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# Sri Lanka: an island in turmoil

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## Introduction

- 1 Sri Lanka is experiencing its worst economic crisis since independence (1948). Shortages of basic necessities (food, fuel, medicine), breakdown of electricity supplies and inflation have provoked an unprecedented popular uprising of Sri Lankans since March 2022, across ethnic and religious divides, often instrumentalized in the island, which led to the flight of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on July 9 and his resignation on July 14, putting an end to almost two decades of rule by the Rajapaksa brothers. But the struggle – or *aragalaya* in Sinhalese – is not over yet. On July 20, 2022, Ranil Wickremesinghe was elected president of the republic by parliament with the support of the Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP) – which still has a majority in the assembly after Gotabaya's landslide election victory in 2019. The new strongman of Colombo has since launched a crackdown on *aragalaya* leaders (activists, priests, students, lawyers, trade unionists). The population blames the new president for defending the interests of the Rajapaksas. For many demonstrators, there is no question of demobilizing as long as Wickremesinghe remains in power.
- 2 The Rajapaksas' stranglehold on the island's political and economic life had been almost total for nearly 20 years. Mahinda Rajapaksa was president of the republic for two terms between 2005 and 2015, and prime minister under his younger brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa from 2020 to 2022. Two other brothers, Chamal, 79, and Basil, 71, have built up their positions in governance, ports, agriculture and financial management. Dozens of family members held senior positions until March 2022 (in embassies, in the management of government-owned enterprises such as Sri Lankan Airlines and as heads of ministries). More than a dynasty, it is in fact a clan that has

held power almost continuously since the end of the civil war, supported by the voices of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority in a context of rising Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and radical religious populism (Schonthal and Walton, 2016). As Neil de Votta mentions, "following the civil war, one Rajapaksa sibling boasted that "an era of 'ruler kings' has begun." Sri Lankans, however, will remember the Rajapaksas as crooks who pauperized the island and drove its people to starvation" (de Votta, 2022: 94).

- 3 While the July 1983-May 2009 war between the Sri Lankan military and separatist militants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has significant after-effects at multiple and nested scales (Madavan, 2013; Meyer and Madavan, 2015), it appeared, at least to international observers and investors, that the country was "a development success story, with a significant decline in poverty and a Human Development Index (HDI) that ranks fourth among 29 countries in developing and emerging Asia" (Ehrhart and Madariaga, 2017: 1). So how to explain this multifaceted crisis? How do we think about this brutal trajectory from economic emergence to humanitarian crisis? Now, in a country that was on the verge of achieving upper-middle income status, "three in 10 Sri Lankans are food insecure. Nearly two-thirds of families are resorting to at least one negative coping mechanism, including taking smaller portions, or less nutritious food"<sup>1</sup>. As Anne Thushara Matthias and Saroj Jayasinghe rightly point out, "just as the COVID-19 pandemic is receding in Sri Lanka, we are battling a fresh challenge: a health catastrophe stemming from economic and political crises" (Thushara Matthias and Jayasinghe, 2022: 959).
- 4 Throughout its history, the island has experienced many tensions, the most recent and most important of which is undoubtedly that between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the Tamil minority. Since the 1950s, through opportunism and malice, politicians have fueled and manipulated a "Buddhist majoritarianism" (de Votta, 2016) that tends to produce fateful "predatory identities" (Appadurai, 2006) and a bipolarization of political life (Pfaffenberger, 1995). As historian de Silva reminds us, the civil war that plagued the island for nearly three decades could be seen as a conflict between "a majority with a minority complex, and a minority with a ... majority complex" (de Silva, 1998: 304). Having enjoyed advantages in education, employment, and influence during the British colonial period (Madavan, 2007)<sup>2</sup>, and being able to rely on the support of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu<sup>3</sup>, it is easy to see how the Tamil minority cultivated a majority complex. For their part, Sinhalese Buddhists, though clearly in the majority, have long felt surrounded by non-Buddhists in South Asia. Many of them feel that while Tamil, Arabic and English speaking minorities practising Hinduism, Islam and Christianity may seek support beyond the island's borders, the Sinhalese people and the Sinhalese language have only Sri Lanka as their homeland (Meyer, 2001). This is why every politician is willing to defend, at least in appearance, the Buddhist teaching (or Buddha Sasana). This political frame of reference<sup>4</sup> is also based on another dialectic, the rural/urban opposition. It is important to note that Sri Lanka is a predominantly rural (81.14% of the population is considered rural in 2021) and agricultural country. Sri Lanka ranks fifth among the least urbanized countries, according to the UN's World Urbanization Outlook. Officially, according to World Bank data, only about 18% of Sri Lankans live in an urbanized area<sup>5</sup>. The agricultural sector employs – according to estimates – between a quarter and a third of the national workforce (for only 8% of GNP), which means that the vast majority of its production factors are concentrated in agriculture or in its innumerable plantations. With the opening of the economy in 1977<sup>6</sup>, the distinction between urban and rural areas was

