

Paternalistic leadership as a double-edged sword: Analysis of the Sri Lankan President's response to the COVID-19 crisis

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Abstract

Despite the challenges facing small economies, leadership research has given scant attention to leaders' behaviour in those countries during crises. Using seemingly paradoxical domains of paternalistic leadership theory: authoritarian, benevolent and moral leader behaviour, together with concepts like populism from the political science domain, we analyse how Sri Lanka's 'strongman' President provided a façade of paternalistic leadership during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through analysis of written and verbal content (public speeches, independent reports and government media output), we show how the power exercised through authoritarian, as opposed to authoritative behaviour, together with espoused morality and benevolence, appears to have been effective in the short term in containing the pandemic. However, sustained success in dealing with the crisis is hampered by the contradictions between this paternalistic façade and the dark realities of authoritarian and populist leadership. Accordingly, we offer theoretical insights into how the darker elements of paternalistic leadership can be better understood and averted.

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Crisis leadership, COVID-19, nepotism, paternalistic leadership, political leadership, populism, xenophobia

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the major global crises of our time, with more than 315 million people infected and the death toll surpassing over five and half million by January 2022 (WHO, 2022). Along with the intolerable burden of loss of life and risks of disease, the pandemic has caused devastating and long-term socio-economic consequences (Antonakis, 2021; UNDP, 2020). As humanity struggles to defeat the virus, the crisis places global political leaders under tremendous pressure. Arguably, few leaders such as Vietnam's Nguyen Xuan Phuc (Ivic, 2020), Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen, Denmark's Mette Frederiksen, New Zealand's Jacinda Arden (Hayes, 2020) and Germany's Angela Merkel (Belluz, 2020) have dealt with the situation well, raising the question as to whether many countries are bereft of the quality of leaders needed to effectively respond to the crisis.

Some excellent research has already discussed how different leaders have handled the pandemic, alluding to what factors contribute to or impede their success. Wilson (2020) discussed how Jacinda Arden fostered a shared purpose and used a science-led approach to successfully deal with the crisis. Similarly, Ivic (2020), argued that solidarity and ethics of care promoted by the political leadership enabled it to combat the virus in Vietnam. Crayne and Medeiros (2020) argued that a pragmatic approach founded on rational reasoning was effective for Angela Merkel of Germany, at least during the first wave. In contrast, other authors (e.g. Prasad, 2020; Tourish, 2020) have discussed how the exploitative nature of populist leaders has led to destructive outcomes when handling the pandemic.

In our study, we focus on a lesser-known story, Sri Lanka's early success in dealing with the pandemic, during its first wave, under the leadership of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was later challenged with a more aggressive wave. Crisis management includes mitigation and preparedness, during the pre-crisis stage, the response stage, which is the stage where the crisis is in action, and the recovery stage, which is post crisis (Lettieri et al., 2009). Our research is situated at the 'response' stage, during the first wave of the pandemic (March–November 2020) in Sri Lanka. The growing interest in exploring leadership in non-Western nations has prompted leadership and cross-cultural researchers to question the appropriateness of applying mainstream leadership theories which are rooted in Anglo Celtic values and behaviours (Dickson et al., 2012; Jackson, 2016). These calls to explore leadership from a non-Western perspective saw the emergence of a growing but limited body of literature on 'paternalistic leadership', considered an effective leadership style in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East (Hiller et al., 2019; Jackson, 2016; Selvarajah et al., 2020). In contrast, our study explores the contradictions of paternalistic leadership by applying it as a theoretical lens to critique the leadership of President Gotabaya in managing the COVID-19 crisis.

Jackson (2016) claims that despite the prevalence of paternalistic leadership in the majority of the world (see also Cheng et al., 2014; Aycan et al., 2013; Kagitcibasi, 1996), there is yet limited research on this area. He argues that exploring leadership in non-western countries while ignoring the predominant paternalistic style of leadership that exists is problematic and shows a weakness in the leadership literature. A recent study examining managerial leadership in Sri Lanka (Selvarajah et al., 2020) argued that Sri Lanka, like its Asian counterparts, has a strong inclination towards paternalism intertwined with strong familial values (Pellegriani and Scandura, 2008). The President's background, discussed later in the paper, also warrants a critical use of paternalistic leadership theory to analyse his leadership. For instance, Gotabaya served in the military for 20 years and was later Defence Secretary before being elected as the Executive President. As discussed later in the paper,

the President relies heavily on the military to manage the COVID-19 crisis, to the extent that he has been criticised for militarisation of the government (Foreign Policy, 2020). As an ex-military officer, he has been trained and nurtured by the military. The top military brass remains his highest source of confidantes and ingroup members. With a strict heterarchical command structure, the military is consistent with the hierarchical structure of paternalistic relations (Chou et al., 2015), and provides clues to the leadership approach of Gotabaya.

In addition, the popular mandate was for Gotabaya to emulate late Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of post-colonial Singapore (Edwards, 2021). Yew is regarded as a paternalistic leader and embodied a 'strongman' approach and authoritarian leadership in transforming Singapore from a least developed country to one of the strongest economies in the world (Choi, 2018). But just as Singapore shows evidence of authoritarianism and repression of dissent, we suggest that the Sri Lankan President's use of paternalism warrants closer attention for its darker elements. A 'strongman' is defined as a leader displaying an authoritarian profile, who drives the centralisation of executive powers, hierarchical governance, muscular treatment of opponents and the media, and the promotion of traditionalism and nationalism (Lindén, 2017; Nai and Toros, 2020).

Rooted in Confucianism, the paternalistic leader is perceived as a father figure who is moral, authoritarian, and benevolent, with these three elements being simultaneous (Bedi, 2020; Farh and Cheng, 2000; Laua et al., 2020). According to this view, the morality of a leader demonstrates personal virtue, self-discipline and unselfishness. Moral leadership entails *shuh-der* (setting an example) behaviours, such as 'demonstrating personal virtue', 'integrity and fulfilling one's obligations', 'never taking advantage of others' and being a 'selfless paragon'. Benevolence of a leader implies individualised concern for personal or familial well-being beyond work relations. Benevolent leadership contains *shi-en* behaviours (favour granting), such as 'individualised care' and 'understanding and forgiving' (Cheng et al., 2004). In contrast, authoritarianism of a leader indicates that they exert absolute authority and demand unquestionable obedience (Cheng et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2018). Authoritarian leadership comprises five types of *li-wei* (awe-inspiring) behaviours: 'powerfully subduing', 'authority and control', 'intention hiding', 'rigorousness' and 'doctrine' (Cheng et al., 2004). In this paper, we argue that all three elements (where authoritarianism is one) cannot coexist and are in fact antithetical. We show this by juxtaposing the President's communications and public displays with evidence of more troubling impacts of his leadership on Sri Lankan minorities during the COVID response phase. This is in contrast to studies which argue that paternalistic leadership is effective in some contexts and that its contradictory elements (benevolence, authoritarianism) can coexist (Farh et al., 2006; Tian and Sanchez, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). However, we see potential benefit in this leadership model in non-Western contexts where 'authoritarianism' is replaced with 'authoritativeness'.

