

Conflict Weekly

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A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

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Precarious ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, fresh rounds of violence in Gaza, and the new US bill supporting climate change

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Map indicating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Image Source: Shutterstock/Nemanja Cosovic)

COVER STORY

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

Armenia-Azerbaijan: Renewed fighting in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region

In the news

On 8 August, Azerbaijan accused Armenia of targeting its military positions 10 times in 24 hours. The Azeri Defence Ministry claimed that in six of the incidents, Armenian forces opened fire “from positions in the direction of the Basarkechar, Garakilsa and Gorus regions” on Azeri military units “stationed in the direction of the Kalbajar and Lachin regions.”

On 3 August, Azerbaijan had claimed it had captured the territory in Karabakh in a retaliatory campaign, Operation Revenge, after an Armenian attack near Nagorno-Karabakh killed one Azeri soldier. Additionally, Baku accused Yerevan of violating the ceasefire, stating that its forces thwarted the Armenian troops’ attempt to capture a hill in the Lachin district, an area controlled by Russian peacekeepers. Meanwhile, the military in Nagorno-Karabakh disputed this and accused Azerbaijan of killing two soldiers, declaring a “partial mobilization” in response to the clash. Following the incident, Armenia called on the international community to help stop Azerbaijan’s “aggressive actions” claiming that Azerbaijan continues its “policy of terror” against the population of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Meanwhile, Russia accused Azerbaijan of violating the ceasefire over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh and that Russia was “taking measures to stabilize the situation” with Armenian and Azeri representatives.

Issues at large

First, the recurring skirmishes in Nagorno-Karabakh. The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh which ended with a Russian-brokered agreement on 10 November 2020 was seen as a victory for Azerbaijan and a defeat for Armenia. However, the ceasefire has since been broken several times with skirmishes becoming a common occurrence in the region. A report by the International Crisis Group highlighted that since mid-July, residents of Azeri villages have testified to increased Azeri forces’ activity in Lachin, near the border with Armenia, and Shusha, which lies on high ground close to Stepanakert making it a strategic outpost.

Second, grievances of de facto authority in Nagorno-Karabakh. The ethnically Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, also known as the Republic of Artsakh, has expressed frustration over Armenia’s willingness to make concessions to Azerbaijan under a larger prospective peace settlement. Additionally, reports of top Artsakh officials planning a referendum to become part of Russia have increased pressure on Armenia to address these issues. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has raised concerns over Nagorno-Karabakh’s de facto authorities retaining an armed force, arguing that this force was illegal and has urged Russian peacekeepers to disarm it. However, Armenia and the de facto authorities rebutted it claiming disarmament was never part of the ceasefire deal.

Third, the stalled negotiations. Armenian and Azeri diplomats have been meeting regularly to formulate a peace deal to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. However, several unresolved issues are yet to be addressed. These include delimiting the border between the two countries, the nature of new transportation corridors in the region, and the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh itself and its current ethnic Armenian population.

Fourth, the apprehensions of Russian peacekeepers. Since 2020, there have been growing frustrations over the Russian peacekeepers’ presence in the region and their inaction in stopping

ceasefire violations. Additionally, Russian peacekeeping forces conducted daily patrols in the disputed regions, but the patrols stopped a couple of days before the recent Azeri advances drawing criticism to the Russian troops in the region.

In perspective

First, the continuation of ceasefire violations. The Nagorno-Karabakh region is likely to witness the continuation of low-intensity attacks as a result of the fallouts of the ceasefire. The 2020 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan has failed to initiate a peace process because it has altered the power balance between the two countries and left many issues unresolved. Thus, these recurring skirmishes are likely to continue in the future.

Second, the rise of the de facto authority in Nagorno-Karabakh. Over the past few months, the de facto authority in Nagorno-Karabakh has stepped up its engagement with the region both militarily and politically. This is a cause of concern for both countries as they are unable to consult with the group.

Third, Russian peacekeeping forces. Russian diplomatic efforts and their peacekeepers' presence have not deterred an escalation in the situation. Since the Ukraine war, Russian peacekeeping forces have been criticised for being inactive in the region. Thus, the pressure on the peacekeeping forces is likely to increase.