gradually imposed in the popular consciousness, given the primacy given to Colombo. This focus of policies and investments on Colombo will be exponential after the civil war. Even as he claimed to be a representative of village constituencies, in contrast to opposition elites whom he characterized as urban and rootless, within the final phase of the conflict, Mahinda Rajapaksa made Colombo a centerpiece of his postwar development strategy, evidencing this ongoing tension between populism and neoliberalism that characterizes the Sri Lankan state (Gunawardena, 2015). As Gunawardena argues, this tension or indeed performance of permanent contradiction is expressed in the disparity between the urban and rural areas of the island, and vice versa (Gunawardena, 2015: 57). This defines contradictory aspects of the Sri Lankan state, as policies must appeal to two distinct groups of constituents: the new urban middle classes (with all the methodological and intellectual difficulties inherent in drawing the contours of this class) and the increasingly impoverished small farmers and fishers. For more than four decades, the island has intensified the implementation of neoliberal policies, which have resulted in increased dependency, the capture of power by a small elite, the monetization of the economy and land, and, above all, increased inequality.

- 5 The current crisis (a combined political, economic, social and humanitarian catastrophe) on the island must be analyzed in the light of these fault lines and this political frame of reference. To do this, our paper will be organized in three parts. The first part will look at the roots of this crisis and the daily challenges it poses to the inhabitants. The second part will analyze the ways in which civil society has been mobilized, this movement of struggle or *aragalaya* that has gradually been formed to overthrow the members of this political class, in order to question, in the last part, the geostrategic stakes in the Indian Ocean that this particular temporality allows us to foresee: India sees here the opportunity to reposition itself within its natural sphere of influence in the face of China.

## A crisis with multiple causes

- 6 The immediate cause of Sri Lanka's troubles is a balance of payments crisis resulting from long-standing budget deficits, a bloated public sector, and inefficient and wasteful government enterprises. The economic crisis that the island is currently experiencing is thus essentially endogenous and the result of inappropriate political choices.
- 7 Certainly, an unfavourable global economic context has weakened the Sri Lankan economy. Tourism, an essential foreign exchange generator for the island, which usually accounts for more than 12% of the wealth created, has collapsed under the effect of the various lockdown measures linked to the pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. As a reminder, Russia and the Ukraine occupy the second and third places for tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka, the first being India. The sector's share of GNP has fallen from 5.6% in 2018 to 0.8% in 2020. Remittances from the diaspora have also become scarcer. As de Mel states, "migrant worker remittances fell from US\$ 7 billion in 2020 to 1.3 billion in the first quarter of 2022" (de Mel, 2022: 92). Since 1976, a large number of Sri Lankans have become temporary migrants, seeking employment mainly in the Arabian Gulf countries (United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar). This labor migration, encouraged and supervised by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, mainly involved women from low income backgrounds (employed in the

countries of this zone as domestic workers) but has tended to become more masculine since 2010 particularly where professional outmigration is concerned (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2015). At the national level, remittances from these migrants contribute significantly to the balance of payments. This is why, since the beginning of the crisis, this same office has wanted to intensify departures to the Gulf countries. To this end, the government has lowered the minimum age at which women can migrate to work from 25 to 21<sup>7</sup>. Some of these transfers (or remittances) are also made by Tamil refugees in the West (Europe, North America and Australia): members of this diaspora supporting their relatives in their regions and/or villages of origin.

