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Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's Crisis is Endgame for Rajapaksas

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Sri Lanka's citizens' movement known as the Janatha Aragalya ('Peoples' Struggle'), notched its most significant victory yet, when Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced through the Speaker of Parliament that he would quit on 13 July, mid-way through his presidency. His admission of surrender, after resisting for months the central demand of public protests — #GotaGoHome — in the political fallout of the island's devastating economic crisis [1], followed mass protests on 9 July.

Symbols of State

These demonstrations across Sri Lanka, were capped spectacularly in Colombo, by the occupation of three symbols of state authority: the President's office (under siege by protestors for three months); his official residence (which he fled the hours before to reportedly take refuge on a naval ship); as well as the Prime Minister's official residence (unoccupied since early May but heavily fortified), breaking through metal barricades and iron fencing, and state security personnel. [2]

More than 100,000 people, cutting across class, gender, ethnicity, age, religious and political beliefs, converged on the commercial capital, overcoming through sheer numbers and resolve, at least 20,000 military and armed police who fired tear gas, shot water cannon, and unleashed live rounds and physical violence, which left three protestors critically injured with gunshot wounds and at least 105 hospitalised.

Later that night, the Prime Minister's private residence was gutted through arson under suspicious circumstances. An enraged mob surrounded it, likely provoked by social media alerts and live broadcast of brutal assaults by paramilitary police on journalists filming peaceful protests near his home. The Prime Minister had resisted demands for his resignation. He believed he could secure his position or even assume the Presidency following Gotabaya Rajapaksa's removal. Wily as he is, he miscalculated.

UNP Leader

Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader-for-life of the opposition United National Party (UNP) and its sole parliamentarian after a humiliating wipe-out in 2019, was appointed Prime Minister by Gotabaya Rajapaksa on 12 May, despite lacking majority support in the legislature — controlled by the President's party — and more importantly, popular legitimacy.

This manoeuvre followed the resignation of the incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa (the President's older sibling and two-time President), and political instability within the government, as realisation dawned on governing party parliamentarians of the deep-seated economic crisis and the growing unpopularity of the President's family (four of whom were Cabinet Ministers).

Mahinda Rajapaksa had summoned his supporters to Colombo on 9th May for a show of support to secure his position as Prime Minister, during a period of emergency rule. These local agents of parliamentarians were mobilised to physically attack the protestors camped for weeks outside the Prime Minister's official residence ('Temple Trees') and the President's office ('Secretariat').

There was immediate outrage and solidarity from the public, who spontaneously flocked to fight back against the thugs as the latter began leaving the city to return to their towns and villages. This localised counter-violence soon spread across the country, as the homes and other property of 78 pro-Rajapaksa parliamentarians, provincial and local government representatives, were set ablaze. Ten people were killed including a ruling party legislator, while over 200 were injured.

During the violence on the afternoon and night of 9th May, the security forces passively watched the assaults and destruction but subsequently, over 2,500 persons were arrested including non-party affiliated protestors and cadre of the left-wing Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP—Peoples Liberation Front), simply from name lists furnished to the local police force by the President's aggrieved partymen.

Ranil Wickremesinghe's astonishing ascension to the post of Prime Minister, which he had occupied five times until then since 1993, was denounced by the core of the citizens' movement as well as the parliamentary opposition, for deflecting the campaign to oust the President and be rid of his family.

Sections of the middle-class, big business, liberal and right-wing civil society, diplomats, and donors, hailed Wickremesinghe as Sri Lanka's 'saviour', bringing the missing "political stability" and credentials to carry forward deferred neoliberal economic measures; conduct negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for reprieve from the foreign exchange crisis; and begin 'restructuring' external debt with private and bilateral creditors posed by Sri Lanka's first post-independence sovereign default on 12 April. [3]

The misgivings by the citizens' movement were entirely justified. There was a decline in the scale and intensity of daily public protests. The protests were presented as having run their course, and turning detrimental to "economic stability", that requires order and social peace to reassure international creditors and incoming tourists and investors. There were several attempts to co-opt sections among the protestors and to publicise dialogue with those claiming to represent what is an amorphous group independent of political parties and charismatic personalities.

Instead of paving the way for the early removal of the President, Wickremesinghe appeared content to govern alongside him for the foreseeable future. He secured defections from opposition parties to bolster his new Cabinet headed by the President. He did not introduce the constitutional changes demanded by the people to drastically limit the executive powers of Gotabaya Rajapaksa so long as he remained in office, as an interim measure towards abolition of the all-powerful Executive Presidency. Neither could he ease the misery of the common people, whose livelihoods and lives are being hammered by an economic crisis of unfamiliar proportions and pain. [4]

Political Advantage

The events of 9 July have succeeded in regaining the political advantage from the short-lived Gotabaya Rajapaksa-Ranil Wickremesinghe dyarchy.

The massive crowds overcame many obstacles. The Police Department warned of a possible terrorist attack in the run-up to the mobilisation, aiming to sow fear among the public. The Inspector-General of Police unlawfully slapped an indefinite curfew banning public movement on the night of 8th July but was forced to rescind it within hours on the following morning, in response to denunciations from opposition politicians and lawyers' groups. However, the intended damage was done as trains and public buses were cancelled from operation, denying protestors those modes of transport. Meanwhile, the only fuel company with stock-in-hand suspended distribution, also with the intention of disrupting mobility.

In a remarkable demonstration of will, people made their own way from the deep south, the central hills, and along the western coastline. Those who had gathered at railway stations in Avissawella, Galle, Kandy and Matara commandeered available trains, adorning the front with anti-government banners, for travel. Others found any private bus, truck, tractor, van, or other vehicles that still had diesel or petrol, that they could squeeze into. A large number cycled in the blazing heat while others walked for tens of kilometres throughout the 9th of July to somehow make their way to Colombo. They came dressed in black, waving the national flag, holding home-made posters, and chanting anti-government slogans and messages that have travelled far and wide.

The day before, students from state universities were mobilised to travel to Colombo by the Inter-University Students Federation (IUSF), sleeping in the rough overnight. The protests on the 9th were not restricted to Colombo. In every major town and many smaller places, people took to the street, beating pots and pans, waving flags, and voicing their anger and demand for political change, from Sinhala-speaking majority Galle in the South to Tamil-speaking majority Jaffna in the North and Batticaloa in the East. There were also solidarity demonstrations of the Sri Lankan diaspora (mostly from the Sinhala community but also Muslims and lesser numbers of Tamils, reflecting fractures and distrust) in Australia, New Zealand, North America and Western Europe, on the same day.

Unthinkable

How to register what was unthinkable even a few short months ago: the toxicity of the Rajapaksas? What is the character of the citizens' movement, and the place within it of organised labour and the Left? What are cleavages and contradictions that colour the responsiveness of the Tamil nation and the Muslim ethno-religious community towards the *Janatha Aragalaya*? What happens now, if and when, the President and Prime Minister do indeed make their exit?

What has been achieved by the citizens' movement in a matter of months, prolonged and exhausting as it feels to those who have passed through it, needs to sink in. It was unimaginable last year that Gotabaya Rajapaksa would not complete his full term as president, nor that his successor if he did not contest (and likely win) again, would not be another Rajapaksa. Neither was it conceivable that at least for another generation, the Rajapaksas are substantially damaged and unable to directly make a bid for power anytime soon. The deep fear attached to criticism of the first family, and its extra-legal methods of dealing with dissidents, has dissipated.

Since Mahinda Rajapaksa's first presidential victory in 2005, mega-infrastructure projects financed by foreign borrowing, defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 concluding 26 years of protracted internal war, and consolidation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism which has been the state ideology since independence after 443 years of European colonialism, he has been beloved within the Sinhala nation (comprising almost 75% of the nearly 22 million population).

Gotabaya Rajapaksa, though lacking in his older brother's magnetism and shrewdness, was associated with these achievements as unofficial Defence Minister and the bureaucrat in charge of resettlement of the urban poor, and the 'beautification' of Colombo through their removal, and the development of commercial and leisure spaces. His profile as an outsider to party politics and a no-nonsense 'doer' endeared him to the business community, professional groups, the middle class and public officials fed-up of inept politicians profiting from their office and meddling in state administration.

When the novice candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa won election to the presidency with over 52% of the popular vote (6.9 million) in November 2019; the only question to be asked was by how large a margin the recently founded Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP—Peoples Front) led by Mahinda Rajapaksa would win in parliamentary polls in

August 2020. In fact, the SLPP scooped 59% of votes cast, winning 145 seats in the 225-member legislature, just short of the 2/3 majority that it sought to effect constitutional changes to strengthen the powers of the President. This amendment did follow, with the support of allies, weakening the independence of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet as well as that of oversight institutions.

However, his record in office coinciding with the COVID19 pandemic, has sorely disappointed his core constituencies. Although Sri Lanka's vaccination drive was successful within the region, his reliance on serving and ex-military men (of whom he is one) to manage civilian functions antagonised career civil servants. His inability or unwillingness to curb the venality of governing party legislators including from his own extended family disappointed the public. Above all, his mismanagement of the economy – including a ban on chemical inputs in agriculture [5] – aggravating a crisis in the making for decades, has punctured the myth of technocratic efficiency cultivated by his erstwhile backers.

Citizens' Movement

What is the nature and identity of the citizens' movement that knows itself, and is known in society, as the *Janatha Aragalaya*? It is extremely vigilant in being recognised as 'non-party' (nirpakshika), that is unaffiliated to any political party or indeed ideology. This is novel in a society where political parties across the ideological spectrum have been vehicles of social protest or quick to appropriate such protests. In fact, its point d'honneur is that it rejects all parties represented in parliament, as to blame for lost opportunities over 74 years since decolonisation in 1948. It takes pride in being non-violent (samakami) – not insignificant in terms of popular acceptance when Sri Lanka has thrice experienced armed youth uprisings since 1971. From the beginning there have been clear messages of opposition to racism, understood belatedly and still incompletely, as having been used by the ruling class to divide people on the basis of their ethnicity (Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim) and religion (Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian).

It has no dominant leader or identifiable spokesperson, coalescing a variety of backgrounds and interest groups bound by their distaste for Gotabaya ('Gota') Rajapaksa and his family; but also their determination to effect what they call "system change" – correcting structural defects in the political system including the concentration and centralisation of power in the presidency; the nomination and election of political representatives; and a new constitution to replace the 1978 one based on vesting executive powers in the office of the president.

It is neither critic nor advocate of capitalism or even neoliberalism. At most, there is attachment to the free health and education services and social programmes that are what remains of Sri Lanka's welfare state. But mostly, the movement mirrors the mainstream in its adaptation to, and normalisation of economic liberalisation: deregulated markets, prices fixed by cartels, privatisation, foreign capital, and export-driven growth.

Often described as 'middle-class' and of 'youth' – and not positively – these categories are not exact in their application in Sri Lanka, nor accurate in all contexts. The social composition of the main permanent site of protest known as 'GotaGoGama' ('GotaGoVillage') adjacent to the President's Office) is largely Sinhala and Buddhist, their ages ranging in the main from the early 20s to the early 40s, and drawn from the self-employed and aspiring professionals, but also working-class youth and students from lower middle-class homes. It is mostly male but with better representation and visibility of women than is to be found in trade unions and on the Left. Volunteers and visitors are drawn from all ethnic communities, genders, sexualities, and faiths, and older people including long-time activists energised by this unique and unprecedented movement.

This citizens' movement does not begin and end where it is most concentrated and visible at Galle Face Green in the heart of British colonial-era Colombo. There are also permanent encampments in other cities and towns:

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Anuradhapura, Badulla, Galle, Gampola, Jaela, Kandy, Kurunegala, Matara, Monaragala, Negombo and Ratnapura. Beyond these, this movement includes the way in which it began: small scale protests by people who gather every evening or weekly in their neighbourhoods to hold placards, wave the national flag, and chant anti-government slogans. In each place, the crowd varies by class, ethnic and religious origin.

Its beginnings are from late February, when a handful of co-workers and friends in a suburb of Colombo, fed-up by lengthening power-cuts and shortages of essentials, staged small silent candle-lit vigils for an hour or two each evening. Inspired by this example and looking for ways of expressing their frustration with the government, more people from around Colombo joined this action. They were encouraged to begin similar ones in their own neighbourhoods.

By late March, there were many such vigils taking place, attracting media attention, and following the same format of holding candles or flashing torchlights to symbolise the darkness in homes from power outages; and with self-made placards blaming the government and especially then Finance Minister (and younger brother to the President) Basil Rajapaksa as well as then Central Bank Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal for their mismanagement of the economy.

One of the most consistent demands has been to 'Give Back Our Stolen Money', directed mainly at the Rajapaksas who are believed to have accumulated considerable wealth while in government that is secreted away overseas, as the state treasury began to run dry in 2022 limiting imports including coal and diesel for electricity.

In plusher parts of Colombo, some held signs that read "Go to the IMF". Since last year, there has been a groundswell among economists, business associations and the upper middle class, that only the International Monetary Fund (IMF) can 'bail-out' the economy, institute necessary policy reforms, and facilitate Sri Lanka's access to new borrowing from the international money market. This belief that recourse to the IMF is not only unavoidable but even desirable has become common-sense within political and civil society. There has been no serious debate on how Sri Lanka fell into a debt-trap (USD51 billion in a USD80 billion economy); nor whether those debts should be repudiated as illegitimate. It is only recently that stray voices calling for an audit of the debt have been heard.

The turning-point for the movement came on 31 March when a routine genteel protest near the President's private residence in a middle-class Colombo suburb, spontaneously swelled with youth and others angered by power-cuts increasing from 10 to 13 hours, shortages of fuel and medicines, and spiking food prices. Violence ensued, as the police defended the President's home. Gotabaya Rajapaksa who had been evacuated earlier, was shifted by his security detail to his fortified official residence where he was to stay with no public interaction until another hasty departure last week – in the first reversal of his fortunes.

Far from discrediting the citizens' movement, the viciousness of the police and attempt by governing politicians to liken it to the 'Arab Spring' triggered a wave of public sympathy. More people began taking to the streets on subsequent days and new sites of protest emerged across the island. To bring together these disparate actions, some organisers began coordinating with each other through online meeting and messaging platforms, but without structure or form. Preparations began for a massive march to converge and amplify their protest.

As they could not get near the President, they opted to march upon his office. The Presidential Secretariat faces the Indian Ocean – where ships in the distance wait to dock at Colombo's harbour – and the Chinese-built 'Colombo International Financial City' rises from the sea, as a zone of exception for global capital free from taxation and regulation of money flows.

The demonstration on 9th April exceeded all expectations in size and militancy. Some of the youth participants decided to make their protest continuous (#OccupyGalleFace) by refusing to leave the site. Others contributed by

providing tents for shelter, distributing cooked food and drinks, sourcing sound equipment to broadcast their anger. Soon, a small community began developing with its own kitchen and drinking water supply, toilets and first aid, library, and solar-powered mobile phone charging facility, later joined by a cinema and multiple performance and teach-out areas for drama, dance, music and spoken word.

As the physical site (#GotaGoGama) like the citizens' movement is an open space to all who share the same core demand for the removal of the President and his family, diverse groups began staking space at the same site ranging from the deaf community to disabled ex-military, Buddhist monks and Christian clergy, the victims of the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks, good governance campaigners, human rights defenders, and many more.

The organised Left, principally the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP—Peoples Liberation Front) and its breakaway Peratugami Samajawadi Pakshaya (PSP—Frontline Socialist Party) is also present but strategically not through party organisations but rather their youth (Socialist Youth Union and Youth for CHEnge respectively) and student (Socialist Students Union and Revolutionary Students Union respectively) wings. Another consistent presence in the movement on the Left has been the Inter-University Students Federation (IUSF), once controlled by the JVP but now non-affiliated though perceived as influenced by the PSP. Throughout the course of this struggle, it has electrified the movement through regular mobilisation of students in demonstrations and rallies, political intransigence, and bold actions such as blockading the Parliament in Kotte and the Presidential mansion in Colombo, braving police batons, tear gas and water cannon and court orders.

In the early months of 2022, the passivity of the working class was palpable. There appeared no appetite for confrontation with employers and the state, despite the pressure on their living standards from the economic crisis. For the daily-waged, the restrictions and lockdowns over the preceding two years of the pandemic have been unbearable on their incomes and survival. There have been sectoral struggles these past few years of plantation workers, export processing zone workers, schoolteachers, health workers, farmers, and the like, but isolated and uneven. Trade union density is low and declining except in the public sector. Working class consciousness is also fragmented and diluted by decades of defensive struggles often ending in defeat, the weight of market ideology, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and racism, the experience of state terror during the war and the second JVP-led insurrection, and the inability to forge durable trade union coordination.

The major private sector trade unions, like their public sector counterparts historically linked to mainstream political parties, were initially suspicious of the citizens' movement, which is seen as anarchic and inchoate. Smaller independent and left-wing unions such as the Ceylon Bank Employees (CBEU) and the Ceylon Mercantile Industrial and General Workers (CMU), along with the Ceylon Teachers (CTU) and others were more sympathetic, joining the demonstrations and engaging with the protests.

As the momentum grew over April, ad-hoc coalitions of trade unions and other organisations spanning the public and private sectors and including the JVP's National Trade Union Centre as well as the La Via Campesina affiliate, the Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR), conducted two highly successful national shutdowns: the hartal (stayaway and shutdown) of 28 April and the first general strike since the stunning rout of July 1980, on 6 May. [\[6\]](#)

The government was shaken by these actions which achieved widespread support from public sector workers in the administrative, health, transport, and postal service – usually loyal to the government of the day – as well as small business operators and workers, rural traders, farmers and fishers, and women workers from the export processing zones. The power of the working class to cripple commercial activity and disrupt normalcy, was a greater immediate threat to the state than the occupy protests. Its response was to impose emergency law and slap essential service orders to make strike action illegal. However, this did not daunt the unions nor dent success.

Where are the Tamils?