Our study aims to advance the paternalistic leadership literature and to contribute to political leadership literature in small economies faced with the COVID-19 crisis. By applying elements of the paternalistic leadership model to the President's official communications and handling of the COVID crisis, we highlight the tendency of the 'authoritarianism' within paternalism to be 'misused, particularly to exclude and disadvantage minorities outside the President's main political base'. The stream of COVID-19 related leadership research thus far has not covered political leaders in region of South Asia. Our study endeavours to fill some of these gaps.

The research context

Sri Lanka and its early experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic

Sri Lanka is an island nation with a population of 20 million. Considered a lower-middle income country with a fragile economy, the nation is ethnically and religiously diverse. According to the 2012 census, the Sinhalese majority makes up 74.9% of the population, followed by 11.1% who are Sri Lankan Tamils, 9.3% Moors and 4.1% Tamils of Indian descent, with 70.2% of the country's population being Buddhists. Sri Lanka at the time of independence was a model country in the British Commonwealth with a high standard of education, a well-established civil service, and an experienced representative government system. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka was unable to live up to its potential and stands among the emerging markets which are in most financial peril ([The Economist, 2020](#)). Under the semi-presidential representative democratic framework established in 1978, the Executive President holds power as both the head of state and head of the government. In contemporary political systems, it is rare for an individual to hold power as both the head of state and head of the government, and as such, immense power is vested in one person.

Although limited in resources, the free and universal health services inherited as part of the post-independence welfare policies enabled Sri Lanka to achieve remarkable progress in most health indicators, including addressing communicable diseases ([Gamage, 2020](#)). Despite these impressive health indicators, which would have helped the current leadership in dealing with the crisis, the Global Health Security Index positioned Sri Lanka as under-resourced and only moderately prepared to face a major health crisis like COVID-19. Since the declaration of the global health crisis in early January 2020, the Sri Lankan government has been proactive in seeking to contain the outbreak, enforcing a strict strategy of case detection, contact tracing, and quarantining. A nationwide curfew restricted inter- and intra-district travel ([Jayasena and Chinthaka, 2020](#); [Xinhuanet, 2020](#)), and a program to identify and track recent returnees from high-risk countries was implemented ([Epidemiology Unit, 2020](#)). These stringent measures implemented during the early days of the pandemic led to success in combatting the first wave of infections in Sri Lanka. Thus, the WHO acclaimed Sri Lanka as a success case in managing the first wave of the pandemic, acknowledging that strong leadership led to these positive outcomes ([WHO, 2020](#); August Feature Countries, p. 75). The WHO report stated:

‘The statistics reflect the success of the country’s ability to respond to an epidemic, saving lives and protecting its population. The proactive and rapid preventive strategies that were implemented and the combined public health approach with strong leadership and whole of society approach have helped Sri Lanka to be in the position it is today’.

Sri Lanka also successfully conducted a nation-wide parliamentary election under the leadership of Rajapaksa in August 2020, without a surge in the number of COVID cases. The WHO was quick to acclaim the holding of an island-wide election as Sri Lanka’s biggest success story in controlling the virus ([WHO, 2020](#)). A recent research study that evaluated the effectiveness of strategies implemented by the Sri Lankan government to control the virus shows that the reduction of contact rate effectively contributed to the successful control of the virus during the first wave ([Erandi et al., 2020](#)). More recently, a Lowy Institute COVID-19 performance index has ranked Sri Lanka 10th in the top 10 countries for successfully managing the virus ([Galloway, 2021](#)). In this paper, we question whether such success can be sustained given the contradictions and ambiguities we uncover in the President’s leadership approach, characterised by the metaphor of a ‘double-edged’ sword.

The leader – President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the constituents, and allies

Gotabaya Rajapaksa is the current Executive President in the country. Unlike his predecessors, Rajapaksa is not a career politician. His limited exposure to politics was during his tenure as the Secretary of Defence and Secretary of Urban Development and Planning, during the presidency of his elder brother Mahinda Rajapaksa. As Secretary of Defence, he played an influential role in the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) where he led a brutal and ultimately successful strategy to end the ethnic war on behalf of the government (Gunaratne, 2020; De Silva-Ranasinghe, 2009). Rajapaksa served in the military for 20 years until his retirement in 1991. Despite his political inexperience, he comes from a political family. The most prominent political figure in his family is his elder brother Mahinda Rajapaksa, who served as President for two consecutive terms. According to his siblings, and contemporaries from school and the military, Gotabaya is a mild and quiet person (Gunaratne, 2020: pp.13–17). He is regarded as family-oriented, a caring brother and a loving husband and father. In the eyes of the public and media however, he is often portrayed as a hardliner, often referred to as a strongman (Macan-Markar, 2019).

Rajapaksa shows a strong preference to work with his immediate family, the military and former military in-group members. He appointed several committees to manage the crisis with a significant feature being that his close allies and the military were used extensively. For example, the Presidential COVID Task Force is headed by his younger brother and nine out of the 40 members of the COVID Task Force are military personnel, some now retired. The Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak is headed by the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, who led one of the divisions that actively fought during the final stage of the ethnic war.

Rajapaksa identifies himself as a Sinhala Buddhist. He won the election in November 2019 with 52.25% of the votes, and his party won the parliamentary election in August 2020 with 59.09%. He admitted that those victories were due to Sinhala Buddhist voters, the ethnic majority in the country. Some named his election victory as the ‘timely return of a strongman’ (Macan-Markar, 2019) and hero of the successful ‘war against terrorism (LTTE)’. Others referred to it as a choice ‘between dictatorship and democracy’ signifying the emergence of an authoritarian regime eroding democratic values (Guriev and Treisman, 2020). His background provides us with an interesting angle from which to explore how the adoption of a paternalistic leadership facade together with other political leadership concepts (e.g. xenophobia, populism and nepotism) have influenced his leadership in managing the COVID-19 crisis.

