



**TECHNIUM**  
**SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL**

**Vol. 20, 2021**

**A new decade  
for social changes**

[www.techniumscience.com](http://www.techniumscience.com)

ISSN 2668-7798



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## **Politics of Corona Pandemic in Sri Lanka: A Sociological Analysis**

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**Abstract.** The COVID 19 has killed nearly 3.6 million people and around 160 million people have been infected with the virus by end of May 2021 in the world. In the Sri Lankan context, more than 1000 deaths and 150,000 cases have been reported by the end of May 2021. The function of modern society and scientific rationality has been challenged by the pandemic with changes in globalization, the capitalist social order, international affairs, and the modern medicalized systems. On the other hand, the pandemic made an impact on the community, family, and individual life. Moreover, the politics of COVID 19 is very crucial, and it is causing severe impact on the power relation of everyday life of people. This paper attempts to understand the power dynamics operating around the COVID 19 management in Sri Lanka. The main objective of the paper is to make a sociological analysis of the impact of the politics of the corona pandemic on the social life of people in Sri Lanka. The methodology is based on a critical review of relevant literature, content analysis of public views shared by social media (Facebook), and in-depth interviews. Discourse analysis is used to review the literature and other qualitative data. The impact of quarantine regulations on the everyday life of people, marginalization of low-income urban groups, changing power dynamics within the medical and health care systems, ethnicization of COVID 19 and forced cremation of dead bodies, prioritizing military mechanism in combating the pandemic, and ignorance of the involvement of disaster management Institutes are the key discursive findings of the paper. In general, the COVID 19 has made a new mode of bio-politics in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords.** COVID bio politics, ethnicization of corona, and military power and quarantine

### **Introduction**

Disasters do not only threaten lives or damage property; they can severely affect societies and their socio-political structures. Since disasters potentially affect all of us and due to frequent occurrences, it is important to understand its general social and political effects. It is crucial to investigate the circumstances of disasters that bring certain effects and the circumstances of lack of effects due to disasters. The most common hazards in Sri Lanka are seasonal and localized flooding and landslides across the country, followed by cyclones, storm surges, droughts, and high winds. Sri Lanka is habitually affected by recurring disasters, which have caused recorded damages of nearly \$US 7 billion between 1990-2018 (UNDDDR, 2019).

As Albrecht (2017) states, a disaster may also affect public opinion about the government, for instance, Citizens have their opinion on how the government handles the disaster. In this respect, potential social and political effects of disasters occur not only through

direct experiences but also through indirect experiences of the events. Citizens may be affected through the purely mediated experience of disasters. In today's world, even though this occurs largely through traditional news media, online news websites and social media platforms have gained popularity and dominated modern communication at present.

Disaster-related studies have proven that politics is an essential part of the disaster in different forms and different names. Concepts such as management, governance, and control are important to understand the role of disaster politics. Complex social problems in relation to the pandemic, climate change, hazards, and disasters, do not fit neatly within the purview of individual organizations and institutions. Governance through networks of collaborating and diverse entities provides a means of addressing these problems due to the flexibility of networks, adaptability, and capability of mobilizing diverse resources. For example, responses to large disasters are typically carried out by large emergent multi-organizational networks that lack central coordination (Tierney, 2012). 'Disaster governance arrangements and challenges are shaped by forces such as globalization, world-system dynamics, social inequality, and socio-demographic trends. Governance regimes are polycentric and multi-scale, show variation across the hazards cycle, and tend to lack integration and to be formulated in response to particular large-scale disaster events. Disaster governance is nested within and influenced by overarching societal governance systems' (Tierney, 2012: 341).

According to Selves (2003), whether people like to believe it or not, political considerations are a significant factor in the preparation for response to recovery from disaster and mitigation of disaster events. Are there any disasters, in absence of political involvements? If the events and issues surrounding disasters are thoroughly analyzed, we readily see politics is an integral element of the disaster and it has to be dealt with in the same way as the other disaster impact.

There are nearly three basic reasons why disasters are political in nature. First, disasters affect people. Basic Emergency Management doctrine tells us that the determination of what constitutes a disaster is the impact it has on people. Secondly, disasters are political due to the fact that it involves in public policy. How well or how poorly we mitigate, prepare for respond to and recover from disasters is directly related to how well emergency management/disaster policy is created, maintained, and implemented. Thirdly, and related to the first two reasons, is the fact that disasters invariably invite public interest (Selves, 2003). In our modern culture of all-pervasive mass communications, disasters are dramatic, newsworthy events that compel intense public interest. Politicians appropriately have to respond to that kind of interest and scrutiny. A disaster such as Katrina has created much social discrimination-based politics even in the USA (Bullard & Wright, 2009).