Israel-Gaza: intermittent attacks end with Egypt-UN mediated ceasefire

In the news

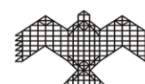
On 5 August, Israel bombarded the Gaza strip of Palestine with missile attacks killing at least 45 people, including 16 children, and injuring more than 260. The “pre-emptive” strike by Israel called operation Breaking Dawn lasted three days. In retaliation, on 6 August the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) launched a volley of 1,100 projectiles targeting Tel Aviv and other heavily populated areas of Israel.

On 8 August, three days after the raids and counterattacks, an Egypt-UN mediated ceasefire was agreed upon. The PIJ demanded the release of its officials, Khalil Awawda (within the day) and Sheikh Bassam al-Saadi (within two weeks) to uphold the ceasefire. An Egyptian delegation in Tel Aviv was working on the release. The ceasefire has been upheld by both sides, but they have reserved the right to respond if the truce is breached.

On 9 August, an emergency UN Security Council meeting was held to discuss the situation in Gaza and the ceasefire agreement. Israel’s Ambassador Gilad Erdan called for the UNSC to place “full accountability” on the PIJ, stating “They fire rockets at Israeli civilians while using Gazans as human shields. This is a double war crime.” A UN Special Rapporteur, meanwhile, termed Israel’s strikes “illegal and irresponsible” and has called for an investigation to check if Israel had breached international law.

Issues at large

First, Israel’s motive behind the attack. Israel in the past week carried out raids on the Jenin refugee camp and arrested Bassam al-Saadi, a senior member of the PIJ. Israel then proceeded to launch a “pre-emptive” strike to prevent the PIJ from responding to the raids and arrests.



Additionally, Israel's interim Prime Minister Yair Lapid is hoping to be elected to power in general elections scheduled for November 2022. This attack can be seen as a political move to display power and ensure he gets elected.

Second, PIJ's retaliation. The PIJ's poorly planned attack resulted in 200 projectiles falling inside Gaza and injuring more civilians. As a result, Israel and its allies feel justified to brand PIJ as terrorists and support Israel's right to defend itself. Israel has blamed the PIJ for the deaths of Gaza's residents and launched an investigation into the errant missiles that hit the strip.

Third, Israel's targetting of high-ranking officials of PIJ. In its attack, Israel killed two commanders of the PIJ, Tayir al-Jabari of the al-Quds brigade and Khaled Mansour from Jabari's southern counterpart. Israeli attacks are aimed at weakening any resistance by Palestine and targetting its senior officials reduces the military might of Palestine.

Fourth, US support for Israel. The US Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas Greenfield, has supported Israel's right to defend itself against terrorist threats and many US officials have sent out tweets appreciating the Iron Dome system. The US has firmly stated its support for Israel in the international arena.

Fifth, regional divide on the attacks. The countries that have signed the Abraham accords such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco have refrained from condemning Israel's attacks. At the same time, Iran which supports and funds the PIJ warned that Israel will pay a heavy price for these attacks. Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar have condemned Israel's aggression.

In perspective

First, relief to Gaza's residents. The blockade imposed by Israel on Palestine has been lifted as a part of the ceasefire agreement and humanitarian aid has been flowing into the Gaza strip much to the relief of its residents. The only power plant in Gaza, previously shut down due to the raids, received fuel shipments, and power has been restored to the Gaza strip. The ceasefire provides time for injured civilians to recover and mourn their losses.

Second, the fragility of the truce. The terms of the truce are contingent upon Israel releasing the PIJ officials it arrested. Both sides have explicitly stated that they reserve the right to respond if the truce is breached. There is a high risk that any side may launch another attack in what they consider a breach.

Third, Israel's recurring attacks. Israel undertakes pre-emptive attacks on various locations in Palestine stating that it's defending itself from Palestine's terror attacks even when there has been no provocation. In the current round of attacks, Israel has punished Gaza before it responded, which does not justify its claim of self-defence. Against this backdrop, similar incidents, such as what happened in the early week of August, are likely to recur in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The US: White House to invest USD 370 billion through Climate Bill

In the news

On 7 August, the US Senate Democrats passed the Inflation Reduction Act aiming to combat climate change, lower the cost of prescription drugs, and increase the corporate tax to extract revenue. US President Joe Biden said: "The House should pass this as soon as possible and I look forward to signing it into law". This act focuses largely on the climate crisis and will inject over USD 370 billion to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent below 2005 levels by the year 2030. This act could become the most significant federal investment ever to have addressed the climate change battle.