Paternalistic leadership

Extant literature on paternalistic leadership has mostly focused on non-Western countries, influenced by Confucianism, mainly China (Bedi, 2020). The paternalistic leader is perceived as a father figure who is moral, authoritarian, and benevolent (Bedi, 2020; Farh and Cheng, 2000). According to Steyrer (1998), the archetype of the father is associated with a soft side of fatherly love and care, as in Christian tradition, God denotes fatherly love and the creator of all things, whilst on the other hand, the archetype of a father in a non-Western context signifies despotism, pointing to the father’s greatness, superiority, strength, and knowledge and characterised by order, demandingness, and punishment (Takala et al., 2013). Takala et al. (2013) attributed paternalistic charisma to President Obama, along with other types of charisma. However, paternalism as seen in the East, with its more authoritarian elements, appears less palatable in the West (Lin et al., 2019). Aycan (2006) argues that this is due to the difference in how power relations are perceived in the East and the West. Accordingly, Kantian principles which are upheld in Western liberal democracies reject paternalism,

describing a paternalistic government as ‘the greatest conceivable despotism’ which ‘suspends the entire freedom of its subjects’ (cited in [Sánchez, 2014](#)).

We find that the literature offers a mixed picture on paternalism as a viable and consistent model of leadership. For example, [Laua et al. \(2020\)](#) point to the complexity created by the conflicting elements within paternalism, arguing that the negative impacts of authoritarianism pose challenges to paternalistic leadership researchers. They argue that authoritarianism is deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of Confucianism and legalism, where a father has legitimate authority over his children and the emperor absolute power over his constituents, and hence should not be viewed as solely negative. Examining a stream of prior research on paternalistic leadership, they suggest that benevolence or morality separately may bring about positive outcomes, but when these elements are combined with authoritarianism, the outcomes may be either positive or negative. [Wang et al. \(2018\)](#) show that high authoritarianism combined with high benevolence have a positive effect on follower behaviours and performance. Similarly, beneficial outcomes of paternalistic leadership have been found by other researchers ([Farh et al., 2006](#); [Tian and Sanchez, 2017](#); [Wang et al., 2018](#); [Laua et al., 2020](#)).

In another recent study, paternalistic leadership was regarded as a double-edged sword, with the element of authoritarianism leading to both positive or negative results affecting team performance ([Huang and Lin, 2021](#)). On the other hand, [Gu et al. \(2020\)](#) contend that the two components of benevolence and morality may nullify the negative impact of authoritarianism.

A study conducted in Indonesia ([Oktaviani et al., 2016](#)) found that while paternalistic leaders were perceived as hierarchical parental figures, ingrained elements of feudalism, politics of friendship, family and favouritism influenced these leaders to be self-serving, corrupt and often inclined towards authoritarianism. Furthermore, paternalistic leadership has been compared to ‘benevolent dictatorship’ ([Northouse, 1997](#)). [Pellegrini and Scandura \(2008\)](#) highlight the possibility of special favours being bestowed on those belonging to the in-group, as a benevolent relationship may only exist between the leaders and the in-group, due to the personal nature of paternal relationships. Furthering this line of argument, [Okun et al. \(2020\)](#) found that paternalistic leadership, in particular the authoritarian element, can lead to xenophobia as it has a significant link to the cultural and identity dimensions of xenophobia (see also [Okun et al., 2021](#); [Okun et al., 2020](#)). Thus, xenophobic behaviours may occur as a result of hierarchical and family-like attributes innate in paternalistic leadership which may lead to exclusion and marginalisation of out-group or minority members. Similarly, emphasising the dark side of paternalistic leadership, researchers caution about the possibility of nepotism and racial discrimination ([Erden and Ayse, 2019](#); [Levine and Hogg, 2010](#)).

Taking a different angle to the majority of paternalistic literature, [Chou et al. \(2010\)](#) argue that authoritarianism in paternalistic leadership includes two types of controls: *Juan-Chiuan* leadership, which focuses on absolute obedience, and *Shang-Yang* leadership, which relates to a didactic and strict discipline-focused approach, similar to authoritative leadership. The authors found *Juan-Chiuan* to have a negative effect on the psychological empowerment of subordinates, while *Shang-Yang* had positive effects. Furthermore, authoritarianism showed an interesting relationship with benevolence as the positive effects of *Shang-Yan* were strengthened while the negative effects of *Juan-Chiuan* were weakened when accompanied by benevolent leadership. In this paper, we argue that the distinction between *Juan-Chiuan* and *Shang-Yan* is fundamental. Authoritarianism (absolute obedience) should not be confused with authoritativeness (didactic and strict discipline).

[Aycan \(2006\)](#) notes that ‘control’ is manifested in both authoritarian leadership and authoritative leadership, however, authoritarian leaders use reward and punishment to compel subordinates to conform, whereas in authoritative leadership, subordinates are willing to comply and obey the leader as they understand that such compliance will ultimately benefit them. Aycan, aptly explains that authoritarian leadership is about ‘people control’, whereas authoritative leadership is to do with ‘task

control'. While the latter has positive effects such as enhancing self-efficacy, hope and optimism and motivating followers to work hard and attain goals (Aycan, 2006; Karakitapoğlu-Aygün et al., 2020), authoritarianism can lead to a range of negative consequences such as discrimination, corruption, nepotism and xenophobia (Erden and Ayse, 2019; Levine and Hogg, 2010; Okun et al., 2020). In this paper, we explore these issues and show how authoritarianism can be misrepresented within a paternalistic façade, making it popularly associated with more positive paternalistic attributes such as benevolence and morality. To this extent, paternalism may offer a useful political model to attract many followers yet is theoretically and empirically ineffective as a leadership model due to the significant harms it promotes. In this paper, we reveal or unmask both the positive and negative consequences of the paternalistic leadership approach in Sri Lanka in the handling of the COVID-19 response stage.

