who took part in the protest, including two workers who were injured in the brutal police suppression. Interviews with NGO and trade union officials also informed the research, especially on some of the less obvious ways in which the protest and follow up actions were suppressed. Photos, and mobile phone audio and video recordings made by the participants, were useful as well. In addition, the newspaper and TV reports of the protest and aftermath were used to compare and contrast as well as to triangulate. I have also interviewed several former global factory workers, now residing in their villages, to get a more complete picture of the causes and consequences of the protest.

Five years later in 2016, I conducted follow-up research with the factory workers and NGO officials to see how the 2011 protest and the means of suppression have shaped the factory worker collective organizing, and NGO support and ideologies. In-depth interviews with workers who have participated in the protest in 2011 (3), new workers (10), and NGO officials (3) were used to collect data.

The pandemic-related restrictions on worker rights during the second wave of the pandemic highlighted the need to extend the research to explore how global workers approached collective organizing in response to the arbitrary impingement on their freedom and mobility. This research utilized quite different methods for data collection than my earlier research. Just as livelihoods have been adversely affected by the pandemic, the research projects have also suffered setbacks. Universities have prohibited face to face research. Travelling for research, even on a private basis, has been next to impossible due to airport closures and quarantine requirements. As such the data was acquired via WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype, and phone interviews I conducted with six daily-hired workers, 11 home workers, three NGO officials, and one factory manager. Most of the crucial data was acquired through a Zoom focus group in which ten workers and two NGO staff members joined in from three locations.

During all three research seasons, I have considered the ethical issues carefully, and research questions were designed in association with NGO staff members and factory workers. Workers were informed of the research, and oral and written consent were obtained before the interviews and focus groups. Pseudonyms have been used in place of workers' names, and their village and factory names, to protect their privacy.

Protests, suppressions, and silences

“Don’t kill our dowry”

On May 24 the global factory workers in and around the Katunayake FTZ stopped working, and got out of their factories to join the protest marches that spread outside their factory premises to the city streets. The protest was in opposition to the government’s proposed private-sector pension scheme which sought to change the existing regulations regarding statutory welfare funds (BBC 2011). Under the existing labour law, FTZ workers can withdraw their Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees’ Trust Fund (ETF) savings at the time they get married, provided they are able to produce a marriage certificate within three months of leaving the factory. The underlying idea was that the women would leave work to get married. Thus the EPF and ETF savings together with the factory gratuity payments as a lump sum would be what they would be taking to the new union; in other words their dowry. In fact, at the beginning of FTZs in Sri Lanka in 1978, and later when another government initiated the ‘500 global garment factories in 500 villages’ programme, this stipulation was touted as ‘young women earning their own dowry without being a burden to their poor parents.’ Unsurprisingly, therefore, this lump sum came to be unofficially known as the FTZ dowry among the factory workers. Many rural women came to work in the FTZ with the hope of working for five years, and then obtaining these savings together with the factory gratuity payments when they left. Unlike in the beginning of the FTZ work in Sri Lanka, men are now welcome to join as machine operators due to the current labour shortages. Still, men are less than ten per cent of the total worker population and thus the savings are referred to as the dowry, especially when mentioned by or with regard to women workers.

The stipulation of having to present a marriage certificate within three months of leaving the factories to get the EPF/ETF savings galvanized the label of dowry. If the leaving workers missed this three-month window they could only withdraw these funds when they turned 55 years of age or in case of serious illness such as cancer, or as a housing loan. Thus many women hasten to somehow meet the requirement and obtain their savings and gratuity together at the time of leaving the factory. Many envisioned starting an income generating activity once they got married by using this lump sum. In fact research had shown that many have succeeded in utilizing the savings together with other micro- credit opportunities available in their villages to become successful local entrepreneurs (Hewamanne 2019; 2020). This success further strengthens the hopes of young village women waiting to work in the urban FTZs, and existing workers placed on obtaining the FTZ dowry.

The new bill proposed a pension scheme that would distribute these savings as a small monthly pension, after they turn 60. They will have to work ten years before they are to be entitled to this pension. As many women in the FTZs only work for five to six years they stand to lose their savings altogether. Moreover, the pension funds will be under the Central Bank and will charge 4 per cent (2 per cent from workers and 2 per cent from the employers) for maintenance. The monthly pension in fact is estimated to be only about 1,900 rupees (\$US17.27) per month for the low-paid garment workers (Geekiyana 2011).

