

## **LST Review**

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### **Aragalaya**

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#### **From Hartal to Aragalaya: the Changing Face of the Politics of Protest in Sri Lanka**

*Sakuntala Kadirgamar*

#### **Can We not Manage without bosses? An Analysis of Public Opinion in the Political Context of the Aragalaya**

*Vidura Munasinghe and Prabath Hemantha Kumara*

#### **The Aragalaya Online: A Sketch of The Political Role of Social Media**

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#### **Gotagogama People's University: An Experiment of An Alternative Intellectual Space**

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#### **Women in the People's Struggle**

*Swasthika Arulingam & Marisa De Silva*

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*Sakuna M. Gamage*

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# Editorial

This LST Review is being published a year since the commencement of the Aragalaya (15 March 2022). The Aragalaya was an explosion of popular protest. It was an inclusive protest, cutting across gender barriers, class barriers and the hitherto passive and silent middle classes were drawn into it. The Aragalaya cut across party loyalties too, with the farmers and trade unions – the vote base of Gotabaya Rajapaksa turning against him. The protest reached out to draw in the minorities, recognising their hitherto unaddressed demands and tentatively recognised their past struggles. It was not led by politicians. It drew in the young and the old. In this sense it was unique.

The high cost of living, inflation and shortages of fuel and essential items were the catalyst for the Aragalaya, but it provoked soul searching and highlighted the nature of politics in Sri Lanka – mired in corruption, nepotism, exclusion and authoritarianism.

To the people, the Aragalaya was many things. It was an event, a political process challenging the old representative institutions of parliamentary democracy and it created the opportunity to cleanse the system and build anew. “Gota Go Home” and “System Change” were the slogans. The Aragalaya was also a phenomenon and a political, social and intellectual space. It was a pathway to a new future. The Aragalaya unleashed a democratic energy; it highlighted Sri Lanka's constitutional conundrums and the crisis of representative democracy that was self-evident. The Aragalaya was a result of the system's inability to respond to youth demands for a system change – the third time in Sri Lanka's history where the youth challenged the existing system and structures of power.

It was the opportunity to demand constitutional reforms - People's Councils, right to recall the elected and other mechanisms of direct democracy, citizens' movements as societal checks and balances on power exercised by the political

and bureaucratic elites, and participatory citizen bodies to take part in policy deliberations – these are some of such ideas that seek to address the chronic shortcomings of representative-parliamentary democracy.

The citizens' movement's interventions during the Aragalayas have added an entirely new dimension to Sri Lanka's politics, marking a shift of the citizen's role in politics from being passive onlookers to vigilant and participatory political actors. That process of transition has also provided a new intellectual and political energy to reimagine and deepen our democracy and the constitutional foundations of our democratic-socialist republic, true to the meaning of these not-so-empty, but wholly neglected concepts. The Aragalaya also created a space for new forms of citizen communications – through art, cartoons, sculpture

The LST Review captures these multiple dimensions through a collection of articles that include: a review of the history of protest movements in Sri Lanka ("From Hartal to Aragalaya: the changing face of the politics of protest in Sri Lanka" by Sakuntala Kadirgamar), an analysis of public opinion in the context of the Aragalaya, ("Can we manage without bosses? An analysis of public opinion in the political context of the Aragalaya" by Vidura Munasinghe and Prabath Hemantha Kumara); a sketch of the political role of social media in the context of the Aragalaya (The Aragalaya Online: A sketch of the political role of social media by Lara Wijesuriya and Samal Vimukthi Hemachandra); the role in creating an alternative intellectual

space (GotaGoGama People's University: An experiment of an alternative intellectual space (Samal Vimukthi Hemachandra), an analysis of the role of women in the struggle - breaking boundaries of gender, ethnicity and region ("Women in the people's struggle/Aragalaya/Porattam" by Swasthika Arulingam & Marisa de Silva) and the opportunity it generated for the creation of resistance art (Aragalaya - Sri Lanka's people's struggle: Expressions of the art of resistance through resistance art by Sakuna Gamage).

A full year has passed since the Aragalaya took root in public spaces and in the public imagination and the scene has changed, with the government of the day reasserting itself. Fears of political capture of the movement diluted some of the middle-class support for the Aragalaya and the slogans demanding a "system change" are competing with requests to "give the government a chance". However, these mixed messages come forth in a context where the government is considering draconian laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Bill and is considering a slew of economic reforms for structural adjustment that will severely impact on the life chances of the people. The campaign for a "system change" shows signs of being undermined by an authoritarian 'Police Raj'<sup>1</sup> The state is preparing itself to counter popular protests using the apparatus at hand – the law and security forces.

The politics of protest may be reformulated to draw strength to counter such intransigence and singular determination not to learn lessons from history.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Aragalaya, One Year on: ATA is Spoiling the Party," *Sunday Times*, April 09, 2023, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/230409/>

# From Hartal to Aragalaya: the Changing Face of the Politics of Protest in Sri Lanka

SAKUNTALA KADIRGAMAR

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*The author presents a detailed analysis of the changing face of the politics of protest in post-independent Sri Lanka. She also refers to India's profound contribution to categorizing and fine-tuning the language around protest and recent global protest movements.*

Sri Lanka's post-independence history has witnessed several expressions of citizens' protests against government actions and inactions. While some expressions of protest (such as coup d'états and armed rebellions) are clearly unconstitutional and illegal, there remain several expressions of protest that are not in themselves unconstitutional or illegal. In democracies that guarantee (or pay lip service to) freedom of speech, freedom of expression and labour rights, the right to associate (include demonstrate) is well established. Trade unions have expanded their understanding of the right to demonstrate to include the right to strike and while its constitutionality is contested, it is a frequently utilized strategy.

Political parties, especially when in opposition, opt for organising or supporting demonstrations and protests, while governments of the day resist protests or protestors, regarding them as inconvenient, especially when they claim to speak truth to power and expose the lived realities of unhappy citizens. Protests are often met with violent responses by the state or its functionaries. Protestors too may counter with violence creating an association of all protests with disruption and violence. But this association may be unfounded.

## South Asia's Fascination with Hartals, Satyagrahas and Bandhs

India has made a profound contribution to the categorization and fine-tuning of the language around protest. Hartals, Satyagrahas and Bandhs

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- all these terms point to similar ends and to those uninitiated in the politics of protest in India, the nuances are often lost. To Indians and other sub-continentals, the words - 'Hartal', 'Satyagraha', 'bandhs' and 'chakka jams' evoke profound emotions and revitalize many memories associated with the "Quit India" movement - the undoubtedly legitimate struggle for freedom and Independence.

Hartal is a term found in many Indian languages and it was first used during the Indian independence movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term comes from Gujarati and Mahatma Gandhi, who was from Gujarat, used the term to refer to his pro-independence general strikes, and he effectively institutionalized the term.

A hartal is a form of civil disobedience, a mass protest, calling for a total shutdown of workplaces, offices, shops, and courts of law. It is similar to a labour strike. In addition to being a general strike, it involves the voluntary closure of schools and places of business. It is a way of appealing to the people to pressure a government to reverse an unpopular or unacceptable decision. A hartal is primarily used for political reasons, and a tactic most used by an opposition party protesting against a governmental policy or action.

In Sanskrit and Hindi, Satyagraha means "holding onto truth". Satyagraha, as a concept and as an apolitical strategy was also introduced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Mahatma Gandhi to formulate a determined but nonviolent resistance to what he constituted as evil – i.e., colonial rule in India. There are three forms of Satyagraha, namely: non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and boycott. The term Satyagraha neutralises the politics behind the protest and infuses the protest with a sense of virtue – a civic virtue.

Bandh literally meaning "shutting down." It is also a form of protest through civil disobedience that is used mainly by political activists in South Asian countries such as India and Nepal. It carries similarities to a strike. During a bandh, a community can generate a general strike as well.

"Chakka Jams" are the tactics used to blockade a road or deliberately creating a traffic jam as a form of protest. The activists may hold a chakka jam on the railway tracks or on the roads to bring traffic to a standstill.

Mahatma Gandhi first conceived of satyagraha in 1906 in response to a law discriminating against Asians that was passed by the British colonial government of the Transvaal in South Africa. However, he launched the first satyagraha campaign in India in 1917, in the indigo-growing district of Champaran and it is considered a historically important rebellion in the Indian independence movement.

In Champaran, Gandhi organised peasant resistance to the colonial-era laws, where many tenant-farmers were forced to grow some indigo on a portion of their land as a condition of their tenancy with barely any payment for it. Indigo was used to make dye but as it was a cash crop the farmers were vulnerable to the market prices. It also depleted the soil. The Champaran Satyagraha gave direction to India's youth and to the freedom struggle, which was divided and vacillating between moderates who prescribed Indian participation within the British colonial system, and the extremists from Bengal who advocated the use of violent methods to topple British colonial rule in India.

In 1918 Gandhi supported the Ahmedabad Mill Strike, where mill workers were agitating for higher wages. During the plague, the mill owners had increased the workers' pay but, once the plague conditions subsided, the mill owners wanted to bring down the pay. The workers did not agree with this reduction and wanted to negotiate a new pay scale. When the industrialists refused, Gandhi urged the workers to go on a strike and supported them by going on a fast. By increasing the moral pressure on the mill owners, they eventually agreed to an increment. By going on a fast Gandhi brought a moral dimension to the strike and he did this despite his friendship with the mill owners.

In 1918, Gandhiji teamed up with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to help distressed peasants who

were entitled to full concessions as their crops produced a low yield but, were pressurized by the Government to pay tax as the Government did not want to lose their revenues. Organizing the Kheda Satyagraha, Gandhi urged all farmers to fight unto death against this injustice. He appealed to the rich farmers to support the poor farmers by not paying revenues too, despite having the ability to pay.

Gandhi declared a hartal in April 1919, to protest the Rowlatt Act that allowed certain political cases to be tried without juries and permitted imprisonment of suspects without trial. The Rowlatt Act was passed by the British, through the Imperial Legislative Council in February 1919, stating that it would curb terrorist violence. The Act severely restricted the civic liberties of the Indians as it included provisions for arrest without warrant and detention for 2 years. Gandhi called for a nation-wide hartal accompanied by fasting and praying – these being the key elements from the Satyagraha campaign. By combining the strategies of the Hartal and the Satyagraha, Gandhi created a powerful resistance to British injustice. However, the movement went in a different direction than what was expected as violent outbreaks including a lead up to the Jaliawala Bagh Massacre on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1919 in Punjab. Gandhi stopped The Rowlatt Satyagraha on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1919 as it deviated from its non-violent principles.

A Bharat bandh is a call for a bandh across India, and a bandh can also be called for an individual state or municipality. The community or political party declaring a bandh expects the general public to stay at home and not report for work. Shopkeepers are expected to keep their shops closed, and public transport operators are expected to stay off the road. There have been instances when large cities have been brought to a standstill.

In 2010, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and 13 parties not belonging to the United Progressive Alliance parties called for a nationwide bandh, to protest a fuel price hike. The bandh prevented Indians from carrying out

day-to-day tasks, especially in states that were ruled by the NDA and the Left.

In 2012, the BJP and other parties called for a nationwide bandh in response to economic reforms undertaken by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh protesting the cut in subsidies for diesel and cooking gas and the decision to allow foreign investors to own majority stakes in the retail sector, including supermarkets and department stores.

In 2018, Prakash Ambedkar called for a bandh in response to an attack on Buddhists, as well as some Hindu Dalits and Sikhs by supporters of the Hindutva ideology in the Pune district, Maharashtra. They also protested against police inaction. More than 50 percent of Maharashtra's population supported or participated in the bandh.

The mother of all protests that took place in India in recent times and which caught global attention were the farmers' protests in India (2020-2021). Farmers protested against a set of farm laws that they believed will gradually lead to the deterioration of, and ultimately end the regulated Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee system that ensures guaranteed prices for produce. The farmers feared that this would leave them at the mercy of corporates. Further, the farmers believed that the laws will end their existing relationship with small-scale businessmen in the agricultural sector (commission agents) who act as middlemen by providing financial loans, ensuring timely procurement, and promising adequate prices for their crops. The protests endured for over a year, with large numbers of farmers from many states converging on Delhi, camping out on the roadside, cooking their food, enduring the cold, and refusing to move or remove their blockades until the legislation was withdrawn. The farmers eventually converged on Delhi in their tractors to participate in the Independence Day parade heightening the visual drama of their protests. A Bharat Bandh (all India Bandh) was observed on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2021 marking the anniversary of Farmers Protest in India. The government



eventually withdrew the legislation. The farmers' protests were unusual as it was not initiated by a political party or recognised political actors but by the farmers themselves and it united the farmers across age groups, religion, ethnicity and states. It did not depend on a formalised leadership structure.

Bandhs, Chakka Jams, Hartals, Satyagrahas, strikes and agitations continue to be very frequent in the various states in India and are legitimized in popular culture, given their association with and validation through the Gandhian independence struggles, and the frequency with which the major political parties resort to them. Nevertheless, in India too their constitutionality remains confusing. Many times, these are linked with the fundamental right to form associations and unions secured in Article 19(1). While the Indian Supreme Court has many times held that hartals cannot be unconstitutional as the right to protest is a valuable democratic right, they do not recognise the right to strike as a fundamental right and do not consider bandhs to be legal.

India's Language of Protest permeated the language of protest in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). When the Jaffna Youth Congress, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi first called for "Poorana Swaraj" or complete self-rule from the British and rejected the limited reforms proposed by the Donoughmore Commission. The Jaffna Youth Congress carried out symbolic gestures of defiance against British rule and held several protests and satyagrahas using this language of protest.<sup>1</sup>

## Politics of Protest in Post Independent Sri Lanka

### *Recalling the hartal of 12<sup>th</sup> August 1953: Protest against austerity measures*

"Hartal" in Sinhalese is "Varjanaya". The Hartal of 1953 in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) is etched in political history because it was the first people's struggle against an elected government in the country – a mere five years since gaining independence. There was a country-wide demonstration of civil disobedience and strike, to protest against the policies and actions of the incumbent United National Party (UNP) led government. It was the first mass political action in Ceylon and the first major social crisis after independence. Unlike the Gandhian hartals it was accompanied by loss of life and considerable damage to property.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and other leftist parties called on the public to resist the government and to demonstrate against it with acts of civil disobedience and strikes. The hartal was primarily a protest of the working class, and as such the protestors were not divided on cleavages of caste, ethnicity or religion. The protesters sabotaged and destroyed public infrastructure and the objective of the hartal - to frighten the government and halt the government in its tracks, was well realized. The demonstrations lasted only a day but at least 10 people were killed, there was considerable damage to roads, bridges, railway lines and other property and it resulted in the prime minister, Mr. Dudley Senanayake resigning.

Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) was in the throes of an economic crisis – the first of many to haunt the country. With the end of the Korean War, rubber and tea exports fell sharply and the commodity price boom that buttressed the expenditure on welfare spending ended. The United National Party (UNP) came to power in 1952 with a convincing majority and so it felt empowered and ready to take steps to rationalize the economy.

It took steps to remove the subsidy for rice, the country's staple food, although it was a time where the rice prices were rising. It also raised the prices of essential commodities such as sugar, withdrew the midday meal for school children and slashed expenditure on health and other social programs, while increasing charges on railway transport and postal, telephone and telegraphic services. All that was emblematic of the welfare state was under threat.

Mr. J. R. Jayewardene, the finance minister justified the measures on the grounds that the government had to remove the food subsidy "because it could not find the money to finance the country's development program." With the sensitivity of the fabled Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, he advised the poor people holding out for subsidies, to grow their own food, no doubt presuming that the country was made up of landowners. As the government had also announced tax concessions and other handouts to the affluent sectors of society on the grounds that these concessions would help grow the economy, Mr. J. R. Jayewardene's comments did not resonate with the general population. The UNP government had already alienated the plantation workers and the Tamil political parties by removing the citizenship of hundreds of thousands of Indian-origin plantation workers. The high cost of living and the diminished living conditions they experienced sparked anger among workers and the rural poor who believed that the government had no empathy towards the workers and the poor.

### *Leadership and political mobilization in the hartal*

As mass opposition brewed against the government's austerity measures, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which had considerable support among workers and in rural areas, announced a one-day protest – a hartal, on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1953. The Communist Party (CP) and the Viplavakari Sama Samaja Party (VLSSP), a right-wing nationalist group that had split from the LSSP, also joined the campaign. The

Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which had been formed in 1951 in a split from the UNP was led by S.W. R. D. Bandaranaike, and was the main opposition party. The opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) condemned the government's repression but did not support the protest. The Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi, or Federal Party, did not participate directly in the hartal but it also expressed support for the protest. The government stood isolated.

On August 12, workers, peasants and youth blocked the entrances to Colombo by setting up barricades and even fought with the police. Communication links between Colombo and other regions were severed. Bridges were destroyed. Transport and postal services were stopped. Some railway tracks were torn up and some trains were stopped and seized. Police shot dead nine workers and youth in Colombo and in the southern and western rural areas, and seriously wounded another 175 protesters. Although the protest was called for one day, in some areas the demonstrations continued, especially in the Colombo suburbs and southern areas. Despite the LSSP's call for a halt, the protest developed its own momentum and force.

### *State response to the hartal*

The UNP cabinet felt besieged and fearing for their safety, met on board the British warship anchored in Colombo's port. The Governor General Sir Oliver Gunatilleke, on the advice of the Prime Minister declared a state of emergency to quell the protestors. He called out the army, issued them with orders to shoot at sight, sealed the offices and presses of Left parties, imposed a curfew and introduced capital punishment for damaging property. With these draconian measures the violence was quelled.