- 8 Of course, the rise in fuel and food prices has been aggravated by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. But it was a series of decisions taken by the Rajapaksa clan that brought the island to the brink of collapse. Gotabaya's demagogic measures, which reduced the number of taxpayers from 1,550,000 to 412,000 by abolishing seven taxes, and the lowering of the VAT rate from 15 to 8 per cent between 2019 and 2021 have sharply reduced government revenue. The shortage of foreign exchange has pushed Colombo to save dollars by limiting imports. This has led the regime to impose a sudden conversion to organic farming<sup>8</sup> in the name of combating environmental degradation, with an equally sudden halt to imports of fertilizers and other chemical inputs (herbicides, fungicides and pesticides). In just six months, national rice production fell by 20% and tea production by 40%, even though tea is the second largest export (after the garment industry)<sup>9</sup> and therefore a significant source of foreign exchange.
- 9 This failure forced the island to import rice (June 2021) and aggravated food price inflation. It is an entire sector and several branches that have been destabilized, leading to the collapse of farmers' livelihoods. The rising fuel prices and shortages have also affected the livelihood of fishermen in coastal areas.
- 10 Moreover, the decision to maintain a large army busy with civilian tasks, despite the end of the war, is also weighing on the country's finances. The share of the budget devoted to the army (excluding loan repayments) has been maintained at more than 15% in 2021, compared with 8% for education and 10% for health!
- 11 Since 2007, the government has tried to revive its economy, using the facilities provided by the global capital market and investment offers from China, among others. The island's debt is nearly US \$51 billion. During Mahinda's presidency, the government took out numerous bilateral loans from India and Japan for the reconstruction of the conflict-ravaged Tamil areas in the north and east. Loans were also taken from China to finance costly and unnecessary infrastructure projects – often oversized – such as the international airport and the deepwater port at Hambantota. The government was forced to hand over the port to a Chinese company (China Merchants) for 99 years, while Colombo was unable to repay its debts. Despite this precedent, the Rajapaksas have taken out other loans from the People's Republic of China to finance Colombo's urban renewal projects (port city project, business and leisure center) but also to pay the interest due to the Chinese banks. One could add to this list of white elephants a large and little used cricket stadium and a museum dedicated to the glorification of the Rajapaksa (destroyed during the May 2022 protests). The island quickly became a paradigmatic example of what some economists and geographers call "debt-trap diplomacy": China, by granting excessive credit to the Rajapaksa clan, which was already heavily in debt, obtained economic concessions when the island became unable to meet its repayment obligations.

- 12 As Sri Lanka's financial situation deteriorated, credit rating agencies downgraded the country. To stay afloat, the government printed money, increasing the supply by 42 per cent between December 2019 and August 2021, helping to fuel what would become the fastest inflation in Asia. The worsening balance of payments, coinciding with maturing global loans, made the country's external debt unsustainable. Without foreign exchange, the country has been unable to import petroleum products, cooking gas, food and medicine. From 2021 to the first quarter of 2022, the refusal of foreign agencies to lend to Sri Lanka forced Gotabaya to turn to Asian partners, who may have less regard for human rights, to take out loans to avoid bankruptcy and default. The increased borrowing increased foreign debt while foreign exchange reserves stood at less than US \$0.5 billion. With no foreign reserves to pay back foreign debt, Sri Lanka announced it would default on its international debt repayment on 12 April 2022.
- 13 With virtually no foreign exchange reserves, the import of medicines, food, cooking gas and fuel is becoming very difficult. The devaluation of the Sri Lankan rupee, which lost 66% of its value on 8 March 2022 against the dollar<sup>10</sup>, has considerably reduced the purchasing power of the island's inhabitants.
- 14 Skyrocketing inflation has made access to available food stocks at times unaffordable, causing concerns about the possibility of famines due to food shortages. Many Sri Lankans are now living on just one meal a day, and some are fleeing the island to India<sup>11</sup> for fear of not being able to feed their families. According to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), 6.3 million people (30% of the population) are facing acute food insecurity. On the field, more than 60% of families are eating less food, and eating cheaper and less nutritious food.
- 15 The announcement on March 31 of daily 13-hour power cuts triggered the first wave of protests in Colombo near the home of Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The protesters also sought to know why certain neighbourhoods (such as Mirihana, where the president lived) continued to have uninterrupted power supply (de Mel, 2022). During this first mobilization, 37 people were hospitalized and 54 arrested<sup>12</sup>. On April 9, hundreds of protesters took over Galle Face Green, the urban park next to the Indian Ocean in the capital Colombo. The brutal deterioration of living conditions and the fear of not being able to feed their children has provoked widespread social anger, bringing together Sinhalese Buddhists (the majority on the island), ethnic and religious minorities (Tamils, Muslims, Christians and Hindus), trade unions, religious authorities, students, families of victims of the last war and human rights defenders. Beyond a cry of anger against the overwhelming management of the country leading to shortages of fuel, gas, oil, medicine and food, a spectacular inflation, and more globally the economic and political bankruptcy of the island, these protests show the organization and the progressive structuring of a civil society.

## Civil society mobilizations and political repercussions

- 16 In this country, with its strong community identities, it can be assumed that there is not a single civil society, but rather civil societies with partisan interests, referring here to the idea of the predominance of one form of social capital over another<sup>13</sup>. Thus, much of what constitutes civil society can be described as interest groups trying to divert public resources to their preferred causes (Fukuyama: 2001). As Michael Foley

and Bob Edwards have noted, "individual and collective actors get things done better thanks to social capital; society as a whole may or may not be better off as a result" (1997: 552). This is particularly the case in multi-ethnic societies where ethnicity and nationalism are manipulated to generate political loyalties and preferences. In Sri Lanka, bonding social capital has predominated since Independence. Indeed, strong or exclusive bonding ties that unite individuals within the same community are more intense than weak (or inclusive) bridging ties that would promote interethnic cooperation (de Votta, 2005). As Neil de Votta notes, "civil society activists in Sri Lanka must deal with impassioned Buddhist nationalists, separatist rebels from the LTTE, an aggressive government that can stymie and circumvent their activities, and their own disconnected agendas" (2005: 172).

