

Sri Lanka: Janatha Aragalaya | The movement that booted out the Rajapaksas

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Gotabaya who came to power three years ago promising security and prosperity was forced out of power by unprecedented protests as the country fell into a cycle of economic miseries

The staggering visual of tens of thousands breaching the high, iron gates of Sri Lanka's heavily guarded Presidential secretariat and residence on July 9, to unseat its most powerful politician, is still playing on loop in everyone's mind.

It was less than three years ago, in November 2019, that the former soldier rose to Sri Lanka's highest office. He secured an impressive election win, promising national security, splendour, and prosperity. Last weekend, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled his mansion, fearing for his life, and later, desperately sought refuge in two other island countries, before he resigned mid-term.

The tale of his mighty fall, decidedly more pacey and dramatic than his giddy political ascent, had an unlikely protagonist — the 'Janatha Aragalaya' (Sinhala term for People's Struggle).

In deposing the leader, known for his ruthlessness and repressive streak, the Aragalaya did the unthinkable. It wrote his political obituary. Something that the country's weak political opposition or critical civil society organisations did not dream of.

The citizens' rebellion against Mr. Gotabaya exposed the entire Rajapaksa clan's insatiable thirst for power, and apparent disregard for human life and dignity — something the Tamil and Muslim minorities knew for long. The Aragalaya revealed both, the fragility of power, and the power of protest, as citizens underwent the country's worst economic crisis post-Independence.

The financial crash has radically altered their existential realities, and daily life as they know it. The poor could not afford milk powder for their children. The rich could not find petrol for their cars. They all had to contend with long power cuts. "If we want to cook at home, there is no gas. If we try to get out of the house, there is no petrol. If we just stay at home, there are no lights as well," as a chant that later evolved in the protest movement put it.

The government cited the pandemic as reason for the country's economic meltdown. It delivered a severe blow to Sri Lanka's chief foreign exchange earning sectors — garment and tea exports and tourism. Analysts, on the other hand, pointed to the government's post-election swingeing tax cuts in 2019, corruption, misgovernance, and the President's ill-advised ban on chemical fertilizers as main causes for the downturn.

To the average citizen, however, the economic reasons didn't matter as much as the politicians who presided over it. When their families were going to bed hungry, people had little appetite to dissect which of the government's policy failures contributed more to their misery.

The Rajapaksas embodied their problems. A solution, therefore, had to begin with removing the ruling family from the ship of state. Seething in anger, they fixed upon their target. Some time in February, they began giving it expression, using social media platforms to communicate and coordinate. Children in tow, and along with neighbours known and unknown, they gathered at street corners, main roads and nearest junctions. They held posters, candles, or simply showed up to stand with others. As people's distress grew, what began as a weekly protest soon became a daily dose of dissent. Many among them were first-time protesters. Their chants were uncoordinated, and their banner fonts clumsy. But they knew what they wanted. "End family rule," their posters screamed. "Give our stolen money back," they said. "Gota go home," they chanted.

The Janatha Aragalaya was born.

Path of dissent

In an island that has witnessed two armed uprisings and a civil war in the last four decades, the idea of dissent cannot be novel. Sri Lanka's Independence struggle was hardly assertive, but the country has a long history of public protests since Independence in 1948. For instance, the 1953 Hartal, mounted by then powerful Left parties, against the government's welfare cuts.

Even after the civil war ended in 2009, the Tamil-majority north and east has remained a site of unrelenting struggle — seeking justice for disappeared youth, against military occupation of private land, archaeological takeover of places of worship, and for sheer survival within a long-disadvantaged local economy.

In one of the longest protests in recent times, tea estate workers protested for over three years, asking for fair wages for their extractive labour. In 2018, several thousand Malaiyaha Tamil youth, from the central and southern hill country and capital Colombo, came to the streets and demanded fair wages for estate workers from the community, in a dramatic show of strength at Galle Face, now the emblematic site of the Aragalaya. Early in 2021, Tamils and Muslims held a five-day march, the 'Pothuvil to Polikandy' rally or 'P2P', from the eastern Ampara district to Jaffna in the Northern Province. It was a rally held by ethnic minorities to assert their rights, while highlighting historic injustices and contemporary threats.