The LSSP's contribution to the hartal was largely around making rousing speeches. It did not organise any action nor did it call for the building of defense committees. Interestingly, the hartal (like the Aragalaya that emerged seventy years later) appeared to be leaderless as there was no



follow up in the aftermath of the chaos that was unleashed. The LSSP's failure to mobilize after the hartal for a more concerted onslaught against the state, was explained by the party's official historian Leslie Goonewardene who noted that: "... the mass movement had reached only a stage of protest against the actions of the Government in imposing the burdens it did on the masses, and not at a stage where it was aiming at the overthrow of the Government". The fight was then recast, to compel the UNP government to hold a fresh general election. The LSSP appeared to view the hartal as a tactic - an adjunct to its parliamentary maneuvering, rather than as a catalyst for revolutionary change.

Some identified the 1953 hartal as a class struggle. The long-term effect of the hartal was for politicians in Ceylon / Sri Lanka, to recognize that the laboring classes had coercive power. This in turn increased the political and coercive power of trade unions.<sup>2</sup>

Although both protests appeared to be leaderless, unlike the hartal of 1953 the Aragalaya of 2022 demanded "system change". Although the Aragalaya did not fully articulate the parameters of the new system, "Change" with a capital C was in the air.

### *1956 Satyagraha campaign: agitation against the Sinhala Only Act*

Sinhala and Tamil parties were briefly united during the hartal in 1953 but this unity soon gave way with the introduction of "Sinhala Only" policy. The Left parties that once endorsed language parity and equality abandoned that stance. The national hartal gave way to Satyagraha campaigns led by the Tamil parties and this became the new form of political protest favoured by the Tamil political parties.

1956 saw the first nonviolent agitation against the government's Sinhala Only language policy and the Language Act. The Tamil parties felt let

down by the Sinhala Only policy and vehemently protested against it – seeing it as the mechanism to erode their status as co-equal citizens and one that would impact on their economic opportunities as well.

Hundreds of Tamils, led by the Federal Party's SJV Chelvanayakam, staged a satyagraha –by way of a peaceful sit-in protest on Galle Face Green, protesting against the Language Act of 1956. Nevertheless, they were set upon by a Sinhala mob and subjected to violence and humiliation.

Somasundaram Nadesan, a leading Tamil lawyer and member of the Senate of Ceylon recalled: "Hooligans, in the very precincts of Parliament House, under the very nose of the Prime Minister of this country, set upon those innocent men seated there, bit their ears and beat them up mercilessly. Not one shot was fired while all this lawlessness to persons were let loose... Why? Orders had been given: 'Do not shoot, just look on.'"<sup>3</sup>

He noted that the rioting and violence were instigated by the government and actively supported by ultra-nationalist Sinhalese organisations and Bhikkhus to frighten the Tamils into accepting the "Sinhala only"<sup>4</sup> policy.

The violence was well-documented. Satyagrahis were beaten and pelted with stones; at least one Tamil was thrown into the nearby Beira Lake, and another had an ear "bitten and torn off. (DeVotta 2004) Among the wounded Tamils were several members of parliament. The police, in the main, stood by as passive observers. Apparently, they were given explicit orders not to intervene unless they themselves were attacked (ibid).

The attack on the Tamils on Galle Face Green and subsequent violence in Colombo encouraged further attacks and looting on Tamils throughout the city, and it sparked a wave of state-backed Sinhala mob attacks across the island. Even as the Sinhala Only Bill was being debated, the violence was spreading across the country and Tamils were attacked.

A demonstration in Batticaloa, attended by 10,000 Tamils was fired upon by the Sri Lankan police. At least two Tamils were killed in the shooting. The Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike subsequently banned another large Federal Party march planned in the city.

Violence also flared in Batticaloa and in Trincomalee, but the worst violence occurred in Gal Oya, which had been opened for colonisation by Sinhalese settlers. Tamils in the region were murdered by Sinhala mobs on the night of 11 June 1956. Sinhalese mobs – inspired by fantastic rumours – seized government cars, bulldozers and high explosives and for a few days terrorized the Tamil minority in the colony. Scores of Tamils, certainly well over one hundred, were massacred and hundreds more were driven into hiding” (Manor 2009).

The death toll and the extent of the campaign of terror were under-reported. “In Batticaloa and the Gal Oya valley there was such violence that between 20 and 200 persons were killed, depending on which side was doing the tallying (Wriggins 2016)

Violence then spread across the whole island. A Hindu priest was burnt alive in Colombo, whilst mobs roamed the streets of Colombo checking whether passers-by could read Sinhala newspapers. Those who could not were beaten or killed. The government waited five days before declaring an emergency.<sup>5</sup> This was in sharp contrast to the management of the hartal in 1953.

Violence in Gal Oya broke out on an unprecedented scale and it set the precedent for even more destructive violence two years later (Tambiah 1992).

### *1958 Satyagraha campaign: Protesting the Prime Minister’s abrogation of the Bandaranaike- Chelvanayagam Pact*

On 26 July 1957, Prime Minister Bandaranaike and the Leader of the Tamil party, Mr. Chelvanayagam signed a pact to formulate provisions to establish a degree of autonomy for regions most populated by Tamils. The regions were to be demarcated on a linguistic basis, parity of status for the Tamil language, restoration of citizenship to the Tamils working on the plantations and the immediate cessation of colonizing the traditionally Tamil-speaking areas were also features of the pact. However, this political accommodation was resisted by many members of the Sanga and the Sinhala community who in turn mobilized the polity against the pact.

In 1958, the Bandaranaike - Chelvanayagam pact was unilaterally abrogated by the Prime Minister, and after that, the Tamil parties launched a satyagraha campaign. As it went into effect, Sinhala mobs began attacking Tamils who were on their way to the Federal Party convention in Vavuniya. The riots engulfed the country in flames. It took the government four days to declare a state of emergency and in the meantime, hundreds of innocent civilians were murdered. The tensions caused by the language policy spilled over to create an unsettled polity. The Prime Minister fell prey to the very nationalist forces that he unleashed and was assassinated on 26 September 1959, by Somarama Thero – a Buddhist priest who was also a teacher and a practitioner of ayurvedic medicine, thus epitomizing three of the five pillars that constituted Bandaranaike’s vote base.<sup>6</sup>

Looking back on the first decade of Independence, it was a turbulent period during which there were bouts of violent protests and violence generated by economic deprivations and the unresolved tensions surrounding nation-building national identity and the place of minorities. These issues continue to dominate the polity throughout the years.

Citizen's alienation from the institutions of governance and state structures and their growing distrust continued to increase and seventy-five years later, culminated in the Aragalaya.

### *1961 Satyagraha campaign of the Federal Party: Continuing protests against the marginalization of the Tamil community*

The Government under Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, formed in July 1960 accelerated its commitment to the 'total Sinhala-isation' of the Administrative and Judicial spheres. Accordingly, Sinhala would be implemented as the sole Official Language in all areas of administration. The Government also intended to pass legislation making Sinhala the language of courts in all parts of the island. This increased insecurity among the Tamil people about their political future and the leadership of the Federal Party was under tremendous pressure from its constituency to address this. The Tamil leaders tried to resolve the issue through negotiations but when the talks collapsed after two rounds of negotiations the Federal Party decided to conduct a widespread 'Satyagraha' campaign in the north and east before 20 February 1961.

On 19 February, the Party Leader S.J.V. Chelvanayagam set out the parameters of the Satyagraha campaign in a lengthy statement issued. Batches of dedicated volunteers were to sit in front of the entrances to the Kachcheris or administrative secretariats of districts and prevent Government employees from working by blocking them. The campaign was to commence in Jaffna and then be conducted in Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mannar and Vavuniya. The aim was to paralyse civil administration in the North and East through non-violent action.

On 20 February 1961, the first batch of Satyagraha volunteers converged at the party office and the contingent then started out in a procession towards the Jaffna Kachcheri. Chelvanayagam headed the group and the satyagrahis took up positions in

front of the entrances to the Kachcheri. Sitting on the ground opposite both the Kachcheri main entrance and entrance to the residency, they blocked Government servants from entering their office premises and working.

Some women volunteers sat behind the frontline leaders and a reputed singer conducted 'bhajans,' to align the protest with the prevailing Gandhian ethos. She started off by singing 'devotional songs that were favoured by the Mahatma. The lead singer chanted the lines followed by the others repeating the lines. Interestingly, the Aragalaya protestors followed similar approaches, with a lead protestor chanting his or her lines of protest and the others, using their scripts, would chant their responses.

Despite the efforts by the satyagrahis, the police were able to create a gap and break the cordon ensuring that the Government Agent (GA) could reach his place of work. Infuriated by the escape of the GA, members of the public pelted a few stones at the vehicle. The windscreen cracked as a result. The Police turned on the public, and responded with disproportionate force, baton charging the crowds, firing in the air and firing tear gas. There was a clear danger that the non-violent Satyagraha was turning into a violent skirmish and the Federal Party leaders appealed to the crowds to disperse peacefully. The crowds diminished, the tensions eased and the Satyagraha was called off. Although the Tamil leadership memorialised the day as a great day for the Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon, and as the day the Tamils resorted to direct action to win back our rights, it was also described as a "baptism of fire."

53 persons, satyagrahis and members of the public were hospitalised for injuries and more than 300 satyagrahis and members of the public received treatment for minor injuries. While the Police action against satyagrahis angered the Tamil public, it popularised the Satyagraha among the Tamil people and for the next decade, this form of protest was the reference point.

In the following years, there were many policies that caused offence to the minorities and these included

policies relating to university entrance exams, language, access to public sector employment and personal security. As satyagrahas and peaceful protests ceased to gain respect or results, its value diminished to the Tamil community, especially to Tamil youth who took the stance that only militancy will yield results.

### ***The politics of protest re-vamped: From Satyagrahas to Secession and beyond***

With the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) the discourse around language, equal rights, federalism, and regional autonomy through provincial councils was displaced in favour of militancy and a demand for a separate state. The method of canvassing rights - through parliamentary debates, hartals and satyagrahas, was displaced in favour of an armed struggle, culminating in a fully-fledged separatist war. During this armed struggle, there were numerous assassinations, suicide bombings and, guerrilla attacks that made the North and Eastern provinces ungovernable and impacted the whole country.

The war ended with the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009 but in the following years, the causes of conflict remain unaddressed. It was described as an uneasy era of “peace without justice”. Nevertheless, in the shadows of the destruction caused by the conflict, the military surveillance, and the frequently used Prevention of Terrorism Act, Tamil protest was circumscribed.

While the state was adept at responding with force against Tamil protectors lining the streets and blocking entrances to buildings, Tamil politicians and activists searched for alternative means of voicing protest. The “Pottuvil to Poligandy” (P2P) Protest that ended in February 2021 was regarded as a watershed moment in the political history of Sri Lankan Tamils. The five-day “P2P” protest march began in the East on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021 and concluded in the North on February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021. Thousands of Tamils marched on foot and proceeded in

vehicles from Pottuvil in the Ampara District to Poligandy in the Jaffna District. The P2P protest trek was a long journey covering over a distance of 700 km across the Districts of Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Mannar, Kilinochchi and Jaffna attracting tens of thousands of Tamils and Tamil speaking Muslims who demonstrated their support for the protest along the route in a remarkable show of solidarity and unity.<sup>7</sup> The P2P protest provided an opportunity for the long-suppressed Sri Lankan Tamil community to “engage in an imaginative political campaign” of a large scale and wide scope. It was described as a display to the world at large, that there was a creative potential within the community to organise and execute a huge political demonstration of this nature despite the repressive legal and political context that prevented civic mobilisation.

While the P2P protest refreshed memories of past non - violent protests by Tamils, it indicated that the future course of Tamil politics in this country could, should and would be proactively dynamic in a democratic, non – violent mode.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Satyagraha campaigns – civil disobedience, non-violent actions and fasts to secure economic justice***

While strikes and satyagrahas are traditionally resorted to against the government of the day by those who believe that their grievances are not heard, Mr Saumyamoothi Thondaman was perhaps the only minister who launched a successful strike in his capacity as trade union leader while being a cabinet minister. Although many of the leftist trade unionists turned against the working class when they became government ministers, Mr Saumyamoothi Thondaman did not. He launched, what was effectively a strike by plantation workers, thereby hobbling the economy while being a minister in the Jayewardene Government, but he couched his direct actions as “a prayer campaign where every worker would attend a place of worship and be there praying the whole day for a wage increase instead of working.”



The government caved into Mr. Thondaman's demand who astutely did not present this as a triumphant victory of trade union action but as evidence that "Prayers can move mountains" and expressed relief that "Our prayers have been answered."<sup>9</sup>

The intransigence of employers and refusal to address the wage demands of plantation workers to meet the rising cost of living continues to haunt the relationship between workers, the government and the employers.<sup>10</sup> There is growing support for the protests among plantation workers and the workers are increasingly frustrated by the promises given to them and to their leaders prior to elections to secure their votes and the failure to review wages after the elections. The union leadership warned that "Unless they (the plantation workers) are treated reasonably they will be forced into the waiting hands of radicalism."

The struggle for a daily wage of 1000 rupees is meaningless in today's context (2023) where the rupee is devalued and the cost of imports has sent sky rocketed inflation. The government is facing an unprecedented economic crisis, the plantation industry is facing its own crisis and the workers are trapped within it.

The Yahapalana government too faced protests when in December 2017 a group of Residents in the Mullaitivu area launched a 300-day Satyagraha campaign demanding the government to release the 133 - acre land in the Keppapilavu area back to its rightful owners. Mr. R. Sampanthan, the Leader of the Opposition and leader of the main Tamil party, Tamil National Alliance (TNA) sought President Maithripala Sirisena's intervention several times to secure the release of land held by the Army. The Sri Lanka Army eventually agreed to hand over occupied Keppapilavu land in Mullaitivu District to residents.

The Army has vacated the contested land and relocated the troops in order to return the land to the general public. The Army has also assured

that the buildings situated in the area which were utilized by the armed forces will not be demolished and can be utilized by the people.

With the return of the land, the Ministry has also taken measures to resettle those who had been displaced at Keppapilavu in the new year.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2021 a Satyagraha campaign was launched by farmers in Walsapugala demanding the proposed Wild Elephant Management Reserve in Hambantota be included in the government gazette. Eighty-six agrarian organizations supported the satyagraha campaign and it was held for 68 consecutive days.

Seeking solutions for the Human Elephant conflict (HEC). The All-Ceylon Farmers' Federation is engaged in a satyagraha campaign for fifteen consecutive days in Medawachchiya in the Anuradhapura District, North Central Province. They sought to raise awareness of the HEC and propose a novel solution to it. Speaking to *The Morning*, the All-Ceylon Farmers' Federation Chairman Susantha Kumara said that the farmers commenced their satyagraha on 19 March due to the increasingly negative impact on their lives from the HEC and to highlight the need for a new solution to the issue. "We are proposing that Sri Lanka's main wildlife zones be properly identified and that fences be put in place around the said zones. The fences do not necessarily have to be electric fences – they could also be 20-metre-wide fences made up of Palmyrah trees, which have to in turn be reinforced by honey bee habitats."

In March 2022, The United National Party (UNP) held a satyagraha today, with the objective of reaching a common agreement with the Government to form a long-term national policy. The General Secretary of the United National Party, Palitha Range Bandara speaking to media said the country must be taken forward within a strong framework of unchanging policies and the objective of the satyagraha is to persuade the government to formulate a national policy framework for the next 15 to 20 years.



In November 2022, in the throes of the Aragalaya, a ‘Satyagraha campaign’ was launched opposite the United Nations (UN) Office in Colombo urging the release of two Inter-University Students Federation (IUSF) leaders. The campaign is being conducted calling for the immediate release of IUSF Convenor Wasantha Mudalige and the Inter-University Bhikkhu Federation’s (IUBF) Ven. Galwewa Siridhamma Thero. The two student leaders have been detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) over their participation in a protest in Colombo. Those involved in the ‘Satyagraha campaign’ handed over a letter to the UN Resident Coordinator (UNRC) in Sri Lanka to highlight their cause.

### *The power of protest movements and their impact on democratic politics*

In recent years, the world has seen a spate of protests, some of which have dramatic consequences, dislodging well-established tyrants and changing regimes. Some protests have created disruptions and challenged the status quo but have not had the desired outcome of leading to systemic change. Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, and the Arab Spring sweeping through Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria and Yemen did not put the respective countries on the pathway to democracy and stability, but nevertheless had a profound effect in challenging authoritarian rule.

Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, the protests of late 2004 initially succeeded in preventing Kremlin-backed candidate Viktor Yanukovich from stealing the Ukrainian presidency and made possible the election of his reformist rival, Viktor Yushchenko. However, Yushchenko soon found himself beset by infighting and was unable to lead Ukraine decisively towards Euro-Atlantic integration during what proved to be a hugely frustrating five-year term in office. This paved the way for Yanukovich to mount an unlikely comeback and win the 2010 presidential election race. Once he became president, Yanukovich was unable to put the genie of a free press back into the bottle. Instead, his attempts to reverse the gains

of the Orange Revolution helped spark the 2014 uprising that led directly to his downfall.

