

Educating Sri Lankan Youth to be Catalysts in Social System Change: The Need for Empowerment with a Democratic Ethos

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the critical role of education and tertiary-level training in empowering Sri Lankan youth to serve as catalysts of social system change. Recognizing the transformative potential of young people, the study proposes a multidimensional approach to educational reform that embeds civic education, environmental awareness, and social entrepreneurship into curricula. Such integration is essential for nurturing critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of responsibility toward societal issues. The paper further advocates participatory learning methods that promote practical problem-solving and community service, bridging the divide between theoretical knowledge and lived realities. In doing so, it calls for reimagining education as a holistic process that prepares youth not only for employment but also for democratic engagement, ensuring their role as pivotal drivers of inclusive and sustainable development.

Key terms: Youth Empowerment, Democratic Ethos, Social System Change, Educational Reform, Vocational Training, Youth Unrest, Civic Participation

Introduction

Transforming Sri Lankan youth into agents of modernization aligned with democratic values requires an integrated approach that places education and civic engagement at the forefront. Embedding democratic principles, rights, and responsibilities into curricula is vital for cultivating critical thinking and appreciation of democratic norms. This approach should be interdisciplinary, merging social sciences with technology to equip students with the tools to address complex contemporary challenges.

Technological engagement is central to this vision. By strengthening digital literacy and fostering innovation hubs, young Sri Lankans can be empowered to participate in the digital economy and contribute to technological advancement. Civic engagement must complement this

effort, with youth councils, volunteerism, and community initiatives creating opportunities for meaningful participation in democratic processes.

Equally important is the cultivation of environments that encourage freedom of expression, open debate, and respect for diversity. Media literacy programs can help young people navigate digital information responsibly, while structured forums for dialogue can foster informed decision-making and mutual respect.

In sum, this paper advocates a holistic reform agenda that positions education as the foundation for youth empowerment, enabling Sri Lankan youth to become catalysts of democratic renewal and sustainable modernization.

Literature Review

Research on youth in Sri Lanka highlights a recurrent nexus between education, unemployment, and political unrest, situating young people at the center of social system transformation. Hettige (1992) emphasizes how youth unrest emerges not merely as spontaneous revolt but as a structural response to systemic exclusion, where unmet expectations generated by education translate into resistance. Similarly, Gunawardena (2002) underscores how rigid academic curricula—disconnected from vocational opportunities—alienate youth from practical skills, deepening frustration with institutions.

The persistence of educated youth unemployment, as explained by Lubyova (2001) and Dickens and Lang (1996), exposes structural inefficiencies in aligning education with employability. Lakshman (1992, 2002) situates this within broader neoliberal reforms, arguing that shrinking state employment and precarious alternatives intensified youth vulnerability.

Fernando (2002) links this alienation to cycles of rebellion, while Hettige (2002) reveals youth ambivalence: education generates aspirations for mobility, yet systemic barriers entrench marginalization. Emmanuel (2004), however, points to the promise of vocational training and conflict prevention programs, which not only equip youth with employable skills but also foster social cohesion. Gender-sensitive analyses such as Kottegoda (2000) further highlight how women face disproportionate exclusion in informal employment.

Taken together, this body of work illustrates a cycle: education without opportunity breeds frustration and unrest, whereas integrated reforms—anchored in vocational training, inclusivity, and democratic values—can transform youth into constructive agents of change. The literature thus makes clear that education must move beyond credentialing toward cultivating critical awareness, transferable skills, and civic responsibility, positioning youth not as rebels against systemic failure but as architects of equitable development and democratic renewal.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to capture the complex and multidimensional processes linking youth empowerment to social system change in Sri Lanka. The methodology combines a critical review of existing scholarship with original qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews.