Disasters and politics maybe two vital parts of the same process and the combination of the two can have two processes namely, "disasters producing politics" and "politics producing disasters". From this point of view, it is politics itself, as a mode of ordering the world that produces disasters for its own purposes and according to its own rules (Mahees, 2019). Natural disasters are political. Political choices such as those about resource distribution, as well as socio-economic institutions and power structures influence the level and distribution of individual vulnerability to natural disasters. At the same time, disasters can produce notable effects on political processes when they rupture the everyday workings of society. Disasters can be politicized in that they raise questions on how to protect society from risks and are subject to debate and contestation in the public sphere (Hörhager, 2017). The sociological study of the human body is important to understand how disaster deals with the human body as bio-politics explained by Michel Foucault (1995). The bio-politics-based discourse will be used as key argument of this paper as follows.

**Objective**

The main objective of this paper was to critically analyze the impact of different power dynamics of COVID 19 in Sri Lanka on people's daily social life and its power relation. The paper attempts to look at how the current process of corona pandemic management of Sri Lanka influences the socio-political power structure of society. The study focuses on the areas such as quarantine regulations and military-based COVID-19 management and challenges in daily life, livelihood activities of people, cultural rights, and basic civil rights of people including general political participation of civilians.

**Methodology**

Since this research paper was fully designed during the pandemic period, a new methodology had to be adopted. There were limited opportunities for the researcher to engage in any field-level data collection activities. The methodology of this paper was mainly based on qualitative data, collected from the content analysis of social media and twenty in-depth interviews. For this purpose, the statements, posts, and some pictures related to the pandemic politics of Sri Lanka that were published or shared on Facebook from 2020 May to December were studied incorporating the content analysis technics. In addition, critical social media information found in all three mediums of languages- Sinhalese, Tamil, and English including twenty respondents from different ages, gender, ethnic and educational background. The selections were made on the basis of purposive sampling technic and phone interviews were conducted considering the COVID 19 condition. Moreover, the secondary information on the politics of disaster and pandemic were reviewed. The literature was selected from the relevant research papers, books, and online news publications that focused on different forms of politics of pandemics globally and locally. All these qualitative data were analyzed based on sociological themes and discourses that are broadly used in pandemic politics.

**Results and Discussion**

Sri Lanka has been experiencing different types of disasters such as floods, landslides, droughts, and dengue frequently. The thirty years civil war followed by terrorism and the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 was the most devastating two disasters that made drastic changes in the civil society of Sri Lanka (UNDDR, 2019). The policies and politics of disaster management began to change as a result and the country started to adhere to many new strategies and management plans in terms of disaster management.

According to the Report of UNDDR (2019), there were many political and institutional transformations occurred to strengthen the disaster management process. The establishment of the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) and Ministry Disaster Management are good examples in this regard. Since the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, Sri Lanka has increased its efforts in building a comprehensive multi-hazard disaster management infrastructure. The tsunami led to wide reforms, and the Disaster Management Act of 2005 was established. It also mandated the establishment of the National Council for Disaster Management (NCDM) and its operative office, the Disaster Management Centre (DMC). Responsibility in dealing with disasters began to rest with the National Government, Provincial Councils, and Local Authorities, and District level administrative system.

DMC plays a role in coordinating, facilitating, and bridging with relevant ministries, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and other social and community organizations through coordinating committees at national, regional, and village levels. In addition to these initiatives, National Policy on Disaster Management (2010), Sri Lanka National Disaster Management Plan (2013-2017), and National Disaster Risk Management Plan (2018-2030) was found significant in the politics of disaster management policy. However, it

is possible to experience different forms of politics in the management of COVID 19 in the present context.

According to the study of Covid-19 Socio-Economic Impact on Sri Lanka (2020) conducted by the Faculty of Social Science, University of Ruhuna, the Corona pandemic has a socio-economic impact on people's lives in Sri Lanka society. The COVID 19 has paved the way for new bio-politics in society. It is important to understand the connection between power and the human body in order to analyze the political impact of COVID 19 in Sri Lanka. The corona pandemic is being used as a mode of social control or mechanism of regulating human behavior in the world. According to Foucault (1995), "biopower" is basically power over life. It is specifically the power of bio-politics to control the life of a specific population. Bio-politics is the effort of state control over the functions and processes of life. The bio-power that applies a positive and negative influence on life, endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations. Bio-power is strategies and mechanisms by which human life processes are managed under regimes of authority over knowledge, power, and the processes of subjectivities. Governments use bio-power to make some other way to control them, to produce 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1995). Even in the case of Sri Lanka, under the attack of COVID 19, the knowledge and practice of managing or controlling this pandemic are used as a type of social control based on the power/knowledge dualism.

