

# Negotiating Solidarity: National People's Power, Palestine, and the Limits of Ideology

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## Abstract

*In a recent study, Huberman (2025) argues that Latin American leftist governments, despite expressing solidarity with the Palestinian cause, are constrained by the global order and the capitalist system in further deepening its strategic influence on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Drawing on this insight, the present study examines how Sri Lanka's newly elected National People's Power (NPP)-led government has responded to the ongoing Israeli occupation and genocide in Gaza. Similar to cases in Latin America, the Sri Lankan context is particularly pertinent given the NPP's left-leaning orientation. This study argues that, despite the party's anti-imperialist ideological commitment to the Palestinian cause, the NPP largely replicates the trajectory of previous administrations—reaffirming support for Palestinian self-determination while simultaneously pursuing strategic engagement with Israel. Crucially, the government has refrained from adopting substantive measures to alter this established pattern, even amid global condemnation of Israel's disproportionate bombardment of Gaza. A key factor constraining its response is Sri Lanka's economic vulnerability. Finally, beyond supporting international resolutions, the study recommends that the government clearly articulate its opposition to Israel's ongoing military assault in Gaza and implement concrete measures—such as ensuring that tourism, trade, and other exchanges even do not indirectly support the Israeli illegal occupation of Palestine.*

**Keywords:** National People's Power; Gaza; Sri Lanka; Pro-Palestine Solidarity Movement

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## Introduction

In a provocative study, Bruno Huberman (2025) asks: 'Is Latin America Pro-Palestine?' He examines previously underexplored dimensions of Latin America's relations with Israel, the United States, and the Palestinian liberation movement, showing that even in countries vocally supportive of Palestine—such as Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, and Chile—complex dilemmas persist. While these states publicly affirm solidarity with Palestine, pressures to maintain relations with Israel—particularly to secure military equipment, technology, and support for internal security and counter-narcotics operations—often prevent them from taking decisive action. Huberman (2025, p. 18) states: 'It restricts

popular sovereignty and autonomy of Latin American states. However, the inclination of left-wing leaders to decrease or terminate military collaboration with Israel indicates a decline in the effectiveness of this Israeli strategy'. Huberman's (2025) analysis highlights the limits of expressing genuine solidarity in a global capitalist order where political and economic structures—especially international finance, security, trade, and diplomacy—constrain states' capacity for independent foreign policy, shaping the possibilities and limits of transnational solidarity. His work underscores the persistent tension between normative commitments to solidarity and structural dependencies, even in regions historically associated with left-wing governments



and vocal support for the Palestinian cause.

Against this background, this paper's main objective is to broaden Huberman's analysis of Latin America to Sri Lanka exploring how newly elected National People's Power (NPP)-led government has responded to the ongoing Israeli occupation and genocide in Gaza. Like Latin American countries, the Sri Lankan case is also especially pertinent given the NPP's left-leaning orientation and its grounding in a Marxist-Leninist ideological tradition. Through this examination, the study aims to strengthen Huberman's argument, suggesting that his observations hold relevance not only for Latin America but also for the South Asian context. The study become even more particularly significant and interesting

case study, as the current NPP government's position on Israel has increasingly drawn critique, especially for its perceived effort to avoid antagonising Israel while expressing solidarity with Palestine. These critiques are especially salient given the government's leftist credentials, with its principal constituent, the People's Liberation Front, historically rooted in Marxist ideology. Some pro-Palestinian activists contend that the NPP has yielded to external pressures, thereby creating a rupture even within the continuity of policies pursued by previous governments. These criticisms have ignited wider public debate in the context of growing international condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza and global campaigns framing the military operation as



'genocide'. Highlighting this contradiction and tension, an editorial in the *Daily Financial Times*, a leading Sri Lankan English-language newspaper, (2025) noted:

*'Interestingly, the NPP/JVP politicians were staunch critics of Israel before coming into power and their prominent leaders have been passionate advocates of the cause of Palestine going back to decades since the formation of the JVP... Denouncing Israel in the strongest terms while in the opposition and then extending friendship after assuming power has been a recurring occurrence in the political spectrum of this land...'*

Moreover, this paper is guided by an analytical question: how can the current NPP-led government's approach be understood in terms of translating its ideological commitment and

solidarity with the Palestinian cause into concrete policy, and what structural, political, or strategic factors shape and constrain its capacity to do so. The central argument of this paper is that, despite the NPP government's stated commitment to supporting Palestine on anti-imperialist ideological grounds, its actual policy behavior closely mirrors that of its predecessors. Constrained by a combination of socio-economic pressures and geopolitical considerations, the NPP has attempted to balance symbolic expressions of solidarity with Palestine while simultaneously seeking diplomatic, economic, and strategic engagement with Israel. To address this question, the paper is structured into six sections. Section two, immediately following this introduction,



examines Sri Lanka's historical positions on the Palestine-Israel question, with particular attention to its relationships with both Palestine and Israel. Section three provides a brief overview of the ideology and development of the National Peoples' Power, the political movement which currently govern Sri Lanka. Section four constitutes the main analysis and discussion, where the current NPP-led government's position is examined in detail. The paper concludes with section six, which presents an analytical summary of the findings.

