

# Sri Lanka's 'organic only' policy | Sowing the seeds of a disaster

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**The rash policy shift to 'organic only' agriculture in May could severely impact Sri Lanka's food security, according to experts. With farmers angry, it could also have a considerable political cost for the ruling Rajapaksas, reports Meera Srinivasan**

From the time he began voting, Kurunegala farmer B.M.H. Jayatilleka has not backed any party other than the [Sri Lanka Freedom Party \(SLFP\)](#) at the polls. By extension, his vote in recent elections went to the [Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna \(SLPP or People's Front\) that the Rajapaksas carved out of the SLFP](#) where they made their political careers.

In the presidential poll of 2019, Jayatilleka voted for Gotabaya Rajapaksa. In the 2020 general elections, he campaigned hard for Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa who contested from Kurunegala district, located in Sri Lanka's North Western Province and home to a large population of farmers and military families. [Prime Minister Mahinda](#) polled a record 5,27,364 preferential votes in that election, reflecting his enduring electoral appeal a decade after the armed forces under his leadership defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), [ending the country's long civil war](#).

In the last few months, though, Jayatilleka feels very differently about his hitherto favourite political camp, with his staunch loyalty giving way to seething anger. "I will never vote for them [Rajapaksas] again in this lifetime," vowed the farmer leader, nearing 70. His shift is drastic, much like [President Gotabaya's overnight policy switch to 'organic only' agriculture](#) that triggered it.

## No transition plan

On May 6, President [Gotabaya issued a gazette banning the import of chemical fertilizers](#), in what was widely seen as a rash embrace of organic farming promised in his poll manifesto. At a time when all sectors, including agriculture, were reeling under the persisting economic impact of the pandemic, the Rajapaksa administration's announcement, perhaps the most consequential change to agriculture policy in the region in recent decades, came with no consultation, forethought, or convincing transition plan apparent. In a curiously belated effort months after changing policy, the Ministry of Agriculture on Thursday (December 16) said it was setting up a task force to study and report on the "adverse effects of the use of chemical fertilizers and chemical pesticides on the human body."

President Gotabaya has defended his ambitious initiative locally and at international fora. "We need a new agricultural revolution that is not against nature," he said, speaking on the sidelines of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow held in October-November. Acknowledging there was "some criticism [of] and resistance" to his government's 'organic only' policy, he told the summit: "In addition to chemical fertilizer lobby groups, this resistance has come from farmers who have grown accustomed to overusing fertilizer as an easy means of increasing yields." He did not mention Sri Lankan scientists, who have slammed the initiative, terming it "ill-

advised” and “a catastrophe” in the making.

“The ban was a big jolt,” Jayatilleka said, seated in a community hall adjacent to a Buddhist temple in Ibbagamuwa, about 13 km from Kurunegala town. “Paddy is our livelihood, our main source of income for generations. And that is under serious threat now.”

In the face of criticism, government spokespersons have sought to justify the move with more than one reason. They pitch it as a necessary step to prevent a chronic kidney condition – loosely attributed by non-scientists to chemicals in the soil – and to save dollars spent on fertilizer import [about \$300 million annually] for the country that is in a dire forex and economic crisis.

But the argument did not find many takers among farmers, who came under enormous pressure soon after the new policy took effect. They had no source of chemical fertilizer when sowing season — one of two tied to Sri Lanka’s monsoons — began in September. As for organic fertilizers, farmers are caught in uncertainty — over its availability, quality and potential effect. “It is all just chaotic,” said Jayatilleka, who heads a farmers’ society in the district.

E.P.D.K. Atugalage even considered quitting farming. “The pressure to buy organic fertilizer, the transport costs and the uncertainty about the quality of organic fertilizer... all this made me think why I must farm hereafter. Is it worth growing paddy with all these risks,” she asked.

The district, with over 4 lakh farmers, is among the top paddy producers in the country. For paddy cultivators like Jayatilleka and Atugalage, whose farming lives began in the 1960s, coinciding with the Green Revolution that aimed to increase productivity, organic agriculture is alien. The abundance and security they are used to are a consequence of using chemical fertilizer, one of the chief drivers of the Green Revolution, and the subsidy — promoted especially by the earlier Rajapaksa administrations from 2005 to 2014 — that made it easily accessible to them all this time.

Some 1.8 million farmers across the island are engaged in paddy production, delivering an average yield of over 3 million tonnes a year, data published by Sri Lanka’s Rice Research and Development Institute showed. Like many other countries, Sri Lanka too witnessed a marked increase in productivity in the last five decades, achieving self-sufficiency.

