



Aravinda. Source: Screen capture from *A Virgin Vote*.

Why I Made *A Virgin Vote*

By Udan Fernando

It all began with a very long conversation I had with a person. He became both the subject and protagonist of what later became a short English-language film, *A Virgin Vote*, released in September 2020 in Colombo and online. The conversant was a childhood and teenage classmate in Sri Lanka. Our conversation took place in a bar/restaurant in July 2020, literally a stone's throw away from the school we attended. I had just returned from Singapore, where I was located for about three months during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. My former classmate, who lived in Singapore, visited Sri Lanka in early March 2020. The COVID-triggered travel restrictions did not allow him to return to Singapore. He was compelled to be stationed in Sri Lanka for many months. In the remainder of the essay, I'll call my classmate Aravinda, which is not his real name.

Aravinda left Sri Lanka soon after the exam we were to take after the first ten years of schooling. I didn't have much contact with him thereafter. But later, I learned that he attended a school in the UK and entered university for higher studies. The year Aravinda left Sri Lanka, 1983, marked a significant juncture in both Sri Lanka's history and migration. Thousands of Tamils (a minority ethnic community, 12.7 percent of the population, according to the 1981 census), many of whom were Hindus, left Sri Lanka as refugees or asylum-seekers to many countries abroad, following a spate of ethnic riots and pogroms in July that year.

Aravinda's circumstances for leaving were different. He was not affected, as he happened to be from the majority ethnic community, the predominately Buddhist Sinhalese. The exodus of Tamils from Sri Lanka as refugees or asylum-seekers continued as the riots became a civil war between Tamil armed groups and the Sri Lankan Army for nearly three decades. A Sri Lankan diaspora of sorts occurred as approximately 10 percent of the Tamil population left the country and settled abroad, mainly in Europe, North America, and Australia. It is important to note, though, that this was not Sri Lanka's only relatively recent diaspora.

A few years before the exodus of the Tamils took place, Sri Lanka experienced another diaspora in 1977 following a significant policy transformation that liberalized the hitherto-closed economy. (In fact, the term "diaspora" was not used at this stage. In Sri Lanka, the usage of the term "diaspora" is different. It is largely associated with outmigration triggered by conflict and political unrest.) Coinciding with the demand for labor in

A Virgin Vote

By UDAN FERNADO

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LINK TO SHORT FILM: <https://tinyurl.com/89ydmeet>

The director of this film from before sunrise until the early evening accompanies a childhood friend, a fifty-three-year old native Sri Lankan, who has spent forty years of his life living in the UK, Switzerland, Hong Kong and Singapore. Since 1983 this anonymous highly educated economically mobile professional who left his nation by choice has visited Sri Lanka a few times but built his career in first, Hong Kong, and currently in Singapore. Home to visit his mother in the Capitol, Colombo and to attend a famous annual cricket match, the subject is detained from returning to Singapore for months because of COVID-19 travel restrictions. *A Virgin Vote*, the documentary was filmed on a particularly auspicious day for the subject because it is his first chance to ever vote in a Sri Lankan election, in this case, national parliamentary elections. During the day, much of it spent walking, the subject recounts how he spent his time during this hiatus, self-identifies as someone keenly interested in politics, identifies as a patriot and differentiates between what he considers patriots and nationalists. Despite the brevity of the documentary, important issues ranging from family, to the meaning of citizenship, especially from the perspective of the subject's self-perceived belief in liberal democracy, are discussed. The documentary should provoke meaningful student discussions on several profound questions that transcend Sri Lanka.

the Middle East, many Sri Lankans, including a disproportionately high number of Sinhalese relative to the nation's population, this trend continued in the decades that followed to the extent that domestic worker remittances became a major source of domestic economy revenues. Nearly 10 percent of the Sri Lankan labor force works abroad, and if both diasporas are considered and family members of workers are included, as much as 20 percent of the Sri Lankan population could live abroad.

The Sri Lankan government during the escalating civil war made much use of the concepts "motherland" and "patriotism," crafted for the majority Sinhalese population as Tamil armed movements fought relentlessly for the creation of a separate state. While the physical war was fought on Sri Lankan terrain, an equally intense war of ideology was fought at the international level, legitimizing and delegitimizing the narratives of the two warring parties. It is in the latter terrain that Sri Lankan diasporas played an active role somewhat akin to "long-distance nationalism," a concept introduced by anthropologist Benedict Anderson.

Let me lay my cards on the table. I wasn't an exception to this dimension of reality. I lived a little more than a decade in Europe to pursue my doctoral studies and thereafter to work. Aravinda, upon completion of his higher studies in the UK, lived and worked in Switzerland, Hong Kong, and Singapore. We both belonged to the category of highly skilled migrants. Like Aravinda, I too belong to the majority ethnic group, Sinhalese.

Killings and bomb explosions were daily realities during the period of 1983–2009. The civil war ended in 2009 with a fierce Sri Lankan government aggressive military offensive that resulted in large number of



Aravinda. Source: Screen capture from *A Virgin Vote*.

casualties of civilians and displaced people in the war zones. Though the reasons for the conflict were largely left unaddressed, the country has experienced a relatively peaceful period since the war's end. The so-called Victor's Peace was seen being established, along with an excessive celebration of the military under a "patriotic political leadership" that "liberated the motherland from terrorists." However, in my view, nationalism by this time lost its currency to some extent. Perhaps it is because of the lack of an "enemy," the main reason to secure the motherland.

It is in this vacuum that a completely unexpected series of bomb explosions—allegedly by a local radical Muslim group with links to networks abroad—took place on Easter Sunday in 2019 in multiple locations, killing 267 people. This ignited a new phase of securitization, following a decade-long dormant security imperative. This new phase also coincided with the political campaign of a presidential candidate who was secretary of the Defense Ministry during the last phase of the war. The political campaign revived the hitherto-moribund sentiments of nationalism with a new lease on life. The candidate secured a landslide victory in November 2019 with the support of the majority Sinhala-Buddhist votes. The COVID-19 pandemic hit Sri Lanka in March 2020, when the constituency of the newly elected president was still basking in the glory of their victory that claimed

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The pandemic itself evoked certain elements of nationalism and patriotism. Bringing

back a group of students stuck in Wuhan, China, on a Sri Lankan Airlines flight—the only international flight service in the country, run by a government-owned company—in the height of the pandemic was celebrated as a heroic nationalistic act. The need to "repatriate" migrant workers who lost their jobs or preferred to come "home" was a key preoccupation of the government.

After a gradual containment of the first wave of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, a general election was to be held August 5, 2020. It was during our long conversation in July that Aravinda revealed to me his hope to vote in a Sri Lankan election for the first time in his life. Despite his long spells of stays abroad, Aravinda had not obtained citizenship of any other country. He had always retained Sri Lankan citizenship. This aroused a great deal of curiosity on my part, particularly in the light of the revitalized discussions of nationalism and patriotism. I understood that Aravinda is not a full-fledged representative of the broader historical narrative I have explained before. However, I wanted to have an extended conversation with him on the very day of his first vote as a Sri Lankan citizen. I was keen to let a voice—with some extraordinary circumstances—be heard in this regard. A small crew, including me, spent the entire election day with Aravinda, letting him speak his heart and mind.

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