

ISSN: 2582-6433



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed 6th Edition

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 7

www.ijlra.com

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Sri Lanka's Crisis and the Power of Citizen Mobilization

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Abstract

Due to inadequate management, Sri Lanka had extreme political unrest and disastrous economic stability in the recent years (2020–2022). This study found numerous contributing factors to Sri Lanka's current social, economic, and political crisis; international relations with bias, Civil upheaval, a prohibition on chemical fertilisers, the collapse of small and medium-sized businesses, the tourism industry, and COVID-19, issues with crisis management, immunisation programme that is delayed, energy crisis, environmental catastrophes, politics in families, currency scarcity for consumption, government borrowing elevated inflation Lock-downs, The UN Human Rights Council has lost my trust. medication scarcity causing a medical emergency misuse of the law, printing money for the everyday government, Non-scientific, and superstitious approach to solve public problems, Oil shortage, influence of politics in civil matters, difficulties managing diplomatic relations, repeatedly closing schools, Russia-Ukraine conflict, minorities are in danger, improbable financial planning, Unpunished war crimes and crimes after the conflict, both a violation of international commercial law and of human rights.

Introduction

On November 16, 2019, the Sri Lankan people chose a new president, then on March 20, 2022, they demanded his resignation. The President wants to stay in office for at least the next three years despite denying that there are issues with the current political and economic climate.

Currently, Sri Lanka is going through its greatest economic crisis ever. The majority of the populace is protesting in the streets, calling for the resignation of the one governing family-dominated administration. The President, however, disputes his inability to act quickly, and the conflict has since escalated to widespread street brawls. This editorial makes an effort to comprehend how online mass media have covered Sri Lanka's two-year journey towards this crisis, as this economic disaster did not develop suddenly.

An extraordinary political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka has led to months of nationwide protests. The Rajapaksa family has held sway over the country for many years, but its residents have requested that they step down under the hashtag #GoHomeGota, that the government deal with systemic corruption, and usher in political accountability. Tens of thousands have joined demonstrations across Sri Lanka in a reawakening of nonviolent political activism, defying government attempts to put an end to these movements. Massive mobilisation and persistent pressure shook the hitherto invincible Gotabaya Rajapaksa from office, caused a wave of widespread resignations from the current administration, strengthened already-existing places for opposition, and generated new spaces for talks on urgently needed changes.

Despite the unsettling trends of authoritarianism, democratic regress, and ethnomajoritarianism that are sweeping Sri Lanka, pivotal times in recent history have brought together many groups in a display of nonviolent resistance. The most recent wave of citizen mobilisation has been made possible by these events, and it has the potential to fundamentally alter Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's History Of Political Activism

Several actors, including victims' groups, civil society organisations from all over Sri Lanka, trade unions, and political parties, are credited with contributing to Sri Lanka's long history of political action, which serves as a foundation for the present upsurge in mobilisation. In order to push for progressive reforms, activism has concentrated on a variety of topics, including civil and political rights as well as socioeconomic issues. These issues have been the subject of street rallies, legal challenges to public comments, and political discussions.

Opposition organisations, civic society, labour unions, and victims of political violence all worked to combat state-sponsored violence and enforced disappearances during the 1980s and 1990s. Among these initiatives is the potent work of the Mothers' Front, whose members mobilised in order to raise awareness of forced disappearances and demand accountability. Many demonstrators experienced persistent harassment and violence as a result of this mobilisation, which cost the participants dearly personally. For instance, since the end of the nation's civil war in 2009, the families of those who have vanished have protested nonstop for more than 1,900 days. Other issues have also received attention, including teachers and union members who opposed attempts to militarise higher education, farming and fishing communities whose members' livelihoods were impacted by disastrous government policies, communities opposing government-initiated land grabs, and many other causes. These and other protests have helped Sri Lanka's opposition movement mobilise over its long history.