Through 2021, Sri Lanka witnessed a string of protests island wide, as angry farmers vehemently resisted President Gotabaya's abrupt switch to organic farming, to save dollars spent on fertilizer imports. Garment workers, schoolteachers and university students agitated intermittently, for better salaries, and increased spending on higher education.

Except, these were disparate protests. Tamils demanding justice for the disappeared, workers asking for their rights, and farmers agitating to maintain their production and incomes. Their demands had no meeting point or common ground. Their struggles have had limited resonance with, let alone solidarity from, Sri Lanka's wider populace. Annoyed by the traffic snarls protests cause, Colombo's elite and middle classes would often dismiss these groups as a nuisance, or more charitably, "just another protest." But the Aragalaya proved different.

The most striking feature of the people's uprising amid Sri Lanka's economic collapse is that it cannot be neatly fit into a template or category.

It is neither a students' movement, nor a workers' mobilisation, but has both groups, especially youth, participating in substantial numbers. Its members are not all Sinhala speakers, but it isn't comfortably bilingual in English, either. It is centred in the commercial capital of Colombo but also spread across the country. It has Catholic priests and nuns, saffron-robed Buddhist clergy and

Muslim leaders who broke Ramzan fast at the protest site. On a crowded protest day at Galle Face, Colombo businessmen, sportspersons, teachers, doctors, nurses, artistes, writers, scores of young professionals, and even pets, could be spotted. You might run into cricketers of yester-year circulating in the crowd one day, and suddenly hear iconic singer Nanda Malini break into one of her famous songs on another.

Over time, however, some groups and individuals began playing a more prominent role in sustaining the momentum of the protests, that could have easily fizzled. Especially when individuals and families were scrambling for essentials, spending long hours in serpentine queues. It is still a headless movement, far from homogenous, and constantly grappling with contradictions within.

Source of resistance

With no clear political backing or organisational anchor, how did the movement come together and emerge as a formidable source of resistance to the rulers?

It was organic and facilitated by the diffusion of smartphones with their social media apps. In its early days, even basic organisational efforts to sustain the protests were chaotic. Participants turned up late to protests, wore the wrong colour, or left behind their posters at home. Volunteers couldn't always agree on whether they needed more protests at different venues, or more protesters at the same venue. Some opposed using expletives and others could not contain them. Some were more aware of Gotabaya's past record — of overseeing alleged war crimes against the Tamil civilians and running death squads targeting dissidents — while others faulted him purely as a failed leader. Many virtual meetings and calls via secure platforms later, small groups of people unlikely to have ordinarily met each other found their chemistry.

That trust, along with their shared resentment of the President and his government, began cementing what would soon become the Janatha Aragalaya.

All the same, the surge in street protests was not entirely to do with improving organisational capabilities. There were external triggers contributing to its growing momentum.

The economic crisis was rapidly aggravating. Living costs were rocketing, putting basic food items beyond reach for many. Hospitals ran out of medicines. Patients could not get medical help without public transport, which itself was running out of fuel. LPG cooking gas and petrol, that were not available in the market, were being sold at exorbitant rates in the black market. Getting through each day was becoming a challenge for more and more people.

On the night of March 31, hundreds of enraged citizens gathered outside President Gotabaya's private residence in Mirihana, a Colombo suburb. It was a day the island experienced a 13-hour-long power cut. Authorities deployed riot police and used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the protesters who were passionately chanting "Gota Go Home".