The literature review provided the conceptual foundation, drawing on post-insurrection research (Hettige, 1992; Lakshman, 2002; Gunawardena, 2002; Fernando, 2002; Emmanuel et al., 2004) that highlights structural inequalities in education, employment, and governance as drivers of youth alienation. These works also emphasize the need for educational reform and democratization of opportunities, shaping the analytical lens for this study.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives from international governmental organizations (IGOs), state institutions, INGOs, and local NGOs engaged in youth development. Participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives across mandates such as education, vocational training, civic engagement, and conflict prevention. Interviews explored barriers to youth empowerment, assessments of initiatives like the National Youth Commission's recommendations, and proposals for embedding democratic ethos into youth education and training.

The study acknowledges limitations, particularly the absence of direct youth voices, which future research should address through ethnographies and participatory approaches. It also recognizes potential biases in institutional narratives shaped by donor priorities or state agendas. Reflexivity was applied to situate these narratives within Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape.

By integrating contextual grounding from literature with institutional perspectives, the methodology provides a holistic lens for examining how education can reposition Sri Lankan youth as catalysts of democratic social change.

Analytical Discussion

Primary and Secondary Socialization in Contexts of Educational Disparity

In contexts of persistent educational inequality, the processes of primary and secondary socialization often reproduce disadvantage rather than facilitate empowerment. Primary socialization, shaped by family and community, can limit the development of critical awareness when households lack cultural capital and resources. Children from socio-economically disadvantaged families often struggle to cultivate foundational skills such as critical thinking, self-confidence, and civic responsibility.

Secondary socialization through schools can exacerbate these inequalities. Under-resourced schools, outdated curricula, and limited access to technology leave many students underprepared for higher education and employment. Rather than acting as engines of mobility, these institutions reinforce structural hierarchies, trapping marginalized youth in cycles of frustration and limited opportunity.

As stated by a UN Volunteer working with the UNDP Project in Kilinochchi District:

“The tremendous disparity in socio-economic conditions, create enormous disillusionment in youth irrespective of whether they were directly affected by the previous Civil War or not. The youth believe that the government has no reason to relate to their needs as there has been no relationship between the communities on real issues, like education infrastructure and how to deal with school education”.

Addressing these shortcomings requires inclusive education policies, teacher training, investment in infrastructure, and stronger community-school linkages. By ensuring equitable access to quality education, socialization processes can become enabling mechanisms that cultivate empowered youth capable of contributing to democratic and social transformation.

Youth Accessibility to Global Concepts

Global exposure is increasingly central to youth empowerment in an interconnected world. Digital technologies have enabled unprecedented access to international ideas, cultures, and debates, equipping young people with comparative perspectives and global competencies. However, unequal access to these resources highlights the persistence of a digital divide, particularly between urban and rural, affluent and disadvantaged communities.

Resistance from conservative cultural forces further complicates this process. As one senior educator noted, fears of youth being “misguided” by global media often reinforce restrictive policies that limit access rather than enhance digital literacy. This defensive stance risks isolating youth from the very knowledge systems necessary to thrive in globalized economies.

As stated by a Manager of a youth political development programme in Gampaha:

“The gap is ideological as well as technological, with a large mass of youth not been able to make sense of Technology or the ideals. There is a tendency that these people are passively submitting to what is dished out, since there is no scope for any meaningful discussion on what is disseminated”

Educational reforms incorporating global citizenship education, cultural exchanges, and expanded digital infrastructure can bridge these gaps. Civil society initiatives and NGOs also

play a vital role in democratizing access by creating alternative learning platforms. Ultimately, empowering Sri Lankan youth requires balancing global exposure with critical reflection, ensuring they can engage the world while remaining rooted in democratic values.

Digital platforms expanded youth exposure to global discourses of democracy, equality, and environmental justice. The growing phenomenon of “PeaceTech” in Sri Lanka demonstrates how social media, civic technology, and online peacebuilding initiatives can be mobilized to promote social cohesion and counter misinformation (Jackson, 2025). However, the same platforms also enable the circulation of authoritarian and ultra-nationalist rhetoric, requiring improved digital literacy among youth.