### **Israel and Palestine conflict in Sri Lankan politics: a historical perspective**

The Israel-Palestine issue has long been a key aspect of Sri Lankan foreign policy discussions and is closely linked to local politics.

At times, fluctuating local political dynamics have influenced Sri Lanka's relations with Israel, particularly in terms of official state policy. However, the general trend has seen Sri Lankan political leaders, despite their official stance of resistance, attempting to reach out to Israel covertly for pragmatic political reasons. Several factors have hindered Sri Lanka's ability to engage openly with Israel. These include the country's legacy of anti-colonial and socialist ideals, as well as pressure from local Muslim civil and political leadership. Additionally, Sri Lanka's close ties with Arab countries—rooted in the Non-Aligned Movement and driven by the Arab world being a significant market for Sri Lankan tea—have complicated the situation. However, this pattern has



gradually been shifting in recent decades, particularly in the post-war context. Abadi (2004, p. 226) aptly encapsulates this complex and evolving relationship shaped by multiple factors:

*'Sri Lanka's relations with Israel were most unstable and the diplomatic ties were severed twice at Colombo's initiative. Nevertheless, the contacts did not cease because Sri Lanka's political parties were highly pragmatic and tended to ignore ideological principles... However, Sri Lanka's desire to maintain cordial relations with the Arab states constituted a serious obstacle on the road to rapprochement.'*

Sri Lanka was the first state in South Asia to extend recognition to Israel, preceding even India in this regard. Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake initially sought

Israeli expertise, particularly in the fields of land development and agricultural modernisation, viewing Israel as a potential partner in Sri Lanka's developmental agenda (Perera, 2025). At the same time, however, Senanayake expressed reservations about the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, which he perceived as unjustly favourable to Israel in terms of territorial allocation at the expense of the Palestinians (Ideal Island, 2025, 26:00-28:00).

Sri Lanka's early approach to Israel was characterised by a balancing act between pragmatic cooperation and normative concerns. This ambivalence further continued with the rise of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1956. His government infused foreign policy with nationalist and populist rhetoric,



reflecting the broader currents of Arab nationalist sentiment. Bandaranaike aligned Sri Lanka's position with the anti-Israel narratives prevalent in the Middle East and expressed sympathy for the policies of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. However, despite this rhetorical support for the Arab cause, Mr. Bandaranaike did not sever ties with Israel. Instead, relations were maintained, although without the formal establishment of full diplomatic recognition (Abadi, 2004, p. 228).

Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who served three terms as Prime Minister of Sri Lanka (1960–65, 1970–77, and 1994–2000), is widely regarded as one of the country's most pro-Palestinian leaders. Rooted in her socialist orientation, she pursued a foreign policy

that aligned closely with the Non-Aligned Movement and the broader solidarities of the Global South. It was under her leadership that Sri Lanka became the first South Asian state to sever official ties with Israel and, in 1975, to authorise the opening of a Palestine Liberation Organization office in Colombo. Several factors informed this position: her ideological commitment to socialist internationalism and the India's support for Palestine course, Sri Lanka's growing engagement with the Arab world, and the importance of the Muslim electorate in domestic politics (Ali, 2024). Yet, Bandaranaike's policy toward Israel was not entirely uncompromising. As Abadi (2004, pp. 228–229) notes, her government, echoing the pragmatism of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in the 1950s,



continued to demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with Israel on economic and logistical matters. This dual approach again supports the tension between Sri Lanka's normative alignment with the Palestinian cause and its pragmatic interest in preserving limited, often covert, forms of engagement with Israel.

Departing from the earlier covert nature of Sri Lanka-Israel relations, the bilateral engagement became more explicit under the leadership of J.R. Jayewardene, who is widely regarded as the architect of Sri Lanka's open economic policies. Assuming office as the country's first executive president in 1977, Jayewardene confronted growing challenges from Tamil nationalist militancy as well as his own ideological antipathy toward communism. In this

context, his administration increasingly turned to Israel for military assistance and diplomatic support (Yass, 2016). Jayewardene even went so far as to publicly challenge Muslim leaders who opposed such cooperation, asserting that he was prepared to seek assistance even from the devil if national security required it (Ali, 2024). This stance carried significant political risks, as Sri Lanka's Muslim community had traditionally aligned itself with the United National Party (UNP), led by J. R. Jayewardene. Interestingly, Jayewardene's policy of seeking reconciliation with Israel has been cited as a key factor motivating Muslim political leaders to advocate for the establishment of a separate Muslim political party, aimed at ensuring that the community's interests



and concerns are adequately represented within the Sri Lankan political system (Daily FT, 13 August 2025). The overt relationship with Israel therefore placed the party in tension with an important domestic Muslim constituency, while also provoking criticism from leftist forces. Responding to these pressures, Jayewardene's successor, President Ranasinghe Premadasa, decisively severed ties with Israel, officially citing Israeli connections with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in early 1990s (Abadi, 2004, p. 237).