Method

Scholars (Fairhurst, 2009) have emphasised the importance of using layers of data sources to reasonably capture leadership behaviour and traits under study. Thus, in the present study, we applied the content analysis method and used multiple layers of qualitative data to understand the model of leadership espoused or projected by the President during the pandemic (Miles et al., 2020). We included a range of data sources including those emanating from close to the President (see Table 1), his public speeches and press conferences, press conferences and speeches of Covid task force leaders, local and international media articles, documents published by the Presidential secretariat office, the President's Twitter posts and public responses to those posts during the period March to November 2020. We used keywords such as 'Covid-19', 'Sri Lanka', 'President', 'Gotabaya' and 'Leadership'.

Data analysis process

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), we employed a step-by-step process when analysing the data. Firstly, with the intention of making sense, we read all the data collected while reflecting on their innate meanings. Then, we identified and categorised data under the three main domains of paternalistic leadership as informed by literature – authoritarianism, benevolence and moral behaviour, by highlighting and commenting on each data source. Next, authors got together to discuss their initial thoughts on the themes that emerged in the process. Themes were identified based on common leadership traits and behaviours under each of the three paternalistic leadership domains. In doing this, an iterative process was used by referring to both paternalistic leadership literature and our data. Common themes that emerged in this process are listed in Figure 1.

We then transferred all the documents to Nvivo-12 and deposited relevant content under identified themes as indicated in Figure 1. At this stage, we allowed new themes to emerge because in a crisis or a disaster situation a leader may demonstrate behaviours that are not otherwise identified in paternalistic leadership theory. To probe and summarise the voice of the public in Twitter posts, we used the InVivo coding analysis method as suggested by Miles et al. (2020). This coding method enables researchers to pick phrases that are repeatedly used by the participants which leads to the emergence of common patterns within a particular setting. We stress that these 'voices of the public' from Twitter need to be treated with caution, given that social media is susceptible to organised political discourse. For our purposes, the focus here is on how the President and those close to him, such as the COVID Taskforce, projected his leadership, and how this was received by some in the

Table I. Key data sources used in the present study.

Data source	Description
Official public speeches of the President	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Four speeches of the leader addressing the general public (speech 1: 4 February 2020; speech: 17 March 2020; speech 3: 19 May 2020; speech 18 November 2020) 2. Two speeches delivered at international conferences (Non-Aligned Movement online summit 4 May 2020; Un Secretary General 28 May 2020)
Live (impromptu) speeches of the President addressing various forums	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A speech addressing the COVID taskforce: 17 March 2020 2. A speech addressing Central Bank officials: 16 June 2020 3. A media conference: 22 April 2020
COVID Taskforce media	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. General Shavendra Silva – Army commander, the head of the COVID task force, sharing his opinion about the president (June 2020) 2. Dr P.B.Jayasundara – Economist and Secretary to the President, COVID-19 pandemic a great opportunity to boost SL's resilience, new strides (May 2020)
President's official Twitter account	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 53 Twitter posts and related responses of general public from March to November 2020
Communications issued by Presidential Secretariat	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. President scans peripheral health issues connected with COVID-19 spread (November 2020) 2. Our health service capable of controlling COVID with peoples' support (October 2020) 3. 'Stay Safe' digital programme designed to contain COVID-19 introduced to president (November 2020) 4. President directs officials to closely monitor self-quarantine process once curfew lifted (November 2020) 5. President makes concrete decisions to curb COVID-19 spread without disrupting public life and economy (November 2020) 6. President's instructions to increase PCR tests to contain spread of COVID-19 (September 2020) 7. Spiritually rich, religious and moral generation needed for the future (September 2020)
Media Articles (examples)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. WHO August feature countries (August 2020) 2. South Asia Brief (November 2019) 3. Foreign policy (August 2020) 4. Xinhuanet (April 2020) 5. The Guardian (November 2019) 6. 21 local newspapers articles published during the period including Daily Mirror, Sunday Observer, Lakbima News

public. Furthermore, we acknowledge that in authoritarian regimes media is controlled, hence both local and international media were used to mitigate this issue to some extent.

Findings and discussion

We explored how the President displayed and projected characteristics of paternalistic leadership during the COVID-19 health crisis. In doing this, we critique the behaviour and the approach of the

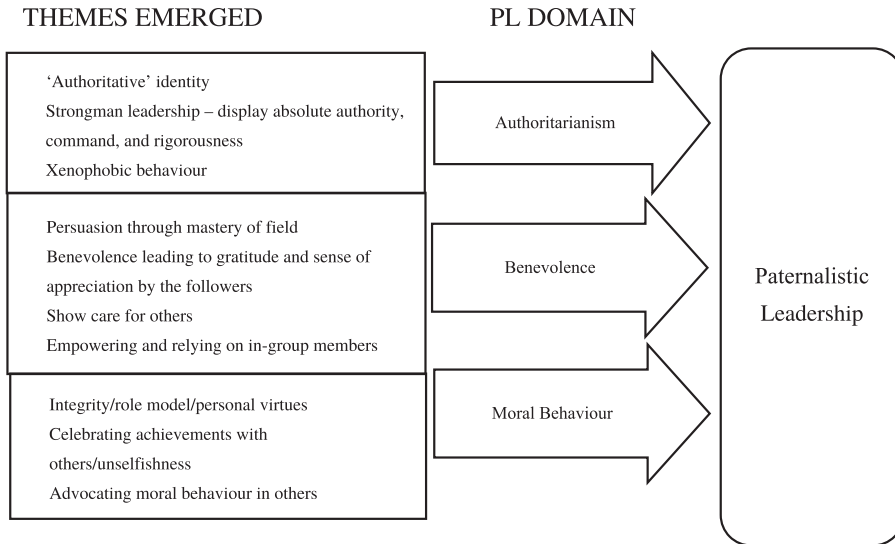


Figure 1. Themes emerged in the coding process.

President, drawing on paternalistic leadership literature, and noting both the positive and the potentially dark side of paternalism when it pushes the boundaries of authority. In doing so, we explore the recent outcomes and likely future consequences relevant to crisis management in this case of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka.

