

Sri Lanka: A Victory for a Non-violent People's Movement

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APR Editor's Note

While the current energy and food crisis contributed greatly to Sri Lanka's economic collapse, it must be emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic has already crippled the global economy, resulting in the impoverishment of people worldwide.

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The people's movement in Sri Lanka that converged in the last three months achieved its main objective on July 9 with President Nandasena Gotabhaya Rajapakse's offer to resign.

On this historic day, about 100,000 people gathered in Colombo in a mass mobilisation. They engaged in non-violent direct action against a heavily-armed military and police force and occupied Rajapakse's office, his official residence, as well as **Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's** official residence. This was an organised expression of popular frustration and anger, due to electricity cuts, fuel and gas shortages, and the rising costs of essential consumer goods.

The night before the main mobilisation, police enforced a curfew on Colombo and surrounding districts. The Bar Association of Sri Lanka immediately issued a statement claiming the curfew was “blatantly illegal and a violation of the fundamental rights of the people”. On the morning of the mobilisation, the station masters were ordered by the defence department — which sits under the president — to suspend train services. The railway unions, including the Station Masters' Union opposed the suspension of services, but were duty bound. However, when crowds of protesters agitated at the stations, the station

masters agreed to resume services.

Many people couldn't travel to Colombo because of fuel shortages, which have paralysed public buses as well as rail transport. Some people held protests in their own towns. Many walked from different parts of the country and some used bicycles. Some started their journey the previous day from their towns. There were numerous walking caravans and rallies organised in the days leading up to the July 9 mass mobilisation.

This was a mobilisation of citizens emphasising diversity and solidarity, without the intervention of any political parties, and built by a range of dispersed protests that began nearly three months ago.

Convergence of spontaneous protests

The movement emerged in early March with people engaging in non-violent silent protests, holding placards and candles in the evening, as electricity cuts and other shortages were affecting their daily lives. In late March, a collective of activists occupied a struggle zone, known as the *Gota Go Gama* (Gota Go Village, GGG) in Galle Face, adjacent to the president's office in the commercial and public administrative centre of Colombo. This followed a peaceful protest in front of the president's private residence, during which the police used tear gas and water cannons, escalating the struggle.

The activists at GGG articulated the struggle as a non-violent, peaceful protest, independent of political parties. Among the activists were citizen journalists, social media activists, artists, students, religious leaders, lawyers, civil society activists and labour activists. These activists also overlapped with a range of feminists, environmentalists and human rights activists. Some activists were informed by the Arab Spring struggles against authoritarian regimes, global anti-austerity struggles since 2010, and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement.

The concept of the GGG soon spread to other urban centres, mainly around Colombo, and the Western Province, the most densely populated part of the island. These were generally led by local youth protesting in a town, in some cases with permanent tents as a gathering point, with loose coordination with other GGGs.

The activists' target was the president, who is accused of war crimes, assassinations of dissenters, theft and waste of public funds and fomenting patriarchal Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Elected in 2019, Rajapakse's three brothers and nephew joined him in the government formed after the 2020 parliamentary elections. Following the 2019 Easter Sunday Bombing, his promise to strengthen national security was a key strategy to gain political power. A former military officer, Rajapakse was also considered a "war hero" and commanded the respect and authority of his supporters.

However, within less than three years, this authoritarian kleptocrat has endured a humiliating defeat by an organised popular peaceful protest movement.

Patrimonial culture engaged in state capture

Rajapakse was the target because he represents a regime that has undermined access to basic goods and remained insensitive to the suffering of the masses. His regime represents an authoritarian patrimonial culture engaged in state capture, where private firms gain access to profit-making activities sold by public officials and politicians. With the pretence of

representing the people, the regime fostered a patron-client culture that used public resources to gain the loyalty of bureaucrats, business owners, Buddhist monks, artists, social media users and civil society actors, as well as voters.

After coming to power, Rajapakse passed a constitutional amendment (the 20th amendment) in October, 2020. This enabled him to appoint his allies in the military and business community into public institutions. He also reorganised a range of public institutions, bringing them under his authority.

Rather than direct privatisation, commercial activities were established within public services, including the military, with opportunities to profit from commissions. The president's allies, with little experience or knowledge of the subject or field, were appointed to positions of power.

Although the regime was promoted as a system based on knowledge and professionalism, the regime directly undermined professions and the integrity of the public sector by restricting any dissent. It was strengthened through chauvinist Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalist tendencies that marginalised other ethnic and religious communities.

Rajapakse was a product of an authoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist military institutional setting. He joined the army in 1971, at the time of a youth insurrection. It was in response to this Sinhala youth insurrection and Tamil youth agitations in the North in the mid-1970s that the anti-democratic *Prevention of Terrorism Act* was introduced in 1979.

Nearly 35 years later — from 2005 to 2015, under the presidency of his elder brother, Mahinda — Rajapakse headed the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development. In 2009, he was involved in the military offensive that ended the anti-Tamil war in a blood bath, massacring 40,000-70,000 innocent Tamil civilians.

Rajapakse is directly accused of a range of crimes, including the assassination and disappearance of two journalists, Lasantha Wickrematunge and Pradeep Ekanaligoda. The images of the journalists, who were killed under Mahinda's regime, are displayed in large posters at the GGG. Wickrematunge's assassination is directly related to his reporting on a defence contract for fighter jets that involved the misappropriation of public funds for personal gain by Rajapakse.

Activism: Non-violence and democracy

The GGG activists maintained their non-violence strategy despite a range of violent and subversive strategies used by the regime. These included police shooting people protesting delayed petrol deliveries and fuel price hikes in April, which left one person dead and dozens injured. Police also arrested a range of activists in late May, claiming they were involved in retaliatory attacks on the private residences of parliamentarians, following the attack on the GGG on May 9 by supporters of the regime. There were also arrests of key activists in June, on false allegations of damaging public property during protests.

From the inception of the GGG, the mainstream media, as well as social media, sided with the regime, devaluing and belittling the protests as an apolitical carnival. Some critiques described the GGG as a potential plot by foreign actors to create unrest. There were dissenting views among the GGG activists, with some — mostly driven by individual self-interest — encouraging alliances with political parties or entering into negotiations with the

regime.

The GGG activists were also committed to a democratic culture that avoided hierarchies. This horizontality enabled a broader participation with transparency and accountability. The GGG received support from a range of people within and outside the country. The GGG was also openly critical of those who tried to commercialise the event through various promotional gimmicks. They established a People's Library, a People's Cinema and conducted discussions on a range of issues. Attendance at these events varied, with crowds often dwindling towards the end of June. Nevertheless, the activism remained lively with discussions over strategy and how to enable more protests actions, especially in rural towns.

The GGG decided in early July to escalate the protest movement with a broad mobilisation into Colombo. The trade union movement, student movement and civil society organisations, along with Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) activists and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front, JVP), began engaging in a range of protest actions while promoting the mass mobilisation on July 9. They were also vocal about the regime's attempts to infiltrate and create violence in order to delegitimise the movement.

Meanwhile, artists and social media activists engaged in maintaining momentum through Facebook, blogs and YouTube videos. Their interventions also created new cultural identities, as active citizens encouraging new democratic practices.

A key part of the GGG non-violent activism was to engage with the frontline security forces, mainly police and the army, in non-confrontational ways, emphasising shared interests. The protesters kept reminding the frontline security personnel that they were not the target of the protests and that the people they were protecting had stolen from the people and plunged them into collective suffering. They also reminded the security forces that those at the top would abandon them to take the fall, if they faced legal charges — an enduring trend to protect and preserve the ruling regime.

Despite tear gas and water cannon attacks by police, protesters refrained from retaliating with rocks and stones, which is the usual reaction.

Protesters committed to a non-violent creative language used to spread the word and contain others who were getting ready for violent reactions. There were numerous instances when the police and the military personnel in the frontlines did their duty without provoking protesters and the people recognised and applauded these actions. At the barricades, protesters continued to engage with the security personnel even when they were being attacked with tear gas and water cannons. At times, the protesters even helped members of the military and police who had been affected by tear gas.

This dynamic between the security forces and the protesters was possible because of the commitment to non-violence that was reiterated through multiple modes of communication. They openly communicated, avoiding any property damage, since the target was reclaiming public property. Containing an escalation of violence was also possible, because the shortages were affecting the lives of security workers, too. Their relatives, like others, were in queues for days. This enabled some of the security forces to empathise with the suffering of the people, particularly when the regime was incapable of doing so.

More than 100 people were critically injured in the protests and occupations and more than

40 are still in hospital. Others suffered multiple minor injuries. Tear gas and water cannons were used against the protesters many times. At the president's residence, live ammunition was fired towards the crowd as well as into the air. The protesters would disperse, but then regroup after a few minutes. They kept demanding the security forces disengage from violence.

The people occupied the presidential secretariate, the president's official residence — located next to the GGG — and the PM's official residence nearby.

Just who was responsible for setting fire to parts of the PM's private residence remains a mystery, although it is blamed on the protesters. This incident happened later in the evening, after dark. The security forces had beaten up a media crew and the crowds were relatively dispersed. The fire also coincided with a power cut that plunged the neighbourhood into darkness.

Thousands of protesters peacefully occupied public buildings, without engaging in any property damage — even returning a large sum of money found inside the president's residence — so a small group engaging in this act of violence, under the cover of darkness, remains suspicious.

The GGG put out an *Action Plan for the Future of Struggle* on July 5 articulating a set of six demands. The main demand is the resignation of the president, followed by the PM and the government. Next is the demand for an interim government that “subscribes to the economic, social and political aims and aspirations of the *janatha aragalya* (peoples struggle)”. This demand includes several other concerns such as “a programme for the provision and distribution of essentials such as food, fuel, gas and the provision of facilities such as education, health, public transport and energy”. The next two demands focus on a new constitution that endorses people's sovereignty to be established through a referendum and a timeframe for the implementation of the proposals. The final line of the statement notes that “Until such time as all the above are achieved, the *janatha aragalaya* will continue in new ways”.

The July 9 struggle in Sri Lanka was a historic, democratic people's movement and a citizen's movements to transform a militarised authoritarian regime.

The GGG activists transferred some of the books from the Peoples Library to the occupied Presidential Secretariat on July 10. The main aim was to encourage an informed educated citizenry, which can deepen democratic values in order to recognise and refuse authoritarian regimes. Given the president's resignation will not take place until July 13, there is some apprehension among activists.

This democratic people's movement emerged in response to the degeneration of representative politics (political parties and the electoral system) that have failed to respond to public demands. Along with the sheer size of the mass gathering, the commitment to non-violence, independence from political parties and a culture of internal organic democracy were the movement's strengths. An organised people's movement, built on dispersed spontaneous protests, was able to achieve its mission of removing an authoritarian leader on July 9.

The lessons learnt from this moment will remain significant for deepening democratic practice locally, regionally and globally.

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Featured image: Masses of people converging on the presidential buildings on July 9 in Colombo. Photo: @UnionProtect/Twitter

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