Ironically, during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015)—a politician widely recognised for his consistent support of the Palestinian cause and his personal association with

Yasser Arafat—the bilateral relationship between Sri Lanka and Israel became increasingly institutionalised. Rajapaksa, who also served as the inaugural chairman of the Sri Lanka-Palestine Solidarity Movement, presided over a period in which formal diplomatic relations with Israel were consolidated through state-level engagements. In 2008, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister undertook the first official visit to Israel and in his visit, he framed the both Sri Lanka and Israel face the shared challenge of terrorism (Farook, 2012). This trajectory culminated in 2014, when Rajapaksa himself conducted a state visit to Israel, thereby becoming the first Sri Lankan head of state, since independence, to engage Israel at the presidential level. However, Rajapakshe regime continued to stress



the country's principle policy which is two-state solution.

This complex history demonstrates that Sri Lanka's state policy toward Israel has been shaped by an interplay of normative commitments and pragmatic considerations. Since the end of the civil war between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE, the country has entered a period of greater strategic flexibility. Concurrently, the recent policy reorientation of several Arab states—where support for Palestine is no longer treated as a prerequisite for diplomatic or economic engagement with other countries, largely due to the momentum of Arab–Israel normalisation—has further reshaped the external political environment. This has further reduced external pressure on Colombo. As a result, successive governments have been able to cultivate

relations with Israel, securing strategic, technological, and defence cooperation, while simultaneously maintaining a formal pro-Palestinian stance. This dual approach reflects a careful balancing act, wherein Sri Lanka seeks to uphold its historical solidarity with the Palestinian cause without undermining its diplomatic opportunities in an increasingly complex international environment. This pattern also highlights the persistent tension between ideology and pragmatism in foreign policy formulation of Sri Lanka.

### **From JVP to NPP: ideology and transformations**

The National Peoples' Power (NPP) was formed in 2019 as a coalition of political parties and civil society groups. Its main goals were to challenge



corrupt political elites and promote accountability and transparency in government (National Peoples' Power, n.d). In the 2019 presidential election, the movement performed poorly, gaining less than three percent of the vote. However, in 2024, it achieved a historic victory when its leader, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, was elected as Sri Lanka's tenth executive president. The turning point for the NPP came during the 2022 economic crisis, when President Gotabaya Rajapaksa failed to manage the country's deep financial crisis. Massive public protests shook the political system and discredited the established parties. In this climate, the NPP positioned itself as a clean and credible alternative. Its message strongly appealed to young people, who saw it as a chance to build a

new kind of political culture (DeVotta, 2025).

Although the NPP is relatively new, its roots go back to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the core party within the movement. Founded in 1965 as a Marxist party, the JVP quickly became a radical force, rejecting the compromises made by other leftist groups. It staged two armed uprisings, in 1971 and 1988, in an attempt to seize state power. After these failed, the party shifted course and entered mainstream politics in 1994. The political economy behind this shift was shaped by the growth of Sri Lanka's middle class. By the 1990s, radical political ideas had lost much of their appeal, and the JVP realised it needed to adapt. Over time, it rebranded itself, softening its revolutionary stance to attract wider public



support. This move, however, led some radical members to leave, accusing the party of abandoning its leftist roots and moving toward the political centre (Dewasiri, 2018, p. 191–222). Despite this, the JVP continues to present itself as a centre-left party committed to socialist ideals.

The formation of the NPP can be seen as the outcome of this gradual de-radicalisation, as the JVP sought to broaden its voter base. Under Anura Kumara Dissanayake who took the leadership of the party in 2014, the party shifted its focus to fighting corruption and promoting accountability-issues that resonated strongly with middle-class voters frustrated by the rise of ‘Rajapakshism’. This political ideology, associated

with the Rajapaksa family, combined three elements: Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, authoritarianism, and the normalisation of corruption (History with Nirmal, 2025, 14:00-18:00).

In contrast, the JVP positioned itself as a clean political force with the potential to challenge entrenched corruption. This positioning led to alliances with civil society groups that shared similar goals. The NPP was born directly from this trend, presenting itself as a vehicle for clean governance and systemic reform. Yet, although the NPP now governs the country, many observers believe the JVP continues to drive its core dynamics, given the movement’s relatively recent formation.