The Orange Revolution also had a profound effect on the way Ukrainians perceived themselves and their national identity. For the first thirteen years of independence, the political, cultural, social, and economic boundaries between Ukraine and Russia had remained blurred. Most people on both sides of the border continued to regard the fates of the two notionally separate countries as inextricably intertwined. This changed dramatically in 2004 when millions of Ukrainians mobilized in defence of free elections and today, in 2023 they continue to defend their country and their democratic way of life against Russia.

Protests have a context that must not be ignored. While the governments facing protests, routinely react to protests as illegal and illegitimate challenges to their own legitimate authority, the protests have a context that cannot and should not be ignored.

What these protests have in common—regardless of where they take place geographically or where their demonstrators are on the political spectrum—are failures of democracy and of economic and social development, fueled by discontent and a lack of faith in the official political processes, frustration with politicians, and a lack of trust in governments. The main findings of the study of protests indicate that social unrest rose in every region during the period covered and protests took a variety of forms, from demonstrations and strikes, to the campaigns of social and political movements, to unorganized crowd actions such as riots. The most prevalent demand of protesters around the world in the period 2006–2020 was for “real democracy” (Ortiz et al. 2022).

Since almost three thousand protests were reviewed in this study, they were classified into four main categories, by descending frequency of occurrence: (i) protests related to the failure of political representation/political systems, focused on a lack of real democracy, corruption and other grievances; (ii) against economic injustice

and austerity reforms; (iii) for civil rights, from indigenous/racial rights to women's rights and personal freedoms; and (iv) protests for global justice and a better international system for all, instead of the few.

As discussed, Sri Lanka is not a stranger to political protest movements. Besides the satyagrahas and hartals, the country has experienced two armed rebellions spearheaded by Sinhala youth and a thirty-year secessionist war spearheaded initially by disaffected Tamil youth. Nevertheless, Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda recognised that "What we now have in Sri Lanka is a historic moment we should utilize in order to settle the question of what kind of a democratic constitution and what type of a democratic political order the people – ordinary citizens, or the demos, from whom political and intellectual classes should also learn — should build anew."<sup>11</sup>

Prof. Uyangoda pointed out what many observed. The Aragalaya unleashed a democratic energy; it highlighted Sri Lanka constitutional conundrums and the crisis of representative democracy that was self-evident. Sri Lanka now has a President, selected by Parliament, to replace a president who once and briefly enjoyed a popular mandate. That President was replaced by a Member of Parliament who was nominated to Parliament when he failed to secure his seat through the popular franchise. What more could be said about the crisis of representative democracy in Sri Lanka?

The Aragalaya was a result of the system's inability to respond to youth demands for a system change – the third of such demands. Uyangoda highlights the emergence of an "indigenous body of democratic political thought" articulated through the slogans and demands of the citizens' movement of protest and resistance. People's councils, the right to recall the elected and other mechanisms of direct democracy, citizens'

movements as societal checks and balances on power exercised by the political and bureaucratic elites, and participatory citizen bodies to take part in policy deliberations – these are some of such ideas that seek to address the chronic shortcomings of representative-parliamentary democracy. The citizens' movement's interventions during the past four months have also added an entirely new dimension to our politics, marked by the shift of citizens' role in politics from being passive onlookers to vigilant and participatory political actors. That process of transition has also provided a new intellectual and political energy to reimagine and deepen our democracy and the constitutional foundations of our democratic-socialist republic, true to the meaning of these not-so-empty, but wholly neglected concepts.<sup>12</sup>

A full year has passed since the Aragalaya took root in public spaces and in the public imagination and it is ten months since President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned. While the cost of living and inflation remains high, the queues and shortages have gone. The eruptions of violence and fears of political capture of the movement diluted some of the middle-class support for the Aragalaya and the slogans demanding a "system change" are competing with requests to "give the government a chance". However, these mixed messages come forth in a context where the government is considering draconian laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Bill and is considering a slew of economic reforms for structural adjustment that will severely impact the life chances of the people. The campaign for a "system change" shows signs of being undermined by an authoritarian 'Police Raj'.<sup>13</sup> The state is preparing itself to counter popular protests using the apparatus at hand – the law and security forces. The politics of protest may be reformulated and still draw its strength to counter such intransigence.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>5</sup> D.B.S Jeyaraj, 1961 Tamil 'Satyagraha' has baptism of fire on first day, Financial Times, 18 February 2021 <https://www.ft.lk/columns/1961-Tamil-Satyagraha-has-baptism-of-fire-on-first-day/4-713351>
- <sup>6</sup> The five pillars or five great forces - Pancha maha balawegaya that constituted S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's base were – thenative doctors, clergy, teachers, farmers and the workers.
- <sup>7</sup> D.B.S.Jeyaraj, 'Tamil "P2P" Protest of 2021 and the Tamil "Satyagraha" of 1961', *Daily Mirror*, 13 February 2021, <https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/Tamil-P2P-Protest-of-2021-and-the-Tamil-Satyagraha-of-1961/172-205729>
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> D.B.S Jeyaraj, "Pragmatic politics of plantation Tamil leader Saumiyamoorthy Thondaman," *Daily Mirror*, 2018-09-01. Also see: <https://www.historyofceylontea.com/ceylon-publications/ceylon-tea-articles/pragmatic-politics-of-plantation-tamil-leader-saumiyamoorthy-thondaman.html> <https://www.historyofceylontea.com/ceylon-publications/ceylon-tea-articles/pragmatic-politics-of-plantation-tamil-leader-saumiyamoorthy-thondaman.html>
- <sup>10</sup> CWC leader R. Yogarajan warned in the March 10, 2001 issue of the WeekEnd Express: "Unless they (the plantation workers) are treated reasonably they will be forced into the waiting hands of radicalism."
- <sup>11</sup> Prof. J. Uyangoda, "Taking Aragalaya Ideas Seriously", <https://groundviews.org/2022/07/19/taking-aragalaya-ideas-seriously/>
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid
- <sup>13</sup> Aragalaya, one year on: ATA is spoiling the party, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/230409/>

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# Can we not Manage without Bosses?

## An Analysis of Public Opinion<sup>1</sup> In the Political Context of the *Aragalaya*<sup>2</sup>

VIDURA MUNASINGHE AND PRABATH HEMANTHA KUMARA

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*The authors present an analysis of public opinion on the peoples' views on the post Aragalaya political context based on a series of interviews conducted in August and September 2022 by the Law & Society Trust in six areas of the island.*

### 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 Gotabaya Rajapaksa. What effect would this development have on 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?
- (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 Gotabaya Rajapaksa?

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

1. The 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

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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 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 challenges to any group outside the two mainstream parties intending to secure political power through elections. Patronage politics has 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

Gotabaya Rajapaksa secured 6.9 million votes,<sup>3</sup> the largest number of votes in the history of Presidential Elections, when he became the Executive President in 2019.<sup>4</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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 which was predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist.<sup>5</sup> But, within just two years into his Presidency, Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his government were heavily criticized and faced severe opposition. This 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 31<sup>st</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> April to 22<sup>nd</sup> 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>6</sup> The stark difference between these armed insurgencies and the 2022 protests was that the latter was a peaceful public uprising<sup>7</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 by Gotabaya Rajapaksa, 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. However, the most surprising phenomenon was of the *Aragalaya*, was the speed at which people abandoned the protest and returned to the routines of their normal daily lives. 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 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, 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 analyses, 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 the ones who led, took part in, and mobilized this massive political move. This "public" will be deciding the future of Sri Lankan 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 Gotabaya Rajapaksa's electoral campaign in 2019. They were:

Hambanthota District – This is the traditional power base of the Rajapaksa family. Out of the ballots cast in Hambanthota, Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2019 received 66.17%<sup>8</sup> and SLPP in the 2020 General Election received 75.1%<sup>9</sup> of the votes.

Kurunegala District – Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa 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>10</sup> out of the ballots cast at the 2020 General Election, and Gotabaya Rajapaksa received 66.92%<sup>11</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 populace is targeted, the focus is given to these districts. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's first electoral rally of was held in Anuradhapura<sup>12</sup> and after being elected, he was sworn in at the Ruwanwali Maha Seya premises<sup>13</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 Gotabaya Rajapaksa received 67.95%<sup>14</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 Rajapaksa regime and joined the opposition and was elected as the President but during the 2020 General Elections, he re-joined the Rajapaksa fold and contested from the SLPP. During the Presidential Election, Gotabaya Rajapaksa received 73.66%<sup>15</sup> of the ballots cast in this district and in 2020 the party received 53.01%<sup>16</sup> of the vote.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa's decision to abruptly ban chemical fertilizers was widely criticized and these two districts were the most affected by

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, Gotabaya Rajapaksa garnered 52.04%<sup>17</sup> of the ballots cast while his party got 38.23%<sup>18</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>19</sup>) and Borella polling divisions have been a politically weak base for the SLFP camp. In the 2019 election, Gotabaya Rajapaksa received 16.39%<sup>20</sup> and 41.76%<sup>21</sup> respectively of the ballots cast from these two polling divisions. During the General Election, his party SLPP received 18.93%<sup>22</sup> and 38.67%<sup>23</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>24</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>25</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 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 an 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 Rajapaksa 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 time of 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>26</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 Gotabaya Rajapaksa 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>27</sup>

A female UNP supporter from Wanathamulla said everyone receives economic benefits from UNP governments, whereas it is only the supporters of the SLFP who receive any benefit during their rule.<sup>28</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>29</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>30</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. The 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>31</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>32</sup>

However, 4/5 of the respondents believe that the traditional differences between the two political camps no longer exist. They did not 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 saviours 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>33</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. trying to make his son the next Prime Minister, instead of him.”<sup>34</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>35</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 did not stick to its promises. She is ashamed now when she looks back at the time when her Facebook profile pictures were of Gotabaya Rajapaksa as if he was the Guardian Deity of Sri Pada – Sumana Saman.<sup>36</sup> A similar idea about the SLFP emerged when people spoke about SLFP's 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>37</sup>

Many respondents thought that Mahinda Rajapaksa 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>38</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 did not believe that the SLFP camp represents such ideologies anymore. Mahinda Rajapaksa and his family or SLFP 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 is 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 from either of these parties. People are disappointed in both groups. They should contest from a different party or independently.”<sup>39</sup>

## 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 the repression 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 favoured 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>40</sup> They kept talking about the youths being

limited to protesting and youth not having the knowledge for diplomatic governance to solve the economic crisis, improve foreign relations and bring more dollars to the country. According to them, there is no better person suited to this task than Ranil Wickremesinghe and his close allies.<sup>41</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>42</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 9<sup>th</sup> May in support of Mahinda Rajapaksa, but she said that she did not join the group that attacked protestors at Galle Face Green. They did not 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 did not believe that *Aragalaya* has the maturity to make an intervention in governance.<sup>43</sup> More or less, they were also of the view that *Aragalaya* became a victim of the Tamil diaspora, foreign conspiracies and NGO agendas.<sup>44</sup>

4/5<sup>th</sup> of the participants are critical of both political camps and did not hesitate to compliment 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>45</sup>

They did not appreciate the involvement of political parties in the *Aragalaya*. However, they rarely mentioned the involvement of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and actors such as Sarath Fonseka and the supporters of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). Twelve 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 did not 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 more 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 most of them 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 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>46</sup>

According to another, all 225 in the Parliament are thieves. But to overcome this economic crisis, around 20 of the least corrupt members from all parties should come together and form a Cabinet.<sup>47</sup> 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 Gotabaya Rajapaksa), they said *Viyathmaga* people did not 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>48</sup>

There was a noticeable silence among 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>49</sup> When we asked whether the same old 225 could contest and win again during the next election, the responses we received did not 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>50</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. Gotabaya 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>51</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 is not their duty. Alternatively, when asked about the changes they expect to see in the country, most of them could not 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>52</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 a whole new generation should come forward and give us some answers. They seem to not have 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>53</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>54</sup>

## Major Political Parties with A Voter base Maintains a Patron-Client Relationship

Even though this was not 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 Rajapaksa 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 discussing 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>55</sup>

Many stated the main political parties follow a special process in organizing at the grassroots. One said the parliamentarians and ministers use their power, position and political networks to keep earning money for four and a half years and come back to their electorate in the last six months and distribute a little from their large



wealth to buy their vote for the next four and a half years.<sup>56</sup> Another said the money spent in this manner does not really belong to the politicians but accumulated as a result of misusing their position and accessing the public money they ought to manage.<sup>57</sup>

Although they used the term, ‘distributing money and goods,’ it is not simple as giving aid to people in return for their vote. They have a far more complex mechanism for 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 centre 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 and putting up posters are organized through them. Given their experience of working in the area, they are aware of the political affiliations of the families and which votes are already confirmed to their party and which votes can be swayed in their favour. They are also informed of the needs and requirements of the people and the public infrastructure that is 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 donates 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>58</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>59</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>60</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>61</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>62</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 do not 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 with fear, shame and gratitude.

Most of the discussants said the grassroots mobilization of main parties is 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>63</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 a few clues on such trends.

The interviews revealed that *Aragalaya* has had a significant impact on the thinking of Sri Lankan society. The first point that we focused on was 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 and ‘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 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 grassroots activists of main political parties will become stronger with time. This is already observed under the presidency of Ranil Wickremesinghe. Grassroot 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. *Aragalaya* was 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 Gotabaya 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 knowledgeable 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 leaders 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 its 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 practised 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.

## Endnotes

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2. The "Aragalaya" refers to the period during which isolated protests against President Gotabaya 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. 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 Rajapaksa 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.
4. [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)
5. However, Gotabaya Rajapaksa received a lower percentage (52.25%) of the popular vote compared with Chandrika Bandaranayake Kumaratunga who received 62.28 % of the all votes cast.
6. Gotabaya Rajapaksa 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>
7. 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.
8. 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 set on fire in front of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa'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 Rajapaksas 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 Gotabaya Rajapaksa 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.
9. [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)

10. <https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/HambantotaV2.pdf>
11. <https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/KurunegalaV2.pdf>
12. [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)
13. <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/10/09/slpp-presidential-candidate-gotabaya-rajapaksas-inaugural-rally-at-anuradhapura/>
14. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/19/sri-lanka-new-strongman-president-gotabaya-rajapaksa-election/>
15. [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)
16. [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)
17. [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)
18. [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)
19. [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)
20. Since 1994, Ranil Wickremesinghe has contested from Colombo-Central.
21. [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)
22. Ibid.
23. [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)
24. [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)
25. These ideas were integrated in the Election Manifestos of the Party in 1970, 1994, 2001, 2005 and 2019.
26. United National Party, [http://www.unp.lk/about\\_party.html](http://www.unp.lk/about_party.html) (accessed on November 8, 2022).
27. At this time Maithripala Sirisena led opposition was weakened and the new political party SLPP steered by Mahinda Rajapaksa 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.
28. A farmer from Eppawala – Interview conducted on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2022.
29. A woman from Wanathamulla - Interview conducted on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2022.
30. A public servant from Kurunegala -Interview conducted on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2022.
31. A small business owner from Suriyawewa – Interview conducted on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
32. A retired school principal from Kurunegala – Interview conducted on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2022.
33. A woman from Negombo – Munnakkaraya – Interview conducted on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
34. A man from Suriyawewa – Interview conducted on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
35. A fisherman from Negombo – Interview conducted on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
36. A man from Hambanthota – Interview conducted on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
37. A woman from Colombo – Interview conducted on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2022.
38. A woman from Sahaspura – Interview conducted on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2022.
39. A farmer from Anuradhapura – Interview conducted on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
40. A woman from Negombo – Interview conducted on 22 August 2022.
41. A retired army officer from Anuradhapura- Interview conducted on 16 August 2022.
42. A farmer leader from Eppawala – Interview conducted on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
43. A boat manufacturer in Negombo – Interview conducted on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
44. A farmer from Hamabanthota – Interview conducted on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
45. A woman from Polonnaruwa – Interview conducted on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2022.
46. A self-employed woman from Negombo – Interview conducted on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2022.

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

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# The Aragalaya Online: A Sketch of The Political Role of Social Media

LARA WIJESURIYA AND SAMAL VIMUKTHI HEMACHANDRA

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*In this article, the writers give a sketch of the political role of social media in shaping the Aragalaya online, which is based on their personal experiences and active engagement with the Aragalaya.*

## Introduction

Large numbers of people participated in the widespread protest that erupted in March/ April 2022. They protested physically and / or through social media. Compared to other protests of the recent past, these protests gained significant support and soon the Sinhala word ‘aragalaya’ and the Tamil word ‘poraattam’, signifying “struggle”, were used specifically to reference the protests that centred in Colombo - on Galle Face and the surrounding area. Aragalaya with a capital A rapidly came to signify many things.

This article is written from the vantage of personal experience of the protests as the authors of this article, actively participated in the Aragalaya, engaging in protests at GotaGoGama and Pitakotte and voiced dissent against the existing political system through online platforms.

By mid-April the conductors on the Moratuwa – Fort bus (route 100) were shouting out the route - ‘Dehiwala-Bambalapitiya-Kollupitiya-Aragalaya’. This signified recognition of the Aragalaya and GotaGoGama (Gota-Go-Home-Village) as physical spaces.

Popular slogans in the Aragalaya, such as “225 *ma Epa*” (reject all 225), “You messed with the wrong generation” and “*Awurudu 74ka Sapaya Awasan Karamu*” (Let’s end the 74-year curse) were demanding not just a change of rulers, but also an ideal society with freedom, equality and justice. The Aragalaya was transformed into an idea.

