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**PARADOX OF PEACE RHETORIC: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF FORMER SRI LANKAN PRESIDENT MAHINDA RAJAPAKSA'S WAR MEMORIAL SPEECH**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The objective of my essay is to identify how the rhetorical situation of war victory is used to formulate peace rhetoric. Even though, there have been many studies conducted on presidential and war rhetoric of western leaders such as Barak Obama and George W Bush, scholars have not paid enough attention on presidential rhetoric used by leaders in other parts of the world, especially in Asia. There is a critical need to understand presidential war rhetoric in the Asian context as terrorism and war have been a growing integral part of the social political atmosphere in most of the Asian counties.*

**KEYWORDS:** Paradox, peace rhetoric, rhetorical analysis, former Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapaksa's war memorial speech

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Sri Lanka, the beautiful island nation which is known as the pearl of the Asia had been under a reign of terror during the three decades of bloody war. The sounds of gun fire in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country and suicide bombings in the south came to an end on May 19, 2009, as government forces defeated Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (L.T.T.E). Addressing the parliament a day after defeating L.T.T.E, Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa said that there are no different ethnicities in the country any more. According to president Rajapaksa, the two communities in the country are the people who love their motherland and the people who do not love their motherland. In this paper, I argue that the war memorial speech by President Rajapaksa at the parliament is a rhetorical justification of war and he used this occasion to tell the world that end of war has already brought peace to the country. The objective of my essay is to identify how the rhetorical situation of war victory is used to formulate peace rhetoric. Even though, there have been many studies conducted on presidential and war rhetoric of western leaders such as Barak Obama and George W Bush, scholars have not paid enough attention on presidential rhetoric used by leaders in other parts of the world, especially in Asia. There is a critical need to understand presidential war rhetoric in the Asian context as terrorism and war have been a growing integral part of the social political atmosphere in most of the Asian counties.

Scholars in Asia have not paid enough attention to critically analyze the rhetoric of the highly influential political speeches of their leaders. This paper is an attempt to utilize western theoretical and philosophical knowledge in order to examine the rhetoric of a nonwestern leader. With this

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paper, I emphasize that certain western originated rhetorical theories and concepts could be applied to understand nonwestern social and political contexts.

President Rajapaksa's speech at the parliament on May 19, 2009, just a one day after the symbolic end to the war, is selected as the case study for the analysis. It was the first parliamentary appearance made by the president after defeating the L.T.T.E. Even though, President Rajapaksha had made highly influential speeches during the war, his war memorial speech at the parliament is quite significant as it is an opportunity for the public to know his political plans and policies after three long decades of brutal war. The President's speech at the parliament is a unique rhetorical situation as a result of the social and political significance attached to the event. It is an ideal opportunity to explore the functioning of rhetorical situation. This study is grounded in the theory of rhetorical situation and the theoretical the conceptual lenses of presidential rhetoric.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Political speeches have been analyzed rhetorically by many scholars using various theoretical and conceptual foundations. One of the major theoretical foundations for the presidential and political speech criticism is the theory of the rhetorical situation presented by Lloyd Bitzer. The rhetorical situation is one of the mostly debated theories in the field of rhetoric. Even though, scholars have presented arguments criticizing the notion of rhetorical situation, they have not underestimated the usefulness of the concept. By presenting Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation and criticisms of other academics, I argue that the rhetorical situation is the most appropriate theoretical framework to analyze the war memorial speech by president Rajapaksa. I also discuss relevant literature in order to prove how rhetorical situation generate unique presidential rhetoric.

The rhetorical situation is the context in which the speaking is taking place and it helps to understand the function of discourse in a specific circumstance. Lloyd Bitzer presented the concept of rhetorical situation in 1968 in the journal of Philosophy and Rhetoric. "rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to being about the significant modification of the exigence" (Bitzer, 1968 p. 6). Bitzer's explanation emphasize the importance of understanding the relationship between the rhetorical context and the rhetor in process of evaluating rhetoric. Rhetoric does not come in to existence as a result of a divine or magical power. Every rhetorical speech is a product of the specific rhetorical situation.