## **Analysis and discussion**

### **NPP and politics of solidarity**

Among Sri Lankan political parties, the National People's Power (NPP)—and in particular its core constituent, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—has emerged as the most ideologically committed actor in supporting the Palestinian cause, consistently framing its position within an anti-imperialist discourse. Thereby, a critical survey of the NPP-led government's statements on the issue reveals a consistent and sustained commitment to the Palestinian cause since the administration assumed power last year. This consistency is evident across all major actors within the NPP coalition, including the JVP,

the Prime Minister, and other government representatives. The government's support has been articulated both domestically and on international platforms, including the United Nations, reflecting a coherent policy stance in solidarity with Palestine.

#### **1. Solidarity**

In this backdrop, as early as 31 October 2023, the JVP released a strongly worded statement, published on the NPP website, demanding the immediate cessation of hostilities in Gaza. The statement located the protracted failure to implement United Nations resolutions on a two-state solution within the broader framework of imperialist politics pursued by major

powers. It further argued that the UN had been rendered ineffective over the past three decades by an imperialist project that sought to erode multilateralism and replace it with a NATO-led 'rules-based international order'-an order, the JVP pointedly remarked, 'for which no one knows the rules' (National Peoples' Power, n.d). Significantly, the JVP described Israel as a colonial entity, contending that the creation of an independent Palestinian state would signify '*the end of the last colony in Asia.*' The statement thus underscored the need to address the structural roots of the conflict and to pursue a permanent resolution grounded in the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

The NPP/JVP government's support for the Palestinian cause extends

beyond mere ideological alignment. Notably, the current chairmanship of the Sri Lanka Committee for Solidarity with Palestine is held by Bimal Ratnayake, an executive member of the NPP/JVP and a cabinet minister holding multiple ministerial portfolios. Significantly, Ratnayake has consistently demonstrated that his commitment to Palestine. As early as 2016, even while serving as an opposition member of parliament, he declared that his support goes beyond formal expressions of solidarity, positioning himself as an active participant in the struggle rather than merely a parliamentary advocate.

*'I am an activist for this Palestinian cause and not merely a parliamentarian who speaks about Palestine for official purposes. I want to motivate my people to join*



*in this struggle... We can win any struggle against imperial power, regardless of how small or poor a country may be, if we fight in the right way and with the right direction. This is a lesson that Fidel Castro taught through his struggle, and it is applicable to the Palestinian cause as well.' (Knowledge Box, 2016, 2:00-4:00)*

At a recent international solidarity gathering on Palestine, Ratnayake reaffirmed his commitment to the cause, even in his capacity as a cabinet minister, stating:

*'The Palestinian people are being victimised and subjected to serious violations of international law that continue to take place in occupied Palestine. There are credible reports of human rights violations committed against Palestinians by the Israeli Armed Forces and*

*Zionist extremists. Some of these actions amount to war crimes.'* (Don Maya Unedited Sinhala, 2024, 3:00-10:00)

In another instance, at an event commemorating the 77th anniversary of Nakba Day in Colombo, Sri Lanka's current Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya (2025), serving as chief guest, explicitly reaffirmed the government's solidarity with the Palestinian liberation struggle while highlighting the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. She stated:

*'When credible evidence of grave violations emerges, silence is complicity. It is our urgent duty to move beyond expressions of concern and take decisive action-ensuring accountability, protecting innocent lives, and securing justice for the Palestinian*



*people. Anything less would be a failure of our shared humanity.’ (Sunday Times, 2025)*

This statement illustrates that the commitment to Palestine extends beyond the core JVP members to the broader leadership of the NPP-led government, as exemplified by Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, a former academic who does not openly align herself with the JVP’s leftist tradition.

On the international stage, the Sri Lankan NPP-led government has consistently aligned itself with United Nations–led initiatives in support of the Palestinian cause. This stance reflects a long-standing commitment to a negotiated two-state solution, grounded in the 1967 borders and relevant UN resolutions. It also signifies a continuation of the policy

orientation adopted by successive governments. Most recently, Sri Lanka endorsed the New York Declaration, jointly initiated by France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The declaration condemned the Hamas attacks of October 7 while simultaneously calling on Israel to end its occupation (Daily Mirror, 2025). It further underscored that the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian state represents the most viable means of addressing both the persistence of militant activity and the wider instability in the region (Delegation of France to the United Nations, 2025). US, however, rejected the resolution, characterising it as ‘a gift to Hamas. It is likewise cynical, transparently driven by the domestic politics rather than a serious foreign



policy agenda' (U.S. Mission to the United Nations, 2025). Commenting on Sri Lanka's support for the resolution, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in the NPP government, Arun Hemachandra, stated on his official Facebook page: *'Sri Lanka voted in favour of the New York Declaration, reaffirming our steadfast support for the Palestinian cause and our commitment to peace and justice in the region.'* (Hemachandra, 2025).