The Aragalaya was also a daily occurrence. When we went to the road, we heard vehicles honking to the rhythm of “*Kaputu Kak KakKak, Basil*

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*BasilBasil*", and when we logged into our social media accounts, our newsfeeds were full of news and commentaries on protests. For most of us, the Aragalaya became an inherent part of life.

As with recent people's protests across the globe, social media was actively used in the Aragalaya. For many of us living in this digital age of instant connectivity and instant information, it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between what happens on social media, and what happens in real life. Sometimes, the discourses on social media are played out in real life. Sometimes, real life events are recorded and broadcast on social media in real-time.

This spillover was marked in the context of the Aragalaya. Protestors were almost always seen with phones in their hands, recording the unfolding events or trying to find out what was happening elsewhere. Perhaps due to the large percentage of tech-savvy youth in the Aragalaya, the boundaries between social media and real life were increasingly blurred. We found it hard to decisively draw a line between the Aragalaya offline and the Aragalaya online. Real-life issues were replicated online, and social media was used to augment the experience of the Aragalaya. As such, our understanding of the dynamic role of social media in protests differs from the traditional understanding of social media as a mere *tool* for protest. (Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman 2012; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016)<sup>1</sup> This essay reflects on the porous nature of that border.

As we frame this article, we reiterate some observations, we draw on our personal experience of the protests. While doing so, we note that we have only been exposed to the discourses surrounding

the protests on social media in Sinhala, and to a certain extent, some of the discourses in English. As we do not speak and understand Tamil, we were unable to track social media discourses in Tamil.

There are certain (online and offline) facets of the Aragalaya that are directly connected to the use of social media. These include the widespread use of citizen journalism, social media's role in the mobilisation of people, and the resistance to authority that was galvanized and expressed through social media. This article reviews these facets within the broader scope of the Aragalaya, seeking to understand how protestors used (and were used by) social media.

## Citizen Journalism

Social media and the Aragalaya combined to give rise to vibrant citizen journalism. Social media gives voice to people who are not members of the media elite (i.e., the established and recognized journalists within traditional media). Social media gives ordinary people the space to express their opinions, mobilise people, and raise awareness about events without being constrained by a lack of access to traditional media. Ordinary people become social media journalists and are not bound by the constraints faced by traditional media journalists who are bound by their editors and corporate hierarchies.

In discussing the role of citizen journalism within the context of the Aragalaya, this article reviews the impact of citizens' journalism in terms of the ground-level coverage of events, the widespread sharing of opinions and its creation and / or recognition of perceived leaders.

## *Recognition of perceived leaders*

Lara: In early April, I joined a protest held at the university. I joined because a friend told me about it, and having made placards I went out at the appointed time with a few people from my classes. Once outside, boys from the students' unions started telling us where to stand, and we started wondering whether this was a union-organised protest rather than a spontaneous protest. We decided that our protests were more important than the organisation of the protest, but this anecdote gives me a useful springboard from which to talk about perceived leaders within protest movements. People who protest of their own volition often have wildly varying motives for doing so. Protest can and does happen organically at different levels, and does not necessarily need a leader to initiate it. In fact, the idea that protests cannot happen without a leader is a misconception that may be based on ideas of gender and traditional political movements (Silkey 2020)

Lara's experience illustrates the tension between traditional notions of leadership in the context of political protests and the protesters in the Aragalaya. In Sri Lankan state universities, students' unions assume the role of traditional leaders, and they have been accused of using force to maintain their authority over students. However, in the Aragalaya, people like us, who have no party or union affiliations, came out voluntarily to protest, and at the outset of the Aragalaya, the traditional leadership framework was sidelined and the individual's power to protest and catalyze action was unleashed through social media.

As pointed out by Bennett, "the pervasive use of social technology enables individuals to become important catalysts of collective action..." (Bennett 2012, 22) In this regard, social media has given a platform for people to express themselves freely which is denied them in traditional media. This creates a personalized network with other individuals. This is why Bennett states, "While individuals may be at the center of their own universes, those universes can be very large thanks to the social networking potential of ubiquitous

communication technologies (Bennett 2012, 22)." This was visible in the Aragalaya, as we observed social media being used to organise or announce protests in the early days of the movement, not by traditional political or civil society leaders but by random people. They included popular Youtubers, and our friends or university mates. Earlier these social media personalities, such as Ratta or Motivation Appachchi, were considered apolitical. This prompted those who would have been reluctant to be identified with a particular political group to join in, thus giving the Aragalaya a non-partisan character.

In a leaderless movement, power is structured differently from traditional political power frameworks. In other words, power is not concentrated in a particular person or a group, as we see in traditional political parties; instead, power is decentralized to every individual who bore a claim on the Aragalaya. Consequently, even if those in authority are willing to engage in negotiations with the protestors, there isn't always a corresponding 'leader' with whom to conduct these negotiations (Kuruvita 2022) Often, the traditional authority misidentifies certain individuals or groups as leaders, and negotiates with them, unaware that they are not able to speak for or control the entire protest. The next step taken is when some people who are accepted by most (but probably not all) of the protestors assume the role of leaders. We think this is what happened in the Aragalaya.

Some of these individuals take on the leadership mantle eagerly, and because of society's predisposition to look for (male) leaders, these "leaders" are further projected as the original organisers and authority figures. This is problematic on several levels- it reproduces the power structures in place in traditional society, and it places these individuals on a pedestal (Ghoshal and Jayasinghe 2022). Although those who participated in the Aragalaya and know the importance and extent of grass-roots level organisation, the "Great Man" theory ensures that these "recognized leaders" will be the ones who are remembered (Silkey 2020).<sup>2</sup>

These leaders are often the ones who are most immediately identifiable, both on and offline. The most successful opinion leaders of the protest movement were the ones who were able to use social media and the online space to their (and to the movement's) advantage.

Citizens' journalism on social media undoubtedly speeds up this entire process, as those who did not physically participate often kept track of unfolding events via certain individuals' social media livestreams. Traditional state media was regarded as "obviously biased", and the non-state traditional media too had certain stakes in the process and its own biases (Ismail, Torosyan, and Tully 2019).<sup>3</sup>

People had their own favoured activists whose social media was closely tracked during moments of action, and this attention also boosted those activists' images as leaders. The international media too picked up on these activists, and gave them coverage and recognition as the leaders of the movement.

**Samal:** On 9 July 2022, the day that forced President Rajapaksa to announce his resignation, I marched 20 km to GotaGoGama and I reached there around 1 pm, and by that time, the whole Galle Face Green, from one corner to the other, was full of protestors who had come (and were still coming) from all over the country. In the evening, around 5 pm, there was press conference by the 'leaders of the Aragalaya'. There were 30-40 leaders, most of them were seated and the rest were standing behind. While watching the press conference, I noticed a great distance between these leaders and protestors. I jokingly said to another friend that no protestor knows who these leaders are. By this, I meant that in a traditional protest, protestors can identify their leader(s) but in this case, protestors, apart from those who are in the same social media network, could not recognize these leaders of the Aragalaya.

## *Ground-level coverage of events*

The social media coverage of events on the ground was a great success. While the traditional media took some time to get to the site and cover events, protestors with their camera phones were usually on the spot and able to speedily upload photos and videos of what was happening. Traditional media also enjoy a certain degree of safety compared to citizen journalists. At the May 6<sup>th</sup> protest outside Parliament, which was teargassed, cameramen from the traditional media channels came equipped with proper gas masks while the rest of us- the citizens' journalists had to make do with soaking our shirts and covering our faces. This gives the footage produced by citizen journalists a poignancy and sense of danger that the traditional media is to a great extent shielded from and is unable to capture.

Another advantage of citizen journalism is that there are people with camera phones everywhere (De Haan et al. 2020). This proved useful when activists were arrested, as multiple people were able to track when and where they were being taken, and where they were held. Many of these activists were released (unharmed) a lot sooner than they would have otherwise been released because so many people were aware of how, when and where they had been taken. It was joked that because of citizen journalism, disappearances were no longer possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Samal:** I finished watching a movie around 2 am on 22 July 2022. Before I went to sleep, I checked my WhatsApp and Facebook accounts to get the latest updates on the Aragalaya which had become a habit. I was shocked to see that the police had launched a brutal attack against the GotaGoGama protestors. I started watching Facebook live videos posted by Xposure News and fellow protestors. I felt extremely sad and feared for the safety of the protestors. At the same time, I felt guilty to stay comfortably in my home while fellow protestors, who I met in the Aragalaya and share a close bond with, were assaulted. However, I did not leave home because I was too scared of getting beaten up by police.

Apart from a couple of TV channels, the rest turned a blind eye to the Aragalaya or provided a derogatory picture of Aragalaya. The police raid on GotaGoGama happened early morning and at that time, all TV channels and the majority of radio channels were closed. But due to social media, Samal was watching the raid live, from the point of view of a protestor, in other words, as if he was experiencing it at GotaGoGama. Also, a friend of ours who lives in the United Kingdom, experienced the same as Samal. Due to the time difference, it was late night for her when the police raid happened. She told us that she was demanding answers from UK politicians on Twitter for not saving protestors from state brutality. In this way, social media has connected people all over the country and the world in solidarity with The Aragalaya.

However, citizen journalism has its shortcomings too. Whereas reputed journalists are trained to deal in hard facts and to avoid using overly emotive language and infusing reportage with their personal reactions, citizen journalists are not trained to do so. While there was less disinformation leading to panic within the context of the Aragalaya, there were many cases where citizens reported news that turned out to be misrepresentations of facts. For instance, on May 9<sup>th</sup>, a picture of the GotaGoGama library where books were strewn on the ground, was circulated, with a caption that supporters of Mahinda Rajapaksa had destroyed the library. This was false as the library was untouched on May 9<sup>th</sup>. Assuming an attack, protestors hastily tried to move books to a safer place and the picture of the library was taken at that time. However, the false news of the attack on the library was spread among the social media community rapidly. Also, when the government sent a low-flying helicopter over GotaGoGama on July 13<sup>th</sup>, it was recorded on video and reported as about to shoot unarmed protestors. While that fear was undoubtedly real, the helicopter did not fire. However, many of those not at the site believed that it did. Many of the activists who constantly uploaded videos and posts to social media used highly emotive language and actions to emphasise the problems faced by those in The Aragalaya. Some activists, in the stress of the moment, advocated for violence and revenge, and this posed a challenge.

## *Open spaces for opinions - both informed and uninformed*

Social media is a space in which people feel safe and empowered to share their personal opinions with the world. Traditional media, which reproduces the voices of certain sections of society i.e., members with a specific level of education, training, and social capital, is seen as a gatekeeper of information and protector of privilege. However, social media can and may reproduce the voices of anyone and everyone. As discussed above, some citizens are seen as more reliable or simply more popular than others; however, any citizen has the ability to share their own opinion about current events etc. As a result, many opinions and ideas that were not backed up by facts or analysis emerged and gained traction. This in turn fermented antagonisms, both online and in the real world. These antagonisms adversely affected the protests when different factions of protesting citizens took offence at others' opinions, with confrontations escalating on social media and on the ground. The limitations of social media are also evident. While it creates a space for sharing information and opinions, it does not stimulate reflection, analysis and debate. It creates a space in which nuance is easy to miss. This leads to an unnecessarily binary depiction of issues and reality, creating further social and political divisions.

When people engage with others via the interface of a screen, it becomes easy to forget that there is a human being on the other end, allowing arguments to escalate far quicker than they would in real life. Within the social media space of the Aragalaya, this happened through several threads of discourse, whereby arguments which had multiple sides were reduced and transformed until there were two polarised camps. One discourse surrounded the Aragalaya itself, with one faction proudly claiming that the protest site was unique and unprecedented, while the other faction dismissed all these claims by drawing attention to other, similar protests. Protestors who displayed signs saying 'You [could be read as the President, the Government, any figure of authority] messed [or a less-polite word] with the wrong generation' were criticized on social media by other protestors



who pointed out all the obstacles faced by older generations of protestors.

Social media interactions have their limitations. Determined by the word count and post length, there is a loss of nuance in tone and in-depth and analysis. Screen-based interactions are often dehumanising and important dialogues and debates became embroiled in offensive sound bites spewing intolerance. What could have been a fruitful conversation about differences in perspectives and experiences instead became a destructive argument that further contributed to the polarisation of individuals and groups. As products of the state university system, we felt the discourse surrounding the Inter-University Students' Federation most strongly. This student body was either hailed as heroes or reviled as scoundrels on social media. The offline reality of their role and of the situation as complex and multi-faceted was not accurately and impartially presented, but social media culture and the online spaces are not geared towards peaceful, reflective and constructive discussion and agreements to disagree.

### *Mobilization*

The Aragalaya used social media imaginatively, using symbols to further spread a message. They adopted and perfected the widespread use of certain hashtags (Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016). Protest movements that gain traction online also tend to draw the attention of those who are against it, (Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016) and in the case of the Aragalaya this was evident both within social media and also in the physical space of the Aragalaya who belonged to the various camps.

Social media was widely used as a means to communicate with people, with the view to mobilising them in multiple ways. Sometimes a simple message or poster was widely circulated and spread the news about a protest organised for a certain time and date (Tufekci and Wilson 2012). Protest groups were created on messaging

apps and then mobilized with the press of a button. Some of these were simple WhatsApp groups to which neighbours who met at junction protests were added, and some were select groups hosted on alternative platforms that were less subject to surveillance and bans. To join these select groups, one had to be recommended by a trusted person already in the group. The best illustration of this mobilisation was the planned protest on July 9<sup>th</sup>, where thousands of people defied a hastily imposed curfew and overcame the lack of public transport, to join the crowds in Colombo. Several days prior to the protest, different posters in different languages had been circulating on social media, all bearing the date and the slogan 'Ratama Colambata' (the whole country to Colombo). The originators of the posters thus provided a connection point for individuals and groups who were protesting the country's situation (Poell and Dijck 2018).<sup>4</sup> The decision to join the protest was made individually, but that decision brought tens of thousands together.

**Samal:** I am a member of the group which ran the GotaGoGama People's University and most of the members live closer to Nugegoda. We decided, as the People's University, to support the people who were organizing the July 9th protest at Nugegoda junction which would later join the protest march coming from Homagama. So, we contacted a person who we thought was an organizer of the Nugegoda protest and informed her of our willingness to support. She gave us the necessary information and we created trilingual posters and posted on the People's University Facebook page. The three posters had a reach of approximately 2000. When we got to Nugegoda on July 9<sup>th</sup>, there were already 500-1000 people. It was obvious that these people did not come because of our Facebook posts since there were a number of organizers, who we were unaware of. Also, while we were marching, one member gave a 17-minute Facebook live video<sup>5</sup> with a commentary on the march and the struggle and this video had a reach of nearly 500.

**Lara:** Sometimes, the mobilisation took place in a different way - where images and videos were shared in order to mobilise public opinion in a certain direction. I was at GotaGoGama on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April when news came of the Rambukkana shooting, where police had opened fire on demonstrators and killed one. A group of us crowded around a mobile phone and watched the video. Previously the crowd's mood was pleasant and cheerful, but that changed very fast into an angry and upset mood. At that time, the spirit and commitment to non-violence prevailed and the protestors all gathered for a candlelight vigil. However, instant mobilization and mood shifts among the crowd that can take place through the sharing of a video was well demonstrated.

Another example of spontaneous mobilization was seen on May 9<sup>th</sup>. with the arrival of people to GotaGoGama soon after the attack on it by supporters of Mahinda Rajapaksa. Dilan Senanayake, a prominent face of the Aragalaya on social media made a 90-minute long live video on Facebook, giving a detailed update on the attack. We do not know the exact number of people who watched the live video, but it is safe to state that a considerable number of people heard the news of the attack through his live video. Only one TV channel broadcast the attack live. Yet, people in nearby areas rushed to GotaGoGama to protect the protestors and the protest site. At the time of writing this article, this video had 2.2 million views, 11,400 reactions and 45,000 comments. The role of social media, in this regard, played a significant role in mobilizing people, both spontaneously and in a planned manner.

### *The power of Hashtags*

The Aragalaya also used certain hashtags across social media. Protestors used these hashtags to link themselves to the bigger movement, and also, perhaps, to gain traction for their own opinions and posts. In modern protest movements, hashtags are often the most visible factor that is symbolic of the movement (Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016) For the Aragalaya, the most

prominent hashtag was probably #gotagohome or variants of the same. As discussed above, the increasing difficulties in distinguishing between online and offline complicates this; we are used to using hashtags offline as well as online. This kind of cross-referencing between the online and offline spaces of the protest gave protestors a clear idea of other protestors' affiliations- and enabled protestors to reinforce their identity and make their participation public.

While the hashtags associated with the Aragalaya were initially used in the context of the Aragalaya itself, others started using them to gain visibility for their non-Aragalaya social media content. Some commercial concerns used them to boost their social media views, just as some clothes shops created Aragalaya themed displays.

A study of the frequency of use of hashtags is also interesting, as it is possible to trace the developments of the Aragalaya through them. While the attacks of May 9<sup>th</sup> were unfolding, citizen journalists started tagging videos of the attack with hashtags such as #attackonGGG. After Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned as President, the hashtag #gotagohome became redundant and some replaced it with #ranilgohome (which was, however, nowhere near as catchy or popular). As we write this, with the latest protest on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, trending hashtags on Twitter are #aragalaya and #economiccrisislka. This last hashtag has been a major hashtag since the beginning of the year, and it seems fair to predict that it will be the last hashtag standing.