From importing 60% of the country’s rice requirement in the 1940s, when Sri Lanka’s population was about 6 million, to producing more than what is consumed now (barring a small percentage of foreign varieties still being imported) — when the population is nearly 22 million — is a significant leap, remarked Buddhi Marambe, a senior professor at the Department of Crop Science at the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya, located in the central Kandy district.

### **Top crop in peril**

The government’s ban, while putting Sri Lanka’s top staple crop in peril, also endangers the country’s food security achieved through decades, experts like him fear. “With this decision, the government has taken the entire country for a ride. The policy will affect the next crop, the farmers who grow them, and subsequently the whole society. A food crisis is imminent,” Prof. Marambe noted, reflecting a sentiment that several fellow scientists have aired from the time President Gotabaya imposed the ban.

Critics of the move are not necessarily opposed to organic farming. As academics studying the science of food production, they were only voicing concern that a transition that ought to take place in phases, over years, was being rushed through without a plan. Now, the implications of the abrupt shift are beginning to manifest. Farmers are dreading their next paddy harvest in January and February, with most fearing their yield would drop by 50%.

Those growing vegetables and fruits are also already noticing worrisome changes, according to W.A.D. Sylvester, a 65-year-old farmer. "The quality of bananas has suffered. Earlier, one large bunch would weigh 25 kg to 30 kg, but now it's barely 15 kg. For coconuts grown commercially, we use chemical fertilizer once in six months. Now I see that coconuts have shrunk without the fertilizer," he said.

The ban will also adversely impact Sri Lanka's \$1.3-billion tea industry, a vital foreign exchange earner for the country, planters have warned. They anticipate a 40-50% slash in production, despite the government relaxing the chemical fertilizer ban for the sector in October after their repeated appeals. Even for other crops, the government partially revoked the ban last month. Agriculture Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage on November 24 said the private sector would be allowed to import agrochemicals, but the part-reversal is too little too late, in farmers' view.

### **Farmers' resistance**

Their resentment over the government's policy change is no secret. Men and women who rely on agriculture for a living have been agitating across the country for months. Visuals of angry farmers, anti-government slogans, and protestors burning effigies of the Agriculture Minister dominated prime time news. As Prof. Marambe observed: "Instead of spending their time on their lands cultivating, farmers were forced to take to the streets."

But the government did not budge, even a little, until late November. Addressing a special meeting on organic farming on November 22, President Gotabaya said there was no change in the government's green agriculture policy, and that subsidies would be provided only for organic farming. Farmers were "organising protests and delaying cultivation" because "they have not been properly educated," he said, as per a statement issued by his office. "If officials who do not agree with the government policy wished to leave, there would be no obstacle," he said.

The government's stubbornness for almost seven months, despite its fast-declining popularity and mounting protests, baffled some of its own supporters. It defied popular analysis that the Rajapaksas are more politically astute than their rivals.

It was also amply clear that the ruling regime despised any resistance or challenge, even if it came from subject experts. Minister Aluthgamage removed Prof. Marambe, who earlier questioned the government's policy in the media, from an experts' committee advising the government on the national agriculture policy. However, the government's emphatic claims of supporting farmers in the long run could not drown the criticism, by now widespread and loud in the public sphere.

Far from being able to locally produce all the organic fertilizer required in the country, Sri Lanka was, rather ironically, importing organic inputs, including from India and China, despite banning agrochemicals in order to preserve draining foreign reserves. In what turned out to be an unexpected diplomatic confrontation, Sri Lankan authorities in October rejected the Chinese company's fertilizer consignment on grounds that it was "contaminated". As the dispute escalated, China blacklisted a top public sector bank in Sri Lanka, and the Chinese firm filed a lawsuit in Singapore, challenging Colombo's "backtracking and insincerity". The government has said it would pay \$6.7 million to the Chinese company, amid criticism from detractors accusing the government of "succumbing" to pressure.

Meanwhile, farmers are watching an unprecedented crisis unfold in their plots, just as a growing fear of a food scarcity next year grips the country.

### **Confusing messages**

Just like the ban in May, the government's decision in late November to permit the private sector to import chemical fertilizers also came all of a sudden. A gazette on November 30 repealed the May 6 gazette, along with another issued on July 31 on the subject.