In another instance of international engagement, Sri Lanka joined a collective response against the United States' unilateral sanctions on Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories. Albanese faced sanctions for her involvement in efforts at the International Criminal Court to investigate Israeli officials for alleged

genocide in Gaza. Alongside countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Iceland, Namibia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Venezuela, and the member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Sri Lanka co-signed a joint letter expressing solidarity with Albanese. The letter condemned the U.S. move as a threat to the independence and integrity of UN special procedures mandate holders (Lankanewsweb, 2025).

Beyond these initiatives, Sri Lanka has also raised concerns regarding the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. At the United Nations, its representatives stressed that *'the end of starvation in Gaza is as important as agreeing on an immediate ceasefire.'* The statement highlighted alarm over the killing of civilians



seeking humanitarian aid, called for the lifting of restrictions on relief operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and urged the restoration of UN-led aid delivery mechanisms. It further reaffirmed the “legitimate and inalienable right of the Palestinian people to statehood” and reiterated Sri Lanka’s consistent support for a just and comprehensive political settlement to the conflict, based on two states coexisting side by side on the 1967 borders (Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations, 2025).

The statements of leading officials in the NPP-led government, including the Prime Minister, alongside positions articulated by its core constituent, the JVP, clearly demonstrate a sustained ideological commitment to the

Palestinian cause. These declarations reflect a broader adherence to socialist and leftist principles, emphasising solidarity, anti-imperialism, and support for the self-determination of oppressed peoples.

## 2. Tensions

Nevertheless, this dimension of the NPP-led government’s solidarity represents only one aspect of its engagement with the Palestinian cause. In practice, specific policy decisions and actions-or in some cases, inactions-have prompted public scrutiny and debate, exposing the limits of this solidarity. This dynamic illustrates the persistent tension between rhetorical commitment and the constraints of pragmatic governance. In response, government ministers and officials have consistently



forced to address critiques from pro-Palestinian movements, clarifying that their policy choices do not compromise their underlying support for the Palestinian cause, thereby attempting to reconcile principled solidarity with the pragmatic realities of governance.

### **Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements and other diplomatic relationship with Israel**

The limits of Sri Lanka's solidarity with Palestine was no more evident than in its official statements issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025) regarding the ongoing and indiscriminate bombardment of Gaza, which drew widespread criticism from pro-Palestinian activists. Interestingly, while Sri Lanka has explicitly supported numerous UN resolutions

condemning Israeli occupation of Palestine, when called upon to demonstrate solidarity in its own diplomatic statements, the government has often adopted a markedly restrained position. This contrast highlights a gap between rhetorical support in international forums and cautious, non-confrontational responses in situations requiring explicit condemnation. For example, the statement issued under Foreign Minister Vijith Herath, a senior JVP/NPP member, concerning the escalation of violence in Gaza was notably restrained, consisting of only three sentences. It did not explicitly condemn Israeli actions, nor did it even mention Israel by name, instead stating that 'Sri Lanka is deeply concerned and disturbed by the recent serious escalation of violence

in Gaza.’ The statement blatantly avoided identifying who was responsible for the escalation. It further called on both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to exercise restraint, thereby attributing responsibility for the violence equally.

A similar approach was taken when Israel attacked Hamas leadership in Doha during discussions over a potential ceasefire and hostage negotiations. In response, Sri Lanka merely expressed concern rather than issuing any condemnation, stating that ‘Sri Lanka expresses its concern over strikes reported in Qatar’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d). Once again, the statement refrained from mentioning Israel by name, avoiding any explicit attribution of responsibility for the attack. Notably, instead of

issuing a direct condemnation, when public pressure mounted and the mood of international community changed, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs released a press statement noting that he had spoken with his Qatari counterpart, framing it as an ‘expression of solidarity with Qatar’ over the attack it had faced (Newswire, 2025). It is also important to highlight that this conversation took place at the level of deputy and state ministers, rather than between the foreign ministers themselves, underscoring the restrained nature of Sri Lanka’s diplomatic response. The irony lies in the contrast between the Prime Minister’s call to go beyond mere expressions of concern regarding Israeli aggression in Gaza and the Foreign Minister’s statements, which effectively do precisely that-



limiting the government's response to expressing the concern.

Moving ahead, Pro-Palestinian activists further questioned the genuineness of the NPP-led government's solidarity when it opted to continue the previous administration's plan to send Sri Lankan migrant workers to Israel. Activists argued that this decision undermined the government's professed commitment to the Palestinian cause, highlighting a perceived contradiction: while Palestinians were subjected to severe bombardment, Sri Lankan workers were being facilitated to occupy jobs in Israel that had previously been held by Palestinians. They highlighted this as a stark contradiction, portraying it as a significant compromise of principle that appeared

to prioritise economic or diplomatic interests over ethical commitment to the Palestinian cause. However, the government maintained that, since it is committed to establishing an independent and sovereign country, maintaining relations with Israel for economic purposes is not problematic (Newswire, 2025). In a very recent development, Israel invited a group of Sri Lankan journalists and media personnels to 'educate' them about the ongoing 'war' and Israel's humanitarian activities in Gaza. During the visit, they were taken to the Israeli Ministry of Defence and were also hosted by the Sri Lankan Ambassador to Israel at his residence (Newswire, 2025). This also has created a controversy. Later, however, Bimal Rathnayake once again expressed his displeasure

at the conduct of the Sri Lankan ambassador to Israel, particularly for hosting and publicly highlighting the journalists' visits in the media (Headline News, 2025).

