



# CAN'T WE DO WITHOUT **BOSSES** ?

An analysis of public opinion in the  
post-Aragalaya political context



Vidura Munasinghe | Prabath Hemantha



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**Law & Society Trust**

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Published by



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## Summary

This article is based on a series of interviews conducted during the months of August and September 2022 by the Law and Society Trust in six areas of the island.

The interviews were seeking public opinion regarding two main issues:

- (01) Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) selected the leader of the United National Party (UNP) Ranil Wickremesinghe to be the Executive President after the resignation of Gotabhaya Rajapakse. What effect would this development have for the political prospects of the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) - the two main political camps dominating party politics in post-independence Sri Lanka?<sup>4</sup>
- (02) Why did the strong wave of political dissent (aragalaya) suddenly subside and why did a period of uncertainty arise in the immediate aftermath of expelling the former Head of State Gotabhaya Rajapakse?

Based on public opinion, the authors present three key findings.

1. Majority of the respondents no longer believe that there is a significant difference between the two main political parties (i.e., the SLFP and the UNP). However, people still recognize and align themselves with the identity labels such as Sinhala-Buddhist, rural / countryside and anti-Western, which were represented by the SLFP camp. Although these identity labels could be decisive factors in determining future politics, which political party or political leader would have the legitimacy to represent these labels and interests? At this juncture it is unclear.
2. Despite the strong expression of resistance to the prevailing economic and political conditions, people were neither interested nor believed in their ability to critically contribute to decision-making and governance processes thereafter. In their opinion, governance should be left in the hands of the “bosses” who are well-versed in politics rather than to them. People do not seem ready to accept ‘aragalaya’ as a force which can create a paradigm shift in the power politics in the country.
3. Political patronage is a crucial element in Sri Lankan politics. It leads to the routine shift of power between the two main political parties. This seems to have weakened as a result of aragalaya, creating a space for alternative political forces and other political parties. But under the new political regime, the old power centres are regrouping and strengthening their political patronage, which can potentially be a pivotal factor in future elections.

These are the key challenge to any group outside the two mainstream parties intending to secure political power through elections. Patronage politics have taken politics out of the hands of the public and has made politics the fiefdom of the political elites. This is an onerous barrier to groups that focus on empowering people to actively engage in civic politics and exercise political power beyond parliamentary politics.

## **Introduction**

Gotabhaya Rajapakse secured 6.9 million votes<sup>5</sup> the largest number of votes in the history of Presidential Elections, when he became the Executive President in 2019.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter, his party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) secured nearly 2/3 majority in the Parliament during the General Election held in 2020. With a few strategic crossovers, the 2/3 majority was secured to enable the adoption of the 20th Amendment to the Constitution. With that amendment the President further strengthened his executive powers. Accordingly, he and his party dominated politics, with the strong executive supported by a numerically strong legislature, as was the case with the government led by J.R Jayawardena in 1977. The President's power was further stabilized by his uniform voter base that was predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist. But, within just two years into his Presidency, Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government was heavily criticized and faced severe opposition. This was opposition was evident in his political strongholds – the Sinhala majority areas in the South.

The protests in Colombo and its suburbs took a different turn, after the 31st of March 2022 when protests took place in close proximity to the President's personal residence. Thereafter,

the protests were further energized and strengthened, with more and more people joining in solidarity. The protests were intensified daily, during the period of 9th April to 22nd July, as the protestors occupied the Galle face Green and the area surrounding the Presidential Secretariat and created the 'aragalaya site'.

During this period, the Minister of Finance, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet of Ministers had to resign due to intense public pressure. Finally, with the protestors occupying the Presidential Secretariat, Prime Minister's Office, President's official residence and Temple Trees (Prime Minister's official residence), the President too was forced to resign. This stands in contrast to the two armed revolts that transpired in 1971 and 1987-89 with the aim of overthrowing the respective governments at the time and which failed in the face of state brutality and oppression.<sup>8</sup> The stark difference between these armed insurgencies and the 2022 protests was that the latter was a peaceful public uprising<sup>9</sup> and yet it succeeded in overthrowing the incumbent President and his Government.

Following the provisions of the Constitution and Parliamentary procedures, the SLPP (which continues to have a 2/3 majority in the Parliament), elected the leader of the United National Party (UNP), Ranil Wickremesinghe, to occupy the Presidency vacated Gotabhaya Rajapakse, for the remaining duration of that term. They did so, despite his holding the only seat of his party in the Parliament. This step enabled the SLPP to form a government and thereby reclaim its power.

On being elected as President, Ranil Wickremesinghe not only used the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to suppress protests, but he also used a number of other laws

to curb freedom of expression, assembly and public dissent. The crackdown on the protesters that he orchestrated was unthinkable at a time when the executive power was weakened in the face of mass public protests. The speed at which people abandoned the protest and returned to the routines of their normal daily lives were bewildering. Even to date there are various levels of protests manifested sporadically at different locations, but none of them attract the same levels of mass public participation or demonstrate the intensity that existed in the period of April-July 2022.

### **Key Observations**

Looking back at the political upheaval in Sri Lanka in the last couple of months, two key observations could be made:

- (1) The difference between the two main political camps that dominated politics in post-independent Sri Lanka has narrowed. The person who was rejected by over 6.9 million voters in the 2019 was subsequently made President by the party that won the election. The party received the support of the people's representatives and brought into the office of President, the individual who was rejected by the same people as a parliamentarian. In Sri Lanka's post-independence political history of Sri Lanka, this is an unprecedented move.
- (2) Tens and thousands of Sri Lankans took to the streets to oppose the leader and his political party that they themselves elected with an overwhelming majority just two years ago. This intense process of public protests has never happened in post-independent Sri Lanka.



People participated in active politics beyond the electoral process in a decisive manner and in effect overturned key political offices. However, after that process and the period of intense protest, people went back to their usual way of life expecting only to exercise their political power at elections, instead of becoming directly involved in governance.

