

Sri Lanka at the Crossroad of Its History

John Smith



Fig. 1: An entire town blocked by queues for fuel (Photo courtesy of Dilip Kumar, 2022).

Nishal's girlfriend Radeeka helps her mother make breakfast. As gas has been out for weeks, preparing breakfast involves waking up earlier, gathering *dara* (left-over palm branches), cooking, and then scrubbing pots hard. Currently, Sri Lanka is experiencing the most serious economic, political, and social crisis in its history.¹ In many parts of the country, the 26-year war has never directly affected the people this much. As a result of the lack of debt repayment, the rampant inflation, and the lack of many basic necessities (e.g., fuel, medicine, food), the island is in the midst of complete economic chaos. Several factors – mismanagement, corruption, lack of political vision, a sudden ban on agricultural pesticides, COVID-19, and the energy crisis in Europe – have contributed to the downfall and social isolation of millions of Sri Lankans.²

The Rajapaksa family

The Rajapaksa dynasty has long held power in Sri Lanka. In the 1950s, D.A. Rajapaksa (1905-1967) was the patriarch, and later his sons stepped into politics. One of these sons, Mahinda (b. 1945), became President in 2005. During his tenure, his brothers and family members held different powerful positions. Among them Basil (b. 1951) and Gotabaya (b. 1949) kept key strategic ministerial roles till Gotabaya, in 2019, eventually became President himself. It's not a matter of individual skills alone. Since the final phases of the Civil War (2009), the Rajapaksas have constructed an extensive political, economic, and financial network. Over many years, they have established companies, firms, financial institutions, and connected these to government and foreign donors.³ China played a major role in funding gigantic projects, supposedly for people's benefit, but often for enhancing the ruling family's power and image. It is true that some projects were necessary for the country to develop, such as highways, ports, and power plants, but loans were a noose for the government.⁴

Additionally, Chinese banks provided huge loans to Sri Lanka for the construction of useless works that merely contributed to rulers' enormous economic wealth at the expense of the people.

One of Sri Lanka's well-known and well-exploited fortunes is that it is in a highly strategic geopolitical position. For this reason alone, the offers of support from India and the USA, the requests for stability from Europe, and the economic interests of Russia and China continue. Yet again, everyone is ready to use Sri Lanka for political interest. Ukraine's president, for example, declared that Russia must be considered responsible for the Sri Lankan crisis.⁵ China, India, the USA, Europe, the United Kingdom, and others, continue to strongly affirm their willingness to help Sri Lankans and the nation. The reality, however, is that such powers just make sure that their physical, financial, and political positions remain intact. Rather than a blessing, this bond appears to be a curse. China comes forward offering financial support and loans: one of the roots of the problem trying again to become the solution.

Street protests

On July 9, 2022, the situation spiraled out of control. Seen from above, the scene resembled a street scene during one of the great religious holidays. The heat was, as always, suffocating, the screams of the crowd deafening. The crowd pushed everyone towards a single center: the presidential palace. That same white building, always so immaculate and silent, was protected by yellow police barriers just a few hours ago. So protected, that the two rows of fences also prevented people from seeing inside. But the crowd managed to enter, to bathe in the pool, and to use the President's toilets, as a form of revenge.

On July 11, the President, the highest expression of a broken political class, announced his resignation, after leaving the same building.⁶ Once again, Gotabaya Rajapaksa did not keep his promises:

I met Nishal, a 27-year-old man, in Colombo in early July 2022. He was buying essentials for his upcoming journey. On 12 July, Nishal's ship departed from the Port of Colombo with a crew of 34. Nine Russians and 25 Sri Lankans were on board, all young and hopeful. The team was united in the task of transporting hundreds of containers across the globe, starting in the USA. On the same day, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the now former President of Sri Lanka, left the country bound for Singapore. Sri Lanka went bankrupt after months of crisis, social unrest escalated, and the new establishment was left with the challenge of rebuilding a collapsing nation.

he left the country using the immunity constitutionally given to his role, and he did not present his resignation on the day he publicly declared it, because he was concerned about being safe abroad. As usual, first personal and family gain and then, eventually, the public interest.

The political future of the country fluctuated for days, reflected in countless projections, predictions, and snide comments. Ranil Wickremesinghe was named Acting President after Rajapaksa escaped. What the Acting President did was what governments in Sri Lanka have always done in times of hardship: he imposed curfews in different areas of the country and enacted the emergency law. People are used to those measures: during wartime, during the orchestrated communal riots in 2018, following the Easter attacks in 2019, and then during COVID-19 in 2020. Curfew and emergency laws were imposed so many times that, now, people no longer feel their weight. Soon, Wickremesinghe was elected by the Parliament as the eighth President of the country with a majority of 134 votes. Hopefully this is the beginning of a new era of stability, so needed and deserved by Sri Lanka's people.

A matter of accountability

In the new government, just after the presidential election, many of the same ministers were confirmed, raising a critical question: can the parliament bring about the changes that are needed, or will continuity mean immobility? Having seen the former President flee, the Supreme Court banned his powerful brothers from leaving the country. This seemed to be the end of the dynasty. Yet many old incidents and crimes remain unresolved. Many attempts to identify root causes and direct responsibilities have failed in the past.⁷

This crisis showed how much the people of Sri Lanka changed since the end of the war in terms of public participation. It also showed how much the democracy matured. The #GotaGoHome or #GotaGoGama⁸ – later *Aragalaya*⁹ – movement has written the history of Sri Lankans as a diverse nation, a nation in which Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Agnostics, and Atheists united for a common goal of justice and development for all. Overall, this movement has demonstrated enduring solidarity and civil faith, showing that there is an alternative to violence and war. And that the alternative is doable. In Colombo and several other cities, hundreds of thousands of people joined the peaceful sit-ins, regardless of weather, opponents, and political attempts of bending their motivation.

Facts and history will prove whether the political system has changed as well. Whether the new leaders prioritize their people will be seen through their actions and the implementation of their policies. Several issues remain unresolved, including delegation of power, constitutional reforms, economic plans, international positioning.

Until now, new leaders and politicians have not been able to find an appropriate space. It's not about new names. It's about a new pattern of living politics, a new approach to power, an open space for participation, and a strong commitment to accountability and inclusion. There is often a vicious circle here: politicians discourage people from participating, and people do not stand up to discouragement.

Realistic hopes

Hour by hour, week by week, the ground situation changes. The state of emergency passed in parliament, former President Rajapaksa's visa was extended in Singapore, activists were arrested, and a court seeks to hold those responsible for the crisis accountable. It all happened within hours, while people kept queuing for fuel. At the end of July schools partially reopened, a sort of rehearsal of normality.

In October this year, Nishal will return to the island and will likely see a different Sri Lanka. He hopes that his parents and girlfriend have regular access to gas for cooking and fuel for transportation. He believes that there will be a solid plan for the economy of the country. He trusts that a recovery from the crisis will be supported by the IMF and reliable international partners.¹⁰ In the meantime, with rampant migration continuing, thousands of citizens will have left seeking a better future.

John Smith lived in Asia for almost twenty years and works in the field of human, social, and personal development. Nishal and Radeeka are pseudonyms.

Notes

- <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61505842>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/09/world/asia/rajapaksa-family-sri-lanka-president.html>
- <https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/sri-lanka-rajapaksa-family-offshore-wealth-power/>
- <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/13/china-sri-lanka-rajapaksa-family-corruption/>
- <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/83636/ukrainian-president-blames-russia-for-sri-lanka-crisis>
- <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/9/sri-lanka-protesters-storm-president-house-demanding-resignation>
- <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/promoting-reconciliation-accountability-and-human-rights-sri-lanka-report-united>
- <https://gohomegota.online/>
- <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/aragalaya-this-word-means-struggle-sri-lanka-gotabaya-rajapaksa-8039897/>
- <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2022/07/27/imf-says-sri-lanka-needs-to-talk-with-china-about-debt-restructuring/>