

Sri Lanka in 2022 and 2023

Things Fall Apart—Can Sri Lanka Hold On?

ABSTRACT

In the span of two years, Sri Lanka saw one of the biggest protests in South Asia, ousted a president and his government, defaulted on its sovereign debt, declared bankruptcy, appointed an unelected president, went to the IMF for a bailout loan, delayed elections, moved even further away from justice and reconciliation, and celebrated 75 years of independence. While the resignation of president Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his family from government hinted at change for the country, the appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe demonstrated a firm commitment to lack of reform or accountability. Austerity, intimidation, instability, and further decay followed. These economic and non-economic shocks converged to reveal a country where multiple crises of dissent, debt, decay, and decline were inextricably bound together, with no way forward yet in sight.

KEYWORDS: protests, sovereign debt, bankruptcy, IMF, delayed elections, illiberal democracy, authoritarianism

THE YEAR 2022 WAS the first of two exceptionally disruptive years in the history of postcolonial Sri Lanka. The previous year, 2021, saw Sri Lanka crippled by the COVID-19 pandemic and a record shrinking of the economy—the most severe depression since independence—as the government’s debt burden reached a point of crisis. However, this crisis had long been on its way. It was caused by years of severe economic mismanagement, as well as a series of post-war mega-development projects, such as the Port City project,

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initiated to stimulate rapid economic growth and investment. Over the course of 2021, the ruling Rajapaksa family had further consolidated its position with their militarized and illiberal style of governance, while also not honoring any public commitment to constitutional reforms. Delayed provincial council elections, increased anti-Muslim violence, passing of the controversial Colombo Port City Economic Commission Act (No. 11 of 2021), and the declaration of a state of emergency, all ensured that the “new repositories of dissent” which produced 2021’s protests (Klem and Samararatne 2022) erupted again in an unprecedented manner. This marked the start of a rapidly unfolding series of events which followed in 2022 and 2023.

DISSENT

Postcolonial Sri Lanka has seen numerous instances of citizens expressing their dissent from government actions and inactions. The first protest of 2022 took place in Colombo on March 1. It was followed by recurrent small-scale gatherings and candlelit vigils marking the swift decline of Sri Lanka’s foreign reserves and the rapidly deteriorating situation in the country. These protests were a response to perceived economic mismanagement by president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his brother and prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, and their government (which also included nine other members of their family), and their failure to uphold constitutional values. Organized through social media networks, the protestors called out the severe hardship the whole country was facing due to unparalleled price hikes, 13-hour power cuts, and an acute medical and fuel shortage. These series of protests, which were named *Aragalaya* or struggle, demanded that the government be held accountable, and asked for the immediate resignation of Gotabaya, Mahinda, and the government. However, in the face of inaction from the government, the small, peaceful protests quickly turned violent. Angry crowds gathered on the roads leading to Gotabaya’s private residence and set fire to two army buses that were blocking their path. Rajapaksa immediately assumed emergency powers and imposed an island-wide curfew. Two days later, all 26 Cabinet ministers resigned from their positions. The resignation of the governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Ajith Nivard Cabraal, followed shortly after.

On April 9, defying the threat of another state of emergency, thousands of people gathered on Galle Face Green holding up signs and chanting “Gota Go home.” The mass protest on the Green swiftly evolved into an

occupation movement, aptly named GotaGoGama (GGG, Gota Go Village). Taking inspiration from worldwide occupy movements, the occupation facilitated the collaborative creation of knowledge in the establishment of a protest village. GGG morphed into a makeshift village, housing a library, a college, a People's University, a legal aid tent, and a theater called Tear Gas Cinema, along with a community kitchen, a medical aid center, an art gallery, a salon, and sanitation facilities. At its core, this creation of infrastructure, which included art, theater, and rituals, was an act of resistance. Smaller GGGs appeared all over the country, as well as in numerous other countries worldwide. As the rallies became bigger, the hashtag #GoHomeGota gained momentum globally, demonstrating how social media serves as a tool to ignite social movements in the digital era. However, the protests were seen as “middle class,” with the main language used at the protests being English—“a language not spoken by 75% of the population” (Illanperuma 2022). It was also not seen as representative of the struggles of the north—the center of Sri Lanka's protracted ethnic conflict, which has a long history of resistance, protests, and challenges to state power and remains a deeply militarized zone—and where the resignation of Gotabaya did not signal an end to the issues facing the Tamil-dominated region (Alagarajah 2022).

A key demand of Aragalaya was first met on May 9, with Mahinda handing in his resignation. But this victory was brief, as pro-Rajapaksa mobs descended on GGG shortly after, wrecking the site and assaulting the occupants. Five people were killed, and over 150 injured. This type of violence is not unfamiliar to the Sri Lankan government, which has historically encouraged violence for political purposes by allowing Sinhala mobs to target Tamil civilians during various post-independence pogroms. The mob violence was followed by the burning of several ministers' houses around the greater Colombo area and Kandy.