The bill suggests an increase in the production of cleaner energy through solar and wind power. It also proposes to bring down the prices of electric vehicles to boost their market demand and to provide oil companies with USD 1.5 billion to encourage them with technologies like carbon capture and sequestration. The bill also mandated the government a lease sale of around 60 million acres of federal waters for the production of oil and gas, keeping intact the availability of fossil fuels as well.

Issues at large

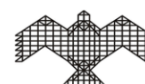
Firstly, the energy consumption trajectory. The US is the second largest carbon emitter after China but has failed to live up to its greenhouse gas reduction commitments made during COP summits. The US commitment to cut its carbon emission by half by 2030 was derailed by the untimely Russian invasion of Ukraine, which created a fuel supply shortage around the world, and led the countries to look for self-reliant options. Consequently, the Biden administration has pressed for an increase in oil and gas production to combat the crisis. However, the administration has now pushed forward a bill that transforms the American energy consumption and climate policy sector.

Secondly, the divided Senate. Following a 27-hour-long session, the bill was passed with a party-line vote of 51-50, which indicates the displeasure of the Republicans who claim that such heavy expenditure will only cause further deterioration of the economy. Some fellow Democrats like Kyrsten Sinema also raised opposing remarks, causing some addition and subtraction to the bill. Although there was criticism among the Democrats, they were united when it came to voting for the bill. The Republicans opposed the Democrats' claim that the bill will pay for itself by pointing out the reinstatement of the "Superfund tax." This will reinstate taxes on crude oil and imported petroleum products thereby increasing spending.

Thirdly, the role of the MNCs. Although the bill postulates a deliberate strain on the corporate sector, the major MNCs in the petroleum sector like Shell US, Chevron, and ExxonMobil have all lauded the introduction of the bill. However, the imposition of a minimum corporate tax on the richest corporation might not sit right with them. This tax demands a 15 percent return, which expects to bring around USD 313 billion in revenue.

In perspective

Firstly, the reconciliation factor. After an 18-month-long wait, the Senate passed the bill through a parliamentary manoeuvre called reconciliation, which allows approval by a simple majority. This move might return to haunt them if the policy does not fare as planned. However, manufacturing more solar panels and wind turbines will create a new job market, which will play to the advantage of the Democrats. Similarly, the lowered cost of energy consumption will be another deciding factor for the people in the upcoming elections.



Secondly, the election gamble. The Democrats are hoping that the people will understand their approach to reducing carbon emissions. However, the rising inflation is an immediate roadblock. The Democrats claim that the policy will pay for itself and will reduce the federal deficit over time, but it certainly won't happen in three months. The Republicans have already claimed that this policy is a job-killing spending spree that will lead to a state of recession. Now, the Democrats have to play safe and not let the Republicans be proven right three months before the elections.

Lastly, the government's whopping financial commitment reflects how they are not afraid to make big decisions. Moreover, the bill would bring the US to the forefront of the climate change battle. Being the second-largest carbon emitter, this action by the US will encourage more nations to take concrete steps toward saving the environment.

Also, from around the world

By Avishka Ashok, Sruthi Sadhasivam, Akriti Sharma, Abigail Miriam Fernandez, Joel Jacob, Rashmi BR, Apoorva Sudhakar, Rishma Banerjee, and Padmashree Anandhan

East and Southeast Asia

China: Taiwan reacts to military drills by conducting counter-drill exercises

On 8 August, Taiwan's Eighth Army Corps spokesperson announced that the army would hold anti-landing exercises in Pingtung as China continued its military drills in response to the US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit. On the same day, China's Eastern Theatre Command announced that it would conduct joint drills including anti-submarine and sea assault operations after its initial four days of military drills. The duration of the drills has not been disclosed.

China: Foreign Minister explains stance on the South China Sea issue

On 5 August, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed the 12th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Cambodia and reiterated China's stance on the South China Sea issue. Wang invoked the historic and legal basis to justify China's claims and position over the South China Sea. He further explained that China was committed to resolving issues through bilateral consultation and negotiation and adhered to the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. On the US involvement in the issue, Wang expressed China's discontent over the sudden US interest after pledging non-interference in the sovereignty of the islands. He said: "What is the credibility of a major country if it changes its established policies so arbitrarily according to its own political needs? How can it win the trust of others in the future?"