Denial of English Language Competence

English proficiency remains a decisive factor in determining youth competitiveness in education, employment, and innovation. As the dominant language of global commerce, science, and higher education, English functions as a gateway to international opportunities. Its absence in many schools and communities creates a profound structural barrier to social mobility.

Despite strong enthusiasm among students, systemic failures limit the creation of environments conducive to language acquisition. Many teachers lack fluency, while families often cannot provide the linguistic exposure necessary to normalize English in daily life. Consequently, English becomes an artificial “school subject” rather than a living language, undermining both proficiency and motivation.

As stated by a young Administrative System officer attached to the Provincial Education Office:

“The idea that English is the gateway to international competitiveness is not accepted with enthusiasm, but with cynicism. The students as well as teachers who have been recruited in recent times come from a similar background, considering English as a factor that kills their spirit. There is no yearning to excel in this subject as it is the common sentiment that this is an evil need imposed by imperialist powers during colonialism”.

The implications are far-reaching: restricted access to global knowledge systems, exclusion from international job markets, and weakened capacity for research collaboration and technological innovation. Equitable access to English education—through improved teacher training, immersive learning environments, and integration of digital tools—is therefore essential for bridging structural divides and enabling youth to participate in global networks.

Consequences of Ignoring Educational Disparities

Disparities within the education system create deep social and psychological imbalances. Unequal allocation of resources, irrelevant curricula, and a lack of mentorship perpetuate feelings of alienation among disadvantaged students. This “educational imbalance” not only limits individual aspirations but also undermines social cohesion.

As one principal observed, marginalized students often internalize their disadvantage, perceiving themselves as permanently “knocked off” from competition. Such experiences can generate resentment, perpetuating cycles of disillusionment and disengagement from both education and society.

Elaborating on the current institutional challenges, it was the view of an INGO Manager in Colombo:

“ Disparities in the context of the prevailing order, is not anything that the people consider as strange, Disparities are a mere given, and all understand that there is no solution in a country like Sri Lanka apart from engaging in empty rhetoric”.

Addressing these inequities requires targeted investment in disadvantaged schools, culturally relevant curricula, and comprehensive guidance services. By re-establishing trust in education as a pathway to mobility, the state can prevent disaffection while ensuring that all students feel part of a collective national project.

Denial of Dignity through Infrastructure Inequality

Disparities in physical and human infrastructure further entrench educational inequality. Urban schools often benefit from advanced facilities, qualified teachers, and digital resources, while rural and underserved areas remain under-resourced. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the push for online education exemplified this divide, leaving many students behind due to lack of devices or internet access.

Human infrastructure suffers similar distortions. Experienced teachers tend to migrate toward urban or prestigious schools, leaving rural institutions with shortages and less qualified staff. These imbalances not only limit academic performance but also erode the dignity of marginalized students, who perceive themselves as systematically neglected.

As explained by a young Buddhist priest, serving an internship with a government office:

“The people have understood, that there is no need for fair treatment, as the disparities cannot be eliminated. It is not strange to anyone any more that in the heart of Colombo, the gap between the social classes will remain irrespective of what the governments try to do”.

Redressing these disparities demands equitable distribution of resources, targeted teacher incentives for rural service, and large-scale infrastructure development. By recognizing dignity as an essential educational value, policymakers can transform schools into inclusive spaces that cultivate equality and empowerment.

Constraints to Youth Empowerment: Insights from the National Youth Commission

The National Youth Commission identified a range of barriers to empowerment: unemployment, poverty, inadequate education, and lack of civic participation mechanisms. Structural inequities continue to exclude many young people from meaningful participation in decision-making, while outdated curricula and resource shortages undermine their educational growth.

These constraints are compounded by institutional inertia and weak support systems. Without structural reform, youth face persistent cycles of alienation that limit their economic independence and civic engagement. The Commission's findings remain highly relevant, underscoring the need for comprehensive reforms that integrate education, employment, and political participation.

