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Issue Brief

Political Uncertainty in Sri Lanka: No End in Sight

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S*ummary*

Despite Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation, there is a bleak possibility that the economic, political and social aspirations of the protestors in Sri Lanka will be fulfilled anytime soon. Though the protestors are determined to continue the struggle through peaceful means, the country may witness violence and unrest as the struggle prolongs.

Sri Lankans who have been chanting ‘Gota Go Home’ for the last three months finally succeeded in making President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resign from the post on 14 July 2022. The decision of Gotabaya, conveyed via email to the Speaker of the Parliament from Singapore, is being seen as a euphoric victory by the protesters who had occupied the residences of both the President and the Prime Minister as well as the President’s secretariat on 9 July. While Gotabaya’s resignation will go down in history as one of the successes of non-violent public protest, it is unlikely that the resignation alone will bring the desired political outcome and the much-needed economic relief to the people—which was the main purpose of the *Aragalaya*, the peoples’ struggle.

Wrath against the Rajapaksas

Unprecedented economic crisis led to political chaos in the country in the month of April, with common people in large numbers coming onto the streets demanding resignation of President Rajapaksa and his government. They held the government accountable for contributing to the crisis by implementing faulty economic policies and failing to provide effective solutions. In addition, imposition of family rule, nepotism, corruption, discriminatory racial policies and authoritarian style of governance made the Rajapaksa family a subject of public rage. The public anger erupted and took the shape of mass protests when the shortages of food, fuel, medicine and other essential items due to foreign reserves crisis affected the lives of each and every individual in the country.

The anti-government public protests compelled the Rajapaksas, who include Sports Minister Namal Rajapaksa, Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa, and PM Mahinda Rajapaksa, to resign in April and May. However, Gotabaya Rajapaksa was determined to not resign from the post of president without completing his first term. He committed that he would appoint a national unity government (NUG) or an all-party government under a consensus prime minister to address the protestors’ concerns. Following the resignation of Mahinda Rajapaksa on 9 May, he went on to appoint Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister without consultations and formed a government of selected few backed by the ruling party instead of an all-party government, as promised.

There was public outcry and dissatisfaction over the appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe as the PM, as he is not an elected member of the Parliament, with Gotabaya Rajapaksa continuing as the President. The protestors, civil society members, the clergy and professional groups like Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) and opposition parties, continued to demand the president’s resignation. They proposed an all-party interim government for 18 months to provide immediate

economic relief to the people and make necessary changes in the constitution to reduce the power of the executive president and eventually abolish the executive Presidency.¹

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe failed to positively respond to these demands and take measures to address them. The Wickremesinghe government voted out the opposition’s motion to debate displeasure against President Rajapaksa and his government in the Parliament. The government’s draft amendment bill to reduce the power of the executive by repealing the 20th amendment and restoring the 19th amendment also indicated lack of genuine desire of the ruling party and the government to reduce the power of President.

Similarly, bills passed in the last one month show that the government was not serious about improving the governance issue. Instead of giving economic relief to the people, Wickremesinghe declared in the Parliament that the economy has completely collapsed and asked the people to brace for tougher times ahead. The plight of the people increased further in the month of June and July under the new government as fuel distribution stopped completely. Wickremesinghe, despite good rapport with the international community, particularly the Western countries, could not bring required foreign assistance to deal with the ongoing crisis.

On 29 June, ‘Gota Go Gama’ protestors had a meeting with the leaders of the opposition parties and they agreed to take collective action to intensify the pressure to remove Rajapaksa from power. There was a call from the protestors to the people across the country on social media to gather in Colombo and march towards the President’s secretariat and occupy it on 9 July. Several opposition political parties, trade unions and inter university students’ association too urged people to participate in the protest march. People across the country responded overwhelmingly and occupied the president’s residence, the presidential secretariat as well as the PM’s residence known as ‘Temple Trees’, without facing resistance from the armed forces on 9 July.

The all-party leaders in a special meeting on 9 July chaired by the Speaker of the Sri Lankan Parliament agreed on immediate resignation of the president and the prime minister. Rajapaksa conveyed through the speaker, his decision to agree to the demand of all-party leaders and stated that he would resign on 13 July. PM Wickremesinghe too announced his intention to resign. However, neither Rajapaksa nor Wickremesinghe tendered their resignation on 13 July. Rajapaksa fled the country on a Sri Lankan Airforce Jet to the Maldives on 13 July and appointed Ranil

¹ **“13 Proposals from BASL to Restore Political & Economic Stability in Sri Lanka”**, *NewsWire*, 23 April 2022; **“What do People at ‘GotaGoGama’ Want? 8 Key Demands”**, *NewsWire*, 13 May 2022.

Wickremesinghe as the acting president in his absence.² On 14 July, Gotabaya Rajapaksa went to Singapore in a private jet from the Maldives and tendered his resignation through email to the speaker only after landing in Singapore.

