

FROM BALLOTS TO ACTION: USING DIRECT DEMOCRACY TO ENFORCE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

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“It transforms the people's sovereignty into a living, breathing force that extends beyond the ballot box.”

In examining the complex relationship between political leadership and the bureaucratic framework within a democratic system, one central truth emerges—**sovereignty belongs to the people**. This foundational principle must not only exist in theory but be made effective through practical and enforceable mechanisms that empower citizens and hold those in power accountable.

In Sri Lanka's context, where democratic governance has evolved over more than seven decades, the need for mechanisms that promote transparency, responsiveness, and accountability is stronger than ever. The recall mechanism, or “recurrent power,” offers such a pathway –

bridging the gap between elections and the continuous exercise of public oversight. This tool allows the people, who are the ultimate source of authority in a democracy, to remove elected officials who fail in their duties before their term officially ends. While such a system does not currently exist in Sri Lanka, introducing it could be a transformational step in reinvigorating the country's democracy.

The current system under Sri Lanka's Second Republican Constitution, adopted in 1978, affirms in **Article 3** that sovereignty is in the people and is inalienable. **Article 4** further outlines that sovereignty is exercised through the Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary. However, despite



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this powerful declaration, there remains a disconnect between these institutions and the everyday citizen. This is evident in how power is often centralized, with limited opportunity for ordinary citizens to participate in governance beyond periodic elections.

Elected leaders, after assuming office, sometimes become insulated from the people who entrusted them with power. Bureaucratic institutions, though constitutionally bound to serve the public interest, are not always held accountable in real time. Consequently, governance becomes reactive rather than proactive—officials respond to public demands and crises mainly near election periods, rather than maintaining consistent service and responsiveness throughout their terms.

The recall mechanism directly addresses this issue, offering a legal and democratic process for citizens to challenge the legitimacy of officials who fail to meet their responsibilities. In effect, it transforms the people's sovereignty into a living, breathing force that extends beyond the ballot box. This not only empowers the citizenry but also compels elected officials to take their duties seriously, knowing they are under constant public scrutiny.

The Power of Recall: Global Lessons and Local Possibilities

The global use of recall systems provides valuable lessons. In countries such as the United States and Switzerland, recall elections have empowered the public to hold their leaders accountable. Noteworthy examples include the 2003 recall of California Governor Gray Davis, who was replaced by Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the recall of North Dakota Governor Lynn Frazier in 1921. More recently, in 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom faced a high-profile recall election triggered by public dissatisfaction with his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and other policy issues. Although he ultimately survived the recall with a significant margin, the process itself reaffirmed the public's right to challenge leadership mid-term.

These instances highlight the recall system's practical impact: it deters negligence, promotes good governance, and ensures leaders remain aligned with public expectations throughout their terms—not just during campaign seasons.

Translating these lessons to Sri Lanka, a recall system could similarly enhance democratic integrity. With growing public dissatisfaction over corruption, mismanagement, and inefficiency—as seen in the economic crisis of 2022 and the subsequent "Aragalaya" protest movement—such a mechanism would offer a structured and peaceful channel for citizens to express discontent. It would also formalize accountability, providing citizens with a meaningful way to enforce the responsibilities they have delegated to their representatives. The introduction of the Anti-Corruption

Act of 2023, while a positive step, is seen by many as insufficient without stronger, people-driven enforcement mechanisms like recall.

Address the Practical Challenges

Implementing a recall mechanism in Sri Lanka is not without its challenges. The most significant hurdle is **constitutional reform**. Amending the Constitution to accommodate recall provisions would be a complex process requiring broad political consensus. Laws governing elections, public administration, and governance structures would need to be updated to include clear procedures for initiating and conducting recall efforts—such as defining valid grounds for recall, establishing thresholds for petition signatures, and creating fair voting procedures.

Furthermore, there is likely to be **resistance from political actors** who may view such a system as a threat to their security in office. Some may argue that recalls could destabilize governance or be misused for political vendettas. While these concerns are valid, they can be addressed through **strict procedural safeguards** that prevent abuse while still honoring the democratic intent behind recalls. These include setting high signature thresholds, requiring evidence of misconduct, and limiting recall eligibility periods within an official's term. For instance, Taiwan introduced recall laws in recent years that include specific thresholds for both petition stages and voter turnout to ensure legitimacy and prevent frivolous attempts.

In South Korea, a 2022 proposal to expand recall mechanisms faced similar pushback from lawmakers, yet it sparked a public dialogue on the balance between political stability and citizen oversight.

A successful recall system also relies on **voter awareness and civic engagement**. Sri Lanka has a politically active population, but widespread political polarization, misinformation, and voter apathy remain issues. Launching national education campaigns would be essential to ensure that citizens understand how recall mechanisms work and how they can participate responsibly. In Kenya, following the constitutional reform in 2010 that introduced recall rights, civic education programs were launched to teach communities how to navigate the new democratic tools effectively. Building civic literacy is not just a technical requirement but a democratic necessity for the system to function effectively.