A holistic approach—linking economic policy, educational reform, and democratic participation—can enable youth to overcome these systemic barriers and act as drivers of inclusive development.

Abandoning Youth Commission Recommendations after President Premadasa's Assassination

The assassination of President Premadasa marked a turning point in youth policy, with the recommendations of the National Youth Commission largely abandoned. These proposals—including youth councils, vocational training, community development, and cultural programs—were designed to address both unemployment and alienation.

The abrupt discontinuation of these initiatives deprived Sri Lanka of a coherent youth empowerment strategy. As one official noted, Premadasa's vision of dialogue with marginalized groups and reconciliation with insurgent actors was dismissed as "unrealistic" by the political establishment. This ideological rupture curtailed opportunities for youth empowerment and deepened mistrust between youth and state institutions.

The long-term consequences include the erosion of institutional mechanisms for engagement and the persistence of cycles of disillusionment. Reviving elements of the Youth Commission's vision, adapted to contemporary needs, remains essential for rebuilding trust and channeling youth energy toward democratic renewal.

The National Youth Service Council and the Absence of Policy Commitment

The National Youth Service Council (NYSC) has undertaken important initiatives in skill development, entrepreneurship, and community service. However, the absence of a mandated policy framework has limited its impact. Without a coherent national strategy, activities remain fragmented, underfunded, and vulnerable to political shifts.

A mandated framework would align NYSC's work with national development priorities, ensure continuity across governments, and establish accountability through monitoring and evaluation. As a UNDP official observed, Sri Lanka's political culture often lacks the "radical orientation" necessary to prioritize youth empowerment, reflecting broader weaknesses in state capacity.

Institutionalizing youth policy through a national framework is therefore crucial for transforming NYSC into a consistent and effective vehicle of empowerment.

Programs without an Ideological Framework

Youth empowerment programs implemented without a guiding ideological framework risk incoherence and short-termism. An ideological framework—anchored in principles of equality, justice, and democratic participation—provides the vision and consistency necessary to sustain initiatives across political cycles.

Without such grounding, programs may devolve into isolated activities shaped by donor agendas or transient political priorities. By contrast, a principled framework ensures alignment with long-term goals, mobilizes stakeholders, and fosters youth ownership.

For Sri Lanka, the absence of such a framework has resulted in fragmented initiatives with limited transformative impact. Embedding youth empowerment within a democratic ethos is essential for cultivating a generation capable of advancing social justice, inclusivity, and sustainable development

Youth Militancy and the Ideological Shift: Are Sri Lankan Youth in Search of Greater Democracy and Political Liberalism?

The rise of youth militancy and shifting ideological orientations suggest that significant segments of Sri Lankan youth are gravitating towards demands for greater democracy and political liberalism. While this is not a universal trend, multiple drivers shape this dynamic.

Dissatisfaction with entrenched power structures, pervasive corruption, and political stagnation generates a strong appetite for systemic reform and accountability. Socio-economic inequality and nepotism intensify frustrations, reinforcing the demand for social justice. Access to global

media platforms, exposure to liberal values such as freedom of expression and tolerance, and expanded educational opportunities that promote critical thinking further encourage young people to question traditional norms.

As one youth entrepreneurial trainer observed:

“Most often the youth believe that this skill development is an academic expectation with no connectivity to grassroots development in society or in organizations. Acute scepticism on the part of youth creates a problem for what we are striving to do.”

Generational divides exacerbate this tension: youth increasingly seek reform, while older generations often remain anchored to conservative or authoritarian traditions. Despite such frictions, youth-led movements and civil society initiatives highlight a discernible shift towards political openness, greater accountability, and democratic governance.