Bitzer clearly explains the interrelationship between discourse and rhetorical situation which is quite important in the critique of political rhetoric. Paulaukos (2013) states that importantly, Bitzer maintained the idea that not all discourse was rhetorical. Rhetorical discourse is a special kind of speech comprised of two main qualities. The first, it is pragmatic not descriptive (p. 16). Discourse is the broader collective form of the text while the situation is specific instance which creates the

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platform for a discourse. “Rhetorical discourse comes in to existence as a response to a situation. .... A rhetorical situation must exist as a necessary condition of an answer” (Bitzer, 1968, p.6). According to Bitzer, just as an answer follows in response to a question, all rhetorical discourse emerges as a response to a situation. There is an ongoing debate in various political contexts regarding the function of ideology and its influence in framing political discourse. There are many politically significant discourses such as neo liberal political discourse, leftist discourse and terrorism discourse in the contemporary political context. As Bitzer mentioned, it is necessary to understand the rhetorical situation which led to the emergence and the domination of the discourse in society.

There have been several critiques on rhetorical situation over the years. Richard E. Vatz suggested that we need to see the difference between rhetoric and the situation in a different philosophical perspective. For him Bitzer’s notion of rhetorical situation is too simplistic. According to Vatz (1973) except for those situations which directly confront our own empirical reality, we learn of facts and events through someone’s communicating them to us (p. 156). Vatz further argues that a situation has no given meaning until it is presented to the public. The public defines the situation as soon as it is presented to the public. The significance of Vatz theoretical explanation is that he questions the practicality of the rhetorical situation. He claims that the meaning is not discovered in situations, but created by rhetors. A Major difference between Bitzer and Vatz’s theoretical stand point on the rhetorical situation is that Bitzer believes the existence of an objective situation before determining the rhetoric while Vatz argues that the meaning is not discovered in situations and it is created by rhetors. I think that Vatz goes beyond the situation in which rhetoric takes place and he tries to identify how meaning creates a rhetorical situation. He argues that as rhetors’ create situation in order to disseminate their messages, there is a possibility of creating situations which are not real. For example, the US security authorities could not find a single weapon of mass destruction in Iraq, but the rhetoric of the US politicians and the media created the situation that the general public came to know as Iraq trying to destroy the US with weapons of mass destruction. The critical political perspective of Vatz on rhetorical situation is imperative if one analyze contemporary political rhetoric as we witness how states and other powerful actors create rhetorical situations in order to achieve their socio political and economic objectives.

In the essay, *Rethinking Rhetorical situation from within the thematic of difference*, Babara Biesecker calls on scholars to rethink rhetorical situation in two interrelated grounds. She writes, “One, the understanding of the rhetorical text as a discourse whose meaning is constituted by its relation to either an exigence operative at a particular historical moment or a consciousness anterior to the rhetorical event commits us to a naïve notion of influence and blinds us to the discourse's radically historical character. Two, the construal of the rhetorical situation as an event made possible by way of an exchange between consummate individuals, severely limits what we can say about discourse which seeks to persuade (Biezecker, 1989, p. 110).

Critiquing rhetorical situation from the deconstructive theoretical perspective of Jacque Derrida, Biezecker argues that deconstruction of the subject opens up possibilities to see rhetorical situation

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as an event structured not by logic of influence but by logic of articulation. This critical approach helps to identify rhetorical situation as an event that produce identities and social relations. Rhetorical situation is not merely an event in which the rhetor expresses himself and it is generated with existing social beliefs, ideologies and relationships. Biesecker's critical insight in to rhetorical situation emphasize the necessity of paying attention to social, cultural, political and other significant aspects by analyzing rhetorical situation and the rhetoric associated with that.

Now that I have discussed the basic theoretical discourse and major criticism on rhetorical situation. I would like to discuss three primary components of rhetorical situation mentioned by Bitzer: exigence, audience and constraints. These three constituents have been a center of debate among rhetoric scholars. These three characteristics provide the theoretical foundation needed to critically examine a specific rhetorical situation and the rhetorical text of the speaker.