Authoritarianism domain

Authoritative identity

The President is frequently identified as the 'once-powerful Defence Secretary' through an authoritative leadership narrative by the media ([South Asia Brief, November 2019](#)). In handling the crisis, we observe that his 'authoritative identity' which resonates with *Shang-Yang* (authoritative) leadership played a crucial role in making quick and significant decisions, including the decisions to lockdown the entire country and to repatriate Sri Lankans stranded overseas, including China, the epicentre of the virus. Many political analysts noted that the weakness and indecisiveness of Rajapaksa's predecessor President Sirisena, resulted in political and security chaos, including the Easter Sunday Attack in April 2019. The Easter Sunday Attack was a deadly terror attack instigated by an Islamic extremist group in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, 2019. It resulted in 250 deaths and left close to 400 injured across the cities of Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa ([Gunasingham, 2019](#)). Consequently, it was thought that the Sri Lankan citizenry yearned for a strong, decisive political leader ([Shah and Aneez, 2019](#)). We see President's 'authoritative identity' fitted this role, seeming to make him the right person to lead the country when the pandemic hit. This is further echoed in the August 2020 parliamentary election held during the pandemic, where belief and trust in his proactive, decisive leadership influence most constituents to vote in favour of his party.

Strongman leadership – display absolute authority, command and rigorousness

The authoritarian element of paternalistic leadership attracts dark sentiments as the ‘authority, command and rigorousness’ dimensions are used by leaders to achieve absolute obedience. This is done by commanding, yelling and humiliating (Karakitapoğlu-Aygün et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2018). From the early days of the President’s appointment, both local and international media portrayed him as a ‘strongman’. (South Asia Brief, November 2019.) Further, the President has pushed a strongman, authoritarian approach (Lindén, 2017; Nai and Toros, 2020) when dealing with international institutions. During the pandemic, in a public forum, he said, ‘If any international body or organisation continuously targets our country and our war heroes, using baseless allegations, I will not hesitate to withdraw Sri Lanka from such bodies or organisations’ (Foreign Ministry Sri Lanka, 2020). Such statements hint at the dark side of the President’s construction of paternalism.

During the early stages of the pandemic, we observed the President exerting absolute authority (Cheng et al., 2004) over senior government officials responsible for economic policy reforms in the country. He said, ‘Help me build the country, you have done nothing so far, no methodology is proposed to come out of this so far, you all are best economists... you need to give your strategy by tomorrow morning, tell me how to get out of this, be responsible, tell me the tools you are going to use to get out of this crisis ... If I say something wrong, you can speak-up, that’s all I have to say’ (The President blasts Central bank officials, June 2020).

It is not uncommon for leaders to use power-oriented authoritarian behaviour to influence underperformers (Wang et al., 2018). However, the use of excessive power and authority during a crisis as cautioned by Tourish (2020) may lead to populist leadership, resulting in exploitation and suppression of those who dissent. The evidence in this case points to a paternalistic leadership image overlaid on top of an authoritarian foundation. However, unlike a fully-fledged populist leader who would offer simple solutions and advocate strong leadership (Tourish, 2020), Gotabaya appears to rely on experts to make informed decisions and project his paternalist credentials.

Xenophobic behaviour

Research suggests that the authoritarian domain of paternalistic leadership can contribute to xenophobia when a leader uses hierarchical and family-like attributes to treat in-group members as worthier and to exclude or marginalise out-group members (Okun et al., 2021; Okun et al. 2020). This is particularly so, where a paternalistic leader accentuates ethnic and religious differences by valorising one group and treating members of other groups differently, as evident in our study. The President’s xenophobic behaviour has been highlighted and criticised by the media. For instance, we observed the emergence of narratives in the international media such as ‘Strongman President spurs fear in minorities’ (Mushtaq, November 2019). Furthermore, official public speeches (speech 1 and 2 in Table 1) of the President show that he often graciously thanked the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, for his comfortable victory in the Presidential election, thus consolidating ethno-centric nationalism in the country. Further, we observe that Rajapaksa was oblivious to the government’s discrimination against ethnic minorities, as manifested through its rigid stance against the beliefs of the Islamic community by forcibly cremating COVID-19 victims, which is against Islamic burial traditions. Ignoring WHO endorsements and recommendations of medical professionals in the country regarding disposal of COVID infected deaths, this policy was most likely used to appeal to the government’s ultranationalist Sinhala Buddhist constituency (Qazi and Mushtaq, 2020). While President Rajapaksa’s party managed to secure a comfortable majority in every district where Sinhalese are the majority, it could not secure any electorate where Tamil and Muslim minorities

were predominately residing. We argue that this xenophobic behaviour of the President may adversely affect attempts to unite the country to fight the virus and to repair the divided social fabric along ethnic lines in the future. This behaviour also unmasks his paternalistic façade of benevolence and morality.

It is also pertinent to question whether such xenophobic behaviour is yet another manifestation of a populist regime (Tourish, 2020). Prasad (2020) on examining the COVID crisis in India, claims that ‘othering leadership’ is present in India as the crisis is being exploited by political leaders in the ongoing persecution of the Muslims. However, the two South Asian Nations, India and Sri Lanka, in our view show different forms of treatment of Muslims, due to very different historic as well as current attitudes towards the Muslim community. In India, the Muslim minority is blamed for the pandemic, and subject to far-reaching injurious and blatantly discriminatory policies, Islamophobia is well entrenched in Indian society due to the long-standing ideology of Hindutva, which is exploited by the current political leadership (Prasad, 2020). Our findings do not indicate any direct blaming and demonising of Muslims or other minorities in Sri Lanka for spreading the disease (Prasad, 2020). Instead, the dynamics of exclusion and xenophobia seem to play out in other ways, such as this policy of forced cremation of the Muslim dead during this phase of COVID.

Benevolence domain

Persuasion through mastery of field

Sri Lanka’s COVID Presidential Taskforce, made up of military top brass, is responsible for preparing, implementing, and monitoring an effective pandemic mechanism, guided by the Secretary of Defence and Commanders of the Tri-Forces. The use of Tri-forces to manage the crisis appears to be an intentional decision of the President, drawing from his experience as a Defence Secretary (Mackinnon, 2020).

Referring to his achievement in ending the country’s war, the President further told the COVID Taskforce: ‘We cannot shut down the country just because we had 28 virus cases. During the war, there were instances where we had 5000 people killed during a single attack, with another 10,000 injured. We need to be careful...we must run the country, that’s called the leadership, ... if we panic the public panics. We need to act responsibly and use our intelligence’ (President Gotabaya, COVID Taskforce address, March 2020b). This quote demonstrates the President’s mastery and capacity to manage the face of the crisis. Worryingly, it also suggests an almost clinical lack of sentiment or compassion for human suffering.