China: NGO report accuses the US of human rights violation

On 9 August, the China Society for Human Rights Studies released a report on the alleged human rights violation by the US in the Middle East and other geographic regions. The report claimed that the US was responsible for serious crimes in the Middle East, including launching wars, massacring civilians, causing harm to human life and property, and infringing on people's livelihood. The report said: "Facts show that the United States has seriously violated the basic human rights of people in the Middle East and other places, causing permanent damage and irreparable losses to countries and people in the region."

China: Envoys from 30 Islamic countries visit Xinjiang

On 7 August, Xinhua Net reported that 30 Islamic countries had sent their envoys to visit the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in China. The envoys from Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen, and Pakistan visited the capital city Urumqi from 1 to 5 August and were briefed about the

economic and social development of the Chinese government. The visit was an opportunity for the country to portray a different narrative from the one being propagated by the Western countries.

Vietnam: Insists on conflict de-escalation in the Taiwan Strait

On 3 August, the Vietnam government called international actors to refrain from aggravating the conflict in the Taiwan Strait. The spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: “Việt Nam persists in implementing the ‘One China’ principle and hopes relevant parties exercise restraint, refrain from escalating the situation in the Taiwan Strait, and actively contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability, promoting cooperation and development of the region and the world.” The government’s response comes in the wake of the US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan to extend support in the face of threats from China.

Myanmar: Insurgent groups capture military camps

On 8 August, Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and People’s Defense Forces (PDF) acquired control over two military camps in Hpakant Township, Kachin State. They captured camps in Sezin village, Hpakant, and Shwe Pyi Myint village. The latter region houses Shanni Nationalities Army (SNA), an ethnic Lisu militia group that shares close connections with the Junta troops. As a result of increasing conflict, the junta “launched air strikes” in the region. As of now, the KIA and PDF forces have collaborated in launching attacks in the Kachin State and the upper Sagaing region.

South Asia

Bangladesh: Dhaka witnesses protests over hike in fuel prices

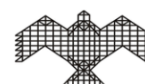
On 7 August, people in Dhaka protested against the hike in fuel prices. Protestors demanded a decrease in fuel prices to their previous rates in two days, cancellation of a hike in transport prices, and concessions for students using public transport. Bangladesh increased petrol prices by 51.1 per cent and kerosene prices by 42.5 per cent. This is the largest hike in fuel prices in the history of the country. Bangladesh has taken the step to counter rising inflation and address the increase in the deficit. It has sought assistance from IMF to manage its foreign reserves.

Afghanistan: ISIS-K claims responsibility for two explosions targeting Shias in Kabul

On 5 August, eight people were killed and 18 others injured in Kabul during a Shia community gathering in Kabul’s western neighbourhood Sar-e-Kariz. On 6 August, three people were killed and seven others were injured in a blast in Kabul’s Pol-e-Sukhta area, another Shia-dominated area. The Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), the official affiliate of the Islamic State, claimed responsibility for these attacks on the Shia community during the days of the Ashura. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said: “Following the Islamic State-claimed blasts in Kabul in recent days that killed and injured more than 120 people, the UN family in Afghanistan urges greater security for minorities so that Ashura can be marked without further attacks.”

Pakistan: Protests laid off for 24 hours by North Waziristan

On 7 August, the elders from the settled districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa approached the Jirga of the Uthmanzai tribe and requested them to end their three-week-long protest against the targeted killing and to reopen the roads and bazaars. Dozens of loaded vehicles had been stranded on the highway. Trade with Afghanistan via Ghulam Khan Border crossing has also been halted due to the closure of roads in the district. The elders, following Pakhtun traditions, also presented sheep to the Jirga as Nanawati, which is a way of seeking reconciliation or



mediation. Officials said that the tribe had accepted the Nanawati and postponed their strike for the next 24 hours.

Pakistan: Taliban confirms TTP leader's killing in Afghanistan

On 8 August, Taliban spokesperson Muhammad Khorasani confirmed the killing of senior Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Omar Khalid Khorasani and two others in a roadside bomb attack in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, TTP officials urged the Taliban government in Afghanistan to investigate the incident and unearth “spies” who could be responsible for the death of senior TTP leaders.

Pakistan: Four soldiers killed in North Waziristan suicide attack

On 9 August, the Inter-Services Public Relations said that four soldiers were killed in a suicide blast at a military convoy in the Mir Ali area of North Waziristan district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to the ISPR, intelligence agencies have begun investigations on the suicide bomber who carried out the attack and his handlers and facilitators.