The 2022 “Aragalaya” uprising reflected the culmination of frustration against systemic governance failures and offered youth a collective space to express political agency (Timberman, 2025). As studies indicate, youth militancy was not solely a reaction to economic collapse but also a response to entrenched political dynasties and the perceived failure of representative democracy. This aligns with Hettige’s (2002) earlier observations that structural marginalization has long been a driver of youth radicalization.

Inadequately Trained Minds for National Development?

It would be simplistic to suggest that all Sri Lankan youth lack the intellectual and professional capacities needed for national development. Many possess significant skills, creativity, and determination. However, structural barriers persist. Unequal access to quality education, mismatched employment opportunities, gender discrimination, and socio-economic disparities hinder broad-based participation.

At the same time, youth resilience remains evident. Many actively pursue education, training, and entrepreneurship while contributing to community initiatives. Their commitment to self-improvement and collective advancement underscores untapped potential.

Addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms: enhancing education quality, aligning training with market demands, and dismantling barriers to equal opportunity. Creating an enabling environment—through entrepreneurship support, innovation hubs, and inclusive development strategies—can unlock youth capacities as key drivers of sustainable national progress.

Sri Lankan Youth as Progressive Risk Takers

Sri Lankan youth are increasingly positioned as progressive risk-takers who contribute to both personal advancement and societal betterment. Startups in technology, social enterprise, and sustainability illustrate a willingness to challenge convention and generate solutions to pressing national problems.

Beyond entrepreneurship, activism is flourishing. Youth engage in social justice, environmental campaigns, and political reform, leveraging grassroots mobilization and digital platforms to amplify their voices. A university academic highlighted:

“University students generally become ardent advocates of better policy since the university is the place for what is impossible in society. They psychologically settle on the notion that it is now or never, though this space is temporary as they soon depend on power holders for conditional jobs.”

Higher education and vocational training also play a transformative role in equipping youth with the skills required for innovation and leadership. Simultaneously, artistic and cultural expression provides avenues to preserve heritage while fostering diversity and creativity.

Collectively, these trends demonstrate a generation willing to take risks in pursuit of progress. Supporting youth-led initiatives through education, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement is essential to ensure they can sustain their role as catalysts of innovation and reform.

Towards a Futuristic Ministry of Youth Empowerment

A modern Ministry of Youth Empowerment must act as the central coordinating body that nurtures and integrates youth into Sri Lanka’s development agenda. Such a ministry should design policies that address youth needs across education, employment, health, and civic engagement, while creating an enabling environment for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Strategic program implementation—ranging from leadership training to entrepreneurship support and civic participation—must be pursued in collaboration with state agencies, civil society, and the private sector. Equally critical is the ministry’s advocacy role: ensuring youth voices are represented in national decision-making and policy forums.

Evidence-based policymaking, grounded in rigorous research and attuned to emerging challenges, will be essential to maintain relevance and effectiveness. A future-oriented ministry should not merely provide services but actively cultivate empowered, innovative, and engaged citizens who can shape Sri Lanka’s developmental trajectory.

Towards a Nationwide Programme of Work

For youth empowerment to be effective, Sri Lanka requires a structured Programme of Work spanning the entire nation. This framework must ensure that initiatives reach all regions equitably, addressing both urban and rural disparities.

Regional representation is key: policies must be tailored to account for localized socio-economic, cultural, and geographic realities. Multi-sectoral collaboration—between government, civil society, the private sector, and international actors—is vital to mobilize resources and expertise.

Robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should track progress, enabling continuous adaptation and accountability. Equally, youth participation in program design and implementation fosters ownership and ensures interventions remain relevant to their needs.

Such a comprehensive programme would guarantee that young people across Sri Lanka enjoy equal opportunities to thrive and contribute, thereby advancing inclusive and sustainable national development.

The Support for Authoritarianism Proved through Electoral Action (2019–2022)

Youth support for authoritarian leaders during the 2019–2022 electoral cycle in Sri Lanka reflects a complex interplay of socio-political and economic factors. For some young voters, authoritarianism appeared to promise stability and order in the midst of political dysfunction. Others were drawn by assurances of rapid economic growth and security—particularly appealing in a context of high unemployment and economic volatility.