At present, the Corona pandemic functions as a bio-power that attempts to control human actions going beyond the health aspect. The whole day-to-day life of the people has been controlled by the process of management against COVID 19. The government of Sri Lanka and government institutes find it easy to control the behavior of citizens through the mechanism of pandemic politics. The COVID 19 management has totally gained control over society in terms of livelihood functions, educational services, health behavior, and cultural rituals under the quarantine regulations. Sfetcu (2020) confirms this idea further and states that bio-power is exerted by regulating norms over lives than coercing lives under laws. This form of power makes the authority of medical knowledge hard to challenge. The exertion of bio-power through politics can be experienced during the pandemic and the ordinary time. Under the corona bio-politics, there are many ways of controlling day to day activities of people. According to the data collected by interviews, that the Police have arrested many civilians due to violation of the quarantine rules during the lockdown or travel ban period. According to the sources of the police department of Sri Lanka, from 2020 October to 2021 May, nearly ten thousand culprits have been arrested due to violation of quarantine regulations. As per the field data, police were criticized for arresting powerless people favoring politically powerful people even though they have violated quarantine regulations.

Silva (2020) further assures that the quarantine services under COVID 19 managements mostly arranged and run by the armed forces. Their involvement was made mandatory rather than voluntary and they tend to use aggressive approaches to approach COVID 19 suspected cases. No opportunity offered to the suspected COVID patients to inquire on the place of quarantine or type of service providers. The costs of the quarantine are covered by the government as part of its public health services. In the case of compulsory two-week institutional quarantine, imposed on foreign travelers are severely affected by the pandemic and first-level contacts of infected persons.

Sri Lankan COVID 19 management believes that disciplinary control of citizens is the effective method of minimizing the COVID- 19 as the pandemic bio-politics. The pandemic politics mainly depends on issuing government quarantine circulars, curfew, lockdowns, isolations of selected areas, travel bans, control of public activities, and arresting individuals

who violate quarantine rules. The control measures such as lockdowns and travel bans directly influence the daily paid laborers and their families. The three-wheel riders, transport workers, daily laborers, porters, pavement hawkers, and low-income groups undergo severe economic hardships during the time of lockdowns. There were some occasions that a few low-income urban communities were engaged in protests to force the government to shift the lockdowns and travel bans in order to make their living.

Modern society is always influenced by uncertainty and risk (Beck, 1992 & Bauman, 2000). COVID 19 is such a serious and global risk that has brought stress and phobia and uncertainties among the people. It is observed that corona risk is always politically manipulated and communicated as a process of social construction. It was revealed in the interview, it is the government that makes quarantine rules depending on its political purposes. It was found that quarantine rules were made more lenient during the election time and the risk of the pandemic was reduced among the public. Whatever the risk discourse, they are mostly constructed in society by scientists, politicians, and media (Kasperson et al, 2005). Any health risk also can be communicated as serious or normal by the power discourse in society. The respondents pointed out that the risk of the corona pandemic was always manipulated by the government and government lead media. Thus, people behave according to the politically constructed risk of COVID 19.

According to some respondents during the interviews, the government tends to use COVID 19 management process in order to achieve some hidden political purposes. The quarantine rules are used as a mode of political control of citizens. It was also revealed that politically sensitive issues of the country are usually disarticulated by using the corona pandemic and its spreading trends. Sometimes, the pandemic is used as the political shield against other social problems that emerge in the country. It is also used as a leading political manifesto during election times. Both ruling and opposition parties made their political slogans based on the loss and gains of COVID management strategies. The pandemic became the political platform for almost all the hard and soft power relationships of Sri Lanka in the recent past. When it comes to the management of the Corona pandemic, according to Silva (2020), two national-level committees had appointed to manage the COVID 19: coordination of provision of essential services and supply of goods by using military and political leadership without any civil society participation. It further indicates the politicization of COVID 19.

The other most crucial concern with regard to the politics of the corona pandemic is the overuse of military power throughout the entire COVID management process. As countries across the globe are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments have readily deployed military personnel and capabilities to support the crisis response. Military resources have been activated to assist overwhelmed hospitals and civilian medical personnel, for instance by creating additional hospitals or deploying military doctors and nurses to existing medical facilities (Megerian & Cloud, 2020). The armed forces have vast resources and developed expertise with operating in stressful situations. Its way of operating, hierarchical and top-down, can result in fast decision-making and may overcome delays through cutting red tape. Military organizations may well see themselves as indispensable in the management of the current crisis, as they play a “critical role” in countries like China, Israel, and USA (Kalkman, 2020).