### **Exigence**

Exigence operates as an organizing principle within a situation. Bitzer (1968) states "exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than which it should be" (p. 6). Bitzer (1968) further explains that some rhetorical exigencies require discourse while other exigencies are resolved through the assistance of discourse. Racism is an example for the first type exigence which requires a discourse while air pollution is an example for an exigence which resolve through the support of a discourse. Although, discourse cannot eliminate air pollution, it can inform people and legislators to take actions to reduce air pollution. Scholars have given critical attention to exigence when they analyze political rhetoric, identifying exigence of a speaker as a necessary factor to examine the rhetorical situation and the dominant discourse. "Exigence is a kind of discursive space where private perceptions meet cultural knowledge and shared language. But these perceptions meet interpretations and linguistic conventions from the starting point of a rhetor who approaches the exigence and from audience members who approach. For, this reason exigence is dynamic" (Miller 1984). Miller's perspective on exigence helps us to understand how rhetorical situations produce dynamic and unique exigence based on social, cultural and political context. This is an extension to what Bitzer meant by exigence in his thesis.

### **Audience**

The second constituent of the rhetorical situation is the audience. There must be a rhetorical audience for the function of any rhetorical situation. There is a difference between an audience and the rhetorical audience. According to Bitzer (1968) the rhetorical audience must meet two conditions. First, "It must consist of only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse" and second, "those capable of being mediators of change" (p. 7). The audience needs to pay attention to the message and further act as agents of change. The strength of the text decides whether it changes the ordinary audience to a rhetorical audience by making them proactive mediators of change.

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### **Constraints**

Constraints is the third constituent of rhetorical situation. According to Sloane (2013), “constraints are the obstacles that influence or impede an advocate’s ability to engage an exigence successfully” (p.7). For example, opposition charges on corruption in the past is a constraint for a politician’s current election campaign. “One that one can consciously absorb the constraints of the past. By poring over past presidential inaugurals before generating a draft of an inaugural, presidential speechwriters imbue themselves with the constraints of the past” (Jamieson, 1973, P.170).The speaker should pay attention not only to present constraints but also past constraints which might have a negative influence on his or her present speech. A speech flowered with messages of peace does not have the desired outcome if the speaker engages or supports war in their past.

The above review of the literature justifies using rhetorical situation as a theoretical foundation in the critique of a war memorial speech. Theoretical contributions by scholars such as Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Babara Biesecker and Richard E Vatz have broadened the spectrum of rhetorical situation which provide wider theoretical and conceptual platforms for the use of rhetorical situation in critiquing a specific rhetorical event.

### **Presidential rhetoric**

Finally, along with the rhetorical situation, the concept of rhetorical presidency is a key to this study. Presidential rhetoric has been a major focus among scholars and increasing nature of media appearances of presidents in last few decades have opened many opportunities for critics to examine presidential speeches in rhetorical perspectives. According to Ceaser & Tulis (1981) presidential communication has changed presidency and the political system which it is embedded. They further state that as a result of the new doctrine of presidential power, the rise of the mass media and changes in the presidential selection process, the constitutional balances between branches have been destabilized. The use of the term ‘rhetorical president’ could be considered as the influence of presidential rhetoric in the contemporary social and political context. Stuckey (2010) states “the presidency may have always been rhetorical, but it has certainly not always been as powerful vis-a`-vis other political institutions as it is now” (p. 49). I would agree with Stucky that presidential addresses have always been rhetorical and in some contexts, presidency is the highest powerful authority which controls all other political institutions. In Sri Lanka, the president has the power to even control the judiciary as he is in charge of appointing chief justice and Supreme Court judges. There are not legal provisions in Sri Lanka to take a president to a court for any malpractices he committed during his presidency. With this literature on rhetorical presidency, I argue that the more power a president possess, he or she will use more rhetorical measures to maintain his dominance over the society.