In what was later revealed to be the handiwork of provocateurs, a police vehicle was set on fire, prompting more police and military aggression. A curfew was imposed, clamping down on people's movement. A declaration of Emergency rule followed. Issuing a statement, the President called the protesters "extremists" and accused them of plotting an "Arab Spring" in Sri Lanka. Citizens, who were enduring unspeakable hardships, were now told they could not peacefully protest. They were not going to take it. They showed their rage by defying the curfew and turning up on the streets in even larger numbers. The "Gota Go Home" chants got louder and people's resolve, stronger. A new chant, mocking then Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa 'Kaputu kak kak...Basil Basil Basil' [the sound of a crow], became a rage. Demonstrators called the ruling brothers and their family members

“thieves”. At that time, there were five Rajapaksas — brothers Chamal, Mahinda, Basil, Gotabaya, and Mahinda’s son Namal — in the Cabinet.

‘Gota go gama’

A brief history of the Aragalaya could be told in three chapters: April 9, May 9 and July 9 of 2022.

On April 9, Sri Lanka witnessed a marked escalation in protests. Tens of thousands attired in black, thronged Galle Face, Colombo’s iconic seafront, in what was then the largest agitation against the government’s incompetence in the face of the deepening economic crisis. Citizens furiously chanted slogans calling the President “a lunatic”, “a thief”, and calling for him to go to jail.

Overnight and expanding rapidly over the following week, ‘Gota go gama’ [Gota go village] sprang on bare land adjacent to the Presidential Secretariat. Ironically, it was on the very area that had been designated as a “demonstration site” in 2020, when a newly elected Mr. Gotabaya wanted to tell the world that he was not intolerant to dissent. “Occupying” Galle Face, the protesters began camping out there. It began resembling a community with each passing day, becoming a little more liveable as more amenities, including toilets, first aid, legal aid, common kitchen and a library, were added. The barren land on a major thoroughfare connecting Colombo’s harbour, shopping and administrative areas with the newer 5-star hotels lining the seafront was quickly morphing into a mutual aid enclave.

Just outside the Presidential Secretariat, university students erected a dais, blocking entry into the colonial-era building that was the country’s Parliament in its earlier avatar. The Socialist Youth Union (SYU) and the Inter University Students’ Federation [IUSF], loosely affiliated to the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP] and its breakaway Frontline Socialists’ Party, brought in their own protest credentials. They added more catchy chants, leading huge crowds to repeat in unison and now greater familiarity. “Kagedame balawege, Janatha-ge balawage” [Whose power, people’s power], and “Aragalayata jayawewa” [victory to the struggle], they roared. With the growing energy of the space, more tents began cropping up — housing many more groups, including deaf community activists, disabled ex-soldiers, and IT specialists.

Those who could not reside at ‘Gota go gama’ supported in other ways. They provided meals, medicines, books, umbrellas, water bottles, or whatever they could share. The evening crowds were steady. Family groups of Muslims were visible through their distinctive attire. It seemed that the most-recently persecuted ethnic community was there to protest a series of injustices in the last decade. The targeted attacks against them were orchestrated by racists, who were known to be supporters of the Rajapaksas. It seemed as if they were recalling the Aluthgama riots of 2014, Digana carnage of 2018, the attacks on the community following the 2019 Easter attacks, and the forced burials during the pandemic.

Some individuals turned up every night after work, a few of them resolutely standing alone, carrying their home-made poster. In a sense, no one owned the space. In another, everyone owned it. In parallel, ‘Gota go gamas’ were set up in several other districts. They customised these sites of dissent, from where they chanted slogans, and railed against the widely despised political leadership in capital Colombo. In Matara, for instance, the ‘Gota go gama’ included a coffin for the Rajapaksas.

Gradually, with more diverse voices joining the call for “Gota” to go, the scope of the protest began expanding. More Tamil posters were visible, with some even calling for justice and accountability for war crimes, and the repeal of the country’s draconian terrorism law. Weeks into April, protesters marked the third anniversary of the Easter Day serial bombings, at the protest sites, demanding justice for the nearly 300 victims. Significantly, it was the terrorist attack of April 2019, claimed by

Islamist radicals, that propelled Gotabaya's big win in the polls that year which he fought on a plank of national security. Trade unions marched to the agitation site, bringing their May Day rallies to the country's most urgent struggle.

