

Sri Lanka: Protesters Demand Regime Change, Demilitarisation of the State

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*A month after popular protests began in Sri Lanka, the government deployed its party members, loyalists and thugs to attack peaceful protesters on May 9 in Colombo. The protesters were demanding the resignation of **President Gotabaya Rajapaksa**, under the “go home Gota” slogan, and the removal of the corrupt ruling family regime that has led to mass suffering due to shortages and increases in the cost of basic necessities.*

Following a meeting with Rajapaksa at his official residence, his Sri Lanka People’s Front (*Podujana Peramuna*) party members, including elected officials in provincial councils, launched a violent offensive against the protesters. They assaulted protesters and destroyed the protesters’ stalls in front of Rajapaksa’s residence. Thugs — paid and provided with alcohol — with the tacit support of the police force, proceeded towards the main protest area, *Gota go Gama* (Go home Gota village), about a kilometre away.

The thugs destroyed stalls and tents and physically assaulted protesters. This act of state-supported violence was met with outrage from the masses who sympathised with the protesters. Local people surrounded party members, and destroyed some of the buses they were transported in with. This anger spread to other regional areas and local protesters targeted some elected officials’ personal residences.

Within hours, all-powerful Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned.

Attacks condemned

Amidst the protests were former cricketers Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayawardene, who condemned the attacks on the peaceful protesters.

Jayawardene tweeted:

“These thugs was [sic] assembled at prime minister’s official residence this morning and walked in numbers to assault innocent peaceful anti-government protesters. How can this happen? Police and others just watching this.”

When Mahinda Rajapaksa tweeted:

“While emotions are running high in #lka, I urge our general public to exercise restraint & remember that violence only begets violence,” Sangakkara responded, “The only violence was perpetrated by your “supporters” — goons and thugs who came to your office first before going on to assault the peaceful protestors”.

Former Sri Lankan national cricket captain **Sanath Jayasuriya** tweeted:

“I never thought that this type of thuggery will be unleashed on innocent protesters at Galle face in broad day and outside temple trees. The police must remember they are here to protect the PUBLIC of this country not corrupt politicians. This is the end of the Rajapaksas.”

Jayasuriya was also an elected party member from 2010–15.

The support of the popular protests from cricket celebrities overlaps with support from other national level athletes. Despite the merger of popular sports cultures with the media and entertainment industry, particularly since the mid-1990s, there is an institutional and cultural gap between popular athletes and artists. There is a significant difference in the exchange value of labour between artists and athletes. Unlike artists, the life of an athlete in the realm of competitive sports is limited and so are opportunities for alternative careers.

Military control

The expansion of neoliberal markets and the military over the past 40 years has transformed sports cultures. The integration of the military with sports institutions took place through authoritarian “security state” strategies under the *Prevention of Terrorism Act 1978 (PTA)*, which enabled torture and disappearances along with criminalising dissent and enforcing multiple forms of censorship.

While local business elite run the mass spectator sport of cricket and some popular sports — male football, rugby and basketball — the state coordinates all others. The Ministry of Sports is integrated with the military, subsidising national level sports workers and national level elite disabled athletes, who are mostly war veterans. The state coordination of sports, through the sports ministry and the military, links media and markets which shapes sports consumer culture and articulations of “sportive nationalism”. The links between the military and sports were strengthened after the anti-Tamil war in 2009.

As defence minister, Gotabhaya Rajapakse gained control of urban development after the Urban Development Authority — the agency responsible for planning and construction in urban areas — was brought under the purview of the military in 2011. The military expanded into commercial activities, such as tourism, especially in colonised Tamil and Muslim lands in the north and east.

The sports ministry targeted sports venues with its new urban development powers. It

outsourced three international cricket stadiums, mainly in rural areas, to the Sri Lankan Armed Forces for maintenance in 2011. However, the military also contract out development projects to private firms, creating commissions for a range of deal-makers and middle-men.

More importantly, the military subsidises elite athletes in multiple sports, enabling the military to participate in and influence sports organisations. In the context of a lack of funding from the government for sports associations, many are reoriented by male oligarchies to build business networks, political alliances and short-term profits.

In the Sri Lankan professional football league, four teams out of the top 20 are from the military — army, navy and air force — and police. Most of the national women's football team are enlisted in the military.

The military subsidises many track and field athletes. The Olympic silver medallist for the 200-metre race in the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Susanthika Jayasinghe, began her athletic career through the army. She also briefly joined Rajapakse's party.

The institutional integration of sports with the military has reproduced authoritarian sports cultures. Most sports cultures are grounded in subordinating and silencing any dissent among sports labour. There is no union of sports workers. Male cricketers have a relatively weak players association, mostly focused on their wages. Multiple forms of violence and abuse of sports workers are maintained under these authoritarian sports cultures.

The absence of most athletes and sports labour from showing solidarity with the Galle Face protests highlights the need to demilitarise sports and the state.

Tamil communities in north and east Sri Lanka have struggled with the lack of essential goods under conditions of war for over 30 years. The military still occupies their homelands. Families of the disappeared continue to demand information about their missing loved ones. May Day rallies held across the Tamil homeland demanded the abolition of Sri Lanka's PTA, demilitarisation of the North-East, the release of Tamil political prisoners and an international justice and accountability mechanism.

The popular protests demanding regime change are also about demilitarising the state, which can address the demands of the Tamil and Muslim communities in the north and east, as well as regain sports as a public civil democratic institution.

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Featured image: The meeting site for peaceful protesters, 'Go home Gota' village, was attacked. Photo: gohomegota.online

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