Nationalist appeals also resonated with segments of youth, particularly in communities grappling with ethnic and religious tensions. Media manipulation and controlled narratives further shaped perceptions, while limited political education often left young voters unable to fully grasp the long-term risks of authoritarian governance. In some cases, coercion and the absence of viable political alternatives reinforced electoral support for illiberal leaders.

Addressing these dynamics requires deliberate efforts to strengthen democratic literacy, cultivate critical thinking, and ensure free media. Empowering youth to participate meaningfully in democratic processes while safeguarding their rights is fundamental to preventing a normalization of authoritarianism and securing a more participatory political culture.

The Rhetoric in Search of a Hitler as a Role Model during the 2019 Presidential Elections

A particularly troubling phenomenon during the 2019 Presidential Elections was the invocation of Hitler-like rhetoric, reflecting disillusionment with democratic governance and a yearning for

authoritarian decisiveness. This tendency was rooted in public frustration over corruption, insecurity, and ineffective leadership, leading some to valorize the notion of a “strongman” capable of restoring order.

Nationalist narratives amplified this rhetoric, portraying authoritarian leadership as synonymous with safeguarding sovereignty and protecting majority interests. Political actors and media outlets further exploited these sentiments, using provocative imagery and language to channel public grievances into support for authoritarian-leaning candidates.

Such rhetoric signals deep democratic vulnerabilities. Romanticizing authoritarianism not only distorts historical realities but also risks eroding democratic institutions and values. The antidote lies in strengthening political education, promoting media literacy, and nurturing civic cultures that value accountability and inclusion rather than authoritarian control.

The Marxist–Leninist Group as an Alternative to a Neo-Liberal Regime

The attraction of Marxist–Leninist groups as alternatives to neoliberal and authoritarian regimes reflects both ideological appeal and political disillusionment. Promising egalitarianism, redistribution, and systemic transformation, these groups resonate with youth and marginalized communities frustrated by inequality and exclusion. Their anti-establishment rhetoric offers hope of breaking free from entrenched hierarchies and failed governance structures.

For some, historical precedents of Marxist–Leninist movements succeeding against authoritarianism bolster confidence in their potential as agents of change. Yet this appeal is not without risks: such movements often carry authoritarian tendencies of their own, threatening political pluralism and individual freedoms.

A balanced evaluation is therefore required. While Marxist–Leninist critiques of inequality are often valid, solutions must be pursued within frameworks that safeguard democracy and human rights. Constructive engagement with youth grievances, rather than wholesale adoption of radical ideologies, is vital for sustainable reform.

The Strong Urge to Leave Sri Lanka in Search of Greener Pastures

The persistent desire among Sri Lankan youth to migrate reflects profound socio-economic and political disillusionment. Chronic unemployment, underemployment, and limited career prospects drive many to seek better opportunities abroad. Political instability, corruption, and declining public trust in governance further compound this sentiment.

Equally important are structural gaps in education and healthcare, which prompt many young people to pursue studies or careers overseas. Family ties abroad and aspirations for enhanced

quality of life add to this momentum. Despite emotional attachments to their homeland, many perceive migration as the only viable pathway to secure dignity and progress.

Reversing this trend requires addressing root causes: revitalizing the economy, ensuring equitable access to quality education and healthcare, strengthening governance, and restoring public confidence. Only by creating an environment of opportunity and security can Sri Lanka retain its youth and harness their potential for national development.

Social Entrepreneurship and Creative Activism

Marginalized youth in plantation and rural communities often lack direct channels for policy engagement. Yet, as Gunaratnam (2025) shows, creative activism among plantation workers illustrates how cultural resources and relational humility can be mobilized to advance justice and dignity. Such examples underline the potential for social entrepreneurship and grassroots innovation to empower excluded groups and build bridges across divides.

