

Is It Sri Lanka’s ‘Arab Spring’ Moment?



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Two dates – May 9 and July 9 – will remain significant for the Rajapaksa brothers in Sri Lanka. It was on May 9 that Mahinda Rajapaksa, who enjoyed majority in parliament, resigned as the prime minister of Sri Lanka after his supporters clashed with anti-government protesters in the Galle Face Green, resulting in the death of two protesters. Exactly two months later, on July 9, the protesters, who had gathered from all over the country, forced Mahinda’s brother and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the presidential house and took it over, in the culmination of what is described as “aragalaya” or struggle of the masses against a powerful regime.

Once the most powerful political family enjoying popular support and winning accolades for bringing peace by eliminating the LTTE, the Rajapaksas are now facing people’s ire for corruption, maladministration and what people perceived to be a sense of entitlement – the manner in which the Rajapaksa family exercised power and enjoyed it with impunity. What started as the Mirihana protest on March 31, with police action against the protesters and later the student protest at Nugegoda and other parts of the country, was only the beginning of the end. Not to be browbeaten by the state power that Rajapaksas wielded, the crowd continued to gather at the Galle Face Green and engaged in peaceful protest with the slogan “GoGotaGama.” This slogan captured youth imagination as students, activists, youths and the general public from all walks of life, overcoming the ethnic and religious divide, joined in large numbers spontaneously. Finally, they succeeded in unravelling the unpopular regime.

Now, the question is: What’s next for the aragalaya? Both the political and economic roadmaps of Sri Lanka are bumpy. The opposition remains divided, and a consensual candidate to take over and form an interim government is not going to be smooth as the ruling party continues to enjoy a majority. Political instability is going to impact Sri Lanka’s negotiation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the release of

much-needed funds. The movement started in April against the unfolding economic crisis in Sri Lanka as the island nation defaulted in its debt repayment. Economic distress was apparent with the fuel crisis, mounting inflation that led to the devaluation of Sri Lankan rupees. Food inflation increased to 80.1 percent in June 2022 from 57.4



percent in May 2022, while non-food inflation increased to 42.4 percent in June 2022 from 30.6 percent in May 2022. Hospitals announced that they did not have the essential medicines to carry out life-saving procedures.

This crisis has been in the making for the past few years. Sources of revenue were drying up due to a series of populist measures that the government adopted. For example, VAT was reduced to eight percent from 15 percent, tax-free threshold for turnover for VAT was raised from one million rupees to 25 million rupees. The government also abolished debit tax imposed on banks, capital gains tax, Pay as You Earn tax and debt services tax, while also withholding tax on interests and reducing income tax on the construction industry by half. The tourism industry had already shown signs of distress after the Easter bombing; the pandemic only

▲ Demonstrators celebrate after entering the Presidential Secretariat during a protest, after President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled, amid the country’s economic crisis, in Colombo, Sri Lanka on July 9, 2022.

PHOTO: REUTERS

one-third of the foreign currency earned. Moreover, 80 percent of the foreign debt was government debts. There was 33 percent depreciation of the Sri Lankan rupee against the US dollar this March, making the import-dependent country more vulnerable. Remittance flow reduced due to the depreciation of the Sri Lankan rupee.

The CBSL also admitted that the International Sovereign Bonds (ISBs), which Sri Lanka issued to raise finance, were priced at relatively high interest rates compared to the development assistance finances that the country received at concessional rates. The government’s decision to finance large infrastructure projects with non-concessional and commercial borrowings resulted in the rise of the debt-to-GDP ratio of more than 60 percent.

Last year, the government’s decision

to introduce organic farming to save foreign currency resulted in a food crisis. Production of rice, the main staple, reduced by 20 percent. Production of tea, which fetches USD 3 billion annually, and rubber, another important item in the export basket, was affected. Businesses were unable to open a letter of credit due to scarcity of foreign currency. Inevitably, the government announced that it cannot service its USD 52 billion in debt. It started rationing fuel, resorted to load-shedding, announced “work from home” for its employees, and advised schools to hold online classes. All this mounted political disaffection. Already categorised as a “defaulter,” the country would be moved to the D category if debts remain unpaid after the grace period.

Sri Lanka’s economic fate still hangs in the balance. Political instability may be addressed with an all-party interim government and the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa today. It is unlikely that the future government would be in a position to provide economic relief. The process of economic recovery will be long and arduous. Debt restructuring would be an important component of economic reforms. While the conclusion of the ongoing negotiation with the IMF would be an important first step, reforms are going to be unpopular and hurt the people who are still struggling. Taxes have to be imposed and unnecessary expenditure has to be curtailed. These were part of the IMF’s USD 1.5 billion bailout package in 2016. Will there be another aragalaya against economic difficulties that the Lankans have to endure to put their economy back on track?