### **Case Study and the Context of the Study**

President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s first war memorial speech at the parliament is the case study of this project. The Sri Lankan government had been fighting a war with L.T.T.E for three decades and the war resulted in deaths of thousands of soldiers and civilians from both parties. Ubayasiri

(2009) describes L.T.T.E as an internationally designated terrorist organization that had been fighting for a separate state in Sri Lanka for more than three decades. The L.T.T.E was responsible for killing innocent civilians in both northern and southern parts of the country with suicide bombing and other terror strategies. L.T.T.E activities were banned in most western countries due to their brutal terror activities including assassinations of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa. The L.T.T.E was far beyond a traditional terrorist group as they had their naval air forces known as sea tigers and air tigers. The L.T.T.E received supports from the major Tamil political parties in the north for their fight for a separate Eelam (Tamil) state.

There have been several attempts by both parties' for peaceful negotiations but none of those efforts were not successful. President Rajapaksa came to power in 2005 with a promise of bringing peace to the country. He first tried to conduct peace talks and later decided to use military powers to defeat L.T.T.E. On May 19, 2009 government troops killed the L.T.T.E leader which brought an end to the three decades of conflict. Even though, the Sinhalese majority of the country celebrated war victory, there had been severe criticisms against the government for large numbers of civilian casualties. "The celebrations in the Sinhala-dominated south were shadowed by claims of what international observers called a civilian 'blood bath', with initial United Nations reports claiming about 7,000 civilians may have been killed in three months of fighting. More than 300,000 civilians in the crossfire were forced to trek to 'safety' across one of the deadliest battlefronts in south Asia. In later weeks there were reports the death toll had tipped 20,000 civilians." (Ubayasiri, 2009, p. 1). The final few days of the war was a major news event not only for regional media, but also for international media such as BBC and Al Jazeera.

I argue that president's war memorial speech at the parliament was the most appropriate occasion to get an understanding about his post war plans and countries' future political directions. President made a couple of media appearances before his parliamentary speech to announce the nation that the L.T.T.E was completely destroyed by his forces. But those speeches were just public addresses to officially inform people about the war victory. Addressing parliament members and the general public from parliament premises added prominence to his speech. Another reason for the selection of the case study is that the content of his speech could be examined comparing to his current political standpoint. President Rajapaksa gave his speech for 45 minutes sitting at the speaker's chair of the parliament. The gallery of the parliament was full of state officials, soldiers and their families.

### **Analysis**

In this section, I analyze president Rajapaksa's speech through the theoretical lens of Bitzer's the rhetorical situation. One can simply identify war as the rhetorical situation in this specific case study. But I would like to identify war as a discourse in Sri Lankan context. War has been the center of discussion from the president to ordinary citizens in the country for many decades. As Bitzer argues a rhetorical situation must exist as a necessary condition for rhetorical discourse,

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War discourse has created many unique rhetorical situations in Sri Lanka. In 1994, amidst tense fighting between government troops and the L.T.T.E, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga came to power with a sixty two percent vote majority as the symbol of peace. Gradually, the discourse turned from peace to war as her peace talks became unsuccessful. When president Rajapaksa, started fighting with L.T.T.E, he did not mention the word war, instead, he used the term 'humanitarian mission'. In his parliamentary speech, president Rajapaksa said "We did not attempt to respond to the terrorists in their own language. When the terrorists were calling for war, we responded with a humanitarian operation. Our troops went to this operation carrying a gun in one hand, the Human Rights Charter in the other, hostages on their shoulders, and the love of their children in their hearts" (05.19.2009, [www.president.gov.lk](http://www.president.gov.lk) ).

The war discourse which was created during the last stages of the war was quite unique not only because of president Rajapaksa's adaptation of just war theory with the use of term humanitarian missions, but also he made powerful patriotic appeals to the ordinary citizens in the country. For example, one of the president's sons joined Sri Lanka Navy during the war and media reported that as the best sacrifice a president could make during a war. The rhetorical situation of president's parliamentary address was quite a complex one. He made the speech few hours after defeating L.T.T.E. I identify this specific rhetorical situation as war victory. There was no official requirement for the president to address the parliament after defeating L.T.T.E. He had already addressed the nation before his parliamentary speech. One reason may be due to the pressure from the opposition parties who had been criticizing him for not listening to the parliament and taking all the political decisions using his executive powers. Even though, parliament is considered as the country's constitutional body, President did not ask the opinion of the parliament before going to the war against L.T.T.E. That is why it is quite important to identify why the president used the specific situation to address the parliament. President Rajapaksa was cordially welcomed by members of the parliament when he arrived at the parliament. The state owned television presenter compared the president with great king in the Sri Lanka history. I believe that the president decided to address the parliament in order to use the rhetorical situation, 'war victory', to maintain his political popularity. No Sri Lanka president had the opportunity to address a parliament in a similar rhetorical situation. President Rajapaksa was the first to defeat L.T.T.E out of the four presidents who ruled the nation since 1982. People in the south came in to streets and burnt firecrackers to celebrate war victory. All these events made an ideal rhetorical situation for the president to address the parliament.