Central Asia, Middle East and Africa

Israel-Palestine: Israeli forces kill al-Aqsa Brigades commander

On 9 August, the Israeli forces raided Nablus, a city on the West Bank, and killed Ibrahim al-Nablusi, the Commander of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Al-Nablusi was on the run for several months and had survived multiple assassination attempts by the Israeli forces. The Palestinian Health Ministry said that the gunfire lasted for several hours leaving three Palestinians dead and wounding 60 others.

Lebanon: Hezbollah warns Israel against targeting Palestinian militants in Lebanon

On 9 August, Hezbollah's chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah warned Israel against conducting any operation against the Palestinian militants who were in Lebanon. In a televised address on the Day of Ashura, he said “any attack on any human being will not go unpunished or unanswered.” The statement comes as a response to Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz who said that the country will take action against the Islamic Jihad militants and officials who are in Iran, Syria, and Lebanon.

Iraq: Protests by al-Sadr's supporters

The demonstrations in support of the Sadrist movement continued through the week, and the protestors continued their sit-in at the Parliament building in Baghdad, calling for the dissolution of the Parliament and early elections. Meanwhile, the southern Iraqi province of Basra also saw massive protests, with people taking to the streets to protest against the power cuts. The protests began after the collapse of the electricity grid in six southern provinces due to excessive demand amid temperatures reaching 50 degrees Celsius. The protestors in Basra also supported al-Sadr's candidature.

Yemen: Conflict escalates between the UAE and Saudi Arabia-backed fighter groups

On 8 August, violence broke out between the proxy fighters of the UAE and the Islamic alliance of Saudi Arabia in the southern province of Yemen, Shabwah, marking the largest clash since the new President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi took the position. To control the fight, the Presidential Council replaced many local military leaders but failed to deter the escalation. According to locals, the reason behind the conflict was the divide between the population and provocation by Governor, Awlaqi who claims to be the representative of the Presidential Council. Awlaqi stated: “I appeal to my brothers and the residents of Shabwah to stop the bloodshed and to stop the escalation and fighting that establish conflicts and societal strife that only serves parties from outside the governorate.”

Senegal: Government and separatist group sign peace agreement

On 4 August, the rebel group Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance signed a peace agreement with the federal government. Signing the agreement in The Gambia, the group agreed to lay down their arms. However, Amnesty International's Senegal Director said the group did not pose a huge threat to regional stability; instead, groups operating along the Gambian border were more aggressive. Therefore, the Director emphasized the need to include other groups in negotiations towards a peace deal.

South Africa: Migrants attacked by a mob for alleged criminal activities

On 4 August, residents of the Krugersdorp township attacked migrants accusing them of criminal activities in the area. The development comes after 130 people were arrested on charges of raping eight South African women near a mining dump on 28 July. The residents attacked the migrants with machetes and hammers; they also stripped and whipped the migrants before setting the migrant camps on fire. A witness to the demonstration against the migrants said: "We want support from the police because the illegal miners are terrorizing us. We cannot simply walk around the neighbourhood at night because they rape us." Krugersdorp houses several criminal gangs attempting to exploit the abandoned mines in search of any leftover gold. Several immigrants from Lesotho, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe live in the area.

Democratic Republic of Congo: MONUSCO spokesperson expelled over remarks

On 3 August, the Foreign Ministry released a statement expelling the MONUSCO spokesperson claiming that the UN official had stoked tensions leading to week-long protests. The government accused the spokesperson of making "indelicate and inappropriate" statements and therefore maintained that the UN official's presence will not "promote a climate of mutual trust and calm between Congolese institutions and MONUSCO."

Europe and the Americas

Russia: Iranian Satellite launched by Soyuz-2.1b amid the Ukrainian War

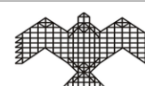
On 9 August, the Russian launch rocket Soyuz-2.1b carried Iran's Khayyam satellite from the Russia-controlled Baikonur cosmodrome. Despite the global criticism and boycott of Russia, Iran has maintained its ties with Moscow. In this context, they have refrained from criticising the Ukraine invasion and deflected suspicions that Moscow could use Khayyam to spy on Ukraine. Western intelligence officials claim that Russia "plans to use the satellite for several months or longer" by using the data to assist its war efforts before allowing Iran to take control of the Khayyam. To this, the Iranian Space Agency responded by saying, "No third country is able to access the information" sent by Khayyam and the data that would be transmitted would be controlled by Iran from day one and is unlikely to be useful for Russia due to the "encrypted algorithm."