While "Gota go home" remained the chief demand of the surging demonstrations, several other demands were now making their way in, such as the abolition of the Executive Presidency. Mr. Gotabaya was still the main target but not the only one. The protesters began talking about "system change", calling for a drastic shake up of the existing political order. In a harsh reality check for the political opposition, they asked all 225 MPs to resign. Parliament did not represent them anymore, they contended. International media that flocked to Sri Lanka zoomed into the protests that were now making global headlines.

By now, protesters also set up another exclusive site, a couple of kilometres south, outside the Prime Minister's official residence, to step up their resistance to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. The Aragalaya had become larger than its members realised, and more powerful than the leaders had expected.

Violent repression

On May 9, following a meeting summoned by the Prime Minister, ruling party activists stormed the protest sites in Colombo, and brutally assaulted peaceful protesters. Police stood and watched. The violence unleashed by Rajapaksa supporters, were on demonstrators who were now heroes to many in the country.

The episode provoked a day of attacks by vigilantes who thrashed ruling party members and torched the homes of several government MPs and Ministers. They burnt down the Rajapaksas' ancestral home and vandalised their parents' memorial in their village in the south.

The intensity of the public outrage against the ruling clan, once celebrated for its role in bringing the war against the LTTE to an end, was shocking, even if not inexplicable. It was clear that fear had been displaced by fury.

Mr. Mahinda resigned the very same day, seeing his continuing in office as untenable. If he had heard the protesters, he'd have realised it sooner and avoided the violent attacks. Another round of curfew followed.

The two months since were rather challenging for the Aragalaya. Many were stunned by the events of May 9, days after which Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed Premier.

While he took a seemingly conciliatory approach to the protests, even inviting protesters for talks, there was no let-up in the drastic deterioration of the economy. The government had already defaulted on its \$50 billion foreign debt. The country had now run out of dollars to import fuel, while existing credit lines dried up.

Mr. Wickremesinghe was keen to show the world, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) whose help Colombo is counting on, that protests would subside, making way for economic recovery. His assessment was wrong. Protesters did not take the bait, seeing him as a protector of a discredited regime.

Protests continued, although a bit subdued. On May 18, 'Gota go gama' members held a solidarity event at the seafront to mark 'Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day' in memory of the scores of Tamil civilians killed in the final phase of the war. Weeks later, Colombo's first pride rally was held along the stretch. Queer community members and their allies, too, asked for "Gota" to "go home", even as

they demanded equality and respect.

After a few weeks of a lull, perhaps owing to a combination of fear, fatigue, acute fuel shortages that prevented people from turning up for the protests, they planned another big show of strength on July 9. The turnout surpassed their own expectations. Demonstrators walked miles, travelled in extremely crowded buses, or hitchhiked to Colombo from afar to show up. The storming of the sites of power seemed more spontaneous than strategic. At that moment, it was as if citizens' pent-up rage had found its own course to reach the very seat of power they so detested. Mr. Gotabaya officially resigned on July 14 and Parliament is now trying to find a new President through available constitutional provisions.

Far from over

The Aragalaya is unprecedented in Sri Lanka, in its scale, geographic spread, and impact. It brought together Sri Lankans of all ethnic hues and class locations, who were together in their suffering brought upon by the crisis, and in their shared resolve to oust the man who was responsible for it.

But the common ground may be fleeting. The struggle periodically confronts many internal contradictions, such as, who represents it, whose proposals are more valid or inclusive, and how to take the movement forward. While some see value in allowing for a parliamentary resolution to the political crisis that has ensued, others see it as a failed institution, and call for extra-parliamentary methods, including a people's council.

While some in the Aragalaya are convinced that the IMF can help the country's economic recovery, others see it as part of the problem. All actors do not necessarily converge in their critique of the military and militarisation, or their sympathy towards Tamils' call for justice and a political solution to the national question.

They may remain together for the immediate future, as the "Ranil go home" sentiment gains momentum, amid frantic political manoeuvres by presidential aspirants including Mr. Wickremesinghe, the acting President now.

But if it is truly system change that the citizens' uprising desires, the Janatha Aragalaya may have just begun.

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