### **Israel Defence Force (IDF) and tourism in Sri Lanka**

The NPP government's policy on solidarity with Gaza was never questioned in its foreign policy dimension as much as it was in terms of its domestic response to the crisis. Over the past year, the war in Gaza was not only treated as an urgent international issue but also an internal political and policy challenge within Sri Lanka. The government faced significant criticism on two main fronts: its handling of IDF linked Israeli tourists in the country and the securitisation of pro-Palestinian solidarity movement activists, both of

which ignited intense public debate and scrutiny.

In recent years, an increasing number of Israeli tourists have overstayed in popular destinations such as Arugam Bay, a coastal town internationally renowned for surfing. Reports suggest that Israeli tourists have established a parallel economic ecosystem in the area by purchasing land and businesses, developing Chabad houses, and acquiring vehicles (Saroor, 2025). The situation has also fuelled a proliferation of conspiracy theories, including claims that Israeli tourists are attempting to establish a foothold in Eastern Sri Lanka analogous to Israel's occupation of Palestine (Wickramasinghe, 2025). The issue took on a new dimension when it was revealed that members of the IDF, including individuals



directly involved in military operations in Gaza, had been vacationing in Sri Lanka. Reports further indicated that some of these visitors commemorated fallen comrades by displaying their photographs on billboards along local beaches (Saroor, 2025 & Kuruwita, 2025). These concerns were amplified following the resurfacing of the documentary *Arugam Bay*, which depicts the experiences of a group of childhood friends from Israel-surfers who had served together in the Israeli army-traveling to Sri Lanka as a means of recovering from wartime trauma (Toronto Jewish Film Festival, 2024). Although the film presents a personal narrative of healing, it has become entangled in local debates regarding the political implications of Israeli tourism and its intersection with the Palestinian struggle

for liberation. Adding insult to injury, even after all of these developments, the Sri Lankan government further decided to grant Israeli citizens visa-free entry for tourism, prompting renewed debate over whether its actions were appropriate given the ongoing humanitarian and political concerns (Rasooldeen, 2025).

Against these developments, pro-Palestinian activists began questioning why there was no serious response from the government, arguing that official statements showed no intent to address the presence of IDF tourists or their activities in the country. As a result, they implicated the NPP government in or associated it with ongoing hostilities in Gaza. This inaction fuelled public criticism, highlighting the perceived contradictions between the government's



rhetorical support for Palestine and its practical tolerance of visitors linked to the conflict. Reminding the NPP of its ideological roots, veteran Sri Lankan leftist activist Bopage wrote: 'For the NPP government, the challenge is not only economic but moral. If the government's commitment to Palestinian sovereignty is genuine, it must be reflected in policy, not undermined by expediency' (Bopage, 2025).

### **Securitisation of Pro-Palestine Movement**

Compared to previous controversies that brought the NPP's solidarity statements under scrutiny, the most severe and publicly contentious incident was Anura Kumara Dissanayake's authorisation to detain Mohamed Rushdi under the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act

for displaying an anti-Israeli sticker in a shop. This action sparked intense debate over whether the government was beginning to treat pro-Palestinian symbols and activities as forms of terrorism, potentially influenced by pro-Israeli propaganda machinery. The incident is particularly significant given that the President had campaigned on abolishing the PTA due to its anti-democratic nature. Commenting on the government's attempt to arrest Rushdi, Izzadeen (2025, para. 15), a leading pro-Palestinian activist, remarked:

*'If expressing pro-Palestinian sentiments is terrorism, then all those who have taken part in rallies and protests to condemn Israel's genocide in Gaza are also committing terrorism. This includes the JVP youths... However, the minister*



*says the sticker suspect is different and adds that investigations were continuing to ascertain whether he has extremist views. Such a stance amounts to ethnic profiling, similar to what happened in the US in the years after the 9/11 attacks.'*

Apart from these isolated arrests, many pro-Palestinian activists publicly reported being monitored by security agencies for their activism and support for Palestine. They stated that they were frequently called in for questioning by terrorism investigation units. As a result, civil society actors began questioning whether the government still upheld its professed solidarity with a free Palestine, or whether it was adopting a double-standard position influenced by external and internal pressures such as local far-

right movements and the rise of Trump in US political and his international trade policy changes (Gunathilaka, 2025). It is important to note that the securitisation of pro-Palestinian activism is not a sudden or isolated phenomenon that emerged only in the last two years. Rather, its roots can be traced to post-war developments marked by the rise of anti-Muslim and Islamophobic narratives. In particular, extremist Buddhist nationalist movements have portrayed Muslim minorities as a threat to national security, alleging that they are influenced by foreign ideologies such as Wahhabism and political Islam. These entrenched discourses have shaped public perceptions and state practices, and during the Gaza war they resurfaced sharply—framing pro-Palestinian

activism as a potential source of radicalisation within the Muslim community, thereby legitimising its securitisation.