Russia: Moscow responds to Zelenskyy's call to deprive Russian citizens of access to the West

On 8 August, in an interview with the Washington Post, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy proposed to ban all Russian travelers from going to the West. Ahead of the anticipated referendums, Zelenskyy called on the Western countries to shut their borders to all Russian nationals regardless of their stance on their country's invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin criticized the move calling it "off-the-scale irrationality," and said the measure was unfeasible and counterproductive. Anti-war Russians too were not supportive of the proposal and warned that it could backfire and consolidate Putin's support base.

Russia: Brittney Griner's sentence signals prisoner exchange talks between Russia and the US

On 4 August, US basketball star Brittney Griner was convicted in Russia of drug possession and sentenced to nine years in prison. She was also fined RUB one million, following a long



and politically charged trial. On 05 August, after her sentencing, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Moscow is prepared to discuss a possible prisoner exchange with the US. The exchange is likely to see Griner and Paul Whelan, arrested in Russia for espionage charges being exchanged for Victor Bout, an infamous arms dealer from Russia.

Russia and Ukraine: Blame game over Zaporizhzhya shelling

On 5 and 7 August, shelling was reported at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant. The shells hit a high voltage power line due to which operators had to disconnect two reactors. The International Atomic Energy Agency Director, General Rafael Mariano Grossi, criticized the action saying that it was risking a nuclear disaster, and has asked for access to the plant. Ukraine's state nuclear power company Energoatom said that Russia was engaging in "nuclear terrorism", but Russia's Defence Ministry accused Ukrainian forces of shelling the plant.

Ukraine: Amnesty International report blames Ukraine for risking civilian lives

On 4 July, Amnesty International in its recent report accused Ukraine of voluntarily endangering civilian lives by concentrating its troops in residential areas. The report stated that establishing military bases was not only risking civilians but also violating the laws of war. In response, Zelenskyy said that Russia's aggression in Ukraine cannot be justified and blamed the report for promoting propaganda and using disinformation tactics like Russia. Later, Amnesty International announced that they regretted the distress caused by the report but confirmed the charge behind its findings.

Latin America: Fourth oil tanker damaged in the continuing fire in Cuba

On 9 August, the fire at the oil storage in western Cuba continues. The firefighters and rescuers have been attempting to control the blaze through boats, planes, and spraying foam, but the fourth tank has caught fire. So far, one person has died and 125 injured; 14 firefighters have been missing. The tank facility is key to Cuba's electricity supply as it depends on the oil pipelines, and it is also important for unloading and transshipments to import crude oil, fuel oil, and diesel. Therefore, Cuba is set to be impacted economically and face electricity shortages from the continuing fire.

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COVER STORY

Crisis in Sri Lanka:

100 Days of People's Protest: What's Next?

Chrishari de Alwis Gunasekare



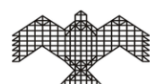
(Image Source: EPA/BBC)

100 Days of People's Protest: What's Next?

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 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

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/>

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/>

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 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.

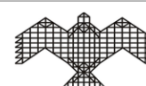
Milestones of the 'Aragalaya'

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

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>



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 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

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

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

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, seeking shelter in the Maldives and eventually in Singapore. In the absence of President Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Wickremasinghe 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 Wickremasinghe 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.

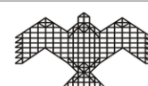
The people's protest went past the 100-day mark on 17 July, with a quiet celebration in remembrance of lives lost and the injured during the protests, while elated of the fact that their primary goal was now achieved.

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

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>

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>



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 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

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>

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?

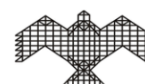
On 20 July, Ranil Wickremasinghe won the parliamentary vote and became the Ninth Executive President of Sri Lanka. When he came to power, he came with the promise: “Our divisions are over. We have to work together now”.¹³ However, his words have only proved true in the sense that he's working together 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 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.

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>

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



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 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

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>

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/>

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.

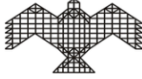
Nonetheless, it is evident that Sri Lanka's political and economic troubles are hardly over. In fact, the coming months and years would see the island nation striving for political and socio-economic stability. During these past months, the Sri Lankan citizens have learnt the hard way that politicians 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

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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