Alluding to the President’s forward-thinking approach, the Army Commander, who is also the head of the COVID Taskforce, shared that ‘As soon as the President heard the Wuhan case, he wanted to build quarantine centres... The general public respects the army and listens to us and health sector intelligence, helped immensely. We worked collectively as a country. It is the plan, the method and the foresight of the President that was instrumental in helping us control the spread’ (Sri Lankan Army Media, 2020). This view promotes the President’s forward thinking as building trust between the leader and the followers in handling the crisis, which is intended to build public confidence in the decisions made by those at the forefront of managing it. It can also be seen as the Army contributing to propaganda that credits the President with all-seeing and all-knowing wisdom, perpetuating his image as a benevolent paternal leader. To this end, the paternalistic leader is created and perpetuated by in-group members and followers (Chen et al., 2019).

In contrast to the success achieved through reliance on mastery and previous experience, overconfidence and overreliance on past success may impede successful outcomes in responding to

the current crisis in the longer run (Sadler-Smith et al., 2017). Rajapaksa's statement 'These are not a great deal of things to me, if we go 15 years back, during the war time, when I was the Defence Secretary, they say there was bomb in somewhere, or the army commander was killed, and we didn't have an army commander for a period of six months' (President Gotabaya, COVID Taskforce address, March 2020b), indicates an immense amount of confidence to handle the health crisis, perhaps understating its severity. Overconfidence in one's own abilities and performance may indicate hubristic tendencies, resulting in destructive and self-serving behaviours, especially when there is power, authority and lapses in checks and balances (Claxton et al., 2015; Sadler-Smith et al., 2017). Furthermore, the positive image of the President as perceived by his followers (particularly, the Sinhalese majority) fuelled by the favourable role played by state-controlled media and army propaganda may lead to a romanticised conception of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985), where over exaggeration and overreliance on the leader's abilities seem likely but undesirable outcomes.

The President also stated, 'The experience of war means that the military is well trained in surveillance and in providing rapid logistical support, skills that are useful for contact tracing and relief distribution' (Foreign Policy, August 2020). While this statement upholds the capability of the military, it fails to acknowledge the need for all groups in society to cooperate and support the military's efforts. We question if this overreliance on military experience and his failure to mobilise all groups in society in tackling the COVID crisis has a bearing on why the country is struggling to curtail the spread of the virus in the second and subsequent waves as effectively as the first wave. Over-confidence and political reliance on the President's espoused wisdom and foresight as a leader may encourage complacency on the part of the public, such as lack of stringent adherence to health guidelines. Moreover, we contend that the divisive civil war victory and subsequent treatment of Muslim death rites has hindered the chances of enlisting every citizen to fight against the pandemic. Unlike in Vietnam (Ivic, 2020), the war victory narrative which was effectively used to combat the pandemic is a partisan rhetoric in Sri Lanka.

Showing care for others

Our data suggest that the President projected a sense of responsibility, care and appreciation towards his followers and the public during the first wave. In January 2020, when the virus was still new to the world, he took a quick decision to repatriate 34 Sri Lankan students stranded in Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the pandemic, Sri Lanka being among the first few countries to do so. Similarly, he expressed concern and acknowledged the impact of the curfew on the livelihoods of people, although he considered such measures essential in combatting the invisible enemy. 'We knew that people would face the issue of storing food once the curfew is imposed. Hence, the Government took several people-friendly decisions such as door to door delivery of essential food items'. In a country like Sri Lanka, where a large majority of people depend on daily wages, a huge responsibility is cast upon the government to ensure that basic needs of the public are met. This is particularly so, in an economic crisis, which followed the health crisis.

Benevolence leading to gratitude and appreciation by followers

Our research showed that during the response phase, there was a high dependency on the leader's strategic vision and expertise. For example, one member of the public commented 'Our country needs a vision, and determination to reach that. I believe you have it. We really do not trust anyone else for this but you. So please hoist our country and make it sustainable again'. Similarly, another said, 'His excellency the President Sir you're the one and only our country's real hero' (Twitter, 1

May 2020). High dependency on leaders in non-Western societies is often criticised in Western leadership literature (Salminen-Karlsson, 2015). In the case of the pandemic, we caution that such dependency may lead to complacency and failure given the pervasive nature of COVID beyond the first stage.

Empowering and relying on in-group members

When we look at leaders like New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (Wilson, 2020), who have been in the forefront during the crisis, we noticed that she constantly communicated with the public through media. By contrast, in the case of Sri Lanka, the President directly addressed the public via national media only thrice in 2020. Although it is not uncommon for leaders to avoid media appearances during the pandemic (Tomkins, 2020), we question if the Sri Lankan President placed too much responsibility on his highly trusted COVID Taskforce which he empowered. He was of the view that 'Corona is not the biggest issue, we need to run the country, trust doctors, health care workers will deal with the virus, we have to get on with the other issues in this country' (March 2020). This statement shows that there were other priorities in his agenda such as dealing with the country's economic crisis, and he was willing to empower experts including medical professionals, scientists and especially his trusted tri-forces to handle the pandemic. It is possible to argue that the President's passive communication to the public about the country's COVID situation, particularly during the second wave, was due to the high level of trust or reliance he placed on the Taskforce. Alternatively, based on the success factors identified by Wilson (2020) regarding New Zealand's Prime Minister Ardern's handling of the pandemic, we can infer that Rajapaksa's lack of visibility may work against creating a sense of shared meaning and uniting the public to fight against the virus in the second wave (see also Antonakis, 2021; Tomkins, 2020).

Moral Domain

Integrity, role model and personal virtues

Studies on moral behaviour of paternalistic leaders reveal that such behaviour not only inspires followers but also contributes to collective self-efficacy and self-confidence of followers (Chen et al., 2019). We observed that the President engaged in role model behaviour, openly promoting his integrity and personal virtues when managing the crisis (e.g. 'I will not leave any room for you to lose the trust you placed in me – please be assured that all measures are being taken to contain the spread of coronavirus' (March 2020)).

Chen et al. (2014) argue that paternalistic leaders who work towards shared goals, attain those goals through culture-based values. We observed that the President often engaged in Buddhist religious activities and cultural practices. For instance, in May 2020, he participated in a religious event at a historic Buddhist temple to invoke blessings to keep the nation safe from COVID-19. At this ceremony, he was also mindful to offer a special blessing to the heroic frontline workers for their tireless efforts in handling the pandemic. These behaviours show reliance on dominant religious/cultural values and personal virtues when responding to the crisis and emphasise the powerful role of Buddhism in Sri Lankan society. They further suggest the willingness of the President to project a narrative of paternalistic benevolence coupled with cultural/religious hegemony through the use of the dominant Buddhist faith.