Despite this violent state response, Aragalaya gained momentum. On July 9, global audiences witnessed tens of thousands of protestors overcoming tear gas, breaking barricades, and entering the grand, neo-baroque Presidential Secretariat. Images of protestors swimming in the president's pool made headline news the world over (BBC 2022). Shortly after, Gotabaya promised to step down. However, instead of honoring this promise, he fled to the Maldives in a military jet and appointed Ranil Wickremesinghe acting president. The latter is a veteran politician and five-time prime minister, and his appointment signaled that state power would remain in familiar hands.

His strong ties to the Rajapaksas, both personal and political, resulted in him being nicknamed Ranil Rajapaksa: a new president seemingly controlled by the previous regime (Gunawardena and Kadirgamar 2022). On assuming power, he immediately declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew. His first day concluded with violent clashes outside his office, where security forces used tear gas and water cannons, injuring 84 people and killing one: 26-year-old Jaliya Dissanayake. Gotabaya's resignation came shortly after.

Within days, Aragalaya came to a forced end: Wickremesinghe used military force to remove all the remaining protesters. He also pushed legislation that would establish high-security zones in the vicinity of Colombo—a measure used by the state during the civil war to target and militarize areas suspected of terrorist activity. While these legislative efforts were revoked, the proposed high-security zones, which included public spaces such as the Green, were seen as a draconian effort to suppress future protests. Regardless of all these attempts, protests have not stopped. Hundreds of thousands of public-sector workers have been taking to the streets since October 2023 demanding pay raises, urgent revision of current tax policies, and the end of austerity measures.

DEBT

Sri Lanka entered 2022 with insufficient US dollars to meet import needs. In the face of this impending crisis, Gotabaya announced that his government would potentially seek International Monetary Fund (IMF) support. This was the country's worst upheaval since independence. It was popularly attributed to COVID-19, but the economy was already suffering, partly due to a dependence on tourism and the agriculture sector, which generated limited tax revenues due to their often-informal nature. Ill-timed tax cuts, including a reduction in the VAT in late 2019, had further diminished revenue streams. The economy contracted by a record 7.8%. Annual inflation hovered around 60%, and the currency depreciated by over 80%.

On April 12, the government of Sri Lanka announced a unilateral suspension of foreign debt repayments. This amounted to a default on all foreign debt, including bonds and bilateral loans from foreign governments. Not long after, the governor of the Central Bank, Nandalal Weerasinghe, confirmed the country's inability to repay its national debt. This was the first instance of Sri Lanka defaulting on its sovereign debt since 1948.

Three months later (July 6), the country officially declared bankruptcy, followed by a decision to seek IMF assistance. This decision was greatly debated and highly contentious, as it would end Sri Lanka's record of successfully meeting its external debt obligations since 1948. In September 2022, Sri Lanka reached a staff-level agreement with the IMF for an Extended Fund Facility program. The IMF stipulated that Sri Lanka must first reach an agreement with its bilateral and private creditors before securing the initial tranche of funds, and that mandated the formulation of specific strategies to attain a primary surplus by 2025, aligning with the IMF's Debt Sustainability Analysis (IMF 2022). Two hundred days later, in March 2023, a board-level agreement was announced for a bailout loan of USD 2.9 billion over four years.

Delivering the deal, Wickremesinghe was quick to assert that Sri Lanka “will no longer be declared a bankrupt nation,” as the bailout was expected to catalyze additional external support, with up to USD 7 billion of funding expected from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank over the next four years (*Daily Mirror* 2023). A domestic debt restructuring plan soon followed. It entailed withdrawing 0.5% of the GDP annually for the next 16 years from the retirement savings of the labor force, reducing their accumulated retirement funds by 30%. As Kadirgamar (2023) notes, this came at the expense of Sri Lanka's working population: it disproportionately affected those employed in sectors such as the plantation sector and the garment industry. Analytically, it remains unclear whether the overall measures outlined for debt restructuring can chart a sustainable path beyond 2023—the planning horizon of the IMF program. The absence of analytical support for economic policies, unequal distribution of the debt restructuring burden, and unchecked corruption all add to the uncertainty at hand.

And despite these actions, the release of the second installment of funds stalled. Following a two-week visit by an IMF team in September 2023, a staff-level agreement for unlocking the next USD 333 million disbursement could not be reached. With the IMF expressing concern regarding the measures taken, the government announced an additional 18% hike in electricity rates and a hike in fuel prices. This was followed by a controversial VAT increase, from 15% to 18%, when Wickremesinghe presented his “revolutionary” budget. While these budget proposals were presented as required for the second tranche of the IMF loan, which was finally approved, they have been widely criticized for further exacerbating a dire economic situation, while “taxing the poor to reward the rentiers” (Pathirana 2023).