Former president Mahinda Rajapaksa (who served in office from 2005 to 2015 and is the elder brother of current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa authoritarian)'s policies and impunity gave rise to unprecedented heights of activism among political repression victims, civil society, and opposition parties. These government critics drew attention to the atrocities committed during the civil war as well as the country's escalating authoritarianism, including threats to press freedom and the improper impeachment of the nation's chief justice for having the temerity to rule against the Rajapaksa administration. A common cause was created at this time as a result of democratic backsliding, which gave rise to movements like the National Movement for a Just Society, which called for regime change.

Notably, a march from Pottuvil in eastern Sri Lanka to Polikandy in the north in February 2021 was the first attempt by Tamil and Muslim citizens to unite during Gotabaya Rajapaksa's presidency. Thousands came together to march for minority communities' equality and justice. The demonstrators disobeyed court orders to stop and desist while being watched and intimidated.

The Sri Lankan government's use of violence, intimidation, and other methods, such as arbitrary limitations, to put an end to protests has changed as well. For instance, public health issues were employed to put an end to protests at the height of the coronavirus outbreak. Widespread broadcasts showed protestors being beaten up and brought to military-run internment camps, giving a chilling message to potential protests. To prevent opposition demonstrations, the government also imposed extensive controls under the pretence of pandemic prevention measures. However, despite all of these endeavours, protestors persisted in their opposition to the administration.

The Latest Crisis

Given that various members of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's family hold multiple government positions, the current problem can be mostly attributed to his administration and family. The Rajapaksa family has controlled Sri Lankan politics for a number of years, building a sizable support base among the country's majority-Sinhalese population by endorsing populist ethnomajoritarianism and highlighting the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a force in the country's nearly three-decade-long civil war. Even though he was accused of corruption and nepotism after losing the presidential election in January 2015, Mahinda Rajapaksa entered politics again later that year as a member of parliament. Since gaining a seat in the legislative elections in August 2015, he has established the Rajapaksa family as the most influential political family in Sri Lanka by working with family members to build a new political party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna or Sri Lankan People's Front.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa became a presidential contender in the wake of the tragic Easter Sunday terrorist attacks that shook Sri Lanka in 2019. He positioned himself as a strong leader capable of reestablishing security, stability, and economic prosperity. Even though he had never previously held an elected position and was accused of egregious human rights violations connected to the

civil war, he was elected president within a few months by a margin of more than a million votes.

His numerous initiatives have wreaked havoc on Sri Lanka's democracy and economy. For instance, the 2019 tax cuts he implemented dramatically decreased government earnings, making it harder for Sri Lanka to buy necessities like food, medication, gas, and petrol. Additionally, the agricultural industry and food security were negatively impacted by the 2021 ban on chemical fertilisers, which caused many Sri Lankans to struggle to make ends meet and support their families. The country's tea industry as well as other businesses were affected by the prohibition. The economy, which is mostly dependent on the tourism industry, was also severely affected by the outbreak and following lockdowns. High inflation is a result of government failure in a number of other areas, which has exacerbated the crisis and created fresh opportunities for violence.

Years of unrest, bloodshed, and unpredictability in Sri Lanka have been interspersed with a protracted civil war, many humanitarian crises, and a constitutional coup in 2018. The nation was still unprepared for the current crisis, which has affected thousands of people and left many of them struggling to find basic necessities and deal with prolonged power outages brought on by fuel shortages. These issues have also disrupted important services, such as healthcare and education, as well as people's livelihoods. Numerous people passed away after collapsing during protracted lines in the blazing sun for essential products and services, which is a heartbreaking testament to the appalling circumstances. Concerns over the effects of pharmaceutical shortages and malnutrition on Sri Lankans are also growing.

Political activism among Sri Lankans has reemerged in the midst of this historic crisis, sparking months-long nonviolent demonstrations. Rallies have been held to protest the unaffordable cost of life, the frequent power outages, and the long lines to buy vital necessities. However, after a few weeks of nonviolent protests, on March 31, 2022, violence broke out. On this day, a peaceful demonstration in front of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's home descended into violence, leading to numerous arrests and starting an ongoing police investigation. In response, the government enacted a curfew and declared a state of emergency. Thousands of people proceeded to peacefully demonstrate in spite of these measures, leading to the biggest display of civil disobedience in recent memory. The demonstrators persisted in calling for systemic change in Sri Lanka, including the resignation of the Rajapaksa family from government positions, political

accountability, openness

in governance, and an end to corruption. On April 3, the government collectively resigned in retaliation. However, for a while, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who still holds the president, continued to serve in their positions despite repeated requests for them to step down.