## **What explains the tension?**

### **Contested narratives**

For the purpose of this study, interviews were conducted with six key opinion leaders and civil society activists in Sri Lanka. These individuals come from diverse backgrounds, including independent organisations, political parties, and pro-government think tanks. They were selected as they have been consistently vocal about their positions on the government's policies regarding the Gaza issue and actively participate in public debates on the matter. Their perspectives diverge in their responses to the NPP government's reluctance to adopt a firm stance on the

genocide in Gaza, as well as its monitoring and investigation of pro-Palestinian activities within the country. From these interviews, four key perspectives can be identified that help explain the limits of the NPP's solidarity with Palestine across different forums and levels.

### **1. NPP-led government goes astray**

A prominent strand of opinion, articulated mainly by civil society organisations and political parties with radical leftist orientations and civil society activists, criticises the government for abandoning the Palestinian cause and thereby seeks to undermine its legitimacy. They argue that the government's inaction in response to Israeli atrocities, coupled with its continued engagement with the Israeli regime, reflects underlying



ultra-nationalist, majoritarian and latent Islamophobic tendencies of the party. Its stance also signals a broader shift toward securitising pro-Palestinian activism under both far-right movements pressure and United States' President Donald Trump's new international trade policies. This position is further reinforced by the continued surveillance of pro-Palestinian activists and their arrests under counterterrorism legislation (Rupasinghe, 2025). Along these lines, another perspective suggests that the NPP has lost its ideological commitment and, like other parties in the country, engages in double standards and hypocrisy. Consequently, its style of governance and policy-making represents business as usual in Sri Lankan politics (Arulingam & Jayasinghe, 2025).

## 2. Economic vulnerability

In contrast, others adopt a more neutral stance, interpreting the NPP's hyper diplomatic position through different lenses. Among them, individuals who are close to government circles suggest that Sri Lanka's severe economic vulnerabilities leave the government with little choice but to maintain pragmatic relations with Israel, despite its official rejection of Israeli occupation. They maintain that once the economic situation stabilises, the government may adopt a firmer position against Israeli policies. In a recent article published in *The Diplomat*, Rathindra Kuruwita (2025) raised concerns similar to those expressed by the activist who are closed to government circles regarding the NPP-led government's foreign policy on Israel. However,

Kuruwita contends that the NPP's struggle to reconcile its ethical commitments with strategic constraints cannot be understood merely as a response to the current economic crisis. Rather, he emphasises that Sri Lanka's long-standing economic challenges and structural dependencies substantially limit the government's capacity to act independently on the international stage. For example, more than industrial and local exports, the Sri Lankan economy relies heavily on foreign remittances and international tourism. These constraints, he argues, shape not only economic decision-making but also the formulation and implementation of foreign policy:

*'In the end, Sri Lanka's dilemma over the surge in Israeli tourism is less about*

*a single nationality and more about the structural vulnerabilities that limit the country's room for manoeuvre... While tourism and remittances help keep the country's economy afloat, they also make Sri Lanka highly dependent on volatile markets and actors.'*

### 3. Issues in diplomacy

Expanding the above perspective, another respondent insisted that the government's intention to support Palestine should not be doubted; however, unlike past presidents of Sri Lanka, the current regime, which is newly elected, lacks the diplomatic skills necessary to navigate complex geopolitical pressures. This has left the government caught between its ideological stance and pressing economic and geopolitical constraints.



From this standpoint, while it remains essential to demand a stronger position on the genocide in Gaza, the presence of IDF tourists in Sri Lanka and support for pro-Palestine activism, branding the government as not in favour of Palestine course is misleading. Another point emphasised by these activists is that the current government's policy not only exposes a tension with its stated ethical and ideological commitments regarding the Palestinian issue, but also reflects broader discrepancies across other policy areas as well (Interview with the civil society activist, executive committee member, 19 August 2025). Confronted with an ongoing economic crisis and mounting public demands, the government is operating in survival mode, prioritising measures to

stabilise the economy. In this context, the Palestinian issue-affecting the sensitivities of only around ten percent of the country's Muslim population-may be regarded as relatively peripheral. Compared with other pressing domestic and economic priorities, it is therefore likely that the government will gravitate toward pragmatic and realistic policy options.