Thus it was no surprise that one of the more prominent and passionate protest cries in 2011 was “don’t kill our dowry” (*davaddata kellingepa*). Female workers, especially, were furious about the new scheme, which they found economically disadvantageous to them. Not only was the bill crafted without consultation with workers, its hasty introduction took even the unions by surprise. Workers who were interviewed by the BBC (2011), Samaraweera (2011) and Geekiyana (2011), all mentioned how inflation would reduce the value of their savings by the

time they turn 55. I arrived on the island on May 28 and was able to participate in a meeting at Dabindu (an NGO working among FTZ workers), where 12 workers, some still sporting bruises from the police beatings, met with NGO officials to discuss future actions. I interviewed three of the injured workers (two female, and one male) in addition to group interviews with workers and NGO officials. One worker I interviewed explained,

what I can get today as FTZ dowry, will not be enough to even buy a vada and a cup of tea by the time I turn 55. According to this bill, even then we will only get small monthly payments. There's no way I will support a bill that takes away the one good thing about FTZ work.

These interviews as well as newspaper reports, TV footage, and photos showed that the marches were characterized by emotional outbursts, angry shouting as well as tears. A photo of a large group of workers at the closed FTZ gates wailing showed their frustration about the bill as well as other impingements on their rights. About 70 per cent of FTZ factories had to be shut down due to walkouts. The second day of protests, police brutality was used to break the marches. This resulted in the death of one worker and injuries to more than 100 other workers. The footage of the police brutality on mainstream media shocked the general public, and the next day the police were called back and confined to their barracks. Instead, the military was deployed to keep the peace. Now incensed by the sad loss of one of their comrades, the workers were even more emotional, angry and confrontational. Video footage and photos showed workers, mostly women, challenging military men who held heavy weaponry. They also evidenced that the soldiers showed remarkable patience by not reacting, yet holding the women off from restricted areas.

Although the walkout and loud marches seemed spontaneous, after the death of a worker, Roshane Shanaka, the protest shifted gear to focus on police brutality and the suppression of worker rights. Many trade unions, ones that have been working among the FTZ workers, as well as national unions, joined the marches. According to Chamila Thushari of Dabindu, the protest became much more organized and structured (Thushari 2011). Workers and unions were especially vocal in the days leading up to the funeral, and their banners loudly proclaimed, "Rest in Peace EPF/ETF and Gratuity." Specially designed black hats with EPF/ETF embossed on them were also distributed. Both of these underlined how important this lump sum payment was for the mostly female worker population, and that for the first time in the FTZs' history, the conventional unions were taking a gendered cause as a valid labour right concern. Workers were asked to come clad in white, the traditional mourning colours, and wearing the special black hats, to the funeral. The intention was to make the funeral a space for respectful protest. It was expected that the funeral procession would include shouting of slogans, and display of banners. The published time for the funeral was 4 p.m., and workers started lining up near the slain worker's house from 3 p.m. They were outraged to hear that at 2 p.m. the military took the coffin to the cemetery for burial, thus pulling the rug from under the union plans for an emotionally charged protest that was sure to receive much media exposure.

By this time, the government had already announced that they were retracting the bill for the pension scheme. In other words, the workers had won their demands. However, not many were feeling jubilant. They were stunned by what happened at the funeral and the sudden silence that overcame the topic of the death of a protesting worker. Many days after the death, minor rallies happened (100–200 and steadily declining) outside the FTZ gates to demand justice for Roshane Shanaka. His mother and family members were vocal participants of these gatherings. Family presence was a tremendous emotional boost to the gathered workers, as

they held posters and pumped their fists while shouting slogans. A few days after the hijacked funeral, the mother and family members of the victim stopped coming to these rallies, and talking to NGO and union members. Around the same time the TV and newspapers published footage and photos of Shanaka's mother and brother visiting President Mahinda Rajapaksha in his official residence and receiving condolences and a compensation cheque. It was unclear how much money was given to them, but the popular belief among workers was that it was 25 million rupees (approximately US\$ 227,000). Apparently, it had come with a gag order, as the family members completely cut themselves off from all activities related to the incident. The gatherings continued for a couple more weeks, but with the absence of the victim's mother, they lost their emotional anchor, and soon dwindled to just a few NGO and union protester(s).

The NGO activists I talked to were convinced that the Rajapaksha government, which was showing autocratic tendencies in several other political and judicial spheres, had deliberately undercut the burgeoning worker movement. Even though it started as a protest against the pension scheme, it evolved into a protest that was about many other important issues of worker rights and their livelihoods. Both the NGO activists and the workers I interviewed claimed that the unions had been bribed or threatened to undercut the movement. Their frustrations were mostly placed on one particular union. During the apex of the protest, workers showed animosity toward the leaders of this union for abandoning them when they most needed support. It stemmed from the last minute cancellation of a walkout called by a union collective just a day before workers defied the union and walked out on May 26 (Geekiyana 2011). Within a week of the funeral, the national unions lost interest or deliberately cut ties with the FTZ worker protests.