A series of announcements was made around the time by top officials including the Cabinet Minister, State Minister and a senior bureaucrat attached to the Ministry, none clarifying the part-reversal of policy. In fact, farmers and scientists did not know what to make of their statements – some pointing to an exemption for paddy, and others denying the same. They found the messages conflicting and confusing. *The Hindu's* attempts to reach the Minister and Secretary for a comment were unsuccessful.

Gleaning the essence of their statements, farmers found two takeaways — neither of the two state-owned fertilizer companies would now be involved in importing agrochemicals; and the government was doing away with subsidies on chemical fertilizers, that they received at heavily discounted rates or for free thus far, they deduced.

According to Namal Karunaratne, National Convener of the All Ceylon Farmers' Federation (ACFF), there is currently a small stock of imported chemical fertilizers that is grossly inadequate to fulfil the nationwide requirement. It takes months to import a large consignment of chemical fertilizers, from the time of placing the order until it reaches the farmer. Even if the chemical fertilizers were immediately available, few farmers would be able to afford it, spending tens of thousands without the subsidy anymore.

Moreover, with 75% of the current crop's life cycle already over, chemical fertilizers will not be of much help to paddy growers, who add it at different stages after the sowing season, he pointed out. "It might make a difference to farmers growing vegetable and fruits, though," he added.

Karunaratne is now a familiar name in the media in recent months. He has been consistently challenging the government's policy shift, countering its claims with hard data and prevalent scientific opinion. The ACFF is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) — currently in Opposition with just three seats in the 225-member House. It is the largest organised body of farmers in the country.

In his assessment, the government's ban on chemical fertilizers and subsequent tweak in policy allowing private players alone to import the same reveals its "actual agenda". "They just wanted to cancel the fertilizer subsidy, which they know will be an unpopular decision at any time," he said. "Sadly, because of the route they took, our farmers will now forever be repulsed by the idea of organic farming, averse to exploring its merits." The government's efforts, he said, is the "greatest disservice" to the concept of organic farming.

Speaking more broadly about the country's "much-neglected" agriculture sector, Karunaratne said it was naïve on the part of the government to think that they could "simply tinker with" one aspect – fertilizer use – of farming, without reviewing Sri Lanka's water policy that is "heavily tilted towards hydropower" generation, and much less towards agriculture.

The "neglect", he said, began after Sri Lanka liberalised its economy in 1977, ahead of any other country in the region. "Before 1977, agriculture contributed 74% to our GDP. After opening up, it has reduced to about 7%, despite employing 28% of our labour force," he said. The thrust gradually moved to agro business, with successive governments failing to look at value addition, or value chains within the market. "In that way, agriculture in Sri Lanka is still at a very primitive stage," he remarked.

## Short-sighted policy

Regardless of how the government changes its fertilizer policy, the farmers' protests through the last seven months have "built political momentum," he noted. "They [Rajapaksas] promised national security, but fail to realise that a crucial component of national security is food security. And that is in complete disarray now. This is bound to have a political cost."

What began as a farmers' problem is already manifesting as a problem of all consumers – seen in the soaring costs of rice and vegetables, and the fear of an imminent shortage, he pointed out. "LPG cylinders are in short supply, or are exploding," he said, referring to a series of recent accidents amid shortage. "People are just frustrated."

It was this frustration that Jayatilleka voiced, while swearing never to vote for the Rajapaksas again. "It is time to weed out the old crop of politicians; they don't care about us," he said. The fertilizer controversy has upset his decades-old voting reflex, while also making him averse to "all politicians – those in government, those in opposition, everyone."

The sentiment is not insignificant, just two years into President Gotabaya's term. Coming from a senior citizen in Sri Lanka's Sinhala Buddhist heartland – no less than Prime Minister Mahinda's own constituency – it begs the question of whether the sheen of the Rajapaksa brand might be wearing off now.

On the one hand, it is evident that the Rajapaksa administration's biggest slip yet was not on account of a challenge thrown by the political opposition or due to pressure from the international community. It was its own short-sighted policy change that is proving a costly political error. On the other, with no imminent election or formidable opposition – the ruling coalition has a two-thirds majority in Parliament – it is difficult to see what might come of the disillusionment voiced by traditional supporters.

Although vehement in their condemnation of the government's fertilizer policy dilemma, farmers are barely preoccupied with its political implication now. They have more pressing concerns like the next harvest, and what that could mean to their families' three meals in the coming year. "My father was a farmer. I am 65, and I have grown food all my working life. I never thought I would be facing a food shortage at home," Sylvester said.

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<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lankas-organic-only-policy-sowing-the-seeds-of-a-disaster/article37980905.ece>