Moreover, the logistical challenges of implementing a nationwide recall process cannot be overlooked. Ensuring accessibility, especially in rural and marginalized areas, and maintaining transparency in the petitioning and voting process will require robust infrastructure and strong institutional support. Nevertheless, these challenges are not insurmountable. Many of them are similar to those already addressed in national elections.

With proper investment and planning, Sri Lanka can overcome these operational barriers.

Benefits Beyond Accountability

The benefits of a recall system extend far beyond merely removing bad actors from office. It **would restore public confidence** in political and administrative institutions by reinforcing the idea that power is not static or absolute—it must be continually earned and justified. Leaders would be incentivized to govern ethically and competently, while bureaucrats would carry out their responsibilities with the understanding that they, too, are under the people's watchful eye. In Bolivia, the 2008 recall referendum not only confirmed President Evo Morales's mandate but also helped rebuild trust in state institutions following a period of severe political polarization.

This accountability would also have the effect of **reducing electoral manipulation**. Currently, some elected officials act with impunity, knowing that their performance won't be scrutinized until the next election cycle. A recall system would keep them on their toes throughout their term, making them more likely to deliver on promises, avoid corruption, and focus on long-term national development instead of short-term political survival.

Moreover, by allowing the public to play a more active role in governance between elections, **recalls would strengthen democracy at its core**. Citizens would feel a stronger sense of ownership over their political system, leading to greater civic engagement and political participation. This, in turn, could foster a more mature, informed electorate capable of electing—and maintaining—leaders who are genuinely committed to the public good.

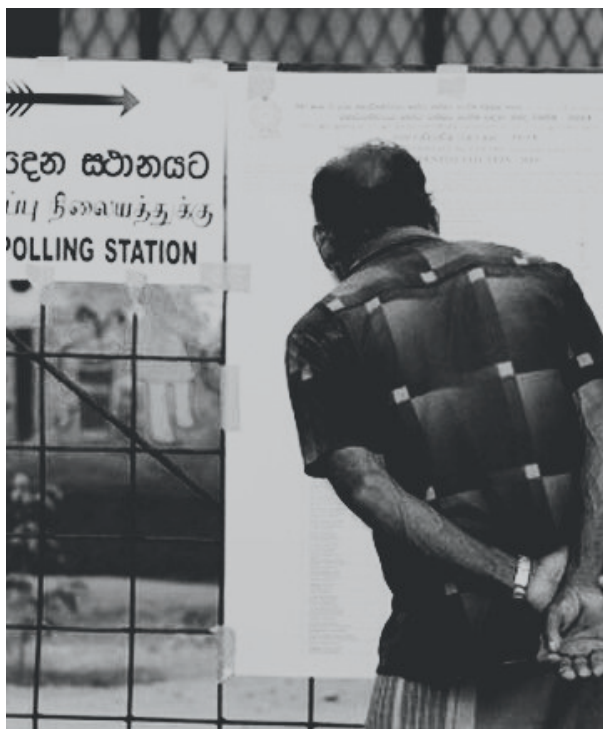


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A Democratic Future for Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka stands at a crucial juncture. The current political climate, shaped by economic crises, public protests, and growing disillusionment with traditional political elites, has revealed deep cracks in the country's democratic architecture. These challenges, however, also present an opportunity—a chance to rebuild governance on more transparent, participatory, and accountable foundations. In Tunisia, following its 2011 revolution, citizen-led democratic reforms—including efforts to expand public participation in law-making—became key to restoring trust in governance after decades of authoritarian rule (International IDEA, 2018).

The 2022 "Aragalaya" protest movement, which led to the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, marked a powerful public rejection of unaccountable leadership and demonstrated the people's demand for systemic change. Yet, despite the protests, there remains no formal constitutional mechanism for citizens to remove underperforming elected leaders between elections.

A recall mechanism, though ambitious, could be a cornerstone of this new democratic era. It would provide citizens with the legal and moral authority to challenge and remove those who betray the public trust. Importantly, such a system would do so in a peaceful, institutionalized manner, strengthening political stability rather than undermining it.

Critically, recall mechanisms should not be viewed as tools of vengeance or populist retaliation. Instead, they should be seen as part of a **larger democratic ecosystem**—alongside referendums, citizen initiatives, and public petitions—that collectively give power back to the people. Together, these tools can revitalize Sri Lanka's democratic institutions and ensure that governance reflects the people's will not only during elections but throughout every moment of a leader's term.

Final Thoughts

While the road to implementing a recall system in Sri Lanka will be complex and politically sensitive, its potential benefits are too significant to ignore. If enacted thoughtfully and transparently, this reform could become a symbol of democratic renewal—proving that the people's power is not just theoretical, but real, active, and enforceable.

In a nation where the constitution already proclaims that sovereignty rests with the people, it is only logical to provide them with mechanisms that give full expression to that sovereignty. A recall system would be one such mechanism—ensuring that elected representatives and public officials do not hold power as a privilege but as a **public trust**, subject always to the judgment of the people they serve.