

Sri Lanka: The Rajapaksa sheen fades in stronghold Hambantota

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Faced with shortages and power cuts, citizens have taken to the streets, primarily targeting the Rajapaksa clan

Paddy farmer S.D. Weerawansa has made a livelihood decision and a political pledge in recent weeks — he will not sow in the coming season, and he will never back a Rajapaksa again.

They aren't unrelated. His crop has fallen by 50% this harvest, a consequence of Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's ban on chemical fertilizers last year. The ban was revoked months later, following farmers' protests and wide criticism from experts, but that did not save the crop. The annual yield of paddy and tea, crucial for Sri Lanka's food security and foreign exchange, has dropped by half, according to farmers and crop scientists.

"I used to pay 2,000 [Sri Lankan] rupees for a bottle of weedicide. Now, a bottle costs 22,000. Even if chemical fertilizers are available now, we just cannot afford them," he explains, seated at the red cement-floored verandah of his small home in Weeraketiya in the southern Hambantota district, known for its big ticket, China-backed mega projects that critics have termed "white elephants".

The Rajapaksa government, in its May 2021 ban and subsequent reversal, effectively cut fertilizer subsidy earlier provided to farmers, resulting in a ten-fold increase in production cost for farmers. That, coupled with record inflation during the current economic meltdown, has made the essential farming ingredient exorbitant in the market. "Everyone is talking about a food crisis and starvation. It is unfair to expect farmers to fix food shortages now," says Mr. Weerawansa.

When paddy farmers decide not to sow this season, seed farmers such as W.W.P. Chandrasiri are directly affected. "How can I expect farmers to buy the seeds at a time like this?" he asks, resigned to his imminent losses. The seeds can't be stored past their stipulated time of nine months following which farmers have no choice but to convert the seeds to rice grains. "A kilo of seed paddy is sold at 150 rupees, but when it is converted to rice, it fetches only 100 rupees," he says, revealing how a powerful President's rash policy shift is impacting the country's food ecosystem.

It is proving especially costly at a time when Sri Lanka, reeling under a crippling economic crisis, has run out of dollars to import essentials, including food. Colombo is coping with external help, including from India that has extended credit lines for food. Flagging impending food shortages recently, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said the country needs \$ 600 million to ensure adequate fertilizer supply. President Gotabaya, who in April admitted that the fertilizer ban was a "mistake", has now asked officials to formulate a National Fertilizer Policy "expeditiously". He also instructed the officials to immediately launch a "comprehensive public-private partnership programme" on food security, his office said in a statement on Monday.

The threat of starvation is real, as Parliamentary Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana told legislators early in April. Agitating farmers have been warning the same for much longer, but to no

avail.

“People in the capital and major cities say that those of us living in villages are still better off during this crisis, we can grow something in our backyards and put together a meal. That is true, we can manage to an extent. But that takes care of just our own family, that too temporarily,” says Mr. Chandrasiri. “If we can’t grow food, the country will go hungry.”

The anger that farmers expressed last year, is now widely shared by citizens, as seen in heightening public protests in recent months. Grappling with acute shortages of milk powder, other essential food items, fuel, and LPG gas, in addition to power cuts all day until recent rains, citizens have taken to the streets in capital Colombo and many other districts, demanding that President Gotabaya resign. The public outrage is directed at the entire government and ruling establishment but is primarily against the Rajapaksa clan. It forced Mahinda Rajapaksa, President Gotabaya’s older brother, to resign as PM. Other brothers Chamal and Basil Rajapaksa, and Mr. Mahinda’s son Namal Rajapaksa also stepped down from cabinet positions. They all resigned on May 9, after their supporters brutally attacked peaceful protesters in Colombo, setting off violent retaliatory attacks by incensed citizens.

Citizens’ fury

The citizens’ fury manifested starkly in Weeraketiya, a Rajapaksa stronghold. Arsonists destroyed a memorial for the Rajapaksa brothers’ parents built here, allegedly using public funds. Mr. Mahinda’s ancestral home in nearby Medamulana was attacked, as was Carlton House, the family home in Tangalle, some 15 km south, where their father’s statue was also destroyed.

At the top of the road leading to Mr. Mahinda’s Weeraketiya home, two conical, crystal-like structures installed in his parents’ memory, just above a small underground museum, lay broken, their corners shattered into pieces. Armed soldiers guard the area. A few meters down the road, are ‘Chamal Rajapaksa Primary School’, named after the eldest Rajapaksa brother, and the adjacent D.A. Rajapaksa Maha Vidyalaya, named after their father. It is hard to miss the Rajapaksa imprint in this Sinhala-majority, southern belt where Mr. Mahinda was, until recently revered like a king, and even a deity.

Not anymore. “You see how they have attacked the Rajapaksa memorial,” says Mr. Weerawansa, who had voted for Mr. Gotabaya in 2019, to “give him a chance”. “He was new to politics and promised to work for the country, but he has let us all down. Now, people have shown that they will not tolerate any Rajapaksa - no brother, no son!”

In the neighbouring Matara district, at ‘Gota go gama’ [Gota go village] — an anti-government protest site like in Colombo, dolls dressed like the Rajapaksas are put behind an iron cage, reflecting some demonstrators’ demand that they be jailed for “stealing people’s money”. A coffin is placed at the roadside near the busy bus terminus, with a maroon shawl, popularised by Mr. Mahinda, placed over it.

“People have now realised that Mahinda Rajapaksa deliberately created rifts among people, using war victory and racism for their political gains. They will not fall for the same trick anymore,” says 36-year-old businessman Sampath Liyanage, seated at the protest site. He sees no difference in Mr. Wickremesinghe’s recent appointment as PM, and dismisses it as “all part of their deal politics.”

All the same, there are some who are yet to consider alternatives to the Rajapaksas, like 48-year-old lottery ticket seller J.P. Badra, who supports her daughter and grandchild with her meagre earnings. “He [Gotabaya] saved the country once that is why we voted for him,” she said, alluding to his role

as Secretary Defence, when the armed forces defeated the LTTE in 2009. "If our economic problems continue, we can't support him again, but if the government provides us with some relief, we will see," she says, at her stall at the Weeraketiya town junction.

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