Sri Lanka’s crisis has important lessons for the region. It is politically instructive to note that a powerful regime headed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, wielding far-reaching executive powers, who was popularly elected only three years back, was shown the door by the people. It is evident that populist agenda cannot sustain regimes. Mismanagement of the economy, high-level corruption, and short-sighted economic policies steered by regime cronies rather than professional economists are a recipe for political disaster. South Asia has seen many instances of popular uprising against authoritarian and unpopular regimes; however, the Sri Lankan situation remains unparalleled in recent history as it was the economic crisis that underpinned what many describe as the Bastille moment, or its “Arab Spring,” that jostled a political awakening.

The ‘original pandemic’ of violence against women continues unabated

GWYN LEWIS, KRISTINE BLOKHUS, and GITANJALI SINGH

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Almost every morning, as we open the newspaper, we are met with deeply disturbing stories of sexual violence committed against Bangladeshi women. A report issued by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad last week outlines the brutal reality: almost 300 women reported different types of abuse just in the last six months. Some 77 women, the majority of them under the age of 18, reported rape. Murder, suicide, trafficking, and acid attacks are all mentioned as part of the horrific violence that is detailed. Sadly, violence against women is far too common, and the impunity of the perpetrators all too often continues.

The data on violence against women clearly tells us that those women who report their experiences to the police are in the minority. The vast majority suffers in silence. As such, we must assume that horrific as these figures are, they are just the tip of the iceberg. With

Covid-19 restrictions, we have witnessed a resurgence in violence against women/girls, including a dramatic increase in online abuse and harassment.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has clearly outlined her commitment to eliminating this scourge of violence against the women of Bangladesh. Nothing hurts her more, she has said, than violence against women. Her government has enacted several strong policies and action plans to promote gender equality and address violence against women, including the Domestic Violence Protection and Preservation Act, 2010, National Women Development Policy, 2011, Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012, and the Child Marriage Prevention Act, 2017, which clearly demonstrate the will to make changes. As the honourable prime minister herself has expressed, however, laws and policies are not sufficient. It is essential to change the mindset of men, and of the society as a whole. Indeed, despite policies and laws, women continue to be terrorised by violence, and by fear of violence.



▲ VISUAL: STAR

The United Nations also believes that real change requires a whole-of-society approach.

Bangladesh is blessed with a strong and vibrant women’s movement and an opportunity for a demographic dividend. Both will be instrumental in harnessing the power of communities to bring about real change. Young people can help to break the cycle of intergenerational discriminatory socialisation patterns.

It is imperative to break the silence and defeat the stigma which surrounds the issue of sexual violence. Genuine reflection about power imbalances, harmful gender

norms and practices, and the negative impact of all of the oppression on women is needed. Awareness raising and education of boys and girls is also essential. Legal and policy frameworks and accountability need further strengthening in order to address structural and underlying causes and risk factors aimed to prevent violence against women and girls. As part of the response, strengthening multisectoral services, programmes, and responses to violence against women and girls and increasing the amount of available data will help to ensure that core issues are being addressed.

The United Nations in Bangladesh lists ending violence against women and promoting women’s empowerment among its primary objectives. The UN agencies stand ready to continue to support the Government of Bangladesh, the civil society organisations, and society as a whole on their path to bring an end to the culture of violence which oppresses one half of the population.

Everyone has a role to play – no one can remain a bystander.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Football play start

5 Said further

10 Zilch

11 Chauffeur

13 Lab assistant of film

14 Italian cheese

15 Umbrella

look-alike

17 Jack of "Barney Miller"

18 Lettering aid

19 "— your loss!"

20 Ump's call

21 Verse writer

22 Translucent theater drop

25 Ranch workers

26 — the line (obeyed)

27 Combat

28 Sounds of contentment

29 Model of perfection

33 Got together

34 Showy flower

35 Business gain

37 Feedbag fill

38 Peaceful

39 Get — the crack of dawn

40 Stretched

41 Workout count

DOWN

1 Uses shears

2 Bother

3 Find darling

4 Unduly suspicious

5 Skilled

6 Comical

7 Poorly lit

8 Vague answer

9 Signified

12 Perches

16 Soap residue

21 Lover

22 Post office buy

23 Sticks together

24 Make good as new

25 Tortoise's rival

27 Desired

29. "Common Sense" writer

30 Get excited

31 Like bar beer

32 Bird abodes

36 Three or four

SATURDAY'S ANSWERS

G	R	A	M	M	Y	H	U	T	S
R	E	S	C	U	E				
A	T	T	E	S	T	M	I	C	A
P	I	O	N	S		C	O	C	K
H	E	R	R		C	A	R	O	L
				O	A	R	S		R
				T	H	E	W	E	E
C	O	O	F	E	R	N			
H	E	M	S	U	P		E	G	O
O	N	E	A	L		P	E	R	I
P	A	I	L		L	O	C	A	L
R	I	C	E		E	L	A	T	E
A	L	E	S		M	O	P	E	S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT