



NIAS-IPRI Brief

Crisis in Sri Lanka: 100 Days of People's Protest: What's Next?

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The appointment of the new cabinet with several familiar faces from the previous Rajapaksa government, it is evident that Sri Lanka's political and economic troubles are hardly over. In fact, the coming months and years would see the island nation striving for political and socio-economic stability.

July 2022 marked an eventful month for the island nation Sri Lanka. The country made it to the headlines all over the world as news began to spread of how the people stormed the Presidential Palace with demands that the President "Go Home" and then of a President on the run. Yet long before the international media caught up with the happenings in Sri Lanka, the people of the country were on the streets. At first, it was because they were queuing up for essentials, whether it be milk powder, gas, or fuel. Afterwards, it was because they wanted the leaders of the country – especially the Rajapaksas – that triggered a severe economic crisis through sheer mismanagement, to leave once and for all. Hence, a people's movement, unlike anything the Sri Lankans have experienced before, was born out of need for relief and a need for reforms. This commentary looks at the origins of the people's protests in Sri Lanka, how it progressed for 100 days, what it achieved so far, and finally what the future will look like for a nation that took to the streets.

The tipping point

At present, Sri Lanka is experiencing one of the worst economic crises that it has gone through in recent years, which is exacerbated by political instability. However, what led Sri Lanka to this point took years in the making. The economic crisis alone was predicted as early as 2012, as experts began to notice how the economic growth of the country has turned sluggish with low exports and high expenditure, while accumulating public debt and multiple development projects with no payoff contributed to an increasing budget deficit each passing year. Moreover, when Gotabaya Rajapaksa became President of Sri Lanka in November 2019, what he took over was an economy that was already on life support. The 2019 Easter Attack slowed down tourism – which was a major source of revenue for the country – and came to a standstill with the travel restrictions that came into effect with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹

Yet, the Easter Attacks and the Covid-19 pandemic were merely contributory factors that

¹ Arunatillake, N. (2020) 'Easter Attacks in 2019 vs. COVID-19 Outbreak of 2020: What Lies Ahead for Sri Lanka?', *Talking Economics*. Available at: <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2020/04/03/easter-attacks-in-2019-vs-covid-19-outbreak-of-2020-what-lies-ahead-for-sri-lanka/>

brought Sri Lanka to the brink of bankruptcy. The crisis was triggered by and large due to the defective policies followed by the Rajapaksa government which included tax cuts, money printing, refusal to restructure debt or seek aid from the IMF at an earlier stage, and the complete ban of chemical fertiliser in 2021 which crippled the country's agricultural sector and food supply.² The impact of these policies remained unnoticed by the general public up until February 2022. By then, the people were experiencing the consequences of years of mismanagement; the lack of foreign exchange meant that the government was no longer able to supply them with uninterrupted power and fuel, prices of commodities sky-rocketed with inflation measuring up to 15% and rising daily, and shortages of essential pharmaceuticals and warnings of a food shortage was looming in the horizon.³

By the beginning of March 2022, small pockets of people's protests began in the suburbs of Colombo. These began as an expression of dissent against the incumbent government, and especially President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, whose inefficient governance had led to the people to be stuck in queues for the better part of their day.⁴ What was interesting about these protests was that they were non-partisan in every way, which was previously unseen in the political landscape of Sri Lanka. The protesters would hold up slogans and candles in silent protest in the evening hours, giving voice to people's dissatisfaction with the country's leadership and their hardships. These silent protests soon gained momentum, as the youth and the elderly from Colombo and its surrounding suburbs soon began to organise themselves via social media and online communication platforms, demanding relief from their economic woes.

Nonetheless, this was only the beginning of the people's movement that lasted over 100 days. The tipping point came on 31 March, when a 13-hour-long power cut pushed the general public off the edge. Discontented citizens gathered in Mirihana where the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's private residence is located and demanded that he step down immediately. The protestors pulled down Police barricades surrounding the President's house and remained there for over six hours despite water cannons and tear gas being deployed against them multiple times. The situation turned violent when the riot squads and the Police attempted to disperse the crowds with the use of batons and rubber bullets, with allegations of setting fire to a bus being levelled against the protestors. 1 April dawned with the imposition of State of Emergency that also brought Emergency Regulations into effect, which essentially curtailed several fundamental rights, including that of freedom of expression.⁵ This move was harshly criticised by both human rights defenders and foreign diplomats who saw it as the Government attempting to silence the people, who were exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly enshrined in Article 14(a) and 14(b) of the Sri Lankan Constitution.⁶

The situation escalated when further state repression came into force in the form of an island

² Rafi, T. and Wong, B. (2022) 'The Deep Roots of Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis', *The Diplomat*. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-deep-roots-of-sri-lankas-economic-crisis/>

³ Jayasinghe, U. and Ghoshal, D. (2022) 'Shocks and missteps: how Sri Lanka's economy ended in crisis', *Reuters*, 25 February. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/shocks-missteps-how-sri-lankas-economy-ended-crisis-2022-02-25/>

⁴ Fernando, R. (2022) 'The Ides of March: Protests, Discontent and Disconnects', *Groundviews*, 23 March. Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2022/03/23/the-ides-of-march-protests-discontent-and-disconnects/>

⁵ Welikala, A. (2008) *A State of Permanent Crisis: Constitutional Government, Fundamental Rights and States of Emergency in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, pp. 174-187.

⁶ The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Article 14(a) and 14(b). Available at: <https://www.parliament.lk/files/pdf/constitution.pdf>

wide curfew was imposed on 2 April along with a gazette extraordinary prohibiting the gathering of people in public places. This was coupled with a social media ban that lasted for over 15 hours, which was put in place to curb a major citizen uprising that was scheduled to take place on 3 April in Colombo. These events prompted political instability that would become the new norm for Sri Lanka, as the Cabinet members handed over their resignation on 4 April throwing the country into further turmoil. By April, protests had become a regular part of an average Sri Lankan's life, with professionals from all fields, students, and religious leaders calling for the resignation of the President, while the hashtag campaign #GoHomeGota gained traction on social media. However, the demands of the people went unheeded by President Rajapaksa, who failed to acknowledge that the people have lost faith in him and his administration.

It was in such a backdrop that the larger people's protest – now famously dubbed as the 'Aragalaya' (people's struggle) – was born on 9 April, when protestors planned a large demonstration that was to take place on the Galle Face Green, in the vicinity of the Presidential Secretariat. The protestors came into Colombo despite an announcement by the authorities that the Galle Face Green would be closed to the public that day. They came in large numbers and stayed overnight amidst inclement weather conditions, overcoming signal jammers that made communication outside nearly impossible, and continued a peaceful protest that eventually transformed into the people's protest that lasted for over 100 days until President Gotabaya Rajapaksa handed in his resignation on 15 July.

Milestones of the 'Aragalaya'

As 17 July marked 100 days of protests, the 'Aragalaya' has gone past several key incidents that not only shaped the political landscape of Sri Lanka, but also initiated significant change within the society. Following is a documentation of those key events in chronological order which illustrated the progress made in such a short duration of time.

Before the 'Aragalaya' was formally established on 9 April, the Cabinet ministers tendered their resignation on 3 April, which included several members of the Rajapaksa family – Basil Rajapaksa, Chamal Rajapaksa, and Namal Rajapaksa. This also became the point in which President Gotabaya Rajapaksa lost the Parliamentary majority as by 5 April more than 40 Ministers had declared that they would break away from the government and operate independently. Another significant change was the resignation of Central Bank Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal – who was being held responsible for advocating for money printing, refusing to depreciate the rupee and thereby complicating the forex crisis, refusing to go for an IMF bailout, and for overall fiscal policies that triggered the country's economic crisis. A Cabinet reshuffle took place in the interim as the President extended invitations to form an All-Party government which was refused.⁷

The protests continued peacefully for almost a month with no relief in sight. However, pressure began to mount on the Rajapaksas as power cuts, fuel shortage, and rising inflation saw more and more people out on the streets. 9 May marked a crucial point in the protests as GotaGoGama and protestors were attacked by supporters of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, which created a ripple effect of incensed public seeking retaliation as busses carrying Rajapaksa supporters was set on fire and the supporters themselves being thrown into the Beira Lake.⁸ A night of unrest saw several politicians' houses being set on fire around

⁷ Vaidyanathan, R. 'Reshuffle begins after cabinet quits over protests', *BBC*, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60975941>

⁸ *Groundviews* (2022) 'Thugs Attack Peaceful Protesters, GotaGoGama Destroyed' 9 May. Available at:

the island, which included the ancestral home of the Rajapaksas in Medamulana.

Mahinda Rajapaksa was heavily criticised for the 9 May attack against the peaceful protestors and as a consequence tendered his resignation as Prime Minister the same day. In a highly controversial manner, the position was taken over by Ranil Wickremasinghe. The appointment was questioned by both politicians and the people, as Wickremasinghe came into the office for the sixth time, but was also in the Parliament only by the grace of the National List which allowed his party UNP a single seat from the Parliamentary Election.⁹ Despite the resignation of the Prime Minister Rajapaksa, there was no visible improvement of the political and economic quagmire that Sri Lanka was stuck in. While aid flowed in, primarily from India in the form of credit lines for fuel, it was barely sufficient to keep the country running. Deaths in the fuel queues became a familiar occurrence as incidents of death by suicide became more frequent as people became unable to cope with the economic burden. The talks with the IMF had at this point come to a standstill as the political instability affected the progression of the talks and hindering the implementation of any measures recommended by the IMF staff to restructure debt.

The month of June saw another turning point in the people's protest. A positive response that heeded the demands of the protestors saw the 21st Amendment, which annulled the 20th Amendment to the Constitution, being passed by the Cabinet. 21A effectively curtailed the powers of Executive Presidency, held the President accountable to the Parliament, and barred dual citizens from holding public office. In light of this, Basil Rajapaksa, a dual citizenship holder, resigned from his Cabinet position on 9 May ahead of the 21A, giving up the seat he gained through the SLPP National List. While the 21A might not have seen the Executive Presidency being abolished, it was a step in the right direction towards the change in governance demanded by the people.

However, despite months of protesting, the most crucial demand of the people i.e. "Go Home Gota" was not realised. Hence, in a final move, the protestors again called all people to rally to Colombo so that the President can be ousted. On 9 July, a large number of protestors gathered in Colombo despite restrictions in transport caused due to fuel shortages, and succeeded in storming the Presidential Secretariat, the Presidential Residence, and the Temple Trees. They occupied the said buildings, causing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee his office and go into hiding. The protestors also stormed Prime Minister Wickremasinghe's house and allegedly set it on fire. By 10 July, the Presidential Palace and the Temple Trees had become tourist attractions while the attention of the international community was focused on the future of the island nation that ousted their President. Upon the successful protest, the GotaGoGama activists declared six demands from the government.¹⁰ These demands included: 1) Immediate resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa; 2) Immediate resignation of Wickremasinghe and the rest of the Rajapaksa government; 3) Appointment of an interim government sympathetic to the people's struggle; 4) Drafting a new Constitution that affirms the power of the people; 5) The new Constitution to endorse people's sovereignty; and 6) The interim government to implement above proposals within the span of a year.

Meanwhile President Gotabaya Rajapaksa before tendering his resignation fled the country,

<https://groundviews.org/2022/05/09/thugs-attack-peaceful-protesters-gotagogama-destroyed/>

⁹ Peiris, H. (2022) 'The Inverted October Coup', *Groundviews*, 14 May. Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2022/05/14/the-inverted-october-coup/>

¹⁰ *Daily FT* (2022) 'GotaGoGama activists issue 6 immediate demands', 11 July. Available at: <https://www.ft.lk/news/GotaGoGama-activists-issue-6-immediate-demands/56-737317>

seeking shelter in the Maldives and eventually in Singapore. In the absence of President Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe became the Acting President on 13 July, the same day that President Rajapaksa was supposed to hand over his resignation. The outraged public who claimed that Wickremesinghe did not have the people's mandate protested outside the Prime Minister's house and occupied his office as well. On 14 July the protestors withdrew from the Presidential Palace, the Temple Trees, and the Prime Minister's office while awaiting the resignation of President Rajapaksa.¹¹ The resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was finally confirmed on 15 July, with the Speaker of the Parliament announcing that a new President would be announced through a Parliamentary Vote on 20 July.

The people's protest went past the 100-day mark on 17 July, with a quiet celebration in remembrance of lives lost and the injured during the protests, while elated of the fact that their primary goal was now achieved.

Protests in a nutshell

As the 9 April demonstration became the starting point for occupying the Galle Face Green, the protest site renamed as "GotaGoGama" (or Gota Go Village) became the heart of the 'Aragalaya'. The village began with a small gathering of tents to shelter the protestors from the rain and a signpost in all three languages, eventually expanding to a small self-sufficient model village. GotaGoGama or GGG thrived as more and more people began to pour in and establish their presence as part of the movement to see President Rajapaksa out of his office. The site was occupied from morning to night, with tents set up by various people and organisations, whether it be lawyers, media personnel, teachers, youth, the LGBTQ community, and many others made it their mission to not just protest, but also to educate. Each passing day saw more and more tents added to the small village until food and water storage, sanitary facilities, solar power, a library, citizen's forum, a theatre, and even a garden was formed within the premises. This protest site also encouraged many other similar sites around the island, branching off to Kandy and Galle, along with MynaGoGama being established in front of the Prime Minister's residence Temple Trees demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa as well.

The dynamic within the protest was something wholly unique that Sri Lankans have never experienced before. There were committed protestors that occupied the space 24x7, yet there were also those who protested intermittently. The roles of protestors were not set in stone, each took up whatever tasks required of them to keep the village running, and each were involved in the capacity they were best suited for or needed at the time.¹² The involvement of the youth was a key point in the people's protest; the Sri Lankan youth that were largely uninterested and apathetic towards politics became a force to reckon with, calling for transparency and accountability in governance and acknowledging that aspects such as voter education and citizen responsibilities should become part of their everyday lives.

Another feature of the protest was the level of inclusivity that was observed within the movement. Sri Lanka which struggled with reconciliation for more than a decade past the end of the Civil War, saw itself leaving aside old religious and ethnic differences and uniting under

¹¹ Schmall, E., Gunasekara, S. and Mashal, M. (2022) 'Sri Lanka's President Resigns After Months of Protest' *The New York Times*, 14 July. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/14/world/asia/sri-lanka-president-rajapaksa-resigns-protests.html>

¹² Mushtaq, M. (2022) 'It takes a protest village: 'Gota Go Gama' unites diverse Sri Lankans', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 16 June. Available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2022/0616/It-takes-a-protest-village-Gota-Go-Gama-unites-diverse-Sri-Lankans>

one flag as part of the people's protest. The people at large began to recognize the plight of those that protested against the government before, with the movement becoming a larger vehicle for all those that were formerly repressed. Issues such as justice and closure for mothers of missing persons, attacks against journalists, victims of the Easter Attack, all became part of the people's protest, each being given its own space for expression.

The culture of tolerance practised within the protest was a welcome change that was much needed. It extended past mere ethnic and religious differences into overall inclusivity of marginalised groups such as women, LGBTQ community, and the disabled. There was also a noticeable absence of ageism, as while the movement itself was largely driven by the youth, it always included individuals of all ages. Interestingly, the protest also broke down the classism that was a subtle element ingrained in the society, as the so-called elites and the middle class were able to connect to those from lower-income groups as all equally suffered due to the ongoing economic crisis. Through the 'Aragalaya' people of Sri Lanka became aware of the value of co-existence, and that every individual in the community has an equal voice and an equal right to freedom of expression.

Nonetheless, just as the 'Aragalaya' had its highs, there were also the lows. While each phase of the protest advocated for non-violence, there were inevitably the moments in which the protest was anything but. Primarily, the armed forces and the Police became increasingly violent towards the protestors with brutal attacks of tear gas and assault. They became the visible arm of State suppression, whereas more underhanded methods of attempting to discredit the movement through infiltration and other ways of political manoeuvring and agendas became evident as time passed. The protestors were accused of creating political instability which hindered talks with the IMF, and they were also blamed for the destruction of public property. They were also intimidated at multiple occasions, with shows of force by armed policemen and most recently by low-flying helicopters armed with guns. Another low was when individuals claiming to represent the People's Protest took over the broadcasting of the state television channel Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation as well as the state-owned Independent Television Network (ITN), as well as an attempt to occupy the Parliament itself. At least 10 individuals were killed as a direct result of engaging in protests, while over 250 people were injured, and over 600 arrests were made in connection to the protests. The protests, though largely peaceful, were not without its moments of bloodshed, and while these attacks may have tipped over the protest movement into chaos and anarchy, the true spirit of the movement stayed the course, ensuring that Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the Rajapaksa family itself held no sway over the ruling of Sri Lanka in the future.

What's in store for the people?

On 20 July, Ranil Wickremasinghe won the parliamentary vote and became the Ninth Executive President of Sri Lanka. When he came to power, he came with the promise: "Our divisions are over. We have to work together now".¹³ However, his words have only proved true in the sense that he's working together with the politicians that were previously a part of the Rajapaksa government. From Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardane, to the key positions such as Foreign Minister Ali Sabry and Minister of Power and Energy Kanchana Wijesekara and Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella, the persons appointed for Wickremasinghe's Cabinet are familiar faces from the previous government. At this point the question arises

¹³ Khalid, S. and Kuruwita, R. (2022) 'Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sri Lanka's new president', *Al Jazeera*, 21 July. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/21/profile-ranil-wickremesinghe-sri-lankas-new-president>

whether this was the change that people struggled for over 100 days?

The answer at the ground-level is an obvious 'no'. The current President of Sri Lanka is a one elected without the mandate of the people and is supported by a group of politicians that acted as bystanders as the country hurtled towards an economic crisis of unprecedented scale. Yet another point of concern is that since taking office, President Wickremasinghe has openly been hostile to the protestors and is engaged in dismantling the movement methodically. Through a court order he first prohibited people from assembling within a 50-metre radius of the Bandaranaike statue that acted as a key focal point of the Galle Face Green protest site. On 21 July, a brutal attack carried out by the Special Task Force of the Police in the middle of the night to remove demonstrators from the site saw many of the protestors and a few journalists injured, while others were prevented from entering the protest site to offer support and medical aid. Since, arrests of key persons involved in the people's protests have been arrested and detained amidst rising public outrage.

Wickremasinghe's suppression is aided by the State of Emergency which was declared on 17 July, and approved by the Parliament on 27 July, as the security forces continued its crackdown on the protestors. On the other hand, the people who were cautiously optimistic after the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa are losing faith in the new government as well. While their primary need of the hour is relief of some form, the current President's sole move towards restoring stability to the country seems to be bringing in the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution¹⁴ and attempting to form an All-Party Government while making little to no progress in terms of debt restructuring requested by the IMF. However, on 3 August police officers that arrived at the protest site announced that remaining protest tents should be vacated by 5 August, effectively trying to close the curtain on the people's protest movement. Under these circumstances, the 'Aragalaya' of which the main purpose was to oust the Rajapaksa, is likely to remain beyond its initial goal and see Ranil "Go Home" as well.

In such a backdrop, it is important to remember what the 'Aragalaya' has achieved so far. For one, and most importantly, it reminded the people of Sri Lanka that the power is in the hands of the people. After gaining Independence, the political arena of Sri Lanka became dominated by a few families and political parties that exchanged power between themselves every few years, while the people acted as mere sheep that casted a vote. This tradition was broken with the people's protest, as for the first time in Sri Lanka, a President was ousted by the sheer will of the people.¹⁵ Moreover, they achieved it through peaceful means, without any sort of a military intervention, further highlighting the power of the people. Sri Lankans, especially the youth, are unlikely to forget that all parliamentarians are elected by them, and are therefore bound to represent the interest of the people. The ousting of the Rajapaksa's proved that no family or dynasty can remain in power, or have the favour of the people, forever.

Secondly, it changed the political and socio-economic landscape of Sri Lanka for the better. The protests formed a culture that was more inclusive, that stood up against corruption and advocated for human rights, accountability, and transparency in all aspects of governance. Over several months, people became better educated and aware of both politics and economy, noting the need for a more decentralised mode of governance and the need to reduce the powers of the Executive Presidency, and forming a clear distinction between the

¹⁴ Proposed 22nd Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka. Available at: http://documents.gov.lk/files/bill/2022/8/232-2022_E.pdf

¹⁵ Fonseka, B. (2022) 'Sri Lanka's Crisis and the Power of Citizen Mobilization', *Politics of Opposition in South Asia*. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/06/30/sri-lanka-s-crisis-and-power-of-citizen-mobilization-pub-87416>

Executive, Judiciary, and the Legislative functions. The flaws of the election system were also exposed, with the public paying more attention and expressing willingness to look for better alternatives than the current proportional representation system in Sri Lanka which resulted in Wickremasinghe becoming the President of Sri Lanka.

The citizens further understood the need for strong fiscal policies, and accepted the need for an increase in taxes and other economic reforms to see the country through the crisis. On societal grounds, the majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist community finally began to empathise towards the plight of their fellow citizens from minority communities, as they underwent State suppression first hand during the protests. Many took to social media platforms to apologize to the minority communities in Sri Lanka that had suffered and continued to suffer certain forms of discrimination and State repression during and after the Civil War. They acknowledged the need for reconciliation and justice, stressing that the politicians would no longer be able to use the divide and rule tactics, breaking down religious, ethnic, and class barriers.¹⁶ The protest showed the importance of an inclusive society, where the voices of all communities are represented in the governing body. They also exposed the crucial role that media plays as the fourth estate of democracy, as the people began to navigate through misinformation and disinformation, demanding a more responsible media narrative. Moreover, the Sri Lankans delivered a strong message to the international community by ousting the President of the country through peaceful protests, one of the most successful protest movements that was observed in South Asia in recent times.

Nonetheless, it is evident that Sri Lanka's political and economic troubles are hardly over. In fact, the coming months and years would see the island nation striving for political and socio-economic stability. During these past months, the Sri Lankan citizens have learnt the hard way that politicians cannot be allowed to grow comfortable in power. Therefore, they have come to the weary conclusion that the protests would have to continue, perhaps taking a different shape than the initial 'Aragalaya' occupying the Galle Face Green and morphing into something new, in order to exert pressure over the new government to carry out the people's will and serve as a visible reminder to them that as the Constitution states: In the Republic of Sri Lanka sovereignty is in the People and is inalienable."¹⁷

¹⁶ Sourjah, S. and Wanigasuriya, A. (2022) 'Moving Towards True Reconciliation', *Groundviews*, 7 June. Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2022/06/07/moving-towards-true-reconciliation/>

¹⁷ The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Article 3. Available at: <https://www.parliament.lk/files/pdf/constitution.pdf>

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