The Rajapaksas' defiance of these demands for resignation and the nation's poor economic status fueled demonstrators even more. At Galle Face Green in the centre of Colombo, demonstrators opened the largest demonstration site on April 9. The name of the occupied location was changed to "GotaGoGama," underlining the protesters' call for the president to step down. The GotaGoGama campaign is currently the focal point of the protest, having been occupied for more than 75 days and counting.

This mobilisation stands out in Sri Lanka's longer protest history for its variety, tenacity, and primarily nonviolent tactics (except for some instances of violence largely sparked by government supporters, including deadly attacks on protesters on May 9). Young people are largely responsible for the protests' enthusiasm and originality, although a wide variety of ages, including some in their 80s and 90s, have taken part in the demonstrations. In addition, the movement has adherents who are unified in calling for the resignation of the Rajapaksas regardless of their race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, or profession. The protests have also shown an unprecedented level of organisation, with well-wishers providing food, water, and healthcare. Additionally, areas have been set aside for innovative forms of resistance like open forums, a library, legal assistance, street plays, and monuments to previous acts of violence.

On May 6, shortly after the previous state of emergency had been lifted due to rising pressure and government officials' concerns that an ongoing hartal (strike) would bring the nation to a standstill, a state of emergency was once more established. The numerous people who continued to peacefully demonstrate were unaffected by the state of emergency, as was clearly clear from the demonstrations in April. On May 9, Mahinda Rajapaksa's supporters attacked the nonviolent protestors, sparking more bloodshed. After the violence against the demonstrators expanded to other locations, there were multiple fatalities along with looting and property destruction at the hands of lawmakers from the ruling party. Despite Mahinda Rajapaksa's unexpected resignation from his position as prime minister, which was one of the demonstrators' main demands,

the violence did not stop. It didn't take long for a countrywide curfew to be put in place, but the unrest didn't let up for several days.

The escalation of the peaceful protests into violence was concerning for a number of reasons. Concerns about the police and military's failure to maintain order in the face of the emergency and curfew arose when mobs overran streets and neighbourhoods. Investigations have now resulted in the arrest of a number of criminals, including those responsible for both the attack on peaceful protestors and the subsequent deadly violence in Sri Lanka. Questions have also been raised regarding the possible guilt of important government figures, past office holders, and those in charge of upholding law and order in the wake of these arrests.

Sri Lanka had three days without a prime minister or a cabinet after Mahinda Rajapaksa's resignation. The opposition remained split, and the president was marginalised. Alarmingly, the political, economic, and security crises in the nation was getting worse. Ranil Wickremesinghe, a seasoned politician, was appointed prime minister on May 12. Subsequently, some people who were reportedly connected to the crisis were nominated to the new cabinet, raising doubts about the legitimacy of the new administration.

Diverse Forms Of Pushback

In recent years, Sri Lankan politics have progressed beyond the usual public demonstrations. Today's demonstrations take many different forms, including legal action, public comments, discussions, works of art and drama, as well as social media campaigns. Social media, for instance, has given protests a newfound sense of vitality and inventiveness and has increased participation from protester of all ages and locations.

The use of public interest litigation by citizens has increased recently, with many activists launching cases to oppose proposed constitutional changes, legislative measures, as well as unfair and capricious government actions. Through, among other things, social media updates on developments in pertinent courtrooms and the ramifications of associated judgements, public interest litigation has also affected wider debates among policymakers and common people. This has increased knowledge on significant contemporary topics.