Constraints to Empowerment: Mental Health and Education

The crises of the past decade — including the Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic meltdown — have had significant impacts on youth mental health, limiting their capacity for active participation (Shoib et al., 2022). In parallel, Sri Lanka's public education system faces systemic shortcomings. A recent study highlights that teachers lack confidence and training to introduce artificial intelligence in classrooms, leaving students ill-prepared for global digital transformations (Rajapakse, Ariyaratna, & Selvakan, 2024). Together, these challenges reinforce structural barriers that undermine youth empowerment.

Diversity, Democracy, and Transitional Justice

The ability of youth to participate meaningfully in political transformation also depends on an inclusive civic culture that recognizes minority identities. As Mihlar (2024) argues, transitional justice in Sri Lanka has often overlooked minority rights, reinforcing divisions rather than healing them. This reality highlights the need to cultivate a youth culture that values pluralism, reconciliation, and democratic accountability — in line with progressive rather than reactionary reasoning.

Concluding Observations: Towards a Pragmatic Policy Framework for a Community of Empowered Youth

Sri Lanka's developmental trajectory depends fundamentally on its ability to empower and mobilize youth as agents of change. A pragmatic and forward-looking policy framework must

recognize their diversity of needs while providing structures for inclusion, innovation, and participation.

Education reform remains the cornerstone: equitable access, improved quality, and an emphasis on critical thinking and creativity are essential. Complementary initiatives to foster entrepreneurship, innovation, and employability will enable youth to contribute productively to the economy. Addressing systemic disparities, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, is equally critical.

At the political level, cultivating active citizenship and democratic participation is indispensable. Youth must be equipped with the tools to distinguish between progressive and reactionary ideologies, resist authoritarian rhetoric, and contribute to democratic governance. Creating inclusive platforms for youth participation in policymaking will institutionalize their role as co-creators of the nation's future.

Ultimately, Sri Lanka's future lies in transforming its youth from passive recipients of policy into active drivers of change. By fostering empowerment across education, economy, and civic life, a resilient and inclusive community of youth can emerge—one capable of steering the country toward equity, innovation, and sustainability.

The Ability to Distinguish What is Progressive and Reactionary

For Sri Lankan youth, the capacity to differentiate between progressive and reactionary ideologies is critical to informed political engagement. Progressive ideologies emphasize inclusivity, equity, and forward-looking innovation. They advocate reforms that expand opportunity, protect rights, and foster sustainable development. Reactionary ideologies, by contrast, resist change, cling to outdated hierarchies, and often perpetuate discrimination and exclusion.

Developing this discernment requires cultivating critical thinking, empathy, and democratic values. By strengthening these capacities, youth can resist regressive forces and align themselves with movements that advance justice and progress.

What is Authoritarian and Democratic?

Authoritarianism centralizes power in the hands of a leader or elite, restricts political freedoms, and suppresses dissent. Decision-making is top-down, accountability is weak, and media and civil liberties are curtailed.

Democracy, in contrast, distributes power through representation, guarantees political and civil freedoms, and ensures accountability through rule of law, independent institutions, and free media. It enables citizen participation, protects minority rights, and fosters transparency.

Recognizing these distinctions empowers youth to critically assess governance models and to advocate for systems that prioritize accountability, participation, and rights protection.

What is Modern and Traditional in Reasoning?

Modern reasoning privileges empirical evidence, scientific inquiry, and critical analysis. It emphasizes innovation, inclusivity, and adaptability, seeking to expand knowledge and improve society through rational inquiry.

Traditional reasoning, by contrast, draws on established customs, authority, and communal values. While it emphasizes continuity, stability, and social cohesion, it can also limit innovation and perpetuate inequality.

Both approaches hold value. For Sri Lankan youth, cultivating the ability to balance tradition with modernity—preserving cultural heritage while embracing evidence-based innovation—will be crucial in shaping a society that is both rooted and forward-looking.

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