## Reactions

In the early days of the Aragalaya, in early April, the government responded to a plan for an island wide protest by briefly blocking all forms of social media. This is not a new development for Sri Lanka, as, seeing a clear link between rumors on social media and the communal rioting of 2014, 2018, and to a lesser extent 2019, the government imposed strict social media bans in those situations as well. This time, however, many felt that the ban was unjustified and used VPNs

to access social media. This attempt to circumvent the ban had the unforeseen effect of pushing the hashtags associated with the Aragalaya to be referred to as 'trending topics' in many countries. Throughout the months of April and May, protestors at GotaGoGama had problems with internet connection while at the site; this was probably due to the massive volume of traffic that the communication towers near the site had to deal with. However, the rumour on the ground was that the government was actively jamming signals. The idea of connectivity was very close to the Aragalaya- the GGG Library, which became one of the most symbolic spaces of the protest, began life as a rack of books for people to read as they charged their phones at the facilities set up with foresight for the purpose of keeping people connected.

Reactions to the Aragalaya took many forms. Soon there emerged obstacles to accessing social media as well as obstacles to posting content. Protestors had antagonisms and disagreements with each other as well (Poell and Dijck 2018).<sup>6</sup> In addition to this, there was pushback against the Aragalaya from non-protestors. This especially happened after any outburst of violence. After the orchestrated attack on GotaGoGama on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, people were enraged and set fire to the buses that had transported the rioters and they beat up the rioters too. Non-participants delegitimized this violence as criminal and as proof that the protests were not a valid movement for social change. Other protestors began distancing themselves from those engaging in violence, claiming that their behaviour was 'not our Aragalaya'. While this stance might have been motivated by the ideals of non-violence that many people advocated, it could also have been linked to the desire to remain legitimate in the eyes of the non-participating public and the outer world in general.

## Resistance to Authority via Social Media

A third way in which social media played a role in the Aragalaya was through the show of resistance to authority. It is interesting to examine the

elements that were frequently used during the Aragalaya that have a clear and traceable history linked to the last few years of Sri Lankan politics. This section looks at the online use of memes, and the renaming of locations in the context of the Aragalaya to demonstrate outright rejection of authority.

### *Freedom to Meme*

**Lara:** I grew up being told not to make political jokes in public spaces, and it was within the last two years that I first heard people on the bus joking about the government. Of course, there were those, even previously, who openly criticized the government, but they were usually very serious.

Political cartoons have been a staple of newspapers since independence; but the concept of poking fun at those in power seemed to remain within the domain of elite journalists. Despite their membership in this elite cadre, these journalists themselves were often targeted in the pre-2015 years for their critical commentary. Thus, the average person tended to be cautious when making political criticisms in public, as the consequences could be very serious. However, in recent years, especially in the aftermath of the elections of 2015, political critique became more visible and frequent. With the increased access to the internet and social media spaces, the anonymity that accompanies these spaces, and the comparative increase in media freedom after the elections of 2015, political critique became more visible and frequent. Memes became a major tool in political communications and of this political critique. Memes, through humour provoked thought, and they were extremely easy to spread among the social media-using public (Bharati, 2021). This freedom of expression via social media soon translated to the offline world and people felt safe to make jokes in public, sometimes in front of policemen and other figures of authority. As with hashtags, the memes shared and circulated this year also provide an understanding of the developments in the political and economic spheres.

## *Anti-authority jokes*

When citizens joke about authority, they recognize that the figures of authority are fallible. Through jokes, these figures of authority are in a sense taken off their pedestals and re-humanized (Verdery 1999). The mockery of certain figures, spanned the online and offline spaces, demonstrated a rejection of authority. Possibly the most recognizable mockery used in the Aragalaya was the chant of ‘kaputukaakkaakkaak’, which motorists played on their horns, and which in fact led to arrests during the government crackdown after July 2022. Rejection of the authority of the police and other representatives of authority was also expressed through memes and in the direct interactions of the public with these authorities. For instance, the inhabitants of GotaGoGama asked police to stop investigating a theft at the protest site, telling them that they would handle it since it was within their village.

Sometimes this mockery of authority figures was extended to the ‘69 lakshaya’ (6.9 million) who had voted for Rajapaksa in 2019, through songs and memes. These people formed an easy target, with many of the meme-makers blaming them for their short-sightedness in electing Rajapaksa. The majority of the Rajapaksa voter base comes from a certain demographic who believed that their needs were not addressed by other parties. In exercising their democratic right to vote, they voted for the candidate who seemed to best serve their interests. Ethno-nationalist mobilization in Sri Lanka also coalesces along lines of socioeconomic class as well; so, mocking and ridiculing these people can be interpreted as a class-based action.

Mockery as a form of resistance is recognized. It is also well recognized as the weapon of oppressed groups and classes (Scott 1985). Expressions of resistance against those in positions of power are legitimate and power holders are legitimate targets of criticism and mockery, but those who have less power than the ones leading the mocking should not be ridiculed. We bear in mind that social status and social positions shift in times of political upheaval.

## **Renaming Places**

Place names are sources of information about social, economic and political changes (Bloch 2006). To rename a place is to reclaim it (or alternatively, to stake an older claim to it). This is evident from the disputes surrounding place names in the post-colonial era, where colonial names have been replaced by names of nationalists. In the past decade or so, place names in Colombo have been changed; from reflecting the colonial legacy of the city, to reflect a different, post-colonial and ‘national’ history. This struggle around names of places has extended to the North and East of the island too. When the new custodians of power exercise their power to rename a space, it enables them to erase older claims to the space or the land, and entrench the ideas and beliefs that they consider important (Palmberger 2012). Changing place names is usually done by those in authority, so when the protestors involved in the Aragalaya took it up on themselves the right to change place names, they were signifying their rejection of the government’s claims to certain spaces.

The area of Galle Face was collectively referred to as GotaGoGama, with some people even renaming the place on Google Maps. The protest camp set up outside Temple Trees was referred to as ‘MainaGoGama’<sup>7</sup>, and the protest area outside the Parliament was, briefly, ‘HoruGoGama’.<sup>8</sup> People began to refer to these places by these names, rejecting the official names.

## **Conclusion**

In a society where we access the online world which is literally at our fingertips, there is no clear distinction between the virtual world and the real world. There is no hard and fast way to distinguish between the two. Social media trends of the Aragalaya pervades political discussion and action. This spillover has a profound impact on the protest movement, with coverage of events, mobilization and resistance to authority happening on multiple levels, in multiple places, and across much larger swathes of the public than was ever possible before.

Social media has created an intimacy binding the protestors with the events taking place.

The emergence of citizen journalists -potentially everyone with a camera phone, challenged the state and institutions of authority, diminishing their chances of violating citizens' rights during protests and getting away with it. Social media also allows protest movements to grow from the grass-roots level, with multiple people taking on leadership roles, thus challenging traditional concepts of leadership.

Social media plays a dual role. Like traditional media, it serves as a means of communication through its widespread use and the ability to mobilise thousands of people both quickly and cheaply. This mobilization is also dependent on individual will and decision. Social media provides protestors with tools to further the movement by creating and sustaining momentum. This is done by using simple hashtags as well as more complex pieces of technology, thus creating stronger tools and forums of protest.

Social media also functions as a platform for more passive forms of resistance to authority as well. Through the sharing of memes, free expression of political opinion, and renaming/reclaiming places, social media becomes a site of resistance.

It is a misconception to consider the online space as an alternative to and as separate from the offline space. It is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how people engage with both spaces, and of the nature of protest movements in today's world. In today's society, many people have some sort of access to social media, and they straddle both online and offline spaces. We hope this article illustrates protest activity as online and offline activities that come together to form one undivided Aragalaya. In this endeavour, this article has rambled back and forth across different spaces – online, offline, in the virtual and in the emotional spaces of engaged citizens, struggling for a better political order.

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## *End Notes*

<sup>1</sup> The idea of social media as a space for protest and not simply a communication medium is explored in recent literature

<sup>2</sup> According to Silkey (2020), this is also what happened with men like Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X during the American Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>3</sup> Protestors everywhere have a tendency to lean towards media that provides more legitimacy to the movement than the traditional media does, according to Ismail, Amani, Gayane Torosyan, and Melissa Tully. 2019.

<sup>4</sup> This is the role usually played by the 'connective leaders' of social media protest movements, as explained by Poell, Thomas, and Jose van Dijck. 2018.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/PeoplesUniversityGGG/videos/565501075181279>

<sup>6</sup> A likely outcome whenever leadership functions become explicit in a decentralised social media protest context, according to Poell and van Dijck, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Maina was the name assigned by the Aragalaya protestors to Mahinda Rajapaksa

<sup>8</sup> Hora being the Sinhala word for rogue or thieves signifying the Aragalaya view that Parliament was a village of thieves.



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# Gotagogama People's University: An Experiment of An Alternative Intellectual Space

SAMAL VIMUKTHI HEMACHANDRA

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*This article traces the journey of the Gotagogama People's University in the context of the Aragalaya. It is viewed from the perspective of the writer who was one of the founding members of the university and provides an account of the dedicated efforts of a small group who fights for an egalitarian society.*

## Introduction

Gotagogama People's University was our contribution to the *Aragalaya/Poraattam*, the greatest people's uprising Sri Lanka has ever recorded in history. Considering the magnitude of the struggle, the People's University was like a drop in the ocean, nevertheless, a drop that was absorbed into the ocean of people who demanded a system change, and better prospects for their children and the younger generations.

This article traces the journey of People's University in the context of *Aragalaya /Poraattam*. As I was a founding member of the university, it is viewed from my perspective. As was the case with *Aragalaya/Poraattam*, I must emphasize that this is neither a complete story of the university, nor do I represent all the members. Yet, it provides an account of the labours of a small group who want to make Sri Lanka a better place.

Gotagogama People's University was inaugurated on 16 April 2022 at the Gotagogama space, next to Gotagogama Library. Initially, the People's University team consisted of 11 people. Later, two people left the team, due to personal reasons and disagreements regarding the selection of specific speakers for the Peoples University sessions, and seven others joined, after witnessing the Peoples University activities. The People's University tent was completely destroyed on 12 May 2022 due to the bad weather and with the support of well-wishers, the People's University obtained a better structure and resumed from 16 May. From its onset up to the dismantling of Gotagogama on 12 August 2022, it hosted 53 sessions on a range of topics including politics, culture, law and sports.

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Out of these 53 sessions, People's University organized 36 sessions and the rest were organized by other organizations who wanted to contribute to *Aragalaya/Poraattam*.

This article first discusses how the idea of People's University came into being. It points out that this idea did not originate in one individual's mind, rather the idea was inspired by actions of different individuals and groups. The article also elaborates on how the People's University functioned. Finally, it critically evaluates the impact of the People's University and its relationship with the *Aragalaya/Poraattam*.

## The Origin of People's University– Summing up the Anecdotes that Led to its Creation

Saumya Amarasinghe's friends who were abroad and could not support *Aragalaya/Poraattam* physically, but wanted to help out, sent her a total of Rs. 58,000 to do whatever she felt was good for the struggle. She initially wanted to buy goods, such as water bottles and food, for the protestors. I suggested to her that we should invest this money, not as a one-off activity, but in a people's university, a space where we can have intellectual discussions. She agreed and then we reached out to our like-minded activist friends. This was how the team was built. I am aware that people who know about the Gotagogama people's university, considered me to be the 'leader' of this initiative, but I maintained then and through the following paragraphs in this section ideas and contributions of other individuals and groups also influenced and contributed to the Gotagogama People's University.

I first heard the term, "people's university", from Nirmal Dewasiri. A couple of years ago, he told me that we should establish a people's university near a cemetery in Veyangoda during 2016-17, where a marginalized community lived. We could not actualize that idea then, and this idea occurred to me again during the 'teach out' session held at

the Independence Squire on 8 April 2022 – before the establishment of Gotagogama. The "teach out" was organized by Hashtag Generation and Delete Nothing. There were two talks, one focused on giving a basic outline of the executive presidency and the economic crisis and the other one was more about providing a historical perspective on protests in 20<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lanka. This was a refreshing experience for me because I have never been to an intellectual discussion within a protest site and I was moved by how people engaged with both of the talks. Although both talks were facilitated in all three languages, I felt that they had an elitist bias. As a Sinhala speaker, that space did not allow me to engage because the discussions were oriented towards English. The immediate reason for a people's university at Gotagogama came during a talk by Nirmal Dewasiri in the evening of 12 April 2022. Initially, that talk was planned to be held somewhere else at Gotagogama but due to the noise of protestors and other activities, it was moved under the Bandaranaike statue. The whole talk was done in the pouring rain. Despite all these obstacles, the talk and discussion went on for nearly two hours. While I was there, I became convinced that we should have a proper space to facilitate intellectual discussions. The library was an added initiative to the idea of a people's university. I saw it as a timely intervention to create a space for these readers to discuss and debate about what they read and what they were experiencing. I wanted to highlight here that the idea of people's university, a knowledge-sharing space where anybody can and has the freedom to express their ideas and opinions, did not occur in my mind alone. The idea was circulating among our political activists a long time before the *Aragalaya/Poraattam* and it became actualized after observing the strengths and weaknesses of other, similar, aforementioned activities which happened during *Aragalaya/Poraattam*. Thus, the Gotagogama People's Library had been established by that time and even though it was on a small scale, compared to its development in later months, that space was extremely lively and people from all walks of life came together to read books and to discuss.

Once the People's University team was formed, we collectively wrote a mandate for the People's

University which highlighted our own objectives and the way we functioned during the *Aragalaya/Poraattam*. We noted the following three objectives for the People's University:

1. To bring different political, social and economic ideas within the Gotagogama to one place and to create a melting pot of ideas and opinions.
2. To envision the future of Sri Lanka which was in the process of making since March 31, 2022.
3. To experiment with an alternative intellectual space which is based on freedom and equality.

When Gotagogama was established, we observed that a group of people had gathered, who were diverse in terms of political ideology, ethnicity and sexual orientation. There was no existing space for these groups to come together and discuss their ideas and concerns. Therefore, the first objective was to use the People's University space as a gathering place for people to discuss their ideas and opinions on various topics. The second objective reflected that the People's University should be forward-looking. The People's University sought to be a space where an alternative future for Sri Lanka could be envisioned. The final objective was to experiment with an alternative intellectual space ensuring freedom and equality of participation and discussion. The majority of our team came from the traditional university system and we were very critical of the hierarchical structure prevailing in Sri Lankan universities. Therefore, the Gotagogama space was a great opportunity for us to practice in what we believed to be an ideal intellectual space.

Once we finalized our objectives, the next challenge was to actualize this idea. We knew that the funds we had were not sufficient and we did not know how to collect funds as we had no prior experience in such activities. On 14 April, we reached out to a schoolmate of mine who was a member of Rise Up Sri Lanka organization which comprised youth, professional groups and concerned individuals who came together to promote peace among different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. They had two tents on the seaside, near

the Gate Zero. He was very appreciative of our idea, and offered one of these tents. We relocated that tent next to the Gotagogama People's Library. Establishing the tent was an interesting endeavor. I used a drilling hammer borrowed from the tent used by the St. John Ambulance brigade and the library staff helped us to set up the tent. Solidarity, collective endeavor and sharing were the essential elements animating Gotagogama and it was thoroughly reflected in this process because none of us knew each other but we were connected by the shared revolutionary spirit. My friend from Rise Up connected us with his friend who was willing to fund necessary items for the People's University such as stools and stationery. Therefore, the Gotagogama People's University was not one person's project but a collective effort of people who did not even know each other but wanted to discuss and debate ideas and support a movement.

## The Function of the Gotagogama People's University

On 16 April, we inaugurated the people's University in grand style (Opening session of People's University, YouTube, 2022). Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda, Dr. Janaki Jayawardena and Dr. Prabha Manuratne, who are highly respected academics and activists and Benislos Thushan, a young activist from Jaffna, made inaugural speeches. The full speech made by Prof. Uyangoda was broadcasted on Sirasa TV (Dias, Pathikada 19.04.2022). The statement he made, "I come here [Gotagogama] not to teach you [citizens] but to learn from you" resonated among many in academic circles. He pointed out how vital this people's uprising has been to the democracy of post-independent Sri Lanka. The YouTube video of this speech has, to date reached 19,000 views and the positive feedback in the comments section of the video indicates the powerful impact of this speech. A blog writer named Ransirimal, wrote a poem based on this speech, acknowledging its impact on the protestors (Ransirimal 2022). Dr. Manuratne illustrated the importance of having

alternative intellectual spaces for civic education, by placing the idea of People's University in an international context. In Dr. Jayawardena's talk, she emphasized the importance of having a people's university to counter the limitation of state education. Finally, Thushan discussed the relationship between minorities and this people's uprising. Addressing the criticism that came from some sections of the Sinhala community that minorities are not visible in *Aragalaya/Poraattam*, he noted that state suppression has not been symmetrical for all the communities and that had determined the minorities' role in this struggle.