This analysis is based on the three constituents of the rhetorical situation explained by Bitzer: exigence, audience and constraints. I argue that both forms of exigency mentioned by Bitzer can be found in this case. One can easily identify war as the exigency in this rhetorical situation. But I think that Peace is the exigence in this context which needs to resolve through the assistance of discourse. Throughout the speech, president Rajapaksa emphasize the fact that defeating L.T.T.E has brought peace to the country. Even though, he discussed the need for a political solution for the Tamil community, he reiterated that he has brought lasting peace to the nation. President

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Rajapaksa strategically use the occasion to inform the international community that the country has achieved peace after three long decades.

There are two audiences in this speech. The physical audience consists of both government and opposition parliamentarians while general public watched the speech live on television. President Rajapaksa intentionally addressed both the audiences together. During the speech he said that the parliament can now maintain its constitutional powers throughout the country as government troops have conquered all L.T.T.E controlled areas. That was the only comment which he specifically aimed at parliamentarians. He pointed his hand at the parliament gallery to pay gratitude to the families of two soldiers who were casualties to the war. He specifically mentioned the names of those two soldiers. This is a rhetorically powerful weapon president Rajapaksa used in his speech as it shows that he is aware of the military personnel, who made significant contributions in the war. In Sri Lankan parliament, all the speeches are translated in to English, Sinhalese and Tamil languages. But the president himself gave a brief summary of his speech in Tamil language. Tamil is the language of Tamil ethnicity and L.T.T.E fought the war for separate state for Tamil speaking people. By Speaking in Tamil, president Rajapaksa tried win the hearts of the Tamil community who were severely affected due to the war.

Before identifying constraints of the speech, I think it is necessary to identify the obstacles president Rajapaksa had to face during the war. Pressure from the international community to stop the war and allegations of human rights violations were major issues the president had to address during the war. I identify constraints of his speech as the implementation of a political solution for the Tamil community living in the Northern parts of the country. Even though, he mentioned once the political solution, he did not discuss in detail what exactly the political solution was. It is clear to understand that the president just mentioned the political solution due to pressures from India and the international community. It has been five years since the president made that speech. But still he has not been able to provide a political solution for the Tamil speaking community in Northern and Eastern parts of the country. His inability to implement a political solution justifies my identification of political solution as the constraints of the speech.

President Rajapaksa also used the occasion to justify the prevailing economic situation in the country. He praised people for sacrificing for the nation without thinking about personal goals. Even though, president Rajapaksa did not accept that financially people were having a difficult time, he indirectly claimed that people did not care about the financial situation as they all supported war. He further said that it is now our duty to pay tribute to those who sacrificed their lives by developing the nation and also by promoting good governance. President Rajapaksa stressed that even though, he has finished war, people need to keep him in power to achieve other goals such as infrastructure development, good governance.