An NGO official, whose name will be withheld to prevent any repercussions, said in an interview conducted in June 2011:

This could have been the beginning of a very good movement, starting with the dowry, but then moving onto protesting against government corruption, high cost of living, and trampling on people's rights. But this government used bribery, threats, and military power to scare or buy off important stake holders. It is so cunningly done, that on one hand it seems like we won, but in the long run we have truly lost.

"This government had scared the hell out of union leaders, now there's nobody to look after the interests of the injured workers who cannot go back to work for months. And some of us have been arrested and we have court cases pending. No one is helping with lawyer costs either," a worker who was injured in the police beating lamented. One of her knees and a shoulder were injured and she needed at least two more months of recuperating, before she could go back to work. She had already been fired from her current FTZ factory by mid-June 2011.

Most of the interviewees expressed frustrations that were part of broader narratives of critique against the Rajapaksha government. These included the widespread corruption, skyrocketing cost of living and the general fear of speaking up against the current government. This fear was expressed as "we will be disappeared via a white van." This was a reference to the reports of white vans, supposedly manned by government friendly para-military men, abducting journalists and others who dared to criticise the government. These abducted people would then just disappear without a trace. The disappearance of the journalist Pradeep Eknaligoda was mentioned as one reason why the workers now felt that neither the workers nor the union leaders wanted to take the spontaneously galvanized worker movement forward (see Perera 2016 for more information on Eknaligoda and other disappearances).

NGO activists as well as some news reports (Geekiyana 2011) noted that the neighbours and general public who they have spoken to supported the worker protest. In 2011 my research was mainly focused on former global garment workers in their villages, and the women I interviewed in June and July of 2011 were very vocal in their support for the FTZ worker protest in Katunayake. They too were shocked by how quickly the protests ended, and how they did not achieve anything beyond the retracting of the bill. Some of the former workers utilized notions of karma and fate to explain the helplessness that came over the worker population after the protest's short-lived climax. "At the end the workers will always end up underfoot, and defeated," one said.

We are still silent

In 2016, I revisited the protest by conducting follow up interviews with the NGO activists and workers who have participated in the protests and new workers. NGO activists talked passionately about how the government deployed nefarious means to break the back of a grassroots uprising that could have led to much transformative politics. They were especially surprised by the way the government denied them a locally meaningful emotional protest over the workers' funeral and how the government managed to buy the silence of the slain workers' family. However, they were also convinced to a certain extent that this protest was the beginning of the end for the then Rajapaksha government. In late 2014 many anti-government, anti-corruption forces joined hands to forward a common candidate, a defector from the existing government, Maithripala Sirisena, to run against the seemingly unstoppable President Mahinda Rajapaksha in the presidential election. This candidate unified many discontented elements of society leading to Rajapaksha's defeat in January 2015. The new government was formed around the concept of good governance and in 2016, the NGO activists were still hopeful that their demands for strong worker rights would be addressed soon.

The workers, however, had forgotten that successful protest which allowed them to still enjoy the FTZ dowry. Even the workers who had participated in the protest now reminisced about it in a defeatist tone. "Actually I have forgotten about that. Because it was just like a soda bottle. We thought we won, but as always, we did not win," one worker said. When I reminded her that they forced the government to retract the bill, and hence at a basic level they won, she smiled slightly and said,

True. I am glad we did it. But you know what happened with the funeral and Roshane's mother refusing to talk to any of the unions or workers. They were bought by the government. Even the unions were bought, because they kept asking us to go back to work.

Another worker who participated in the protest said, "I was fine with the police beatings. That made us stronger. It's sad Roshane died, but we became more united because of it. It's all the underhanded stuff that made me feel hopeless about ever getting any justice." Samudra, a worker who still has a pending court case arising from the protest, said he feels utterly let down by the unions.

Workers who had joined factories after the 2011 protests initially seemed unaware of the reasons, details or the consequences of the protest. Only after I had given much information did they remember hearing about it or seeing TV footage. Although all of them were very keen to obtain their FTZ dowry at the time they leave work, they have not thought much about the protest that thwarted a hasty attempt to take this away from them. Although none claimed that

they feared consequences if they talked about the protest, such fear could have been a reason why they were reluctant to celebrate a protest against government policies. They were, instead, very vocal about the hopelessness of protesting and asking for more rights from FTZ factories. As Ruvini, a worker, said,

these factories belong to foreigners, and they don't care about our rights. The government has no powers over these owners. So what's the point in asking the government to enforce labour laws? That is a way to lose these factories to other countries, and lose our own jobs.