It is important to note several instances where public interest lawsuits and other types of opposition have influenced discussions and sparked change. The Supreme Court, which had previously been viewed as pro-regime, invalidated the Divineguma Bill in 2012, which sought to abolish checks and balances on government and concentrate executive power. The former chief justice was immediately and unceremoniously impeached, which is now largely regarded as government revenge. Though the action brought together a variety of individuals, it ultimately assisted in the formation of a broad-based opposition that ousted the nation's then-president Mahinda Rajapaksa in the 2015 presidential election.

These individuals have been at the forefront of Sri Lanka's political changes before. Political parties, civic society, labour unions, and academia all came together during Sri Lanka's 2018 constitutional crisis, which resulted from Mahinda Rajapaksa's illegitimate power grab and the arbitrary removal of the incumbent prime minister. This caused political upheaval in the island nation. Many people united in a rare display of protest against this development, taking to the streets and arguing their case before the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal. After several weeks of activism and legal proceedings, the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision declaring the president's actions to be unconstitutional. The crisis was finally resolved in December 2018 when Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned as prime minister and Wickremasinghe was appointed back to his position.

Examples from more recent times also show instances where strong protests compelled Sri Lankan government officials to alter their direction. The Twentieth Amendment plan to change the nation's constitution, which was intended to further strengthen the presidency's power and undermine independent institutions, was opposed by a broad coalition of stakeholders in 2020. The Supreme Court received legal challenges from these critics. In addition to rallies, activists used social media campaigns, political discussions, and protests to voice their disapproval, prompting the administration to make a number of adjustments. Despite holding a majority in the legislature, the ruling party was compelled to include a number of amendment modifications.

The planned Colombo Port City Economic Commission Act was also met with vehement opposition in 2021 from protesters, who regarded it as another attempt by the government to transfer authority over Sri Lankan assets to foreign parties without transparency

or accountability. Activists protested once more in the streets and filed a Supreme Court case challenging the planned law. China's expanding presence in Sri Lanka, which protesters saw as a danger to Sri Lanka's sovereignty and economic health, served as fuel for opposition to the legislation. The legal arguments and discussions around the proposed legislation made Sri Lankans aware of the issues with the planned solution and forced the government to revise the law's provisions before it was passed.

These are a few instances where oppositional tactics weakened authoritarian regimes. These illustrations highlight the need to take into account political activism in Sri Lanka's setting of fragmented political parties and weak labour unions. As new organisations and groups for criticising government acts, like citizen-led initiatives and youth mobilisation, emerged, these groups' inadequacies also did.

Potential For Transformation In Sri Lanka

The endurance and ingenuity of Sri Lankan citizens are evident in these months-long peaceful demonstrations. A formidable government fell in a couple of weeks, and a once-invincible political family was sent into exile. In the midst of the despair engulfing Sri Lanka, the strength of citizen mobilisation and resistance has attracted attention from all over the world and given the Sri Lankan opposition much-needed energy, ideas, and views. The function of citizens and their connection to the government have also been redefined as a result of these protests.

However, there are still many obstacles facing protest organisations, such as societal cracks, persistent political polarisation, and intergroup mistrust. Although these demonstrations have brought attention to the need to redress minority rights and hold the war's previous wrongdoers accountable, some people see these issues as unimportant in comparison to the current crises. Therefore, there is much to strive for even though the current crisis presents a favourable opening for upcoming social movements.

A decrease of demonstrators has also been attributed to protest fatigue and the change of administration in May 2022. While many people, especially younger demonstrators, have taken a tolerant position toward the new prime minister, many others, including them, continue to believe that change can only come about if Gotabaya Rajapaksa steps down as president and systemic

reform takes place. The Rajapaksas and their allies perceive the new administration as a continuation of the old guard and a safety net. These factors will continue to influence the protests' course, determine if they can be sustained, and affect how effective they are. Despite the obstacles and uncertainties, Sri Lankans have the chance to capitalise on this time and forge a new national identity. They can confront structural injustices and violence while calling for political accountability, social and economic justice, and a new style of governance. Neither the results nor the task will be simple or quick. Thoughtful, inventive, and inclusive citizen mobilisation has a chance to reshape Sri Lanka, as seen by the recent developments.

