

Sri Lanka: Talk of ‘Prosperity’ a Smokescreen for People’s Ongoing Suffering and State Violence

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Seven months on from the anti-government uprising in Galle Face and on the anniversary of the founding of the Sri Lankan state, Susan Price spoke with Green Left contributor Janaka Biyanwila about how government spin backed up with state violence is attempting to keep a lid on popular discontent.

Janaka Biyanwila: February 4 marked 72 years since the formation of the Sri Lankan state. However, for Tamils, Muslims and the majority of Sri Lankans, this was not a day for celebration. Why is this?

Susan Price: The Independence Day is mostly a project of the elite classes, based on promoting “nationhood” or the national community as a patriarchal Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalist project. One of the main acts following independence was the denial of citizenship (1948 *Citizenship Act*) to Tamil workers in tea plantations. At the time, the population was around 7 million, with close to a million migrant Tamil workers, mostly working in the tea plantations, but they were also part of the urban working classes.

Then in 1956, the Sinhala language was granted constitutional privileges. Although this was seen as an assertion of cultural self-determination, it was mostly about discriminating against Tamil, Muslim and Burger (Eurasian) communities, in order [for Sinhala speakers] to gain public sector jobs. This triggered the initial wave of migration of minority ethnic communities to other parts of the former British Empire (the British Commonwealth) including Australia.

This was followed by the 1972 privileged status given to Buddhism within the constitution, which discriminated against other religions. This piece of legislation linked the state and party politics more closely with conservative, elitist, Buddhist monks. This was also a strategy by the local ruling elites to break the popularity of communist and socialist secular

tendencies among the masses. In other words, displacing class politics with ethnic-identity politics.

Then you have the post-1977 market economy which promoted a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism under the “righteous society” (*Dharmishta Samajaya*) slogan. The market economy project also shifted the party politics from a parliamentary democracy towards a presidential system, which concentrated and centralised power within the presidency.

The state repression of Tamil agitations that began in the early 1970s mainly in the North to demand cultural recognition — led to the rise of militant Tamil groups. Following the 1983 Anti-Tamil pogrom, the civil war broke out, ending in 2009 in a blood bath. Following this military solution, rather than a political solution, there were no efforts towards a genuine reconciliation. So, 15 years after the ending of the civil war, there are still people displaced, living with families and friends, political prisoners and over 20,000 disappeared people, whose families are still searching for answers.

As for the Muslim community, after the end of the civil war, the Muslim community became the target of Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalism. This was bolstered by the Islamophobia triggered following 9/11 [the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in the United States] and the Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) attacks on Muslims in India.

There were multiple incidents of violence against Muslim communities led by militant Buddhist monks, and these attitudes escalated after the 2019 Easter Sunday bombing by an extremist Muslim group. But the investigations into the attack revealed that the military intelligence services had contact with this group. In October 2021, then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed the same militant monk who led the anti-Muslim attacks, to head a Presidential Task Force called the “one country, one law”, mainly targeting changes to personal laws based on Islam.

It is also important to recognise that there are a few Tamil and Muslim capitalists and middle classes that support the ruling regime, but Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-chauvinism is configured by co-opting a few minorities. So, for the Tamil and Muslim communities the celebration of Independence has little meaning.

JB: Seven months on from the protests in Galle Face, how would you characterise the state of the anti-government movement?

SP: The anti-government movement (the *Aragalaya* or struggle) is still active but at a much lower scale because of government repression. After President Gotabaya resigned and the new president, Rani Wickramasinghe was elected, popular support gradually declined. This is mostly because of government propaganda, echoed by the mainstream media, manufacturing a narrative that the economic situation is getting better. Of course, the long queues and shortages that triggered the uprising have disappeared, but the cost of living has increased, pushing more people into poverty and struggling to make a living.

After the occupation of the Galle Face public space (the “Gota go gama”) ended in early August 2022, the government started targeting movement leaders, particularly student movement leaders. In August, two leaders of the student movement, Venerable Galwewa Siridhamma (a student monk) and Wasantha Mudalige, were arbitrarily arrested under the draconian *Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act* (PTA). This piece of legislation, introduced in 1978, essentially allows torture, government secrecy and impunity

for those who commit crimes on behalf of the state.