Prof. Uyangoda's speech at the inauguration, created a positive sentiment among the media and people towards the *Aragalaya/Poraattam*. With the media coverage of the *Aragalaya/Poraattam* in its news, the establishment of People's University increased the legitimacy of Gotagogama as a true alternative people's space. For instance, Gotagogama had been subjected to many criticisms which mainly came from a traditional understanding of conducting politics. The statement that this space was apolitical led to criticisms that if protestors were not there for politics, they must be there to have fun. These criticisms were constantly levelled at protestors. This criticism is clearly reflected in Chandima Jayasena's article "*Nirpakshika Minisunge Deshapalana Bawithawa Koibata da*" ("Where is the Political Practice of Nonpartisan People Heading?") and she criticized the political direction of Gotagogama due to the carnival atmosphere that prevailed. Yet, even she acknowledges the People's University as an important political window to equip people with knowledge to challenge power projects nonviolently (Jayasena 2022). Within a few days after its establishment, the People's University became a permanent fixture of Gotagogama. Many news articles about the nature of Gotagogama referenced the People's University in a positive manner.

As mentioned in the previous section, the sessions of the People's University were organized in two ways: the People's University organized activities and it created a space for other organizations and individuals to work. When the People's University

organized sessions, the main criteria for selecting a topic and speaker(s) had been the relevance of this session to the Gotagogama space. For instance, the first two sessions of the People's University were devoted to understanding the economic crisis, the immediate cause of *Aragalaya/Poraattam* (Kuruvita 2022). We did a session on how struggle can be seen as a performance, targeting the criticism Gotagogama received for being a 'carnival'. Prof. Saumya Liyanage, a prominent actor and drama theorist, conducted this session and he located the value of performance within political action (Liyanage 2022). At one point, a group of protestors at Gotagogama attempted to place themselves above other protestors by claiming that they have 'sacrificed' more than others. As this was against the spirit of the collective nature of Gotagogama a session was organized around the claim and to point out the apolitical nature of the sacrifice (Perera 2022). This session was conducted by Kalyananda Perera who was a prominent figure in radical politics and he pointed out that when we use the word 'sacrifice', we believe that what we sacrificed is more valuable than being part of the struggle and this is counter to the ethos of the struggle.

Vidarshana Kannangara, another prominent activist in radical politics, discussed "what is a system change", and all that it entails as this was a main demand in *Aragalaya/Poraattam* (Kannangara 2022). The People's University hosted two sessions on 18 May, to commemorate the victims of the war (Haniffa & Surenthiraraj 2022, Munasinghe & Anu 2022). There were conflicting ideas regarding the commemoration day, as it was considered by Sinhala Nationalists as a celebration of the war victory over the LTTE. This celebration excluded minorities, especially Tamils, and we, as we have done in the past, wanted to highlight the violence of war and the nationalist politics behind victory celebration. Instead of highlighting the violence of war, in these two sessions, the speakers highlighted the politics of memorialization by pointing out the process of memorialization and determining who had the right to memorialize. Nirmani Liyanage did a session on the importance of Gotagogama as a people's space where she highlighted



how essential Gotagogama space had been to *Aragalaya/Poraattam* (Liyanage 2022) Apart from these, there were discussions on the Sri Lankan electoral system, (Peiris, People's University, Gotagogama videos, 10 June 2022) the need for a new political language to understand *Aragalaya/Poraattam* (Perera 2022), the current health crisis, (Amarasinghe and Marasinghe 2022) the complexity of people's struggles (Hemachandra 2022) and the history of collective identities (Schubert 2022) .

Other groups who wanted to actively contributed to *Aragalaya/Poraattam* also conducted sessions at the People's University. Public intellectuals such as Dr. Sunil Wijesiriwardena, Prof. Nirmal Dewasiri and Sumith Chaminda, prominent protestors at Gotagogama such as Lahiru Weerasekara, Ishara Jayasena and Pieter D'Almeida, and youth and political groups including Marx School, Hype Sri Lanka and Sisterhood Initiative conducted sessions on various topics. These discussions ranged from current crisis to political topics on constitutional reforms and what is meant to be a Muslim woman in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, the People's University space facilitated two book launches; A report on *Dhammika Paniya* (The miracle cure for Covid) and *Arthika Arbudayata Janatha Visadumak* (A People's Solution to the Economic Crisis). Fab Lanka Foundation did a live demonstration of 3-D printing technology and a session on how to use industry 4.0 technologies can be used to transform Sri Lanka into a "Makers Society" by creating a Social and Solidarity Economy (Hettiarachchi et al. 2022 ). They also donated a sound system for the People's University, acknowledging the People's University as a key knowledge sharing space at Gotagogama.

The People's University activities were not limited to the physical space. We conducted zoom discussions and simultaneously livestreamed them on the Gotagogama People's University Facebook page. Two sessions were done on discussing food crisis and solutions (Dandeniya et al. 2022) and

energy crisis and solutions (People's University, Gotagogama, facebook, June 4, 2022) Further, we collaborated with the People's Forum to do a session on different models of citizen assemblies (Morán and Firdous 2022). Apart from these, we opened our virtual space to be used by individuals and groups to host events. Kalubowila Ananda Thero organized two sessions on the trajectory of citizen's struggle and Hype Sri Lanka launched a public proposal initiated by youth on systemic development of Sri Lanka.

The People's University actively contributed to the people's uprising on 9 July. As most of our members resided closer to Nugegoda junction, we decided to support the organizers of Nugegoda rally which would merge with the rally coming from Homagama. We used the People's University Facebook page to inform people to join at Nugegoda Junction by 9.30 am on 9 July. We posted flyers in all three languages and these flyers reached up to 2000 people. The rally was also streamed on Facebook live and reached an audience of 500 people (People's University, Gotagogama videos, 9 July 2022).

Currently, we are in the process of preserving the memory of the Gotagogama struggle. In this regard, we have assembled a group of 10-15 protestors to map the development of the Gotagogama space from 9 April to 13 August 2022 through their memory. The other activity is to publish the sessions organized by the People's University.

## Impact of the People's University

The impact of the Gotagogama People's University cannot be measured through statistical analysis. Hence, I will critically evaluate the impact of the People's University in relation to the three objectives cited previously. The first objective of the People's University was to bring different ideas discussed within Gotagogama to one place and I do not think that we reached

our expectations. We were planning to have one- to-one sessions with different groups in Gotagogama and we only managed to interview Eranga Gunasekara, from the Socialist Youth Union (Gunasekera 2022). However, we hosted a session with the deaf community who had been actively participating at Gotagogama. With the facilitation of a sign language interpreter, members of the deaf community expressed the problems they have been facing as a community and how *Aragalaya/Poraattam* had been giving them a space to express themselves. In relation to the second objective - to envision the future of Sri Lanka, I do not believe that we have done many activities that directly address this objective. However, the themes we discussed on politics, law and economics, proposed reforms which did include a futurist element. In other words, those sessions pointed out the problems in the existing structures and the ways in which those structures should be reformed.

However, in my view, the People's University excelled in its third objective – that is in providing an alternative intellectual space. As we experienced first hand the hierarchical nature of the traditional state university structure, we wanted to experiment with a space where equality and freedom was guaranteed. This has been achieved through different layers. One layer is the structure of the People's University sessions. One criticism we had regarding the structure of the People's University is that we too have established a traditional university structure at Gotagogama where a speaker comes forward and delivers a lecture. However, this was an inaccurate observation because unlike in a traditional university setting, the audience here was very active. Most of the time, speakers gave a short talk on their respective themes and there was ample time for discussion. In discussions, every idea was accommodated respectfully and no one was neglected due to their differences.

Another layer where equality and freedom manifested was in the selection of speakers. When selecting speakers, we tried to accommodate a variety of speakers. For instance, the People's University team has anti-capitalist tendencies, yet

we invited people who were inclined to liberal politics. Further, it can be argued that there was an academic bias when selecting speakers as most of them, came from traditional university settings. In other words, most of the speakers had academic qualifications such as PhDs and Masters. However, though they held academic qualifications and academic positions, they were selected not because of those attributes but because of the belief that they can contribute to the ongoing discussions at Gotagogama as they have been activists for different political, economic and social causes. Nevertheless, we also invited speakers who did not possess academic qualification yet were able to deliver an intellectual discussion due to their long careers as political activists. The list of speakers who spoke at the People's University was diverse as there were community leaders, refugees, foreigners, internationally acclaimed academics, local academics, professionals, and activists.

The third layer manifesting equality and freedom was in the audience. The People's University was an open space, where anyone could join and leave as they wish. As a result, there was no special audience and anyone interested could participate. There was no discrimination due to class, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Even children were welcome to the People's University space. The People's University team always made efforts to accommodate each and every comment, idea or criticism from the audience. Sometimes, discussions were derailed and drifted to different trajectories due to the active engagement of participants. For instance, in Ramindu Perera's session on the Russian Revolution, the initial discussion moved on to a two-hour discussion on limitations of *Aragalaya/Poraattam*!

The final layer manifesting equality and freedom was in the accommodation of different ethnic groups. The majority of the People's University team was from the Sinhala community and, as a result, there were practical difficulties relating the incorporation of the Tamil speaking communities into the People's University activities. For instance, we were not able to find Sinhala - Tamil translators regularly, hence the majority of sessions were

conducted in Sinhala. However, we were able to facilitate a few sessions either in Tamil or provide a translation or a summary in Tamil. As we have discussed in our internal conversations, the People's University team was conscious about the issue of not being able to facilitate discussions in Tamil and we tried our best to accommodate discussions in the Tamil language when possible.

Assessing the overall impact of the People's University, I would say that the impact is low considering the magnitude of the *Aragalaya/Poraattam*. Nevertheless, *Aragalaya/Poraattam* became a successful people's uprising because of the combination of the small impacts of the many small groups. Throughout the *Aragalaya/Poraattam*, the People's University conducted sessions. Hence, it started to build up a regular audience for People's University activities. This is vital to the existence of Gotagogama because there were periods, where Gotagogama was deserted and People's University activities kept the Gotagogama space alive. This was acknowledged in a discussion organized by Hashtag Generation where one speaker appreciated the determination of the People's University for not giving up, even though at the times the Gotagogama space was deserted (Hashtag Generation 2022). Moreover, the popularity of the People's University started to reach out to other regional Gotagogama spaces during the latter stage of the *Aragalaya/Poraattam*. For instance, we were invited to do a session at Veyangoda Gotagogama premises on 8 July which we did.

## Conclusion

This self-reflective writing of the People's University was not an easy task for me. It was mainly because of the tension between witnessing the magnitude of the *Aragalaya/Poraattam* and the smallness of the People's University and its activities. However, as stated above, the *Aragalaya/Poraattam* was a gigantic collaboration of *small* activities of *small* groups and individuals. I always felt that the People's University could have done more. However, while writing this article, I started to appreciate the collective labour of the People's University team because conducting a session at Gotagogama was no easy task. We all were engaged in full time work or study and could not be present at the protest sites all the time. From finalizing a theme, fixing a date and speaker, creating Facebook flyers and uploading photos of previous sessions to the People's University Facebook page, bringing the sound system, arranging the People's University space which had to be clean before a session, Facebook live streaming and engaging in the discussion, required a great deal of determination and effort. The weather too sometimes tested our determination as we were occasionally flooded out by heavy rain. Amidst all these difficulties, we, the People's University of Gotagogama managed to stand with our principle commitment to create a space where every idea was respected. What amazed me the most is that we were *courageous*, as Alain Badiou (2008) would say, by *being not discouraged*.

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# Women in the People's Struggle

SWASTHIKA ARULINGAM & MARISA DE SILVA

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*In this article the authors discuss the role of women in peoples' struggles and the challenges they face in making their voices heard.*

## Mirihana Protest

On the 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2022, a small crowd gathered in Mirihana close to the then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's house. The protest seemed to be a spontaneous gathering of neighbours in Mirihana, who were protesting the long power cuts and fuel shortages. What started off as a peaceful demonstration of people, soon became a site of violence instigated by law enforcement.

The Mirihana protest is seen by many as being one of the turning points of the historic peoples' movement, which led to the ousting of a democratically elected President in Sri Lanka. During the Mirihana protest, a journalist captured the now iconic image of a woman holding an infant in one hand, while raising the other in protest. This image became one of the early symbols of resistance and of the Struggle, leading up to the occupation of Galle Face

## Aragalaya, Porattam, the Struggle – The People's Protest by any Name

Between the period of March to July, 2022, what started off as small neighbourhood street protests, ignited among communities frustrated by their inability to get on with their daily lives due to shortages of cooking gas, fuel and electricity, snowballed into a historical event, that toppled a President, a Prime Minister and Cabinet in Sri Lanka. Hundreds of thousands of unorganized individuals and groups of people occupied Galle Face, a prime public space, flanked by expensive commercial property in Colombo Sri Lanka, with the sole purpose of demanding the then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign. Chants of #GoHomeGota echoed throughout the country, whilst the Galle Face occupation was named "Gota Go Gama" (Gota Go Village). In the early days

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of this occupation movement, the protestors were primarily lower-upper middle class urban dwellers, who lived in and around the suburbs of Colombo. However, as the days progressed, the GoHomeGota movement attracted people across classes, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. With all the limitations inherent to Sri Lankan politics, the Galle Face occupation opened up spaces to sections of society who would otherwise be denied a political voice and remain excluded from protest sites. The distinctive feature of this protest movement was that it was an inclusive and non-violent protest. The protestors prided themselves in calling it a *“AadarayeAragalaya”* (Struggle of Love). This was a spontaneous people’s resistance, calling for a democratically elected President to resign, despite there being no one or other political leadership in line to take his place. The primary reasons for the masses embracing this protest movement and for the diversity among the protestors, was that it was not generally attached to partisan politics.

## Structures within Political Movements which Exclude Women

In Sri Lanka, due to multiple social, structural and economic barriers, protests and resistance movements were dominated by men. Women are seen as the care-givers of children, and are generally left with the sole burden of running the household and seeing to the domestic chores and women were excluded from the political arena. Therefore, even in the most progressive spaces dominated by the Left movements, one would often find the man being in the forefront of political spaces, whilst his spouse, sister or mother is left out and expected to run the household.

When such issues were raised within political spaces, the authors experienced defensive responses from their male comrades. Men would assert that ‘no one was blocking women,’ and that “we want more women to come into politics.” They would also claim “women are not interested in politics, however much we have

called them to come for discussions.” The irony of course is that the same men who make these claims, have their household responsibilities burdened on women. Further, these same persons would find excuses for excluding women with statements such as, “she is not political enough”, “she is not a public speaker”, “what has she done to be given a platform”, to exclude women from speaking in political meetings. Even on the rare occasion when a woman is given a space to speak, it would be as one of the last few speakers, and most often as the only woman speaking in a panel composed exclusively of heterosexual men.

The struggle of women to claim their political space within resistance movements was summed up by Ashila Dandeniya from the StandUp Movement, an organisation based in Katunayake. She said;

“Getting the microphone to speak is the first battle at every public meeting. By the time we push through the crowd and grab the mic to even speak, half our energy is gone. And when we finally get the mic, we are too tired and frazzled that we forget what we wanted to say in the first place. This results in us sounding unsure and our voices quivering...”

This statement is very telling of the struggle women face in just making their voices heard in political spaces. Such comments highlight the structural resistance and unconscious efforts that coalesce to ‘keep women in their place,’ even within progressive Left movements and spaces.

## Women breaking Social and Cultural Barriers in the Aragalaya

However, the Aragalaya inadvertently addressed some of these patriarchal structural barriers embedded within political movements. The

Aragalaya and the non-violent occupation of public spaces which lasted over several months, enabled women to contribute to the resistance in their free time, and they even created child care spaces within the occupied site so that they could be involved in this historic struggle. Younger women who would otherwise shy away from late night events, citing harassment on the streets and other concerns for their physical safety, participated in the Aragalaya in large numbers. Some women even observed that the roads seemed safer during the Aragalaya, even during the nights and early hours of the morning.

The Mirihana protest on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 2022, remained a space where women could bring their children. Several middle-class women consciously made a decision to bring their children, including infants, to the protest marches. The broad political sentiment of several mothers who came to the struggle was: "This struggle is for a better future for our children, so, our children must witness our fight for them," Women ensured that the occupied space was a safe space. The authors believe the State was conscious of this turn of events, and how the participation of children was creating a safe space for even reluctant participants to boldly step out to the protest site.

It was very clear that law enforcement had been instructed to systematically target parents and their children, as part of the State crackdown on protestors, and hence, on the 09<sup>th</sup> of October, at a remembrance event at Galle Face the Police followed those instructions. Images of police brutally separating children from their parents were splashed across the media. The Director of the National Hospital, being part of the State apparatus too, admonished parents, and advised them against bringing children to protests. The idea that protesting parents were using children as 'human-shields' was deliberately planted in the media and social media by the Government, its allies and its proxies. Hence, the October 09<sup>th</sup> attack on peaceful protestors was viewed as a decisive move by the State to close the space in the resistance movement for women.

The Aragalaya also addressed and created spaces for discussions around topics such as women's labour, women worker struggles and enforced disappearances. The subjects and discussions drew the participation of a large number of women. For instance, a discussion organized by the Liberation Movement, (a feminist Left group of women,) highlighted that: women's labour has historically been the backbone of the Sri Lankan economy and the wealth which was plundered and lost by the Rajapaksas, was made as a result of the blood, sweat and tears of working women. Therefore, if in traditional political spaces women were only invited to discuss domestic matters such as 'child care', whilst issues of 'national importance' were left to the men, the Aragalaya turned this status quo on its head. Issues affecting women were made into national issues and thus, national security, democracy and governance, and other national issues became women's issues as well. Hence, it was not unusual to see women leading marches demanding the Repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). It was a common occurrence to see activists such as Vimukthi De Silva, challenging notions of exclusivity in Town Hall type meetings, stating that, "Gota Go Gama" was not a place, but that it was a people's movement. When they attacked us, the entire country came to defend us. Never forget that!" It was also not an uncommon sight to see activists such as Noor Noora challenge the police in the frontlines of protest marches, shouting, "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? We are fighting for the future of your children!"