Another significant point in this president's speech is the use of Buddhist religious rhetoric by the president. According to Maher (2006) Buddha frequently spoke against aggression and urged the



followers to peruse path of peace, both in outward behavior and in their interior lives. War can never be justified under the Buddhist teachings. But political authority and dominant Sinhala (major ethnicity) Buddhist movements reframed Buddhism to support war during the final stages of the war. Giving (dana) is one of the essential preliminary steps of Buddhist practice. Buddha himself practiced giving blood, eyes, limbs, flesh and lives. In the speech, president Rajapaksa claimed that the soldiers who died and injured had given their life, blood, limbs and eyes as a form of Buddhist giving (dana). President tried to reiterate the fact that the defeating of the L.T.T.E was highly a sacred thing could be justified under Buddhist religious perspective. On the other hand, president Rajapaksa did not forget to address Hindu religious emotions of the Tamil people. He said, “Who was it that brought Tamil children who are protected by the Goddess Pattini to this fate? Who was it that abandoned in tents the Tamil people who worshipped the Deity Ganesh at Kataragama, and cared for their health with the antiseptic qualities of saffron water and margosa leaves?”. Johnson (2012) states that one area that scholars have not examined as much is how presidents invoke religious rhetorical appeals or use religious rhetoric to persuade and move an audience (p1). President Rajapaksa’s use of religious rhetoric in the rhetorical situation of war victory supported him for a strategic moral justification of the war in the first place.

Throughout the speech, he talked about the war heroes and great kings who fought to save the country. He mentioned king Dutugamunu who was one of the patriotic kings in Sri Lankan history. “We are a country with a long history where we saw the reign of 182 kings who rules with pride and honour for that extended more than 2,500 years. This is a country where kings such as Dutugemunu, Valagamba, Datusena and Vijayabahu defeated enemy invasions and ensured our freedom” (05.19.2009, [www.president.gov.lk](http://www.president.gov.lk) ).

The state owned media interpret President Rajapaksha as the contemporary king Dutugamunu as he saved the nation. So, the president’s mentioning of king Dutugamunu could be identified as a rhetorical move to solidify his political image. The President addresses the country as “my motherland’ throughout the speech. He used the term my motherland 10 times during the speech. These rhetorical appeals made him to appear to be closer and closer to the Sinhala Buddhist majority. President concludes his speech by saying “I value my motherland first, second and third. This should be so to you and to the entire nation. It is only our beloved motherland that we should all cherish and value”. These patriotic appeals make president Rajapaksha a rhetorical president. According to Stuckey (2010) what does seem apparent in much of the work done on the rhetorical presidency is the assumption that the language of power ought to be deliberative. President Rajapaksha used his speech to showcase his political power by repeatedly mentioning about defeating one of the most ruthless terrorist organizations in the world.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have analyzed president Rajapaksa’s war memorial speech to the parliament through utilizing the theory of the rhetorical situation and the concept of presidential rhetoric. I have

identified war victory as exigence, political solution as the constraints and also the rhetorical audience of the speech. This study indicates the appropriateness of the rhetorical situation as a theoretical foundation for analyzing a presidential address. The patriotic appeals and religious rhetoric justify the identification of president Rajapaksa as a rhetorical president. The president strategically used the rhetorical situation of war victory to create a peace discourse which is actually not existing in Sri Lanka. This politically significant speech could also be identified as a tactical adaptation of war rhetoric in order to keep war mentality among citizens to maintain political popularity in a post war context. By justifying war and emphasizing the need for political stability in the country, president Rajapaksa indirectly urged the public to keep him as the leader of the nation. It has been five years since president Rajapaksa's war memorial speech at the parliament and yet he has not been able to provide a political solution for the Tamil community in Northern and Eastern parts of the country. The United Nations passed a couple of resolutions against Sri Lanka for alleged war crimes that had occurred during the final stages of the war. The present stance of president Rajapaksa on a political solution is completely different from his willingness at his parliamentary speech. President Rajapaksa's strong statements for a political solution at his parliamentary speech a form of peace rhetoric which is quite paradoxical to his present political policies and agenda.

I think there is there is a critical need to analyze the political rhetoric of president Rajapaksha who is now contesting for his third term after amending the two constitution limitation. The opposition parties criticize him for gradually taking the country in to a dictatorship. Even though, president is being criticized for misusing public funds with his family members and lack of law and order in the country, there is still considerable support for him as the president. Scholars need to study the politically powerful rhetorical appeals of president Rajapaksa which I think is a main reason for his popularity. This study also suggests that the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of presidential rhetoric needs to be used in order to analysis rhetorical speeches of leaders outside the US.

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