When it comes to Sri Lankan experiences of deploying military forces for emergency or disaster management, deploying military forces has been a common political practice. Sri Lankan Army played a leading role in managing the one of largest welfare camps of Internally Displaced People after the civil war in 2009 at Chettikulam Vavuniya. There were many critical views in this regard. Even though the Tamil diaspora community and international media criticize the involvement of the military, the majority of the IDPs were happy about the effective

role done by Army (Mahees, 2019). Moreover, Sri Lankan Army is frequently engaged in the post-disaster management of landslides and floods that are usually common as a result of climate hazards.

There are two contradictory views regarding the use of military power for the COVID 19 response: one is that military forces engage in an effective job and the other is, that military power has spread in every sector gaining control. It was also said many quarantine centers are well maintained due to the efficiency and effectiveness of military forces. As pointed out by Silva (2020), Sri Lankan Army managed to run the mandatory two-week institutional quarantine imposed on foreign travelers as well as locals who visit the country from severely affected countries. Those who were quarantined successfully thanked the government and army forces for their successful involvement.

Sri Lankan government established a National Operation Center for Prevention of COVID- 19 Outbreak' led by Army Commander. The entire function of NOCPC is based on military power with the support of Director General of Health and Health Minister. But army commander plays a powerful role more than medical sectors and health administrative bodies. It was subjected to severe criticism. Although there is Disaster Management Centre (DMC), the military power has totally ignored the center. According to the views of the public shared in social media, DMC has no role to play in COVID management and it is considered a serious matter of concern. Sri Lankan State institutes have immense experience in fighting against disasters. There are many civil society organizations, volunteer groups, and NGOs working with pre-and post-disaster management. However, none of these State and social institutes or organizations were utilized for the COVID management. The complete authoritative role was played by the Sri Lankan army even though it is not something new to Sri Lanka and the global context.

The disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on ethnic minorities in some high-income countries throws into sharp relief the effects of racism on health. On almost all health measures, ethnic minority groups, especially Black and South Asians, have the worst outcomes. According to a Public Health England report, the mortality risk from COVID-19 among ethnic minority groups is twice that of white British patients after potential confounding factors such as age, sex, income, education, housing tenure, and area deprivation have been taken into account (Razai, et al, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn new attention to and compounded these existing disparities in health and health care. Since the pandemic hit the U.S. in early 2020, a growing body of research has consistently shown that people of color have borne a disproportionate burden of COVID-19, including being at increased risk for exposure and experiencing higher rates of infection, hospitalization, and death (Hamel et al, 2020). Moreover, the response of COVID 19 has functioned as class oppression even in developed countries (Wallace, & Wallace, 2021).

The other most crucial corona pandemic politics was the ethnicization of COVID 19 in Sri Lanka. It was noticed that minority communities especially Muslims were criticized and stereotyped on social media when some COVID 19 suspected cases were reported from the communities. In the public platforms, Muslims were targeted as they were purposely spread the virus. Many such statements and posts were shared on social media. This is further pointed by Silva (2020) in his study of 'Identity, Infection, and Fear: A Preliminary Analysis of COVID-19 Drivers and Responses in Sri Lanka'. In addition to labeling Muslims for spreading the pandemic, there was a campaign against Muslim businesses on social media, and many social media posts were appeared to boycott the shops owned by Muslims based on the COVID 19. A similar kind of social displeasure was shown against fish sellers when the COVID 19 was spread badly among fish sellers in Peliyagoda, a fish market in Colombo.

COVID 19 management is closely related to the culture and social life of people. The concept of purity and dirt of daily ritual and cultural practice of social groups or communities are important. The cultural argument of Mary Douglas (1966) in her book of 'Purity and danger' can be used for a discourse related to ritual connected with burial and cremation of COVID 19 dead bodies. What is regarded as dirt in a given society is any matter considered out of place or social order. Douglas tried to clarify the differences between the clean and the unclean in different societies and times. Understanding purity and dirt have to be done in the context of relevant culture even in the case of COVID 19 funeral rituals.