When men are targeted by the State, women come to the forefront of protests. This is common to protest movements across the world and this was also the case in the Sri Lanka protests too. Women spearheaded movements against enforced disappearances, arrests under the PTA, and protests to release occupied lands. Similarly, in Galle Face, women often stood in the frontlines, challenging the police. Women also exploited the patriarchy inherent in State structures such as the police. Therefore, male police officers who

would use the baton on men and arrest them in numbers, did not know how to handle the large numbers of women protestors. The Police force struggled with practical dilemmas such as finding spaces to detain female protestors overnight in police cells. The police also seemed intimidated or reluctant to use violence against middle class women. All these stresses were also witnessed in the aftermath of the Galle Face occupation, which was violently stamped out by the State.

## Continued Challenges Faced by Women in the Struggle

Despite women challenging traditional political structures during the Galle Face occupation movement, women continued to have to confront the cultural and social structures, and the indifference of male protestors. These obstacles continued to exist, preventing women from fully contributing in these spaces. For instance, when meetings commenced late evening and continued into the early hours of the morning, women's participation reduced as the hours passed. So often, when final decisions were reached at these meetings, on many occasions there would be no women's voices or consent. Occasionally such practices privileging exclusive male bastions were challenged by women and trans women, when they would disrupt meetings asking, "At 8pm we decided something, how did this decision change by 2am? Whose decision was this?" Some saw this as disrupting the progress of the events. In reality this was a challenge to the structures and practices which exclude women within political spaces – the very structures and practices which men, even those men protesting injustice, take for granted.

Despite the Aragalaya becoming a space to break from certain traditional ideas defining

and restricting women's participation and leadership in protest movements and political spaces, not all women had the same experience. Trans women reported harassment and receiving threatening gestures from men. These incidents occurred despite the first public Pride March being organized in Colombo, in all its colourful splendor. Working class women could not leave their factories and plantations, as work went on as usual for them. Even on occasions when trade unions called the workers for a hartal, factories reportedly threatened women from participating in such strike actions.

## Aragalaya/Porattam - A Pathway for Inclusive Mass Political Activism in Sri Lanka

What began with a woman coming to Mirihana holding her child in her arms, demanding relief from unbearable economic hardship, turned into one of the largest non-violent protest movements in Sri Lanka, which achieved at least in principle, what it originally set out to achieve. That objective was to "send home" the democratically elected Executive President, rejecting him for his actions which sent the country spiraling into economic crisis. Through his failure he lost the people's confidence and his mandate to govern the country. Despite the continuing existence of barriers for women to enter politics and express their political activism, the Aragalaya remains an eye-opener for political movements across the country and region, highlighting how women created their own space and guided a protest movement to victory.

# Aragalaya - Sri Lanka's People's Struggle: Expressions of the Art of Resistance through Resistance Art

SAKUNA M. GAMAGE

*Among the most highlighted features of the Aragalaya – the people's struggle – were the uses of social media (New Media) as well as various forms of art to engage with people. Social media played a major role in creating and expanding an informal social contract among the people of Sri Lanka, urging them to resist the government.*

*Different forms of Art including painting, music, drama theatre, cinema, visual arts and photography, poetry and literature were also used and they played a more active role in expressing the resistance and mobilization of people through alternative artistic expressions.*

## Background



Photograph 1: People of Sri Lanka trying to enter the President's official house from Chatham Street Colombo 01 (Gamage 2022).<sup>1</sup>

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The people's struggle in Sri Lanka was manifested through a mass protest movement locally known as the Aragalaya (in Sinhala) and the Poraattam (in Tamil). It was the reaction to the unprecedented economic collapse and political chaos in the country. The sporadic and individual protests, with several pocket protests and people's movements that sprang up in various sites in the country gained momentum and converged as a fully-fledged people's resistance movement. These waves of mass protests and demonstrations throughout the country were accompanied by protests outside the country as well with the Diaspora joining, thereby increasing the visibility of the protests. The causes of the crisis were deep-rooted but it came to a head in 2020 with the economic strains caused by Covid 19 pandemic.



**Photograph 04: Patient householders - A Little girl and her mother waiting patiently in the queue to buy liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), Kirulapona Junction. Shortages of gas cylinders amid shortages of other essentials, Sri Lankan capital Colombo**  
(Gamage, Little Girl and Mother coping with the crisis 2022)



**Photograph 2: Occupy Galle Face Protest Movement. First day of People's Struggle.**  
(Gamage, Occupy Galle Face Movement 2022)



**Photograph 05: Drivers queue overnight to buy fuel as Sri Lanka's economic crisis worsens.**  
(Gamage, Petrol queue in Kelaniya 2022).



**Photograph 03: Gas Cylinder Protest. Protestors frustrated by the lack of liquid gas at Amour's Street junction, Colombo 11, close the road.**  
(Gamage, Cylinder Protest 2022)



**Photograph 06: Desperate times, desperate life. Tuk-tuk driver, his wife and two-year-old daughter curl up to sleep in the tuk-tuk, which is parked in a petrol queue overnight.**  
(Gamage, Petrol queue in Kelaniya 2022).



The economic pressures on the people were increasing from 2020. A combination of the draconian methods adopted by the government to contain the pandemic and short-sighted policies to suddenly ban chemical fertilizer and reduce taxes, and the increased corruption and the misuse of public funds led to this crisis. Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves fell and the Central Bank's decisions to peg the dollar to an artificial rate led to migrant workers and exporters refusing to remit their earnings through the banking system. The foreign exchange crisis made it difficult for the government to purchase essential goods leading to shortages of fuel, gas, food and medicines and a strain on the delivery of public services such as transport and the supply of electricity. The authoritarian President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his government were averse to public dialogue on these matters. The economic pressure on the people was clearly visible with people queuing up for hours, sometimes days, to get fuel, gas and food. Other economic activities were compromised as people spent most of their time securing essentials. These pressures eventually pushed people to come to the roads and protest against the government.

The first visible protest against the economic crisis began in Kohuwala on the 1st of March 2022. The protesters held a candlelight vigil while holding signboards with various slogans related to their grievances. The major change in the format of the protests occurred when hundreds of Sri Lankans, weary of power cuts and shortages of all essentials converged near President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's private residence in Mirihana on 31st of March 2022, demanding that the President find solutions to the many issues in the country or 'go home' (Colombo Page, 2022). The Mirihana protest was violently suppressed by the Sri Lankan Security forces, causing injuries to approximately 50 people and these included journalists, civilians as well as members of the security forces (News1st, 2022). This incident resulted in galvanizing the protest movement and it drew large crowds from different classes of Sri Lankan society despite the government's efforts to contain it by imposing a curfew and other suppressive methods.



**Photograph 07: As Sri Lanka's economic crisis worsens, the protesters held a candlelight vigil at Kohuwala Junction Colombo holding signboards with various slogans relating to their grievances. Suburbs (Gamage, candlelight vigil at Kohuwala 2022).**

After the Mirihana protest, the resistance movement consistently and vociferously demanded the resignation of the former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The protestors' main slogan was "#Go Home Gota". Public frustration was at its highest as a result of the long hours of power cuts, lack of cooking gas, transport and food. On 9th of April 2022 people gathered at the Galle Face Green, turning this public space where people converged to enjoy the sea breeze, into an agitation site. Ironically, President Gotabaya allocated this space as a site for protesting, just after he became president in November 2019.



**Photograph 08: First Day of People's Struggle. People gather around S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's Statue (Gamage, Occupy Galle Face Movement 2022)**

After the 9th of April, the protest movement strengthened with multiple new steps taken by the protesters. Significantly the Aragalaya protest movement started establishing and expanding agitation sites. The resistance movement centered on the Galle Face Green, renaming the site situated in the heart of Colombo as “Gotagogama”. The People’s Movement of Sri Lanka expanded, calling itself as the “#Occupy Galle Face” movement. On 9th of July 2022 a huge protest was held and it maintained its momentum until and even after the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2022.



**Photograph 09: Protest at Gotagogama, Galle (Gamage, GGG Galle 2022).**

Among the most highlighted features of the Aragalaya – the people’s struggle – were the uses of social media (New Media) as well as various forms of art to engage with people. Social media played a major role in creating and expanding an informal social contract among the people of Sri Lanka, urging them to resist the government. Different forms of Arts including painting, music, drama theatre, cinema, visual arts and photography, poetry and literature were also used and they played a more active role in expressing the resistance and mobilization of people through alternative artistic expressions.

## Art and Aesthetics in Political Movements



**Photograph 10: Confrontation with military police at CID Head Quarters. An artistic protest against arbitrary arrests (Gamage, The Forms of Resistance 2022)**

Political activism, protests, and people’s struggles are potent tools of resistance. The mobilization of people generated power that can create comparative positive change in our world. Art has been used as a form of nonviolent protest and it can carry a depth of meaning, embody strength and connect people through its message of resistance. Different forms of art can link people in different ways. Art is a beautiful and unusual medium. It can be used to create change, generate unity, and strengthen power and determination for resistance. Art has the power to reach out to and connect people through a common message and it visualizes and articulates their expectations and demands. Art is multifaceted. It can be used for propaganda and to build false narratives. But it may also be non-conforming, critical, emotionally clinching, and fearless. To the oppressed, it provides a means to express the gamut of their emotions – their melancholy, determination, despair, pain, and solidarity. When art intersects with dominant discourses and established systems of power, the result is often revolutionary. It challenges popular opinions, belief systems, and authorities, and makes a vigorous tool for activism (Singh, 2021).



The aesthetics distinctive approach to politics is not in itself a novelty. In his book entitled *Aesthetica*, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten used the term “aesthetic” to define a specific kind of knowledge, namely sensuous knowledge (Sonderegger & Kleesattel, 2021, p. 108). The first part of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* is devoted to questions of beauty and art. Kant starts by drawing absolutely strict dividing lines between questions of beauty, on the one hand, and theoretical as well as practical questions on the other (Ibid. p. 109). Walter Benjamin’s through ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936) provides a general history of changes in art in the modern age with the appearance of technology. According to his insights each human sensory perspective is not completely biological or natural, it is also historical. It impacts the ways people perceive change, be they social changes or technological changes that impact ‘humanity’s entire mode of existence’. Benjamin writes of the loss of the aura of art through the mechanical reproduction of art through the use of technology. For Benjamin, the aura represents the originality and authenticity of a work of art that has not been reproduced. A painting has an aura while a photograph does not; the photograph is an image of an image while the painting remains utterly original (Benjamin 1936, 238).

In “Aesthetics”, Theodor Adorno expressed the concept of art as a historical record and the permanent language of human suffering (Ortland, Eberhard; Hoban, Wieland; Adorno, Theodor W; 2017). The Aesthetic view of politics is mainly related to ideology and popular culture. In the periphery of politics, art and aesthetic can be represented from two major perspectives - as mainstream and as alternative. These perspectives are relative to the core of the power of a State and the propaganda mechanism of the government. Antonio Gramsci identifies this relationship through his concept of “Cultural Hegemony” which denotes the predominance of one social class over others (bourgeois hegemony). This refers to political and economic control, but also the ‘hegemonic culture’ whereby the bourgeoisie propagated their values and norms so that they

became the “common sense” values of everyone in the State, particularly those subordinated by it. People in the working class (and other classes) identified their good with the good of the bourgeoisie and helped to maintain the status quo rather than revolting. In the context (or expression) of cultural hegemony, there is a clear relationship between persuasion, consent and the occasional use of brute force. (Gramsci 1971). Art constructs a popular culture which is affiliated to the ruling elite and expands its ideological power base. Challenging that orthodoxy, thorough the alternative discourses that are relevant to that time and space is crucial expressions to expand the true realities facing the polity among the larger community.



**Photograph 11: The Creative Protester**  
(Gamage, The Creative Protester 2022)

Aesthetics refers not only to practices of art, ranging from painting to music, poetry, photography, and film but also, above all, to the insights and understandings they facilitate. In this sense, ‘aesthetic politics’, is about the ability

to step back, reflect and to see, hear and sense political conflict and dilemmas in new ways. A key part of this aesthetic sensibility is to widen our understanding of the political beyond prevailing rationalist models and to recognize the key role played by emotions in politics. Indeed, few realms are more infused with emotion than politics (Bleiker 2018). Emotions play a key role in politics and in society. It reshapes the way people are responding and reacting to political actions. For instance, during the Mirihana protest the photograph of “The Mother and Child” became the icon of the people’s struggle in Sri Lanka. The relentless repression of the protesters by government forces as well as the broader situation in the country generated empathetic emotions to this image. Those perceptions spurred further mobilization of people against the government and established the people’s struggle as recognized protest movement since early April 2022 and in this context it legitimized the occupation of public spaces.



**Photograph 12: Buddhist monk using his umbrella to project a message**  
(Gamage, Monk Protester 2022)

## Elaborating on the Global Nexus between Art and Politics

Along with the therapeutic relationship that exists between art and politics, there are instances in world history where the arts have been used in political and social movements in various ways, to reflect contradictions. Examples of this are found in The New Negro Movement that arose after 1918 in New York, America, the writings of Herbert Harrison who used literary interventions to canvas the rights of African immigrants during the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the deployment of music, drama and theatre as a form of resistance expression during the era of the Harlem Renaissance.

Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore used prose and poetic literature, music, painting, drama and theatre to project a more positive nationalism aligned with India’s freedom struggle. Writers such as Sadat Hasan Manto have written short stories and novels based on the political and social injustices that happened during the partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan along with the Indian independence struggle to create awareness of and opposition to these injustices. Rithvik Ghatak, Goutam Ghose, Deepa Mehta and other filmmakers have made films based on the partitions of India Pakistan and Bangladesh to highlight the violence, brutality and injustice and the grief of the people during those times and today as it continues to haunt the families who were displaced by Partition.

To reveal contradictions, art is the powerful weapon that has been used in Latin America too. Augusto Pinochet overthrew the government of Salvador Allende in the Republic of Chile in 1973 and artists such as Victor Jara protested against these non-democratic acts through music and songs. These protests even led to his death. The intervention of writers and poets such as Pablo Neruda calling out the repression of the military junta in Chile is also notable. In the 1960s the songs of Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and other artists protested further against

racism, war, and the military-industrial complex, thus continuing an American artistic tradition of political protest. John Lennon's musical intervention in the anti-Vietnam war movement and the murals used to draw attention to the Black Lives Matter movement since 2013, are other examples of artistic protest. Bob Marley's rebellious songs are a compelling affirmation of resistance against the systematic dehumanization of oppressed peoples across the globe. The Apartheid Liberation Struggle in South Africa from the 1960s to the 1990s gave rise to many schools of thought on the role of culture (especially art & literature) under a racially oppressive and authoritarian regime. Much of the art produced during Apartheid that was critical of the State's racial, cultural and political

policies was labelled as either 'Protest Art' or as 'Resistance Art' (SAHO 2011).

Protest art emerged to express opposition to the Yugoslavian wars and during the Arab Spring in Egypt and the other countries in the Middle East as well. More recently and closer to Sri Lanka, the protests in India against the amendment to the Citizenship Act, and the farmers' struggle, galvanised protests. So did the death of 22-year-old Iranian student, Mahsa Amini in police custody after she was arrested for allegedly wearing her headscarf too loosely have led to anti-governmental protests in Iran since 2022. All these events have been captured and widely disseminated through the use of art. Thus, the strength of art as a powerful tool of protest in various forms is well established.



**Photograph 13: The Jantra Mantra, India. Farmers protest using the skulls of farmers who committed suicide, unable to cope with their financial burdens caused by government policies and climate change (Gamage, The Farmers Protest 2017)**





**Photograph 14** Women at Jamia Milia Islamia University New Delhi, India protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act, the National Register of Citizens and the National Population Register in India . (Gamage, Anti CCA Protesters at New Delhi India 2019)

## People's Struggle of Sri Lanka – The Aesthetic Turn of Politics and the Politics of the Aesthetic



**Photograph 15:** Actor Jehan Appuhami with slogans “Janatha Paramadhipathaya” (People’s Sovereignty) painted on his body. Image captured on the first day of People’s Struggles, (Gamage, People’s Sovereignty 2022).

Throughout Sri Lanka’s political history, art has been used as a means of expressing and bolstering opposition. There were many literary and musical interventions during the youth uprising of 1971 and the second youth uprising of the 1980s. For example, in the 1970s, cinematographer Dharmasena Pathiraja turned Sri Lankan cinema towards a political path with his Sinhala movies - “Bambaru Awith” & “Ahas Gawwa” as well as with the Tamil movie “Ponmani” all of which revealed through cinema, the major social and political issues.

In the late 1980's, musicians such as Nanda Malani, contributed through the song collection of "Pawana" which motivated the youth during the uprising at the end of the 1980s. The music of Premasiri Kemadasa, and Gunadasa Kapuge is strongly associated as political music and Chandrakumara Wickramaratne was renowned for his alternative poetry and literature during this period.