There were multiple protests demanding the release of these student leaders, and the government cracked down on those protests too. Faced with increasing dissent, the government released the leader of the student monks in January. In early February, Wasantha Mudalige was released. This release was an outcome to continued protests by the students as well as a range of activists linked with Aragalaya. One of the first things Wasantha talked about following his release was about Tamil political prisoners, mostly framed under dubious charges.

Some of the Aragalaya activists are linked with the trade union movement and working-class parties [such as] the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna — People's Liberation Front] and FSP (Frontline Socialist Party), and they continue their activism as well as raising awareness of the people. The JVP is more focused on electoral politics, mainly the upcoming local government elections, scheduled for March, while the FSP is more focused on movement building.

The Aragalaya activists fragmented following the August crackdown, and some of them continued with grassroots activism while others joined the regime in different ways. But, I think this is also a time when activists are reflecting about different forms of engagement, now that local government elections have been announced.

The mainstream media, linked with patronage networks to the ruling regime, is maintaining its agenda of stigmatising and discrediting activism. Meanwhile, the police and the Attorney General's office is trying to manipulate the legal system to prevent protests and the right to dissent. The popular (working class) resentment is fermenting and it is hard to say how the next mass protest is going to play out.

JB: Has the economic crisis that sparked the protests been resolved? Should we believe the government's story that the SL economy will be "back in the black" by 2026?

SP: The government is incapable of predicting anything at this stage, other than appeasing the masses by promising that things are going to improve soon. Global growth is declining and inflation is going to be around for a while, at least through next year, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Even the IMF is also reluctant to make any strong forecasts. The war in Ukraine is a major impediment to local tea exports as well as tourist earnings — both Russia and Ukraine are major markets — so revenues from international trade are going to be constrained. Internally, the government is implementing IMF policies imposing austerity measures. The latest is the increase in taxes.

There was a major mobilisation on February 9 by the labour movement, mostly the public sector unions, against a new policy for an income tax of up to 36% on [incomes exceeding] a threshold of 100,000 rupees (A\$393) a month, with no deductions. In the context of inflation, where people are struggling in their daily lives, this is a major burden.

Meanwhile, the government spent lavishly on Independence Day, which was mostly televised without a live public audience. More importantly, this was a highly militarised fanfare, featuring a range of military and police forces, an array of high-tech military hardware, a customary 25-gun salute, Air Force flyovers and a parachute jump by paratroopers carrying a giant National Flag. It's a kitsch military aesthetic, compatible with that of the ruling elite. But, all this not only adds to the debt, but reinforces and normalises

global militarism and arms trade.

This is represented as patriotism but the hidden code is about state monopoly violence. It's a message to the working classes, as well as minority ethnic groups, that the ruling elites have access to all this technology of violence for class wars and ethnic wars, which includes gender (male) terror, to keep the masses submissive and compliant.

Again the mainstream media frames this event as national pride and patriotism, normalising the militarisation of the state, while completely disregarding the suffering of the working classes as well as Tamil and Muslim populations in the North and the East in particular. This is a working-class or labour force where two-thirds are in the informal sector, and approximately one out of every six (16%) or 3.5 million people in Sri Lanka were considered multidimensionally poor in 2019. That was before the pandemic, so the poverty rates have increased. And, the military, with a bloated budget, is maintaining the colonisation of the North and East provinces.

Nevertheless, there were multiple protests across the island against this waste of public resources. One protest by Aragalaya activists was disrupted by thugs mobilised by the government, followed by the police firing water cannons and tear gas to disperse those protesting. This was a peaceful non-violent protest by less than 100 people. Many were injured and a few were arrested then released. It was a brutal use of excessive force, which has become the standard police practice encouraged by a few senior police figures and the Minister for Police.

So when the government promises “back in the black” by 2026, this is mostly addressing the financial markets, indicating that we are a credit-worthy nation, meaning financial credit-worthiness, and that the elites are going to comply and provide financial markets their return on investment. The IMF is the front organisation for financial markets. The financial markets never demand cuts in military spending, exposing the link between the financial markets and militarism. So this is also about maintaining a system of accumulation (by dispossession) where the elites are the main beneficiaries.

So these government promises represent the “cruel optimism” of the ruling elites. The promise of “prosperity”, despite debt bondage, inequality, poverty, racism, sexism, ecological vandalism and state violence.

It was against this type of repeated fake guarantees of the ruling elite that the Aragalaya emerged, demanding justice and system change.

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Featured image: 'Goto go gama' protest camp at Galle Face last year. Image: @publicnewsdotlk/twitter

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