

# Drawing Strength From Solidarity, Sri Lankans Refuse to Bear More Indignities

Tuesday 19 April 2022, by [ARUDPRAGASAM Amita](#) (Date first published: 14 April 2022).

**Up until March, many suffered indignity and hardship in silence. The desire to be connected in struggle has brought them to the streets.**

On April 9, at Galle Face Green in Colombo, thousands of Sri Lankans [gather](#) outside the Presidential Secretariat. Roads are blocked off and stationed police officers stare blankly as crowds pour in. As I walk past a girl in a superwoman costume, an enterprising trishaw-driver offers me a lift. “Are you going to the protests?” he asks, adding that he will join later if his work ends. Then he veers off to find other customers. Sri Lanka’s financial emergency is now a humanitarian crisis, and he cannot afford to turn down business.

At Galle Face Green, the economy of an ocean-side promenade – ice cream carts, food trucks and pineapple vendors – converges with the economy of protest. Men and women exhausted by the piercing sun pop-open sodas and take breaks to cool down. They discuss what they have seen or heard in excited tones. The giddy excitement is familiar; perhaps comparable to the illicit feeling of defying your parents for the first time. Many here have not been to a protest before.

Protesters in the economically depressed North and East are routinely met with state violence. I hope, rather pessimistically, that one day they too will enjoy a similar environment for protest. As it stands, inequalities are so deep that the idea of an ice-cream truck rolling around to service protestors in those regions is absurd. In Colombo, tetra-packs of water bottles are scattered around the grounds so protestors can remain hydrated. Just a few days later the grounds would have tents, public bathrooms and artwork too.

I hear Tamil voices, of many dialects, Sinhalese and English. The protestors belong to all ages, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. Their chants are angry but I hear an undertone of joy. Perhaps it is the energising joy of feeling for the first time that one actually *can* exercise the right to assembly and protest. That others stand and resist with you. Of believing, even for a few days, that it is possible to have the political class listen. That is no trivial pleasure in a country where until recently, self-censorship was culture and free expression a rarity. When the regime tried to suppress these protests through a state of emergency, curfew and a social media ban — the public was livid.

A man plays on the grass with his two children. Were these the ‘extremists’ the government [described](#)? The rhetoric of ‘extremism’ has been deployed to alienate minorities for decades. One child held a placard that read “Never ever be afraid to stand against injustice!” I thought of those not present – daily wage workers who couldn’t take time off, minorities or others deemed ‘politically inconvenient’ by the regime. They have many reasons to be afraid to stand against injustice. When they have done so before, their alienation, arrest and assault was facilitated by the same language of ‘extremism’.

“Yes, we are extremists!” another placard reads, “*Extremely* fed up of political terrorists!”

Presumably, the protestors mean the Rajapaksa family who this protest is directed against. Ignoring calls by the protesters four days in a row, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa simply refuse to step down. A cabinet reshuffle, intended to appease the protesters and quell dissent, had no effect. When the prime minister announced he was willing to meet and discuss with the protesters, they did not budge.

When I take a break on the lawn, a protestor asks me suspiciously if I belong to any particular organisation. There's an awkward silence. There were rumours afloat that the protests were organised by politically motivated groups. Later, Prime Minister Rajapaksa would [attribute](#) protests to the JVP, a party involved in two armed insurrections in the '70s and '80s. I think about what the man is asking me, and confirm that I'm there with friends. He too is here with a group of university friends, he tells me, offering me an empty bristle board and markers so I can make a poster of my own.

Sri Lankans began to grow restless in September last year, when Sri Lanka's intensifying economic crisis led to [queues](#) for supplies of sugar, rice, lentils and milk powder. In December, when I was heading to a bank in Jaffna town, I struck up a conversation with a man who had voted for a Rajapaksa-allied parliamentarian. When I asked the man why he voted that way, he said the MP had helped get a road in his area paved. Infrastructure development, and the jobs that come with it, are an important part of PM Rajapaksa's appeal. The road was useless now, the man complained, as he would soon be unable to afford fuel for his vehicle.

By December 2021, the government was [unable to afford fuel](#) for its thermal power plants. By March 2022, the public experienced [seven hour power-cuts](#) during the hottest part of the year, ambulance services limited operations because they were [running out of fuel](#) and lines for petrol and diesel lengthened. Professionals in my age group wondered how they could migrate and why I bothered to stay. Get away from here, they implored, as if the thought hadn't crossed my mind.

While an economic crisis impacts all communities, different socio-economic groups are impacted differently. I do worry that a family member will fall sick and a [drug shortage](#) will hamper their chances. When [street lamps are turned off to conserve electricity](#), I am afraid to walk down the road. But I am privileged. My exams weren't cancelled because schools ran [out of paper](#). My child's life is not at risk because doctors are [short of supplies](#). I am lucky that my mother's urgent surgery happened last year, not this year. Privileged that the building I live in has a generator, even if the generator doesn't always have fuel. Fortunate that I do not worry about my meals tomorrow or that nobody I love has died in a queue waiting for fuel. It is a privilege to attend protests and to write, when others cannot.

When inflation [increased](#) over the last few years, Sri Lankans across the country found it difficult to afford food. Families began to skip meals, [dilute milk](#) or [pawn jewellery](#) to make ends meet. Much of this was due to excessive debt, taken on unfavourable terms and with no repayment plan. Sri Lanka's debt crisis was only exacerbated by bad policy. Tax cuts, [import controls](#), [a bid to go completely organic](#). The last policy was so unsuccessful that the government partially reversed it. A farmer who took out a loan to produce organic fertilisers told me he was enraged by all the uncertainty. He is not alone.

Those worst impacted by this financial emergency are perhaps daily wage earners. A domestic worker who works in my apartment complex told me she was furious about gas shortages, and that she was struggling to afford bus fares, which had recently [increased by 50%](#). Unreliable government communication meant she had no idea when gas cylinders would next be available and she could not afford to take time off to stand in a queue. When she told me about how angry everyone else was though, a faint smile crossed her lips. The phrase '*Dan sapa de?* (Happy now?)', used commonly by

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa in the years he was out of power, was ringing through the buses, she said. She was not alone in her struggle and that was a small solace.

That same desire to be connected in struggle, I believe, is what has brought Sri Lanka to the streets. Up until March, many suffered indignity and hardship in silence. Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims had felt wronged for years. Not allowed to grieve those they lost. Not permitted to learn what happened to their missing loved ones. Now others too have had enough. There's a devastating indignity of not being able to afford food, or sit exams or help a loved one needing surgery. Of being told, through it all - endure, endure, endure. *We* are not responsible, your struggle is *yours* to bear. Protest sites are, if nothing else, spaces where these silent indignities are permitted expression. Many gain strength from the fact that they are not alone; from the fact that protests can give shape and form to their frustrations, their fear, their lack of hope. The Sri Lankan people are defiant. And their message is clear: They want the president, and his entire family, to resign.

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**Amita Arudpragasam** is an independent policy analyst from Sri Lanka.

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