Aragalaya Continues

The failure of the president to resign on 13 July and the news of appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe as the acting President created more unrest in Colombo. The protestors occupied the PM’s office and also reached the Parliament where violent clashes broke out between the security personnel and the protestors. Nearly 42 persons were injured during clashes including a soldier and a police constable. Reportedly, anti-government protesters confiscated a T-56 weapon and 2 magazines with 60 rounds of ammunition from an Army soldier during protests near the Parliament.³

The *Aragalaya* protest has been mostly peaceful, except a few cases of violence. However, developments following the occupation of president’s residence were concerning. On 9 July, Wickremesinghe’s personal residence was burnt down. There were also reports of protestors destroying artefacts in the president’s residence and secretariat. There was also a report of protestors attempting to take over the Rupavahini corporation. Though no violent method was used, protestors insisted the officials of the state media corporation to telecast the views of *Aragalaya* protestors only.

The unruly behaviour of some of the protestors was widely condemned. The Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL), the Archeology Department, Free Media Movement, the general public and the sympathisers as well as members of international community urged the protestors to refrain from destroying public property and resorting to violence.⁴ Ranil Wickremesinghe as acting president imposed emergency

² **“President Issues Gazette Appointing Ranil as Acting President”**, *Newswire*, 13 July 2022.

³ **“Parliament Protest: Protesters Confiscate Firearm & Ammunition from Army Officer”**, *Newswire*, 14 July 2022.

⁴ **“Strong Message from BASL to Protesters”**, *Newswire*, 12 July 2022.

“Protests: Archaeology Department Issues Warning”, *Newswire*, 13 July 2022; **“Intimidating Media Institutions in the Pretext of ‘Aragalaya’ is a Wrong Precedent – FMM”**, *Newswire*, 14 July 2022; **“US Ambassador to SL Calls for the Rule of Law to be Upheld”**, *Newswire*, 13 July 2022.

rule in the country, imposed curfew in the Western Province and empowered the military to use force to protect state property and human lives.⁵

On 14 July, activists representing the ‘Gota Go Gama’ campaign, respecting the public opinion and request of the BASL, withdrew peacefully from the president’s official residence, the prime minister’s official residence, Temple Trees, and the Prime Minister’s Office in Colombo.⁶ However, they stated that they would continue to occupy the front part of the Presidential Secretariat and the Galle Face Green to further continue their struggle until their demands were met.⁷

Other than the resignation of Rajapaksa government and end of Rajapaksa family rule, the demands of the *Aragalaya* protestors as outlined on 11 July include the following:⁸

1. Formation of an interim government for a maximum period of a year which subscribes to the economic, social and political aims and aspirations of the people’s struggle.
2. Formation of a ‘People’s Council’ which has legal standing, through which representatives of the *Aragalaya* will be able to effectively engage and mediate with the interim government.
3. Formulation of an urgent short-term course of action within six months to provide relief to the people oppressed by the current economic crisis. Among demands included a programme for the provision and distribution of essentials such as food, fuel, gas, education, health, public transport and energy; cancellation of micro-finance and farmers’ debts; release of peaceful protestors under arrest, including all political prisoners; investigation based on an audit, to recover all monies and assets stolen by the political regime; a complete revision of the current system of taxation among others.
4. A new Constitution within a maximum period of 12 months that incorporates the provision endorsing people’s sovereignty to be established through a referendum as quickly as possible; recognising right to life as a fundamental right; abolition of the Executive Presidency; an appropriate process for a fair election; a process that provides the right to recall elected representatives who are not accountable to the people; a process that

⁵ **“PM Orders to Impose Curfew in WP”**, *Daily Mirror*, 13 July 2022; **“Army Empowered to Use Force to Protect Lives & State Property”**, *NewsWire*, 14 July 2022.

⁶ **“Message from BASL for SL Protesters”**, *NewsWire*, 13 July 2022.

⁷ **“GotoGoGama’ Activists Decide to Withdraw from Pres & PM’s Houses & PM’s Office”**, *NewsWire*, 14 July 2022.

⁸ **“GotaGoGama Activists Issue 6 Immediate Demands”**, *Daily FT*, 11 July 2022.

enables the people to participate in making and amending the law; and to address the limitations in the current constitution on human rights and the rights of women and children; to eradicate racism and racial oppression; to strengthen the relevant legal foundations that affirm the equality of religion, language, sexuality, and other cultural identity as well as democracy and political freedom.

5. Until a new constitution that affirms the power of the people is in place, the interim government within six months of its formation would focus on reduction of the executive powers of the President; strengthen democratic institutions and wherever possible, a further democratisation of the existing constitution.

What lies ahead?

So far, the protestors have achieved their demand for resignation of the president and the end of Rajapaksa family rule. However, they seem to be utterly disappointed by the fact that Gotabaya has now been replaced by Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was rejected by the people in the last election and had entered the Parliament through his party's national-list seat. Wickremesinghe, who once extended his solidarity with the 'Gota Go Gama' protestors and expressed his desire to engage with them, had also empowered the military, as acting President, to use force against those acting in a riotous manner.⁹

The failure on the part of Gotabaya and Ranil to tender resignation on 13 July as committed, led to intensification of the unrest. To maintain law-and-order situation in the country and control the popular uprising, government needed immediate political solution. However, the acting president has felt it prudent to empower the Armed Forces to exercise force to secure public property and human lives, rather than facilitating a political solution by tendering his resignation immediately.