The next challenge ahead of us was to explore what kind of results these two new experiences will produce in the future politics of Sri Lanka. Various analysis, discussions and dialogues are currently taking place regarding these unique occurrences that spanned a few months. But most of these dialogues are limited to a circle of prominent political and ideological clusters in the society. In this context, we focused on how the public perceives this political context as they are ones who led, took part in, and mobilized this massive political move. This “public” will be deciding the future of Sri Lanka politics in the coming elections. During this study, the focus was to understand and infer the future direction of politics based on the opinions and perspectives of the public.

### **Interview methodology**

With this purpose in mind, we spoke in detail with 25 men and 25 women, randomly chosen in August and September 2022. The group that was interviewed was in the 22-78 age range and belonged to a wide variety of professions such as farmers, fishermen, daily wage earners, labourers, civil servants, private sector employees across different levels, lottery sellers, retirees (teachers, principals, law enforcement officers) and small business owners. The time spent on the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two and a half hours. The group was

selected from five geographical areas. Out of that, four areas were predominantly Sinhalese and strongholds of Gotabhaya Rajapakse's electoral campaign in 2019. They were:

**Hambanthota District** – This is the traditional power base of the Rajapakse family. Out of the ballots cast in Hambanthota, Gotabhaya Rajapakse in 2019 received 66.17%<sup>10</sup> and SLPP in the 2020 General Election received 75.1%<sup>11</sup> of the votes.

**Kurunegala District** – Former President Mahinda Rajapakse contested the General Election from this District in 2020 and he received the highest number of preferential votes from the district. After the election, he was appointed as the Prime Minister. In this district, the SLPP garnered 66.9%<sup>12</sup> out of the ballots cast at the 2020 General Election, and Gotabhaya Rajapakse received 66.92%<sup>13</sup> out of the ballots cast during the Presidential Election in 2019.

**Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa Districts** – The majority in these two districts are Sinhalese farmers. Whenever the Sinhala-speaking village populous is targeted, the focus is given to these districts. Gotabhaya Rajapakse's first electoral rally of was held in Anuradhapura<sup>14</sup> and after being elected, he was sworn in at the Ruwanwali Maha Seya premises<sup>15</sup> - one of the most iconic Stupas in the country, located in Anuradhapura. For the Buddhists it has great significance. In the 2019 Presidential Election, in these districts Gotabhaya Rajapakse received 67.95%<sup>16</sup> out of the ballots cast, and at the 2020 General Election his party secured it with 56.97% of the ballots cast.

Polonnaruwa is the district represented by Maithripala Sirisena. In 2015, he broke away from the Rajapakse regime and joined the opposition and was elected as the President but

during the 2020 General Elections, he re-joined the Rajapakse fold and contested from the SLPP. During the Presidential Election, Gotabhaya Rajapakse received 73.66%<sup>17</sup> of the ballots cast in this district and in 2020 the party received 53.01%<sup>18</sup> of the vote.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse's decision to abruptly ban chemical fertilizers was widely criticized and these two districts were most affected this decision. This too was an important factor considered when selecting these two districts.

**Gampaha District : Negombo Polling Division** – Generally this area is not advantageous to the SLFP camp. The area has a Catholic majority. However, the St. Sebastian's Church, Katuwapitiya which was targeted in the Easter Sunday Bombings in 2019 is located in this polling division and the casualties, both the dead and injured, are concentrated in the area. The key slogans for both the 2019 and 2020 elections were justice for the victims of Easter Sunday Attacks and punishment for those who were responsible. From this polling division Gotabhaya Rajapakse garnered 52.04%<sup>19</sup> of the ballots cast while his party got 38.23%<sup>20</sup> of the votes cast at the General Election.

In addition to these four districts, two other polling divisions in the Colombo District, namely Colombo Central and Borella were selected. Traditionally Colombo-Central (Ranil Wickremesinghe's seat<sup>21</sup>) and Borella polling divisions have been a politically weak base for the SLFP camp. In the 2019 election, Gotabhaya Rajapakse received 16.39%<sup>22</sup> and 41.76%<sup>23</sup> respectively of the ballots cast from these two polling divisions. During the General Election, his party SLPP received 18.93%<sup>24</sup> and 38.67%<sup>25</sup> of the votes respectively.

## Do these traditional political camps still exist?

In post-independent Sri Lanka, a key feature of representative democracy is the way in which the power has been shifted only between two political camps. These camps were initially represented by the UNP and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) along with the Communist Party (CP) and later by the UNP and SLFP, LSSP and CP coalitions. These camps were presented to the people to make their political choices as they are different to each other in almost every possible respect. At the 1970 General Election manifesto of Sirimavo Bandaranaike who represented the Samagi Peramuna (United Front) a coalition of SLFP, LSSP and CP stated the following:

“He (SWRD Bandaranaike) was ready to sever the wings of rising capitalism. His intention was to take the bull (capitalism) by the horns and tie it to the pole of socialism. He is the hero of the Sinhala language. He is the great man who stood by the incomparable gift that our forefathers sacrificed their lives to protect. We will defend the language and religion that have been corrupted by imperialism and nurture the language and culture of the minorities.” (Bandaranaike 1970,2)

This political camp led by the SLFP, has almost always been portrayed as an anti-imperialist, leftist, welfarist, Sinhala-Buddhist, safeguarding a rural voter base, protecting national culture, and a camp dedicated to serving the interests of the lower and middle classes.<sup>26</sup> The other camp, led by the UNP, has almost always been projected to the people as a force biased towards the West (to the direction in which the world is headed), supports capitalism, and takes a practical approach

towards liberalized economic development. According to the party leadership, throughout history, the party has been committed to parliamentary democracy, freedom of trade for economic prosperity, individualism, and ethnic harmony.<sup>27</sup>

The anti - UNP forces continuously highlighted these characteristics and factors in order to portray UNP as an urban/anti-Sinhala force – the exact opposite of what SLFP promoted. The UNP's stance on the SLFP's trailblazer- SWRD Bandaranaike, is that he was instrumental in ruining the future of the country and the SLFP simply followed the path set by him. The UNP also criticized SLFP's economic policy and its implementation.

“Mr. Bandaranaike after being elected in 1956, through his political and economic experiments dragged the country to the precipice. The 1970-77 Mrs. Bandaranaike's government brought Bandaranayake's destructive policies to its logical destination." Since 1956, the SLFP policy was for the government to take over the existing profitable businesses” (Chandraprema 1997, 137).

However, ending the economic differences between the two camps, in 1994, the SLFP accepted the open economic policy. Commenting on this new development, strong UNP supporters such as C.A. Chandraprema said that Sri Lanka has entered to an era of developed democracies where the only difference in the biparty system is how they govern instead of having a major difference in ideologies. To quote him: ‘instead of the deadly fight over capitalism and socialism’ (Ibid, 124) the struggle was over how effectively each governed. Although both parties agreed on their economic policy, the SLFP constantly tried to

differentiate itself. They claimed their economic policies to be more humane, as opposed to the strict open market policies of the UNP.

“We declared in 1994 that we will follow a humane approach to the competitive open market economy. Our aim is to distribute the benefits of open economy among many instead of a few. To be extremely clear, the benefits and advantages of open economy will reach the most marginalized in the society.” (SLFP 2001, 10).

Although both parties adopted the open economic policy, SLFP managed to maintain a strong ideological difference with their main political enemy – the UNP, till the 2020 Parliamentary Election. Influential ideologues such as Gunadasa Amarasekara contributed to maintaining this difference. In 2011, he writes the following:

“The victory of Sir Bandaranaike should be considered as the next step of Anagarika Dharmapala’s journey towards reinstating Sri Lankan heritage. After his untimely departure, people rallied around Madam Bandaranaike to accomplish the Sinhala-Buddhist glory through her. She who was conscious about her role owing to her cultural background managed to receive the support of the Marxists towards achieving this goal. During his 17-year-long tenure, J.R. Jayawardena destroyed the Sinhala Buddhist heritage and created a cynical generation that only worried about eating and drinking instead of understanding the national heritage and humanitarian values. In

2005, people elected Mahinda Rajapakse with the hope that a leader from the south could reinstate the national heritage. Identifying him to be the one who united Sri Lanka after King Parakramabahu VI is not incorrect” (Amarasekera 2011, 17-18).

By the 2019 Presidential Election, the difference between these two camps was well established. Ranil Wickremesinghe being the Prime Minister in the 2015-2019 period and the UNP leading the government at the time allowed the SLPP (SLFP camp) led coalition<sup>28</sup> to create a major opposition force against them. Failure to safeguard national security in the context of Easter Sunday attacks, ignoring the Sinhala-Buddhists and rejection of nationalism resurfaced as the usual criticisms by the SLFP camp against the UNP, and Ranil Wickremesinghe was once again portrayed as a failed leader. This backdrop enabled the landslide victory accomplished by Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his SLFP (SLPP) political camp, defeating Ranil Wickremesinghe and his political front.

But just within two years, in the face of public protests, the SLPP chose to be the President, Ranil Wickremesinghe- the same individual they so severely criticized and who was also rejected by the people. Thereafter the party supported the formation of a government led by him. Now the two opposing camps are virtually co-existing. How do the people who voted and organized themselves on the divisions that these two parties created, perceive this new development? What will be the future of the contested ideologies propagated by these two camps in Sri Lankan politics?

Out of our sample of 50 respondents, 10 stated that they still believe that there is a clear difference between the two

political camps although they are co-existing in the present context. All of them were certain that they would vote for either the UNP (and Ranil Wickremesinghe) or the SLPP in future. Their differentiation between the two groups is based on the points that were discussed above – i.e., how the two camps historically identified and categorized themselves.

The ones who spoke in favour of the UNP identified the key difference between the parties to be based on economics. A farmer from Anuradhapura who is a supporter of the UNP said, throughout history, the only instances in which there was some sort of economic development in the country was when the UNP was in power. According to him, the SLFP uses racism and Buddhist extremism to reverse economic development. He added that, every time the SLFP dismantles the economy, the people then elect UNP governments. But the SLFP continues to use their tactics to regain power, making it impossible for the UNP to achieve significant sustainable economic development.<sup>29</sup>

A female UNP supporter from Wanathamulla said everyone receives economic benefits from UNP governments, whereas it is only the supporters of the SLFP receive any benefit during their rule.<sup>30</sup> She believes that there is a considerable difference in implementation, although both parties have a similar economic ideology.

A person from Kurunegala with a dissenting opinion said the short-sighted economic decisions taken by the 2015-2019 Yahapalana government in which Ranil Wickremesinghe was the Prime Minister is responsible for the current economic crisis.<sup>31</sup> Further commenting on the economic



mismanagement of the UNP, a small business owner from Suriyawewa, Hambanthota said: no UNP government has worked to improve the village infrastructure and has only focused on the large-scale businesses. In contrast, the SLFP governments have always looked after the average villager by constructing roads and culverts.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, many who supported the SLFP (SLPP) and opposed the UNP had non-economic reasoning for their respective positions. They view the coalition at present only as an interim measure in response to the political anarchy and not as a long-term agreement.

“The UNP is not Ranil. There is a pro-imperial power behind them. They only represent a certain class. Majority of the Sri Lankans voted for SLPP. The UNP is supported by the middle class and the upper class. The two parties may have joined forces at the leadership level, but we can't expect a blending at the grassroots level. It's two classes. The rich and the poor.”<sup>33</sup>

Re-emphasizing the difference between the two camps, the group against the UNP feels that the recent measures taken by Ranil Wickremesinghe regarding the economy are temporary and the differences between the two camps will resurface in the long run.<sup>34</sup>

However, 4/5 of the respondents believe that the traditional differences between the two political camps no longer exist. They didn't see any difference in the economic policy and doubted the genuineness of the SLFP branding themselves as the representatives of local culture, nationalism, Sinhala-

Buddhist identity and heritage.

“Ranil has imperialist thinking. He once asked us to chew gum if there is no betel. He suggested that we fill up the tanks and construct buildings. The leaders on the other side used these to their advantage and pretended to be the saviors of national pride and heritage. If you really look at it, they mislead the people more than JR or Ranil did. At least the UNP is open about where they stand. These ones twisted everything to support their narrative. While the UNP was addressing the stomach/hunger, SLFP addressed the hearts and minds of people through nationalism and religion.”<sup>35</sup>

The strongest critics thought there is no real difference between the parties other than for the names of these parties.

“Both of them ruin us and protect themselves. It is the same bus. The driver changes from time to time. That’s all. Bandaranaike left the UNP not because he cared about us. He saw D.S. is trying to make his son the next Prime Minister, instead of him.”<sup>36</sup>

“This is a card game. Each group shuffles the deck. No one adds more cards or removes any. We are just staring at it like watching a movie.”<sup>37</sup>

While the majority agreed that there is no difference between the parties, the ideology of the SLFP was preferred by the most. According to them, it is something we need to consider in politics. Their concern was that the ideology they attributed to the SLFP is no longer represented by them. For example, a

young woman said she had high hopes that the SLPP would give priority to Sinhala-Buddhists and reduce the power of the Muslims when she voted for a Gotabhaya-Mahinda combination. But that government didn't stick to its promises. She is ashamed now when she looks back at the time when her Facebook profile pictures were of Gotabhaya Rajapakse as if he was the Guardian Deity of Sri Pada – Sumana Saman.

A similar idea about the SLFP emerged when people spoke about SLFPs rural orientation.

“Mahinda mahaththaya wanted to develop the village he was born in to be like Colombo and make the lives of his people better. The people in villages care about their ones. It is commonly said that people in the cities are less emotional than villagers. I think it is true. Look at Ranil – he has no empathy.”<sup>39</sup>

Many respondents thought that Mahinda Rajapakse initially represented this position, but he lost his way later. Some others thought that it happened to Gotabhaya. They think the narrative about the Western conspiracy theories coming from the SLFP cannot be entirely false. According to them, the SLFP has fallen prey to this conspiracy.

“The West must have told Basil and Gota that their brother is respected in the country. Use that and get into power and destroy the country.”<sup>41</sup>

It is pertinent to note that the traditional ideologies of the SLFP camp still have a strong footing among the average voter even though the majority didn't believe that the SLFP camp represents such ideologies anymore. Mahinda Rajapakse and

his family or SLPP no longer has the legitimacy to embody such principles. But given that people still consider those ideas to be valid and relevant, the space for an individual to convince people that he/she honestly represents them in a political arena remains open. Although the opportunity to represent these ideas are no longer with the traditional political camps especially those held by the SLFP, they continue to hold a significant power in Sri Lankan society.

“If a person who can address the hearts of the people, who loves the country and can convince the people that he/she could do better for the country contests, they have a real chance. But they should not come either from these parties. People are disappointed in both groups. They should contest from a different party or independently.”

### **Why were the people reluctant to engage in politics beyond the politics of protest?**

The second area we explored in the interviews was the reasons for the strong wave of dissent subsiding in the face of political anarchy enabling Ranil Wickremesinghe to gain power and enable therepression that followed. Respondents were encouraged to reflect on what happened and express their opinion on the current status quo.

Out of the 50 participants, only 5 persons strongly opposed aragalaya. An overwhelming majority stated the role played by the protestors was crucial, fair and categorized it as an excellent step. Some of them had been to the Galle face protest site, at least once and even more than once. One individual

had engaged actively supported and contributed to a regional protest site for weeks. But their opinion on the role of the aragalaya varied.

Some respondents who favored the UNP and especially Ranil Wickremesinghe (all of them were male and one of them had stayed overnight at Gotagogama with his family) concurred that there were reasonable causes for the youth to protest but thought the aragalaya eventually became politicized and began to serve the needs of political parties.<sup>42</sup> They kept talking about the youths being limited to protesting and youth not having the knowledge for diplomatic governance to solve economic crisis, improve foreign relations and bring more dollars to the country. According to them there is no better person suited this task than Ranil Wickremesinghe and his close allies.<sup>42</sup> They seem to hold a grudge against the protestors. Many of them believed that entities such as the Tamil diaspora, western countries and the NGOs funded the aragalaya in the final stages and the youth were misled to follow their agendas.<sup>44</sup>

There were a few among the SLPP supporters in that group who were not supportive of the aragalaya. One woman had gone to Temple Trees on 9th May in support of Mahinda Rajapakse, but she said that she did not join the group that attacked protestors at Galle Face Green. They didn't show a similar level of hatred or disapproval towards the protestors like the individuals who spoke in favor of Ranil Wickremesinghe and they agreed that there were sufficient reasons for the public awakening. But beyond that they didn't believe that aragalaya has the maturity to make an intervention to governance.<sup>45</sup> More or less, they were also in the view that aragalaya became a victim of the Tamil diaspora, foreign conspiracies and NGO agendas.<sup>46</sup>

4/5th of the participants are critical about both political camps and didn't hesitate to complement the aragalaya. A considerable majority expressed their strong displeasure about Ranil Wickremesinghe but agreed that it may be too early to oppose his government just yet. The ideas they shared were complex and diverse. Most of them identified university students for taking the leadership of the protests but, other than for a very few, they had never even heard of the term Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) or even their commonly referred name 'anthare'.

“Wasn't it the university students who led the aragalaya. They did it for us, but we couldn't even take part. But we know they did it on behalf of all of us.”<sup>47</sup>

They didn't appreciate the involvement of political parties in the aragalaya. However, they rarely mentioned about the involvement of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and actors such as Sarath Fonseka and the supporters of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). 12 persons directly stated that they would vote for the JVP at the next election, and they spoke about how the JVP is getting an unprecedented amount of support in their villages at the time. But most of them said “No to all 225”.

Respondents didn't have a proper idea about the involvement of political parties and political groups that are not represented in the Parliament. A few mentioned the name of the Frontline Socialist Party and one woman had voted for that party in several elections. However, according to them, the aragalaya was an expression of dissatisfaction with the political system of Sri Lanka and this dissatisfaction was expressed by university

students and other youth groups. Only a few (03 out of 50) said that the protestors should be involved in governance, in addition to opposing the government. Many believed that governance is a much complex process and something that is beyond the expertise of the protestors. According to them, more experienced and educated people should be in governance and they should get the ideas of the protestors. While the most rejected Ranil Wickremesinghe as a political leader, they also acknowledged that only he has the ability and capacity to govern at this time.

“I think Ranil was the Prime Minister for six-times. He came to the Parliament with just one seat this time. He is a man who has a dream to be President one day and he achieved it somehow. True that we don't like him but he is inspiring. Also, he is the only one we have now to get foreign aid, negotiate with them, balance the Parliament and stabilize the government.”<sup>48</sup>

According to another, all 225 in the Parliament are thieves. But to overcome this economic crisis, around 20 of the least corrupted members from all parties should come together and form a Cabinet. Some others thought that instead of politicians, a group of experts are required to sort this situation out. Most of the respondents who expressed similar views stated that they voted for SLPP in 2019. In response to our question, how will this group of experts differ from Viyathmaga (a group of experts and academics which was formed to support Gotabhya Rajapakse), they said Viyathmaga people didn't live up to their expectations and this time we need a group of experts and academics who will genuinely carry out duties expected from them.

“I am sure there are educated people who love the country behind these students who are protesting such as University lecturers. It is good if they come forward.”<sup>50</sup>

There was a noticeable silence among the most of the discussants who criticized the former government’s rule (including all the 225 parliamentarians) and quite vocally and easily justified the aragalaya, when asked about the role of the aragalaya and the people in this political vacuum. Many said, “This needs to be solved within the Parliament now. Then we can go for an election to elect a new Parliament.”<sup>51</sup> When we asked whether the same old 225 could contest and win again during the next election, the responses we received didn’t always quite align with their initial opposition to the 225.

“True. Regardless of what we say, many of them will come back to the Parliament. We can’t completely get rid of them either. We need the experience of the people who have held these positions for a long time. But there should be a mechanism to stop stealing. They are the ones who drove the country to this economic crisis. They are the ones who could turn it around. Even if they returned part of what they have stolen, that would be enough.”<sup>52</sup>

In trying to recover from the economic crisis and the political crisis, most of the respondents went back to wanting the traditional leadership and public intellectuals instead of considering the public that played a decisive role in chasing away the former ruler. According to them the public cannot solve national issues, but they can only push the politicians



to solve those issues on their behalf. Their expectation out of the protests is to put pressure on the politicians to solve the challenges so they could continue their daily lives, instead of getting involved in governance. Getting more people involved in the political process could lead to periods of prolonged anarchy. According to them, what they need urgently is a 'stable' country to get on with their lives.

“Our lives are at high stake. We need some relief. Gotabhaya left. But someone has to continue this. Otherwise, we won't have a country. No one took it up because no one can do the job. We are waiting for someone to stabilize this. We cannot go on like this. We need to get back to our jobs.”<sup>53</sup>

One important thread that runs through all of this, is the preference of the people to have their issues and difficulties solved via established political parties and the political authority, instead of making space for active civic engagement. On the other hand, their inability to commit to a long-term engagement and governance being a field for only knowledgeable experts to engage in were reflected in their responses. According to them recovering the economy, rebuilding the institutions and governing the country is not something that is as easy as protesting - something that anyone can do. Most of the respondents did not feel that their agency can be important in these matters. For them it's not their duty. Alternatively, when asked about the changes they expect to see in the country, most of them couldn't articulate anything beyond the usual election promises. Most of them wanted 'something good' to happen. But many failed to clarify what this 'good' meant for them.

“We are not smart enough to do that. We are asking them to explain to us what happened to the country. We can only say – we will give you some time. We will be looking at what you are doing.”<sup>54</sup>

“Who doesn’t make mistakes. People tried to do something good. But at the end nothing has really changed. Now I think aragalaya people or whole new generation or should come forward and give us some answers. They seem to be not having any answers either. The ones in power playing the old game again. We are not happy about any of them. People might make a change in an election. But who is there for us to select?”<sup>55</sup>

A local council member commented on people’s reluctance to get involved in politics and governance.

“Our people are even reluctant to raise their hand at a public forum. Even if we ask people to raise their hands to approve the minutes of a village meeting, only 2-3 in an audience of 100 will raise their hands. Then we ask whether anyone disagrees. Again no one disagrees. Since there is no disagreement, we consider that everyone agreed and adopted the minutes. Do you think such people would get actively involved in politics? They won’t even vote outside their traditional political party.”<sup>56</sup>

### **Major political parties with a voter base maintains a patron-client relationship**

Even though this wasn’t identified as a factor to be explored at the beginning of this study, in interviews this was constantly highlighted in various ways. People may have distanced

themselves from the aragalaya for many reasons such as uncertainty, suppression, and fear of the country falling into anarchy. However, many believed that the people will teach a lesson to the two main political parties (Ranil's UNP, and politicians connected to the Rajapakse family and the SLPP by voting for the JVP, or a group emerging from aragalaya or not voting for anyone at all. These were among the options expressed. But when discussed about people's behavior during an election, most of them said the politicians of major parties (especially the ones from SLPP and SLFP) are not active in the grassroots as they used to be but if they get to return to their usual politics, people might not be as independent.

“The SLPP-ers can no longer come to our village. If they do, people will chase them away. They are trying to use Ranil to return and restart politics. Overtime it will be possible. But if that happens, things will change. They will start distributing money and goods. They will start canvassing with their henchman and organize pocket meetings all over the area and start giving hand-outs or promises that they would. When that happens, people would follow the same voting pattern.”<sup>57</sup>

Many stated the main political parties follow a special process in organizing at the grass roots. One said the parliamentarians and ministers use their power, position and political networks to keep earning money for 4 and a half years and come back to their electorate in the last 6 months and distribute a little from their large wealth to buy their vote for the next four and a half years.<sup>58</sup> Another said the money spent in this manner doesn't really belong to the politicians but accumulated as a result of

misusing their position and accessing the public money they ought to manage.<sup>59</sup>

Although they used the term, 'distributing money and goods,' it is not simple as giving aid to people in return of their vote. They have a far more complex mechanisms of maintaining and monitoring this client-patron system. It is a mechanism run by local politicians and networks developed through their political and business affiliations. At its center are the village committees of the political party. The local government politicians are leading these and various individuals who are socially active closely work with the structure. They closely work with funeral aid societies, youth associations, welfare societies and Samurdhi society of the locality. These organizations focus on social welfare at times when there are no elections. During such time, if anyone wants to reach a politician, it takes place through these social and quasi-political activists. They sometimes receive benefits (such as tenders for local government development projects) from the local politicians as well. Some of them have dedicated themselves to engage in these village level committees of political parties even without any material benefit, just so that they could have access to the politicians. It is an opportunity to create an identity for oneself and become popular among the villagers.

During election times the politicians deploy these individuals through the above-mentioned networks. Election activities such as organizing pocket meetings, canvassing, putting up posters are organized through them. Given their experience of working in the area, they are aware of political affiliations of the families and which votes are already confirmed to their party

and which votes can be swayed in their favor. They are also informed of the needs and requirements of the people and the public infrastructure that are needed in each area. Accordingly, they could make a commitment to fulfil these needs through politicians at political meetings or they manage to get them done in a hurry. Even the aid distribution takes place at these meetings. These activists can even predict the approximate number of votes their party will receive in each ward. Opening ceremonies and foundation stone laying ceremonies for local development projects are held from time to time using public finances to keep these networks alive and active.

“When an election is nearing, the sports club meets. The office bearers collect around 150 boys. The Minister comes to the meeting and donate Rs. 50,000/= or so. They are also promised something, such as a volleyball court when the election is won. These boys start canvassing and putting up posters. They also get free food and plenty to drink. After the election some of them get low-level government jobs. In return, they get their families to vote for the politician.”<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, during election periods the party offices and the houses of the local politicians become centers where people receive things when they visit. A man from Negombo said that approximately a month prior to the elections, a well-known Minister from the area provides people with various treats, money and other facilities at his house, spending over one million rupees daily.<sup>61</sup> In such instances, the local politicians, members of the village committees and these locally active individuals coordinate the meetings between the politicians and the people.

After receiving benefits during elections from politicians, it is not easy for the people to vote for any party they would like. A woman commented: "It's true that it is the minister who contests but we are voting for the local organizer. He is the man who would stay with us always. He is the one who could help us. How can we face him if we vote for someone else."<sup>62</sup>

"In our area, the village organizer is well aware as to who is voting for whom. He knows the voting pattern of each house. So much so that during canvassing, they don't even come to houses that won't vote for their party. People are already categorized based on how they have voted over generations. If you want something done, you have to wait for your party to come to power. It doesn't matter even if you voted outside your family preference. No one would believe you. If you are doing that, you will have to campaign dedicatedly to the other party, out in the open. But then you are criticized and ridiculed."<sup>63</sup>

Another believed that if someone from his street voted for another candidate, they can find out. "I don't know how, but they get to know" he said.<sup>64</sup> According to him, since the local representative is aware of how each family would vote and they keep a count of the votes at the polling centre, he could easily guess whose votes have decreased. Many don't have the courage to step out of the party they have benefitted from. The mechanism of the main political party has influenced the voters' subconscious by fear, shame and gratitude.

Most of the discussants said the grass root mobilization of main parties are stalled as a result of the aragalaya.

“The henchmen of the major political parties are quiet now. But with Ranil trying to suppress the protestors, they are slowly coming out. If this continues for another year, they will restart their drama.”<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

While we recognize that the opinion of a randomly selected sample of 50 individuals cannot be generalized as the opinion of the entire society, the common dynamics and opinions contained in these interviews show the way in which Sri Lankan society deals with party politics, as well as the trends that we need to think about in more depth in relation to future political trends in this country. We hope this study will provide few clues on such trends.

The interviews revealed that aragalaya has had a significant impact on the thinking of the Sri Lankan society. The first point that we focused on were the ideas pertaining to the two traditional political camps in Sri Lanka. If we pay attention to this, it became very clear that the ideology promoted by the SLFP/SLPP actors – i.e., nationalism, ethnicity, morality, culture, the anti-imperialistic agenda, ‘rural values’ – still play a decisive role in politics. Our observation in this regard is that the SLPP led by Mahinda Rajapaksa has lost the ability to represent the said array of ideas. But the ideas continue to exist as slogans that can be used to turn people against a UNP/Ranil Wickremesinghe administration. It is still unclear which party and which leader will become the embodiment of those ideas. There is still space in the society for any party or leader to become the legitimate representative of these ideas and turn it into his/her political strategy to come into power.

The people are extremely frustrated by the two main political camps. In such a context, there is a space for the people to use their vote differently and break out of their traditional voting patterns. The attention that JVP received by criticizing the traditional mainstream parties, was also evident in the interviews.

The extent to which the patron-client relationship maintained by the traditional actors is preventing people from voting outside the established political camps emerged as a significant factor. The grassroots political activity of the main parties is weak at the moment, but people believe that the presence and engagement of grass root activists of main political parties will become stronger with time. This is already observed under the presidency of Ranil Wickremesinghe. Grass root political activism of the main political parties is connected to wealth, state power, ability to handle public funds, local networks, elitist power relations in local level, etc. It is impossible to envisage an unconventional political force achieving a powerful victory in electoral politics without challenging this patron-client system entrenched within the major political parties.

In a recent lecture, Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri outlined the factors that influenced political 'stability' (i.e., the smooth transition of power between two parties through democratic elections) in Sri Lanka after independence. He presented the elite domination in the political process, the system entrenching the equilibrium within the political party system, the political conservatism closely associated with the major political parties and the neo-feudal relationship networks in electoral politics to be some of the main factors prevalent in the Sri Lanka context. (Dewasiri, 2022).



Emanating from our discussions was an understanding of the factors that became entrenched as mechanisms to prevent voting outside the existing traditional political lines, and which prevented citizens from playing an active role in politics. Aragalayawas and is a process in which these elements were challenged. But in the opinion of the people, these political parties, though temporarily discredited are becoming powerful again.

This is the main challenge facing the parties that are striving to succeed in electoral politics as an alternative to the two main political parties. According to Harini Amarasuriya, the JVP, which had high hopes for power in the 2015 elections, had to settle for 6 seats because people realized that the JVP was not fulfilling the political expectations surrounding patronage politics. The people appear to have become used to and expected the benefits of patronage (Amarasuriya 2021, 1-22).

According to her, the patron-client relationship is extremely critical in Sri Lankan politics.

"As social protection and welfare measures were steadily dismantled, links to the elites in order to be able to access resources became even more important. Accessing limited public sector jobs, getting a child into a prestigious school, jumping the queue in a state hospital, getting the necessary license or simply being allowed to bend the rules increasingly depends on having those important connections and links". (Amarasuriya 2021, 13)

Even though, the network of patron-client relations maintained by the major political parties has weakened

as a result of aragalaya, people feel that it is now being re-established. Accordingly, this time too, any political movement that challenges the major political parties will have to face the challenge of overcoming the patron-client relationship in this country's electoral politics.

The aragalaya arose as a wave challenging the existing regime, gathered momentum with the resignation of the Cabinet of Ministers and peaked at the resignation of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. But now its force has been diluted. Its intensity has decreased and there is a sense of anarchy looming over the country. People are not ready to intervene and participate in a new political system although they opposed the former regime. They do not think they are best qualified to be involved. They believe that those who are more educated, powerful and know about politics and have the necessary maturity, knowledge and ability are better suited to the task. No matter how much they criticize the political leadership, they still believe in the traditional political leadership. Many people believe that it is only the traditional political leadership who can make decisions regarding governance, the economy, the central bank, and foreign relations, and can deal with the relevant institutional system. This is a manifestation of the view of politics being the duty of the elite. Apart from voting in elections, people are less prepared to deal with and intervene in political power beyond protesting.

This pro-elite frame of thinking can be challenged by creating an active citizenry that exercises their civic power in dealing with political institutions from the grassroots level. This is the real challenge for the parties attempting to create active citizens who will utilize their civic power beyond

parliamentary politics. This is a long-term and demanding process that requires a complex and innovative political approach to citizen engagement that is to be practiced at different levels. This is what is required to simply take politics out of the bosses' hands and transfer it into the hands of the common man. ■

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3. "A public economy to empower the people", Election Manifesto, Colombo: SLFP, 2001.
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### Endnotes :

1. Our special appreciation to M.K. Jayatissa, Suneth Kumara, Athula Dissanayake, Ranjan Fernando, Pradeepa Sudarshani, Rasika Balasooriya, W. Ajith and Lahiru Madushanka for their role in organizing and coordinating field interviews. The researchers also appreciate the support of Dr. Sakuntala Kadirgamar, Executive Director of Law and Society Trust, and Sandun Thudugala, Director Programs and Operations of Law and Society Trust, in developing this study.
2. The "aragalaya" refers to the period during which isolated protests against President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and his regime gradually grew into a mass public protest at Galle face Green from 09 April 2022. The assigned protest site was renamed 'Gotagogama' by the protestors. Since then, the protest was titled 'aragalaya' and was used commonly by the public as well as the protestors. The protest site was active for about three months with daily intensifications. Similar protest sites, mimicking the structure of Gotagogama emerged in many other locations in Sri Lanka, although with a reduced intensity.
3. Vidura Munasinghe is a Senior Researcher at the Law and Society Trust and Prabhath Hemantha Kumara is Research Assistant at the Law and Society Trust.

4. Throughout the post-independence political history of Sri Lanka, the UNP and SLFP had been the opponents. But in 2015 when General Secretary of SLFP Maithripala Sirisena became the common candidate of the UNP led coalition, and the overwhelming majority of the SLFP formed SLPP under the leadership of Mahinda Rajapakse and the SLPP became the main opponent of the UNP. The majority of the voter base of SLFP became supporters of the SLPP as SLPP depicted itself as the true carrier of SLFP legacy.
5. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE\\_2019\\_All\\_Island\\_Result.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE_2019_All_Island_Result.pdf)
6. However, Gotabhaya Rajapakse received a lower percentage (52.25%) of the popular vote compared with Chandrika Bandaranayake Kumaratunga who received 62.28 % of the all votes casted.
7. Gotabhaya Rajapaksha at many public events including at his swearing-in ceremony and the Independence Day celebration referred to his Sinhala-Buddhist electoral base and stressed that he is in fact a Sinhala-Buddhist leader - <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/i-am-the-leader-that-you-searched-for-prez-gotabaya-rajapaksa-tell-lankans-on-independence-day/articleshow/80688206.cms>
8. The armed revolution that took place in the North is excluded here as the attempt there was to create a new State against the Sri Lankan State and not to overthrow an incumbent government.
9. Other than for two incidents during this period, the protests cannot be criticized for being violent despite the claims made by the current President and his government. The first incident took place on 31st March 2022, when a bus was arson in front of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's private residence during a public protest. It was alleged that this incident of arson was strategically done by groups that are loyal to the government. The second incident was when people responded violently to the thugs and SLPP supporters who came out from the Temple Trees to attack the peaceful protestors at the Galle face protest site. The counterattack continued for another day in different parts of the country where the property of the Rajapakses and their supporters (SLPP Members of Parliament) were attacked, damaged and burnt. But after these two violent days, no other significantly violent events were reported until Gotabhaya Rajapakse was forced to resign on 9 July 2022. After that, the government properties that were overrun by the protestors were peacefully handed over to the government authorities after few days.

10. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE\\_2019\\_Hambantota\\_Final%20District%20Result.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE_2019_Hambantota_Final%20District%20Result.pdf)
11. <https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/HambantotaV2.pdf>
12. <https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/KurunegalaV2.pdf>
13. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE\\_2019\\_Kurunegala\\_Final%20District%20Result.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE_2019_Kurunegala_Final%20District%20Result.pdf)
14. <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/10/09/slpp-presidential-candidate-gotabaya-rajapaksas-inaugural-rally-at-anuradhapura/>
15. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/19/sri-lanka-new-strongman-president-gotabaya-rajapaksa-election/>
16. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE\\_2019\\_Anuradhapura\\_Final%20District%20Result.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE_2019_Anuradhapura_Final%20District%20Result.pdf)
17. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE\\_2019\\_Gampaha\\_Final%20District%20Result.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE_2019_Gampaha_Final%20District%20Result.pdf)
18. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/Gampaha\\_Negombo.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/Gampaha_Negombo.pdf)
19. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE\\_2019\\_Gampaha\\_Final%20District%20Result.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE_2019_Gampaha_Final%20District%20Result.pdf)
20. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/Gampaha\\_Negombo.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/Gampaha_Negombo.pdf)
21. Since 1994, Ranil Wickremesinghe has contested from Colombo Central.
22. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE\\_2019\\_Colombo\\_Final%20District%20Result.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/presidential-elections/pre2019/PRE_2019_Colombo_Final%20District%20Result.pdf)
23. Ibid.
24. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/Colombo\\_ColCentral.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/Colombo_ColCentral.pdf)
25. [https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/Colombo\\_Borella.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/Colombo_Borella.pdf)
26. These ideas were integrated in the Election Manifestos of the Party in 1970, 1994, 2001, 2005 and 2019.

27. United National Party, [http://www.unp.lk/about\\_party.html](http://www.unp.lk/about_party.html) (accessed on November 8, 2022).
28. At this time Maithripala Sirisena led opposition was weakened and the new political party SLPP steered by Mahinda Rajapakse and his family managed to attract that voter base via their ideology. Almost all parties that were with the SLFP joined the SLPP and finally, during the 2020 General Elections, the SLFP too joined the SLPP.
29. A farmer from Eppawala – Interview conducted on 16th September 2022.
30. A woman from Wanathamulla - Interview conducted on 3rd September 2022.
31. A public servant from Kurunegala -Interview conducted on 2nd August 2022.
32. A small business owner from Suriyawewa – Interview conducted on 9th August 2022.
33. A retired school principal from Kurunegala – Interview conducted on 3rd August 2022.
34. A woman from Negombo – Munnakkaraya – Interview conducted on 26th August 2022.
35. A man from Suriyawewa – Interview conducted on 10th August 2022.
36. A fisherman from Negombo – The interview conducted on 25th August 2022.
37. A man from Hambanthota – The interview conducted on 9th August 2022.
38. A woman from Colombo – The interview conducted on 18th September 2022.
39. A woman from Sahaspura – The interview conducted on 3rd September 2022.
40. A farmer from Anuradhapura – The interview conducted on 18th August 2022.
41. A woman from Negombo – The interview conducted on 22 August 2022.
42. A retired army officer from Anuradhapura – The interview conducted on 16 August 2022.
43. A farmer leader from Eppawala – The interview conducted on 17th August 2022.
44. A boat manufacturer in Negombo – The interview conducted on 25th August 2022.

45. A farmer from Hamabanthota – The interview conducted on 9th August 2022.
46. A woman from Polonnaruwa – The interview conducted on 6th September 2022.
47. A self-employed woman from Negombo – The interview conducted on 25th August 2022.
48. A youth from Sahaspura – The interview conducted on 18th September 2022.
49. A woman from Anuradhapura – The interview conducted on 4th August 2022.
50. A woman from Hingurakgoda - The interview conducted on 6th September 2022.
51. A farmer from Hambanthota - The interview conducted on 8th August 2022.
52. A man from Borella - The interview conducted on 18th September 2022.
53. A man from Anuradhapura – The interview conducted on 16th August 2022.
54. A woman from Negombo – The interview conducted on 26th August 2022.
55. A young woman from Wanathamulla – The interview conducted on September 2022.
56. A local government member from Negombo – The interview conducted on 26 August 2022.
57. A man from Negombo – The interview conducted on 25th August 2022.
58. A man from Kurunegala – The interview conducted on 3rd August 2022.
59. A man from Anuradhapura – The interview conducted on 17th August 2022.
60. A local government member from Negombo – The interview conducted on 26th August 2022.
61. A fishmonger from Negombo – The interview conducted on 25th August 2022.
62. A woman from Polonnaruwa – The interview conducted on 6th September 2022.
63. A young man in Sooriyawewa – The interview conducted on 10th August 2022.



64. A carpenter from Hambanthota – The interview conducted on 9th August 2022.
65. A farmer from Polonnaruwa – The interview conducted on 6th September 2022.



Our people are even reluctant to raise their hand at a public forum. Even if we ask people to raise their hands to approve the minutes of a village meeting, only 2-3 in an audience of 100 will raise their hands. Then we ask whether anyone disagrees. Again no one disagrees. Since there is no disagreement, we consider that everyone agreed and adopted the minutes. Do you think such people would get actively involved in politics? They won't even vote outside their traditional political party.

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**A local government member  
from Negombo**