Both those sympathetic to, and critical of, the citizens' movement, have raised concerns as to its inclusivity and limited resonance – outside of urbanised and Sinhala majority regions in the island – and especially in relation to Sri Lanka's Tamil nation that has historically inhabited the North and East of the island. This is fair. The core demands of the *Aragalaya* and its assimilation of the origins and contours of the crisis are bounded by the identity and consciousness of the Sinhala nation.

Within the citizens' movement, outside of small pockets and spaces, there has been no reckoning with the systemic roots of Sinhala supremacism, nor the historic injustices meted to Tamils. It is beyond difficult for the Sinhala majority to acknowledge that they were not the primary victims of the war. There is no generalised recognition, even 12 years later, of the continuing hurt of family and friends who are not allowed to publicly mourn and memorialise those who did not survive, and those who were 'disappeared' and are still counted as missing, including combatants; of their dispossession from arable and residential land under occupation by the military; of the oppressive presence of the military and its intervention in civilian affairs in the war-affected region; of ongoing attempts to unsettle Tamil (and Muslim) claims to land and sea and their religious sites; and of the ever-present threat of the Prevention of Terrorism Act against critics of the state.

It is not that Tamil people in the North and East are indifferent to the *aragalaya*. How could they be when they have consistently voted for the main opposition candidate to the Rajapaksas in every presidential election since 2005? For many, there is little or no empathy with the Sinhala nation which is perceived as having created the monster that it now wishes to destroy. Is it only because of power-cuts and shortages of fuel and medicines, that there is opposition to the Rajapaksas now, they ask? These scarcities are not unfamiliar to those who lived through the economic blockade on the North during the years of war. They did not see their suffering, which includes but is also beyond socio-economic deprivation, represented in this citizens' movement.

However, a struggle of substance invariably alters the consciousness of its protagonists. In the course of only a few months since the *aragalaya* took off and began taking shape, as rights activist Ambika Satkunanathan has observed: "... there is growing awareness and space to speak of issues previously thought not possible. Militarisation, war crimes, the Channel 4 documentary [video evidence of crimes against humanity by Sri Lankan security forces in the final stages of the war in 2009], racism. One hears people say, 'if they are doing this in the South, imagine what they must have done in the North and East'." [7]

None of this would have been possible without the formative experience of this movement, which includes the patient efforts of progressive Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil activists to inform, educate and reason for attention to grievances and goals of citizens from the minorities. In fact, among the most recent demands (on July 9th) of well-known activists of the movement are the release of 'political prisoners' (which is a reference to LTTE suspects in detention since before and after the end of the war); and justice for families of victims of extra-judicial killings and disappearances (which includes Tamil political and civil representatives, journalists and human rights workers, and LTTE cadre). [8]

And it is not that non-Sinhala peoples are absent from the agitations outside of the North and East. Muslims, who define themselves in Sri Lanka as an ethnic and not only religious community, have been at the receiving end of Islamophobia following the conclusion of the war in 2009. In addition to periodic violence against their homes, businesses and places of worship and education; they were collectively targeted following the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist violence; and underwent the agony of forced cremation of COVID19 deaths, against their religious practices. In the initial stages of the citizens' movement, they were cautious in their participation, fearing racism from protestors or repression from the state. But since April, they are visible and vocal. Meanwhile Tamils resident in the populous Western Sri Lanka, whether of Northern or Eastern or Hill Country origin, also participate in the *aragalaya*. There has

been increased visibility of the Tamil language in the banners, placards, and signage of the movement, even if it is not heard much in slogans, chants and speeches.

What now?

At time of writing, Sri Lanka swirls with rumours of attempted flight by Gotabaya Rajapaksa before he is due to formally resign on the 13th. [9] Meanwhile, Ranil Wickremesinghe attempts to salvage a political future for himself, ideally in the Presidency which he has long coveted. Formal discussions and backroom meetings are feverishly underway among parliamentarians and fixers. What comes next will be a transitional arrangement: another cohabitation between the parties that were formerly in government and those that are presently in the opposition. How long it will last is uncertain.

The demand of the *Janatha Aragalaya* has consistently been for the formation of an all-party government, after the resignation of the President and Prime Minister, which should focus on providing economic relief to the people and to enacting a new constitution that abolishes the presidential system of government. There is no certainty that this will be respected by politicians, which is why activists have proposed the creation of a 'Peoples Council' drawn from its number, to co-govern with Parliament. In some quarters there is anxiety whether there will be a putsch by the military: in concert with or autonomous from parts of the ancien régime. Much is murky. The need is to remain vigilant and mobilised. The Rajapaksas have tumbled. The system that spawned them has not.

Colombo – 11 July 2022

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