The ethnicization of COVID 19 continued with the forced cremation of COVID 19 dead bodies in Sri Lanka. Although World Health Organization has issued clear guidelines for both burial and cremation of COVID 19 bodies, the Sri Lankan government decided not to allow burial based on government medical experts' reports stating that burial would create groundwater contamination. Sri Lankan Muslims and some other minority groups who were seriously concerned about their funeral rituals were disappointed with forced cremation. The imposition of cremation as the only option for handling the bodies confirmed or suspected of COVID-19 amounts to a human rights violation. There has been no established medical or scientific evidence in Sri Lanka or in other countries that burial of dead bodies leads to increased risk of spreading communicable diseases such as COVID-19," said the global experts. However, the government continued to cremate all COVID 19 bodies irrespective of the opinions of international medical experts and human rights agencies. The Government tends to highlight the cremation policy of all COVID 19 bodies disrespecting the needs of the minorities. However, the government implemented the policy and practice of cremating bodies, after one year, with the local and international pressure, the burial of COVID 19 bodies was allowed for burial. The discourse and ban of burial of COVID bodies created many unseen political issues, severe psychological depressions, and racism against minorities.

The other criticism made on politicians was the misuse of public funds in providing a financial allowance of 5000 rupees low income communities during the curfew and lockdown period. This grant was provided even to home-quarantined people during the inception. It was pointed out by the interviewees that these grants were provided on a political basis seeking hidden political benefits prior to the elections in the country. There were complaints and criticism from the public about the method of selecting beneficiaries and transparency in providing grants. Even social media criticized the government for using local-level politicians to distribute the grant based on a politically prepared agenda.

Moreover, the vaccination process was not properly implemented and exposed to corruption in many countries. It could be worst in developing countries and among socially marginalized communities. According to the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime corruption of vaccination, risks include --the entry of substandard and falsified vaccines into markets, theft of vaccines within the distribution systems, leakages in emergency funding designated for the development and distribution of vaccines, nepotism, favoritism, and corrupted procurement systems. These corruption risks must be identified and mitigated by public institutions to help advance access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines by the population, including the most vulnerable and marginalized groups (UNODC, 2020).

The interviews and social media show that the vaccination process was politicized in Sri Lanka. The politicization of vaccines is not only unique to the pandemic situation, however, it is a key problem of public health in developing countries. All the citizens have the equal right of getting the vaccine against the COVID 19. However, the primary qualitative data sources state that the vaccination process is politicized and misused in Sri Lanka. There were much political interest and function of the political economy behind the process of selecting,

procurements, purchasing, and delivering the services. The opposition parties make severe criticism against the government regarding the selection process and purchasing procedure of vaccine and they further accused the government of not purchasing a sufficient amount of vaccine at the right time.

It is also pointed out in the interviews that the government promoted many non-scientific and unwanted methods such as wrong ayurvedic tonics without working on proper vaccination plans by using political campaigns through media. People also tend to accuse the government of not purchasing the vaccines at the right time and accuse them of waiting for donations from WHO. Whatever the amount of vaccine received was given to health workers and other frontline personnel who were committed to COVID 19 management. However, there was a big crisis providing a second dose for health workers due to insufficient vaccines. It was also revealed that there were corruptions, nepotism, and political favoritism in the vaccination programs. People had to wait in long queues and protest to get their vaccines. Since government tends to deliver different vaccines such as Oxford/AstraZeneca, Cinopharm, and Sputnik, people are in confusion. In general, the primary data sources revealed that there were many complications, injustice, corruption, and politics in the vaccination process.

### **Conclusion**

Politics is an integral part of the disaster management process of Sri Lankan society. The power relation that was vested with tsunami and war disaster brought many new aspects in the disaster policies and politics of Sri Lanka. The corona pandemic which challenges the entire global community has brought many social and political impacts on society more than ever before in recent history. As discussed in the main text of the paper, the COVID management process has introduced new bio-politics to Sri Lankan society. The bio-power or bio-politics in the forms of quarantine regulations have transformed the daily life of people and political civic rights of society. The quarantine base bio-politics is used for many hidden political purposes and it is manipulated for many future political-economic gains.

The ethnicization of the corona pandemic was the most sensitive and racial politics that occurred in society. The forced cremation implemented by the government going beyond violating WHO guidelines and cultural rights of ethnic minorities created much ethnic tension and a platform for racial politics. The overuse of military power by ignoring all the well-established disaster management State institutions and social mechanisms has disappointed the general public. This practice has challenged the democratic disaster politics and civic rights of people. However, there were also some positive remarks about military involvement in disaster management in terms of efficient collective actions. Finally, the politics regarding financial subsidiaries to low-income people and vaccination process were found politicized under the banner of COVID 19 management.

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