Advocate moral behaviour among the public

While former US President Donald Trump, called the COVID-19 pandemic ‘the Chinese virus’ demonstrating the ‘othering leadership’ strain of populism (Tourish, 2020), our data reveal how Rajapaksa advocated moral behaviour to manage the pandemic. The President constantly advocated moral behaviour among his followers and articulated a desire to be a role model, as would a beloved father with moral and ethical values within paternalistic leadership theory (Cheng et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2018). For instance, he urged people to act as responsible individuals and play a role in correcting the government if it was engaged in wrongdoings. He said, ‘I request everyone to act in accordance with one’s conscience. Always think about the country. Think about your fellow citizens’. Once again, these quotes suggest the President was very conscious of the moral elements of paternalistic leadership he was projecting in the crisis through his communications.

Celebrating achievements with others

Unselfishness is a prominent attribute within the moral domain of paternalistic leadership (Cheng et al., 2014; Luu and Djurkovic, 2019). Sri Lanka’s effort to control the virus in the first phase was highly commended by the global community. For instance, in August 2020, UNICEF congratulated Sri Lanka for its effort. ‘We congratulate Sri Lanka for its effective response to COVID-19, which has placed it in the impressive position of being among the first countries in South Asia to open schools and bring children back in a safe way’. The President proudly shared those victories with the Taskforce, and public. ‘Today, the reason we have managed to keep the situation under control is because of the difficult undertaking by all these personalities. I must also thank our citizens for their endurance and resilience during difficult times’. Lighting an iconic Tower, celebrating the arrivals of Sri Lanka citizens due to government-initiated rescue missions, celebrating the Chinese COVID patient leaving Sri Lanka after full recovery are other examples of celebrating achievements with others (Sandler-Smith et al., 2017). Again, these can also be seen as opportunities taken by the President to emphasise key paternalistic traits of benevolence and altruism, in contrast to earlier statements where he minimised the concerns about numbers of COVID-19 cases.

Theoretical contribution, limitations and future research directions

In this study, we applied a rarely studied leadership phenomenon to analyse the Sri Lankan President’s handling of the pandemic and his communications about his leadership. We argue that our analysis contributes to a nuanced, in-depth and dualistic understanding of the paternalistic leadership approach he projected, by interrogating negative attributes relating to authoritarianism (as a slippage from the ‘authoritative’ dimension), benevolence and moral domains. Even though, authoritarianism, benevolence and moral behaviour have been studied in organisational contexts (Chen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018), the associated themes that explain the attributes which can impact a leaders’ sustained success or failure have not been explored in depth or at national society level. Furthermore, our study provides rich nuances into how positive attributes projected by the President in the benevolence domain, such as ‘persuasion through mastery of field’ and ‘empowering and relying on in-group members’ and attributes found under the ‘authoritative identity’ can impact the success of a political leader when managing a crisis. The majority of studies on paternalistic leadership are on Confucius Asia, however, this study focuses on a South Asian nation, characterised by Buddhism and a fractured civil war past.

Our findings suggest a strong tendency to project a paternalistic style of Presidential leadership in Sri Lanka (Selvarajah et al., 2020) through carefully managed communications and behaviours based on authority, command, rigorousness, persuasion through mastery of the field, benevolence and morality. Although the application of this espoused paternalistic leadership has been seemingly successful in dealing with the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, its effectiveness may be compromised if the leader displays the negative attributes shown in Figure 2. For example, the authoritative element of the President has evidently helped in promoting swift responsiveness and mobilising experts to handle the pandemic in the first wave. However, this success came with a range of far-reaching negative connotations, such as allegations of marginalisation of ethnic minorities due to xenophobic behaviours (Okun et al., 2021). The paradoxical and dualistic nature of paternalistic leadership and its manipulation by the President’s sources casts a doubt as to its appropriateness in a crisis concerning humanity, particularly if the leader displays the dark side of paternalism, through attributes such as unquestionable authority of the leader, rigorousness, xenophobia and paternal favouritism. Paternal favouritism is a common critique found in paternalistic leadership literature (Northouse, 1997). In supporting this, we noted that close family members were given prominent ministerial protocols in Rajapaksa’s cabinet and relatives were appointed to top diplomatic positions (France-Presse, 2020). The most striking was the appointment of his elder brother and former President Mahinda as the Prime Minister. Nepotism was one of the key reasons why Mahinda, revered by some as the President who ended the civil war, was defeated at the Presidential election (Dibbert, 2019). While the same criticism was levelled against Gotabaya when he was contesting the election, there was a large segment who believed otherwise. However, more recently, his favouritism toward family members, relatives and friends have disappointed the public. Furthermore, the lack of visibility of the fatherly figure at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 during the subsequent

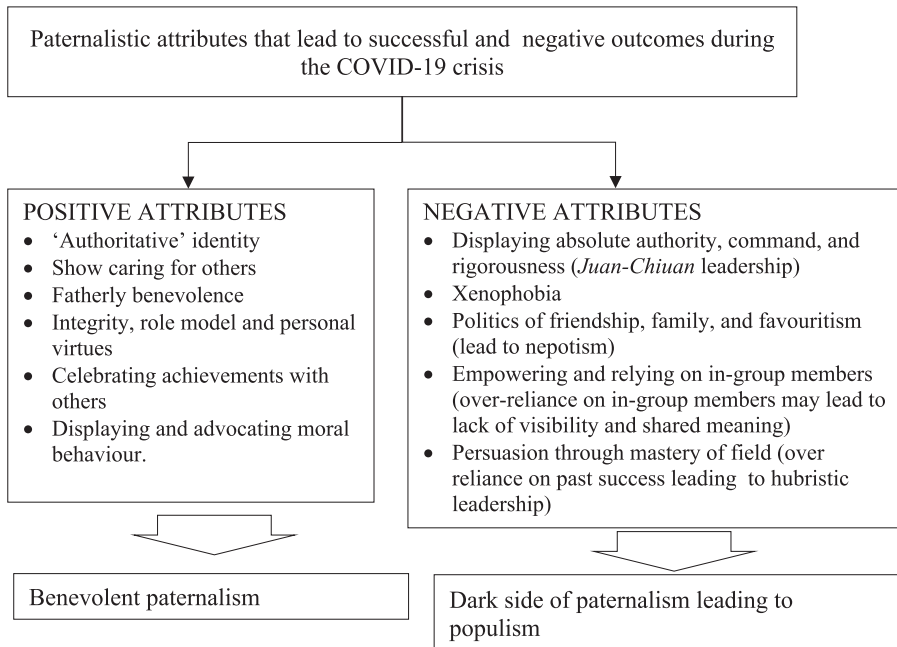


Figure 2. Integrated frameworks of the study findings.

wave, as the President seems to assume a more passive or detached stance, may hinder the nation's efforts in handling the crisis.