Ruvini in fact was referring to the cascading global subcontracting system that subjects local workers to 'just in time production,' demands of the contemporary global production networks (Mezzadri 2014; Barrientos 2013; Hewamanne 2020). Transnational production comes with the threat of factories moving to countries with lower manufacturing costs at a moment's notice. If workers are unwilling to work overtime and meet unreasonable production targets and ask for wage rises that cut into the profits of the buyers (companies in affluent countries, mostly located in the West), they shift their orders to lower-cost countries (Hewamanne 2008). A constructed myth of the disposability of global factory workers (Wright 2006), and the actual precarity of livelihoods associated with global assembly lines make workers reluctant to agitate for their rights. Thus even without government's autocratic tendencies, police brutality and underhanded tactics, the global workers have reasons to feel hopeless about fighting for labour rights.

Since unionization is prohibited within FTZ factories, young women who come from rural areas do not have easy and fast ways of developing class consciousness or engaging in collective organizing. By the Board of Investment (BOI) Sri Lanka stipulation, labour concerns within FTZ factories are dealt with by an outfit called the Joint Council of workers (JOC), which is comprised of management representatives and workers. Men dominated JOCs especially in the beginning. Factories now encourage women workers to join these councils as that makes factories look good in the buyers' eyes. Most workers I interviewed felt that the JOCs discouraged collective organizing more than they encourage, as it works as a problem-solving mechanism and gives the impression that workers and managers are trying to achieve the same ends. With all these barriers to their collective organizing, workers, at least at the outset, seem to be waiting for the government and factories to present their rights on a platter rather than collectively organizing to achieve rights. In-depth interviews and focus groups conducted in 2016, however, highlighted how the fears and helplessness created by the previous government's extrajudicial actions in suppressing working class movements made them reticent in voicing their discontent, and fighting for rights. Again, the 'white van disappearances' were frequently mentioned as a reason for this reticence. All the interviewees mentioned how the government bought Roshane's family and the unions to explain their current apathy. "No one wants to be disappeared via a white van," four of them said. Although in 2016 the government was led by the Sirisena–Wickremasinghe duo who came into power promising good governance (improved democratic values), it was obvious that the previous government's suppression of dissent created long lasting fears among the global factory workers.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, rural women who start work as young as 17 do not have opportunities to easily develop class consciousness and engage in collective organizing due to the prohibition

of unionizing within FTZ factories. Nevertheless, this did not prevent them from agitating for change within their own factories in a piecemeal fashion. 2011 marked a crucial point in which the workers showed that they were able to collectively organize on a common platform. However, although it was a successful protest, the government's crafty means (in addition to the familiar police beatings) to prevent the protest leading to a broader workers' movement had significant impact on the FTZ workers. It led to feelings of hopelessness with regard to changes, and an overall sense of betrayal by general trade unions. Since 2011 there has not been such a broadly organized agitation for rights among the FTZ workers. Even during the 2015–19 period, when the Sirisena–Wickremasinghe good-governance regime was in power, there were no collective protests within the global production sector, although the interviews clearly showed that there were several conditions at workplaces and in society that could have motivated protests.

Fast forward to the new Rajapaksha regime, when workers are still presented with appalling working conditions, they are more silent than ever. As of now in Sri Lanka, the NGOs in the area are mostly engaging in distribution of charity/humanitarian aid to workers. Many workers I interviewed lamented that they have become charity recipients when the only thing they want to do is to work hard and earn enough for themselves and their families. However, there is no collective action to highlight their plight or to agitate for positive changes. The recently introduced pandemic-related laws and regulations and the heavy involvement of the military and the police in enforcing these rules seem to have further impacted a worker population that was already at a disadvantage when it comes to collective organizing. The new Rajapaksha government seems to revel in the conducive conditions of the pandemic anxieties to further consolidate their power via non-democratic means.

Throughout history governments have used violence against their own citizenry. This has taken many forms—physical, psychological, and cultural. This chapter highlights that psychological and cultural violence can in fact be even more effective in making gendered working-class groups silent. Psychological and cultural tools such as appeals to patriarchal values and loyalties, bribery, threat of disappearance, factioning and co-optation have definitely made subsequent groups of FTZ workers wary of collective protest. Even as sporadic resistance emerges and submerges within different sections of society, this case study thus points toward a general declining of democratic values in Sri Lanka which began in 2011, only two years after the war ended.

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