Nevertheless, the NPP-led government has consistently pursued all available avenues to assert its support for Palestine on international platforms, demonstrating an ongoing, albeit constrained, commitment to the cause. We need to appreciate it (Interview with the civil society activist, executive committee member, 26 August 2025). They also emphasise that the government faces pressure from various lobby groups,

which consistently demand that it refrain from taking a firm stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The interviewees note, however, that the government should maintain a principled policy position. If it opts to compromise temporarily due to the economic crisis, with the intention of revisiting the issue later, this compromised approach is likely to negatively affect public perception of the government and undermine its credibility on matters of ethical and ideological commitment. Endorsing such a perspective, Pradeep Peiris (2025), a political scientist at the University of Colombo, has likewise highlighted the widening gap between the NPP's political promises and its actual performance—though not in relation to the Palestinian issue. This perspective helps explain

their cautious stance on Palestine. He argued that the NPP government was elected to spearhead a project of *regime change*, not merely to transform political culture; yet, in practice, it has prioritised consolidating and stabilising the very regime it was expected to reform:

*'The historic role of the NPP at this moment is to give political leadership to a 'system change' that installs popular power by instituting a radical variant of democracy; a system that sees conflict and dissent as inherent and vital to democracy; recognises multiple identities, demands and struggles; ... However, I do not see the NPP making any serious effort to this end. Have they abandoned pursuing reforms painful to the elite and the ruling class,*



*in favour of consolidating their fortuitous rise to power.’ (Pradeep Peiris, 2025)*

#### **4. The government should be accountable**

Echoing Pradeep Peris general insight on NPP’s performance, another set of civil society and political party activists-while acknowledging the government’s vulnerable economic position-argue that the government must nevertheless be held accountable for its failure to adopt a strong stance. They contend that, at the very least, the government should take symbolic measures, such as banning IDF soldiers implicated in the genocide who are vacationing in the country, to demonstrate its commitment to the Palestinian cause. They also stress that the government

should not allow pro-Palestinian activities to be persistently framed through a security lens. It is difficult to reconcile how a government can simultaneously profess support for the Palestinian cause while arresting or harassing domestic activists and permitting individuals implicated in war crimes to enter the country for tourism purposes (Interview with Member of Social Justice Party, Executive Committee Member, 17 August 2025).

Together, these perspectives reveal that the tension surrounding the NPP-led government’s position on Palestine arises from a complex interplay of ideological expectations, economic pressures, diplomatic limitations, and political pragmatism. While critics highlight contradictions between the

party's ethical commitments and its cautious foreign policy, others argue that structural vulnerabilities and limited diplomatic capacity leave the government with constrained room for manoeuvre. Some view the NPP's approach as a betrayal of its professed values, whereas others see it as an unavoidable balancing act shaped by Sri Lanka's economic fragility and geopolitical realities. These competing narratives demonstrate that the limits of the NPP's solidarity with Palestine cannot be attributed to a single factor but must be understood as emerging from overlapping pressures faced by a newly elected government navigating both domestic demands and international constraints.

### **Analytical Conclusion**

This research is motivated

by a desire to understand the extent to which the current NPP government's policy on the Gaza issue reflects its core ideological beliefs versus its practical political considerations. The study identifies three key findings.

First, the current National People's Power government's policy is to support the Palestinian cause in both domestic and international forums while simultaneously maintaining a smooth relationship with Israel. Despite several constraints, the NPP government joined global resolutions opposing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and on-going genocide in Gaza. However, although it endorsed these resolutions, the government strategically avoided any direct implications of its support by limiting condemnations



to general statements of 'concern' regarding the Israeli military campaigns in Gaza, thereby preserving diplomatic relations. Given the party's strong leftist roots, this position can be problematised, particularly at a time when maintaining cordial/unconditional relationship with Israel is increasingly perceived as implicitly complicit in its actions in Gaza.

Second, the NPP's response is constrained by Sri Lanka's economic vulnerability and the potential backlash from international powers that view Israel as an ally. The government fears that any state-led radical action against Israel could be politically and economically disastrous, given its ongoing efforts to rebuild the country after the economic crisis. Consequently, the NPP opts

to temper its ideological stance and pursue a balanced diplomatic approach, seeking to support the Palestinian cause while maintaining stable relations with Israel. In that sense, the National People's Power government's policy on Gaza largely mirrors that of its predecessors. It opted to support the Palestinian cause in international forums while simultaneously maintaining a smooth relationship with Israel.

Thirdly, the study recommends that the government not only continue supporting international resolutions but also clearly articulate its opposition to Israel's ongoing military actions in Gaza, which have been characterised as genocidal. Additionally, it suggests that the government implement concrete measures to ensure that



tourism, trade, and other forms of engagement do not inadvertently contribute to or legitimise the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

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