We have demonstrated in our study that the paternalistic approach is in fact a façade that masks strong elements of authoritarianism, xenophobia and religious/cultural exclusion. We concur with [Lin et al. \(2019\)](#) suggestion that the construct of authoritarian leadership within paternalistic leadership be replaced with authoritative leadership, not for the sake that authoritative leadership is more palatable to Western researchers, but to draw back from the inherent instability and dangers of authoritarianism within this leadership model. Furthermore, we contend that previous studies on paternalistic leadership have failed to acknowledge that the two paradoxical domains, authoritarianism akin to *Juan-Chiuán* and benevolence cannot coexist. We think this is mainly because the extant literature has failed to appreciate the fundamental distinction between *Juan-Chiuán* and *Shang-Yan*. Furthermore, we are of the view that the inconsistent findings in previous research about the outcomes of the combination of the three elements of paternalistic leadership may have arisen due to the failure to acknowledge this important distinction and the reason that the authoritarianism element in paternalistic leadership has been referred to as a 'double-edged sword' ([Huang and Lin, 2021](#)). As such we allude to previous research that the three elements of paternalistic leadership can act in harmony provided authoritarianism, which refers to tyrannical obedience to an authority, is replaced with authoritativeness. The big proviso in this approach is that 'authoritativeness' does not descend into 'authoritarianism' and its associated evils such as nepotism, corruption and xenophobia. In light of our findings, we anticipate that future studies will examine the impact of potentially positive and negative attributes relating to paternalistic domains in a variety of contexts, which may include organisational crises. The contrast between espoused paternalistic leadership approaches and actual policy actions is also worth exploring. Our research sheds light into how paternalistic leadership or the perception of it, may work during a crisis in a democratic political system, provided the dark side of paternalism, plagued by 'authoritarianism' akin to *Juan-Chiuán*, is masked. Importantly, the study shows a nexus between the dark side of paternalism and populist leadership attributes that may potentially lead to destructive outcomes including mishandling of the crisis and threats to societal harmony and democratic principles. This may well be the case in the absence of strong institutional environments with checks and balances on the actions of 'strongman' leaders. We are of the view that paternalistic leadership can be an effective form of leadership in handling a crisis, but this can indeed descend into 'authoritarianism' without such checks and balances. Overall, we hope that these findings will provide leadership researchers with a framework by which to critically analyse contemporary political leaders in different socio-political systems without being constrained by mainstream leadership theories. Many previous studies on paternalistic leadership have been conducted using quantitative methods (e.g. [Chen et al., 2014](#); [Luu and Djurkovic, 2019](#); [Wang et al., 2018](#)). We contribute to the literature by conducting a qualitative analysis through multiple sources of data identifying comprehensive themes to provide rich nuances into how elements of paternalistic leadership can be deployed when responding to a crisis.

Our study has some limitations, and we encourage future research to address these. Though we explored data from a range of sources, including local and international media, from text, audio, video and the speeches of the leader, the followers, and public opinion, we acknowledge that sources such as Twitter comments of the public and the state-controlled local media may be biased. We also acknowledge that our data was weighted towards sources close to the President, providing a useful insight into how the President projected his leadership but not providing a representative view. We hope future researchers will address this by conducting face to face interviews with both followers and other members of society, including those who represent minority ethnic groups, to understand their lived experiences during the crisis ([Wasike, 2017](#)). Though we conducted an in-depth analysis

of one leader's communications at a point in time, it is also a limitation. Future research may involve a comparative analysis of political leaders, using paternalistic theory in a critical way, to explore how they deal with various crises. In our study we did not relate leader behaviour to any macro-level outcomes such as the death rate or economic impact of the pandemic, because several other factors may influence such outcomes in a crisis context, in particular a global pandemic like COVID-19. The pandemic had been running for 12 months in Sri Lanka at the start of writing this paper and is continuing. Future researchers may consider linking actual and espoused paternalistic leader behaviours to outcomes. Given the uncertain and ongoing nature of the COVID-19 crisis, a longitudinal study over several years may lead to a better understanding of the effectiveness, and costs, of paternalistic leadership in handling a crisis in a country such as Sri Lanka and to what extent paternalism may overlap with other, more concerning paradigms such as populism.

Conclusion

Our analysis showed that President Rajapaksa projected the authoritative leadership, command, and rigour, espoused moral behaviour and espoused fatherly benevolence in his leadership approach during the pandemic. He displayed a strong and commanding nature, making demands from the key officials who were empowered although, on rare occasions, he humiliated and ridiculed them. He also concentrated power to manage the pandemic within the military and close allies. Although he was characterised as being ethical and showing 'fatherly' concern towards the public this was compromised at times by less caring rhetoric, and by foregrounding priorities such as uplifting the economy and when minority group practices such as burials were openly overruled. A consistent reliance on the Sinhala Buddhist power base also risked excluding minority groups during the crisis. We also observed that the President projected himself as proactive and forward-thinking during the first phase, but noted the hubristic tendencies in his overconfidence and the attendant risk of complacency within his followership.

We note that to our knowledge paternalistic leadership has not been explored previously in a crisis context. The evidence in our study suggests that paternalism served as a powerful façade or ideology to shore up the President's power and efficacy in the face of the pandemic's first wave. However, we argue that recent events show this façade is unravelling, as the inherent tensions between an espoused paternalistic approach and xenophobic authoritarianism, together with attendant nepotism unfold in Sri Lanka. How these tensions may be resolved is by replacing 'authoritarianism' with greater checks and balances on power associated with 'authoritativeness' and by avoidance of populist, xenophobic overlays. Furthermore, we contend that our findings shed light on the importance of distinguishing between authoritarian and authoritative leadership as applied to paternalistic leadership. We suggest that the domain of 'authoritarianism' be redefined as a continuum, which may include elements of both styles of leadership particularly where authoritativeness descends into the more harmful authoritarianism.

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