All-party leaders in their meeting on 9 July agreed that President Gotabaya and PM Wickremesinghe would resign immediately, following which Parliament would be convened in seven days to appoint an acting president (as per constitutional provision, speaker would be appointed as acting president); then an interim all-party government would be formed under a new Prime Minister; and then elections can be called within a short period of time and a new government can be appointed. Later, when Gotabaya (through the speaker) and Ranil Wickremesinghe confirmed that they would resign on 13 July, all party leaders during a meeting on 11 July decided that the Parliament would be summoned on 15 July, nomination for the President would

⁹ [“GotaGoGama’ Should Continue – New PM Ranil”](#), *Newswire*, 12 May 2022.

be received on 19 July and the Presidential election in case of more than one nomination would be held on 20 July through secret ballot. This would be followed by an all-party government under a new President for the future constitutional framework to be carried out and for the continuation of the existing essential services in the country.¹⁰ Due to delay in Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s resignation, parliament could not be convened on 15 July and the Presidential election was finally held on 20 July, as decided. With the opposition political parties not able to nominate a common candidate, Ranil Wickremesinghe was elected as the 8th President of Sri Lanka on 20 July 2022, and is expected to complete the remainder of the term of the former president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Even though all political parties have agreed to form an interim government, it is uncertain whether the parliamentarians will be able to come to a consensus to appoint an interim PM or elect a President and a national unity government/all-party government that is acceptable to the people. This uncertainty looms large as the ruling party still holds the majority in the Parliament and opposition parties are not united even if they had common demand of ousting the Rajapaksa government and bring about changes in the political system.

Since April this year, despite the *Aragalaya* on the streets, parliamentarians have not felt the urgency to show some political will to address people’s concerns. The parliament in May passed the electricity amendment bill, which ended the bidding process to award contract for energy projects. This is contrary to the demand for introducing transparency to address the corruption and poor governance. The political parties have agreed to curtail the power of executive Presidency. However, three different draft bills for the purpose were put forward in the Parliament as different political parties have different takes on the issue.

Majoritarianism and politics based on ethnicity and racial divide are the key features of Sri Lankan politics that have empowered many of the corrupt leaders. As a result, many parliamentarians would like to maintain the status quo and may not give their consent to any systemic change. The NUG experiment in Sri Lanka during the period 2015–19 utterly failed as political parties simply refused to be united even on matters related to highest level of national security concern. Almost same bunch of leaders are continuing in the parliament. This leaves little room for optimism that things will stabilise soon in the coming days.

Without political stability, there is little hope for economic stability. To meet the immediate economic needs of the people in terms of supply of food, fuel, medicines and deal with the economic crisis, the island requires financial assistance from

¹⁰ **“Press Release: Regarding the Decisions Taken at Today's Party Leadership Meeting”**, Parliament of Sri Lanka, 11 July 2022.

multilateral institutes as well as bilateral partners. Sri Lankans are relying heavily on finalisation of the IMF bailout package. UN, World Food Programme, World Bank and some bilateral partners have committed humanitarian assistance, but assistance from some countries including US and Japan will depend on the successful negotiation of IMF deal. An unsettled and unstable government will not only delay the negotiation process, but also affect the implementation of the IMF conditionalities including the debt restructure negotiation with the creditors, improving the governance system and so on.

In addition to the financial aid and assistance, Sri Lanka needs to implement policies to revive its economy by strengthening various sectors including tourism, remittances, export, agriculture, investment and so on. Political stability and a settled government are the prerequisite to revive the economy.

Conclusion

There is a bleak possibility that the economic, political, and social aspirations of the protestors will be fulfilled anytime soon. Hence ‘*Janatha Aragalya*’ is likely to continue for some more time. Though the protestors are determined to continue the struggle through peaceful means, there is a possibility that as the protest continues, a section in the society that believes in anarchy or in adopting violent means to bring required political changes takes over and decides the nature and scope of the *Aragalya*. Alternatively, there may be also an attempt to sabotage the people’s peaceful struggle by instigating violence.

The main onus to prevent any such situation lies not only on the perseverance of protestors who truly believe on the strength of the peaceful protest, but also Ranil Wickremesinghe and all the 224 parliamentarians who seem to be trying the patience of the protestors.

Many in the Western media have raised the possibility of military takeover. This is unlikely given that the Sri Lankan military is usually subservient to the political forces (even though there was an incident of failed military coup in 1962). Further, the depth of the ongoing economic crisis may not encourage the military to take over as it is well known that there is no easy solution to the crisis.

To address the question of political legitimacy and to effectively execute and implement plans to deal with the economic crisis and bring to an end to the popular uprising, the prudent option for Sri Lanka is to go for fresh elections. However, the situation right now is not economically conducive to conduct the elections. Elections can ideally take place only after an all-party leadership strikes an agreement with the IMF and other bilateral and multilateral partners, and eases the economic pressure on the people.

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