The issues related to the IMF's policy package also became entangled in larger geopolitical rivalries. Sri Lanka's sovereign debt is held by several countries, notably China, India, and Japan. China, often cited in the context of "debt trap diplomacy," holds approximately 10% of Sri Lanka's debt and has showed limited cooperation despite being Sri Lanka's primary bilateral creditor. While it eventually agreed to a two-year moratorium on debt servicing to Sri Lanka, there remains uncertainty as to whether Beijing will fulfil its commitment. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's economic and diplomatic ties with New Delhi have been strengthened. While India remained silent on Sri Lanka's request for an additional USD 1.1 billion currency swap and a moratorium on bilateral debt, its support through lines of credit, currency swaps, and deferred payments was unparalleled. Other members of the Quad (the United States, Australia, and Japan) also announced various levels of support, with President Biden pledging an additional USD 20 million in humanitarian assistance at the G7 Summit, bringing the total commitment to Sri Lanka to USD 40 million (*Outlook 2022*).

Despite all this assistance, Sri Lanka remains under immense stress. It is no longer the market success story it once was. This current adjustment is expected to cause more suffering than the previous 16 IMF agreements. The country remains subject to the demands of its creditors. Hamilton Reserve Bank, which owns over USD 250 million worth of sovereign bonds, has commenced legal proceedings (Dolmetsch 2022). Most Sri Lankans face enormous hardship. And Wickremesinghe and his government are perceived as protecting the elite, consistent with Reinsberg and Abouhard's (2023) argument that IMF deals favor governments, which in turn leverage programs for political advantage, shifting the responsibility for adjustment to supporters of the opposition and low-income people.

DECLINE

In December 2023, CIVICUS, an organization which monitors global civic space, downgraded Sri Lanka's rating from "obstructed" to "repressed" (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). Over the last two years, government authorities have engaged in a systematic campaign of harassment against human rights defenders, journalists, protest leaders, and social media users, subjecting them to surveillance, interrogation, or legal prosecution. In addition, the Rajapaksa–Wickremesinghe administration put in place a series of

oppressive laws aimed at suppressing dissent, protests, and censure. The aftermath of the raids on Aragalaya included a series of human rights violations facilitated by the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Initially passed in 1979, this remains a draconian piece of legislation, particularly burdening minorities, as it is frequently used to detain individuals for extended periods without charges. It was invoked widely during Aragalaya to arrest student activist leaders who are members of the Inter-University Students' Federation. Most recently, in November 2023, it was used to arrest 10 people in Batticaloa, during Maaveerar Nal (Heroes Day), when Tamil families gathered to remember Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam cadres who died in the civil war.

A replacement for the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the Anti-Terrorism Act, was first proposed in March 2023. As it would grant extensive powers to the president, the police, and the military, the bill received much criticism from local and international human rights groups. The revised bill, which was gazetted in September 2023, still represents an unparalleled expansion of executive authority, as it extends the definition of terrorism to offences like property damage, theft, and robbery, and most importantly curtails the rights to speech and assembly. If passed, this bill could enable the use of “draconian measures to silence peaceful critics and target minorities” (Human Rights Watch 2023). Other repressive legislation was also introduced, such as the Bureau of Rehabilitation Act and the Online Safety Bill. The former, first presented to Parliament in September 2022, gave authorities extensive powers to detain individuals in military-managed “rehabilitation” centers. The latter, proposed in October 2023, would permit the government to enact laws that expand the authority of the executive, with inadequate safeguards and extensive potential for misuse.

However, the biggest causes for concern were the delayed elections and the erosion of democratic processes. Against the Electoral Commission's orders, the local elections slated for March 2023 were indefinitely postponed, supposedly due to the economic crisis. This led to a new spate of protests in Colombo, which were met by police with tear gas and water cannons, injuring 15 people. According to Uyangoda (2023), this decision reflects a profound concern among ruling elites about political awareness and democratic reform, which has intensified since Aragalaya. With no elections slated until the presidential poll in the latter half of 2024, the Wickremesinghe–Rajapaksa coalition could be trying to stem the rise of the two opposition parties: Samagi Jana Balawegaya (United People's Power) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front).

In contrast to this alarming deterioration on multiple fronts, two key moments need to be acknowledged. In October 2022, the parliament passed a constitutional amendment aimed at trimming presidential powers. The 21st Amendment reinstated and enhanced the balance of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary branches, which had been undermined by the Rajapaksas. It was seen as a response to the significant public protests that had mobilized citizen engagement. And in November 2023, in what appeared to be a landmark moment, the Supreme Court ruled that 13 officials, including two ex-presidents (the Rajapaksa brothers), former governors of the Central Bank W. D. Lakshman and Ajith Nivard Cabraal, and other senior treasury officials were responsible for the country's worst-ever economic crisis. Hopefully this case, filed by anticorruption watchdog Transparency International and other activists, will pave the way for future lawsuits against the Rajapaksas.

DECAY

Over 14 years after the end of the war, human rights violations, increased militarization, intimidation of civil society, lack of accountability, and deepening repression continue. During Gotabaya's presidency, militarization experienced an unparalleled surge. The 2022 defense budget of USD 1.86 billion was 14% larger than the previous year's. The military, which was in 2020 was twice the size of the British army,¹ maintained an extensive presence in the northeast. Seizing of Tamil lands, attacks on Hindu temples, construction of Buddhist temples, surveillance and harassment of civil society, and the proliferation of military-owned enterprises were unabated. The military also played a pivotal role in the ongoing Sinhalisation of the north and the east, where, under the Mahaweli Development Programme, land continues to be given to Sinhalese people in Tamil- and Muslim-majority areas (Kelegama and Korf 2023). This "octopus-like security apparatus" continued under Wickremesinghe's rule, with even more efforts to restrict the rights of local populations through extralegal means (Satkunathan 2023).

In October 2022, the UN Human Rights Council adopted resolution 51/L1 on Sri Lanka, calling for the country to address several long-standing issues,

1. World Bank data (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.Pr?most_recent_year_desc=true).

including militarization. Based largely on a resolution adopted in 2021, it strengthened the capacity of the Office of the High Commissioner to collect evidence that may be used in future war crimes trials. Sri Lanka categorically rejected the resolution on the grounds that the country has made domestic progress, and vehemently opposed the establishing of an “external evidence gathering mechanism” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). On December 8, 2023, the government announced its decision to establish an independent Commission for Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation—the newest instance in Sri Lanka’s history of forming ad hoc commissions with no meaningful progress. It remains to be seen whether this commission will yet again be driven exclusively by the government, with no consultations with survivors, victims’ families, or civil society, and thus risk providing justice, truth, or reparation to the many people who engage with it.

It has not been long since previous commissions of inquiry came under scrutiny. A report from the International Centre for Ethnic Studies revealed numerous war graves scattered across the country, which previous commissions had not looked into (Bisping 2023). A follow-up report disclosed that despite hundreds of remains being discovered in around 20 mass grave exhumations, no efforts had been made to identify the victims or return their remains to the families (Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka et al. 2023). It also said that tens of thousands of people could still be buried in undiscovered mass graves, and that investigations were hampered by lack of political will and by interference; for example, Gotabaya altered police records to obstruct inquiries into mass graves in a region where he served as a military officer during the JVP uprising of 1989. Shortly after, another mass grave was discovered in Kokkuthoddawai, in the Mullaitivu District, with excavation officials hinting that the grave could be the result of war crimes (*Daily News* 2023).

Further damning evidence against the Rajapaksas followed in September 2023. A documentary released in 2023 by the United Kingdom’s Channel 4 revealed the complicity of the former ruling family in the 2019 Easter bombings—coordinated suicide bombings that targeted three churches and three hotels and left 269 people dead. The film draws on help from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and showcases the allegations of former government aide Asad Maulana that a high-ranking intelligence official engaged with members of the terrorist group National Thowheed Jam’ath as part of a scheme to help Rajapaksa gain power by orchestrating a national security crisis. Gotabaya called the allegations “absurd” and referred to the

documentary as “an anti-Rajapaksa tirade aimed at blackening the Rajapaksa legacy” (*Al Jazeera* 2023). Meanwhile, the government promised to appoint yet another parliamentary committee to investigate.

CONCLUSION

On February 4, 2023, Sri Lanka celebrated 75 years of independence from British colonial rule. While the country’s seven decades of postcolonial government have been marked by a three-decade civil war, ethno-nationalist discrimination, human rights violations, militarization, and authoritarianism, the incidents that took place on that day converged to symbolize the state of the oldest democracy in Asia. Grand celebrations (which cost USD 548,000) took place in Colombo, where naval vessels churned the sea and helicopters soared overhead. A group of demonstrators came together to silently protest such spending in a time of austerity and the perpetuation of the Rajapaksa regime under Wickremesinghe. The military, stationed all over the city with assault rifles and water-cannons, acted quickly to disperse them. Simultaneously, a protest in Jaffna brought together the families of the disappeared and civilians to call for justice, accountability, and the withdrawal of military forces from the north and east. The events of this one day illustrate what the country had dramatically descended into in these two years: the depths of bankruptcy, democratic decay, and repression, with an unelected leader leading the way. Given that it is one of 80 poor and low-income countries facing debt distress in the global South, and one of the many countries in South Asia due to hold elections in 2024, the urgent question that needs to be asked is, how (in)dependent is Sri Lanka at present?

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