Sri Lanka's civil war was founded on political conflicts between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities and was concentrated in the North. Both the Tamil and Sinhalese communities used art as a medium for social justice. Tamil writers such as Pakyanathan Ahilan, and Chern Rudramoorthy made significant contributions to both literature and the political debate through their poetry and literature and Sinhala writers such as Rathna Sri Wijesinghe, Manjula Wediwardena and Bhashana Abeywardana also made significant contributions in last few decades. Sri Lanka has seen a significant rise in protest & resistance art and activism in the post-civil war era as well. Chandraguptha Thenuwara and Jagath Weerasinghe were two artists who confronted war and violence and the looming

unresolved issues in the country through their works of art.

The Peoples Protest Movement 2022 (Aragalaya/ Poraattam) was a result of the increased economic pressures on the people. Initially, the Aragalaya origins were traced to ad-hoc pocket protests and resistance which mushroomed in Colombo and it's environ. A significant feature of the People's Protest Movement (Aragalaya) is that it was decentralized, and it was decentralized by default. Diverse interest groups and stakeholders contributed to the Aragalaya providing ideological, financial and political support. It turned into an "Occupy" movement after the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2022, crystalizing as Gotagogama in Galle Face Green. It became the arena for people to come to and express their frustration with the economic chaos as well as their grievances relating to long-term social, political, and economic issues, including Sri Lanka's entrenched authoritarian politics. It opened-up the floodgates for other grievances including issues relating to war victims and disappearances, actions against media freedom, justice for victims of the Easter Sunday Bomb attack, the impoverishment of the farmers, environmental issues, and LGBTQ rights. All these issues became core components of this People's Protest Movement.



**Photograph 16: A Father holding a photograph of his son who disappeared during the war. Taken on the 50<sup>th</sup> day of protest march at Galle Face Green (Gamage, A Father's Grief 2022)**



**Photograph 17: The protest March by The Artists of People's Movement in April 2022**  
(Gamage, Jana Aragalaye Kalakaruwo 2022)

From the beginning of the movement artists' collectives played a prominent role in expressing people's frustrations and mobilizing people on various causes, through the initiative of "Jana Aragalaye Kalakaruwo collective" (Artists of the People's Struggle).

The other significant feature of this struggle was the expression of resistance through various art forms. The People's protest movement was diverse and the art took on new meaning in the context of this new phase of Sri Lankan life. Protest art was now available to all outside gallery doors and accessible to all on the roads. Art was now used by the people to express grievances in multiple ways. Initially it started with the acts such as creating placards and writing slogans. Artistic expression and resistance language was used not only to express different grievances but also to make political demands – specifically demanding the resignation of then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Social media and technology played a crucial role in mobilizing the people and in energizing the protest movement. The new media and technology assisted in making the art more accessible to the masses. In fact, the

new media proliferated the art to all corners of the country and to many sections of society.

Despite the times which are characterized by hyper vigilance, bigotry, extreme polarity, and uncertainty, Sri Lankan artists have risen to their potential and created beautiful, poignant political artworks. With the Occupy Movement in Galle Face Green and the creation of Gotagogama, this trend of resistance art took root. Furthermore, people started to decentralize the "Occupy Movement" by forming Occupy locations outside of the capital Colombo, creating centres such as Gotagogama Kandy, Gotagogama Wennappuwa, Gotagogama Galle and Gotagogama Kurunagala among others. The longest protest in Sri Lanka, the protest of "Tamil mothers of disappeared" as well as the "Justice walk" initiated in Batticaloa and supported this protest movement from the periphery. Be it the anti-government people's protest movement or other public acts of resistance, the protests would be incomplete without art, murals, poetry, music, creative slogans, theatre, film, and other visual images that represented and reproduced the collective pain.





**Photograph 18: Batticaloa Justice Walk July 2022**  
(Gamage, Justice Walk 2022)

The People's Struggle in Sri Lanka in 2022 (Aragalaya) was a kaleidoscope of Sri Lankan art and culture and it provided space for much-needed political expression and education. The slogans on the placards have different expressions. They use different symbols and make different demands stressing the ultimate goal of the people – see to the resignation of the president as #Gotagohome.



**Photograph 19: The artists enact a street drama to capture the economic pressure faced by people.**  
(Gamage, The Hungry Ghost 2022)

Major expressions of art and paintings were seen in Galle Face where artists such as Sujith Rathnayaka were active in the “Occupy Galle Face” movement. Sujith was involved with the Aragalaya from the beginning making his expressive, artistic contribution in different ways – through the use of slogans, writings on placards,

body paintings, sculptures and drawings on the streets, walls and other surfaces. He expressed his feeling about the crisis in Sri Lanka through his art and tried to teach others also to emulate that way of expressing resistance. When the People's struggle was established as an occupation movement, he transformed his occupied space into an open art gallery for everyone to discuss and express their grief about the crisis and politics and to learn more about politics and the causes for the crisis through the arts. He began an artwork from the beginning of the struggle to express his feeling about people's struggles and the crisis. On 9<sup>th</sup> May 2022 Rajapaksa's political supporters, thugs in plain speak, attacked the occupied space at Galle Face Green and Sujith's art gallery was burned down. While it was saddening, it was also inspiring to watch the artist Sujith Rathnayaka create art from the ashes of his work that had been burned the day before. Through his creativity he continued to challenge the system.



**Photograph 20: Gotagogama Kalagaalaya initiated by Artist Sujith Rathnayaka. A Young artist practicing his art**  
(Gamage, Gotagogama Kalagaraya 2022)

The Aragalaya is one of the most momentous and defining events and looking back, history will judge it as such. It is a memory to be preserved for generations to come (de Silva and Ondaatje 2022). As Sujith Rathnayaka stated “I wanted to contribute and be involved with the people's struggle without any regulations and limitations. Art has made a notable and immense contribution to the Aragalaya in various ways. I also wanted to express the medium of my art which varies

according to the situation and time and is related to the economic and political crisis. I wanted to take my art beyond the galleries and open doors for everyone. Gallery based art or even the resistance arts displayed in galleries are limited only to a certain class, and I wanted to go beyond that limitation. Through the Aragalaya art gallery, I tried to teach children and others about art and capture their expressions and memories of this very political moment in our history. Even my early art works were for the people but I thought that this political moment is crucial and could turn things towards the people's way further" (Rathnayaka 2022).



**Photograph 21: "Bakeriya Kattiya" music group during the protest March at Galle Face (Gamage, Bekariya Kattiya 2022)**

From the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 the music and theatre group "Bakeriya Kattiya"<sup>2</sup> included prominent artists Jehan Appuhami, Ajith Kumarasiri, and Viraj Liyanarchchi made significant contributions to the protest movement by elaborating on the resistance creatively, by singing songs, playing music and staging dramas. Also, they used body art including face paintings, to popularize slogans such as: "People's Sovereignty".

The Bakeriya Kattiya contributed and participated, not only in GotaGoGama Galle Face but also in Kandy, Kurunegala Anuradhapura and many other locations. Also, their resistance acts were visible in many pocket protests related to the people's struggle including the LGBTQ rights protest, the protests demanding bail for imprisoned protesters. It was also used by the protestors from the Inter University Student Federation, and the protestors seeking justice after the Easter Sunday attack. For instance on April 2022, Sri Lankan actor Jehan Appuhami completed his three-day trek from Katuwapitiya church to the president's offices in Galle Face, carrying a life-sized cross on his shoulder, demanding justice for the victims of the 2019 Easter bombings.

Actor Kalana Gunasekara also did a performance at Gotagagama Galle Face reflecting on the current situation and on the oppression inflicted on the people by the government and its leaders. As Appuhami stated "During last decade, I was trying to contribute to different causes within my capacities with resistance art, mainly through drama, acting, theatre and cinema. I thought this moment of crisis was crucial not only for economic reasons but also for the other multiple reasons relating to suppression by the government and leaders. I believe that art has immense capacity to make a powerful political intervention. I wanted to express people's grievances through my acting and music. I also wanted to make and keep alive, the spirit of the people's protest. Therefore, as part of a larger collective, we tried to do whatever we could, through our art. We should be creative in politics and resistance should be immensely creative" (Appuhami 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Bakeriya Kattiya is an artist collective performing and initiating alternative music and alternative theatre and visual arts. Bakeriya Space Art Centre is located near a bakery in 42/2 Mahalwarawa Rd, Pannipitiya 10230, Sri Lanka. (bakariyekattiya 2022)





**Photograph 22: Sri Lankan actor Jehan Appuhami as he completed his three-day trek to the President's offices carrying a life-sized cross on his shoulder, demanding justice for the victims of the 2019 Easter bombings (Gamage, Justice 2022).**

The Ohga collective, Padmini Gamage theatre group, Janani Cooray, Prabaudha Dikwatta and many others performed their art in parallel to different protest initiatives. These protest initiatives included the Easter Sunday Justice Protest, the commemoration of all the people who died in 1983 during the Black July riots against Tamils and in their subsequent efforts to memorialize their loved ones killed during the war. As the protest movement moved forward, many individual artists joined, sharing their paintings and staging public performances acts at various protest site, supporting various causes. Music artists such as Ajith Kumarasiri, Namani Panchali, Dinupa Kodagoda, Nadika Waligodapola, and Indika Upamali contributed to the protest movement with music and resistance songs. As the singer, Dinupa Kodagoda highlights, "Music has the power to set the tone for resistance. It can make these kinds of protest movements very alive and can secure the spirit of non-violence during people's protest acts" (Kodagoda 2022).

Creating songs and music videos about Aragalaya became a trend. For instance, the song "Pal Horuni" (Political Thieves) by Indika Upamali was composed based on a poem by Majula

Wediwardena about corrupt politicians in Sri Lanka (Upamali 2022).



**Photograph 23: A young artist at the Aragalaya depicting suppression experienced under the Rajapaksa Regime (Gamage, The Suppression of Satakaya 2022)**

Cinema and motion pictures are another powerful medium of art which was used during the People's protest movement in different ways. Through the "Jana Aragalaye Kalakaruwo" (Artist of People's Struggle) several artists including Dulika Marapana, Sujeewa Priyalal, Namal Jayasinghe, Jagath Manuwarna Kodithuwakku, Samanali Fonseka, Peter de Almeda and many other artists took the initiative to establish a cinema hall in Gotagagama and named it "Tear Gas Cinema". As film director and actor Jagath Manuwarna said, "Tear gas is something that government forces routinely used to contain peaceful mass protests during the Aragalaya. After the canister explodes, it will directly impact the eyes of a person. Cinema is appreciated with the eyes and naming it "Tear Gas Cinema is an act of resistance" (Manuwarna 2022). Manuwarna further emphasized the importance of including creative mechanisms to understand politics and resistance. "There is always a mainstream ideology which is constructed through popular culture through the intervening hands of the ruling class. In this case, alternative arts are crucial to counterattack that ideological construction established by the core of power holders. I saw the People Struggle became the space for expanding the alternative arts and for counter-narrative and the means of taking those messages to a larger crowd" (Ibid).



**Photograph 24: Musician Ajith Kumarasiri singing "Rabies in Parliament" during a live band performance staged after Parliament Road was occupied. The protesters occupied and named the entrance to Parliament "Horugogama" (Gamage, Rabies in the Parliament 2022)**

The artist collective opened up the platform for young movie makers who have directed movies relating to social, political and economic issues to screen their creations. Every day a movie relating to social and political movements at the global level was screened. This helped to expand the creativity of the local protest movement among the larger crowd at the Galle Face independent film Festival. "We wanted to facilitate the Struggle with our

capacities. Fewer people are watching movies in movie theaters. For multiple reasons we wanted to open the "Tear Gas Cinema Hall" for everyone in the organic political space of Gotagogama. This movement is a process and art can contribute immensely and intervene politically to win over the rights of people "stated Nayomi Apsara, a film maker & artist who pioneered the establishment of the Tear Gas cinema (Apsara 2022).



**Photograph 25: Opening day - Movie screening at Tear Gas Cinema, Gotagogama (Gamage, Tear Gas Cinema 2022).**



**Photograph 26: "Sangadasage Chooti Kalisama," political satire directed by Asanka Sayakkara and staged at Gotagogama open air theatre (Gamage, Sanagadasage Chooti Kalisama 2022)**

During the People's Struggle, drama became a collaborative method of expressing social and political grief. Drama theatre directors Asanka Sayakkara, Namal Jayasinghe, and Athula Pathirana established the "Aragalaye Rangamadala" (Open air theater of People's Struggle). As Sayakkara said, "First we came to protest on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April. Then we thought about how we can contribute to this resistance through drama, expressing what we experienced in the recent past. Most of the dramas including "Meya Thuwakkuwak Nowe", "Sangadasage Chooti Kalisama", and "Sanga Wedha Guru Gowi Kamkaru" which were performed here were political and intended to discuss the political and social grievances in our country. As we all know, forms of resistance arts in Sri Lanka were limited to a certain circle of the crowd and we wanted to use this political moment to take it to a larger circle, particularly going beyond those with an interesting drama and theatre too" (Sayakkara 2022).



**Photograph 27: The Mother & Child (Perera 2022) became the iconic image depicting the Aragalaya and was later used, by way of graphic reproductions for banners, posters, body art and in social media.**



**Photograph 28: A Protester carrying a flag with a drawing of the iconic "The Mother and Child" photograph. Photograph taken at 50<sup>th</sup> day March of People's Struggle (Gamage, The Mother & Child flag 2022).**

The photograph of "The Mother & Child" taken at the Mirihana protest by Chanuka Nadun Perera, a participant of the protest became the iconic image of the People's Protest movement in Sri Lanka. According to Chanuka, "I live near Mirihana, Pangiriwatta. Due to the economic pressures my neighbors gathered around then President Gotabaya Rajapake's private house to make different demands and express their grief. During the protest I saw a mother carrying her child also protesting in front with slogan placards. Then I went there and took a photograph of them on my mobile phone and I shared it in monochrome form, through my twitter & Facebook accounts. I did not have any idea it would become an iconic image. But next day morning after the massive suppression of the Mirihana protest by the government forces I saw and wondered about the way the image was circulating and reproducing as the icon of this People's Protest of Sri Lanka" (Perera, The iconic Mother and Child photograph of Aragalaya 2022). "Images can play an immense role in human history. Eye perception is crucial to understanding and responding to the very next



moment, particularly so in the context of politics. The people's struggle in Sri Lanka became the larger space for the insertion of political images and these images created an immediate response impacting on people's mobilization", said Kalpa Rajapaksha, Political Economist and Practitioner of Social Documentary Photography (Rajapaksha 2022). Ajith Senevirathne, a veteran photojournalist who photographed the People's Struggle from its inception noted, "We live in a visual age. With the technological advancement, the visual has become a part of the everyday life of the people. Images can explain different layers of society. The dynamics of visual politics go well beyond traditional media outlets. For instance, the various forms of new media prevalent in the digital age, from Facebook, and Twitter to Instagram, played an increasingly important role across Sri Lanka's political spectrum and throughout the People's Struggle (Senevirathna 2022).

Photojournalist Shehan Gunasekara engaged in critical social documentary photography for over a decade and his work related to many political events including the war and the post-war ultra-nationalism. He was committed to taking photographs of social-political phenomena related to various events and incidents and to question these social-political phenomena. He intended that the outcome of the visual image goes beyond the mainstream and popular narratives. "The People's Struggle expanded that space for me and many others (Gunasekara 2022). I wanted to express my resistance and show solidarity with the Gotagagama people's struggle and the protest movement". Thilina Kalutotage, a young photojournalist observed, "Since last March, I was experimenting with and practicing capturing multiple incidents related to the Aragalaya. I think the photograph is the most effective way of capturing resistance" (Kalutotage 2022).



**Photograph 29:** A resistance performance staged at the entrance of Colombo Magistrate Court. Protests against the unlawful arrests and seeking justice for the attacks on Gotagagama by Rajapaksa allies (Gamage, *The Rule of Law* 2022).



## Conclusion



**Photograph 30: Thousands of protesters gathered at Chatham Street Colombo for the Occupy the President's Palace protest. Taken before the ouster of former President Gotabaya on 9<sup>th</sup> of July 2022 (Gamage, 9th of July 2022).**

Art, as a medium, has the capacity for generating wider discourses and debates in society. Nothing in life is apolitical and every form of art too has a direct or indirect meaning in politics. The ruling class dominates the modern State through the exercise of its powers.

Art and artistic expression go in two directions in relation to those power holders. One direction is towards the mainstream popular narrative that upholds the hegemonic ideology of popular culture and the other is towards the alternative narrative which questions and produces a counter narrative to the mainstream narrative.

Mainstream art enjoys popular elaboration and glorification through the media and other multiple sources. It is a direct or indirect part of popular culture and it constructs and upholds the hegemonic ideology even though that ideology is repressive and disadvantageous to the majority in terms of their political, economic and social concerns. Alternative art can create a counter-narrative by questioning the phenomenon

occurring around us and which operates against the people's interests. Most of the time, this narrative is only circulated, absorbed and understood by a certain limited group of people. However, it is important and impacts on the relations between the power holders and the people. Alternative art has the possibility to go beyond the mainstream narratives and false narratives and to elaborate the truth, and to express the reality from the perspective of the people.

Sri Lanka's People's movement was strengthened by various artists using their different forms of political art from the very beginning of the struggle to resist the Rajapaksa regime. Throughout this people's struggle and the resistance movement, alternative art was able to overcome that limitation imposed through the mainstream narrative. The alternative art took the initiative to express resistance and to mobilize a larger crowd to question the Rajapaksa political legacy. The mobilized masses actively participated in and creatively contributed to the political resistance. Thus, the alternative art has created its own legacy.

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