- 17 At the level of the island's majority community, civil society supports Sinhalese and Buddhist hegemony. Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism has long been encouraged by the rulers of the state<sup>14</sup>. Since the adoption of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, which made Sinhala the official language, the island has systematically excluded minorities and reinforced the power of the majority. When Sri Lanka declared itself a republic in 1972, the country also adopted a constitution that made Buddhism the foremost religion ("at the foremost place") and Sinhala the only official language. The 1978 constitution maintained Buddhism's status as the main religion while making Tamil an official language. Both constitutions codified and normalized a "majoritarianism" (de Votta, 2016; Kleinfeld, 2006) that had already become largely entrenched during the 1950s. Ethnicity, not citizenship, gradually formed the basis for resource allocation and power; in effect, minorities were given an inferior stake in governance and that too was those handpicked by the Colombo regime. Has this changed? The 23 ministerial secretaries that Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed in 2019 were all Sinhalese, even though the various minority groups together make up a quarter of the population (de Mel, 2022). In the same vein, Gotabaya's supporters instrumentalized the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks into an anti-Islamic discourse that reinforced majority Sinhala Buddhist sentiment and projected Gotabaya as a national savior. The terrorist attacks were also the vehicle for passing the 20th Amendment, which strengthened the executive to a degree not seen since the island's Independence.
- 18 The brutal deterioration of living conditions and the fear of not being able to feed their children has led to widespread social anger with many Sinhalese Buddhists protesting. While the Rajapaksas can still count on the support of a fringe of this community, the majority of Sinhalese Buddhists and Christians have begun to shout their anger at Gotabaya, the man they voted into power in 2019.
- 19 Several other civil society groups have been mobilized since the years of war against Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism, human rights violations and the Rajapaksa clan. Among these groups, one can distinguish one that has the particularity of being interethnic and that mobilizes to defend human rights, that promotes peaceful intercommunity coexistence and that denounces the extremism of Sinhalese and Tamil ethnonationalism, the militarization of the country and the abuses of the Rajapaksas. This heterogeneous group includes academics, artists, lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders and students who try to mobilize in the three languages of the country (English, Sinhalese and Tamil) during demonstrations, meetings, in the usual media (radio and press) or on the Internet<sup>15</sup>. These communities also rely on the support of some members living in the diaspora (who for example organized a protest called

"GotaGoGama" in London), human rights groups (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch), representatives of Western chancelleries or the United Nations. The members of this group exchange and can mobilize members from other countries who share their values and who can support them in order to alert international opinion, following the example of the South Asian Solidarity group<sup>16</sup>.

- 20 Separate civil societies defend the rights of Tamil, Muslim and Christian minorities. They mobilize when the interests or security of members of their respective communities are at stake. In the case of the Tamils, despite the end of the war, many members of civil society remain sympathetic or nostalgic for the LTTE<sup>17</sup> separatist movement despite its defeat. They are at the forefront of mobilizations against the militarization of the north of the island, denouncing war crimes and human rights violations or land grabbing by the army. These groups mainly publicize their actions in Tamil and English, using the Internet as a means of dissemination. They are strongly supported by LTTE activists and sympathizers in the diaspora who have not given up their project to create an independent state for the Tamils of the island: Tamil Eelam.
- 21 Muslims on the island have been particularly victimized by prejudice and violence since the end of the war and more particularly after 2012. Successive governments have indeed turned a blind eye to the Sinhala mob violence committed against Muslim stores, mosques and communities. The violence in Aluthgama in 2014, Ampara and Kandy in 2018 and the harassment of Dr. Shaffi, a gynecologist falsely accused of forcibly sterilizing Sinhalese women, have fanned anti-Muslim sentiment. These feelings are linked to the fear of identity dilution on the part of the majority community. This "anxiety of incompleteness" of identity (Appadurai, 2006) leads Sri Lankan society to use nationalism and to disseminate information against Muslims in the media and on social networks in order to provoke violent actions. As soon as he came to power, Gotabaya Rajapaksa pledged to strengthen Sinhala Buddhist supremacy and to limit the rights of minorities (ethnic, religious, sexual), but he was unable to achieve the "prosperity prospects" promised in his election manifesto.
- 22 The minorities have long protested separately against the Rajapaksa government, which used them to consolidate its power within the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority. However, the two main minorities of the country participated in the peaceful march of February 3, 2021, which linked in five days Pottuvil to Polikandy, two localities corresponding to the southern and northern limits of the territory traditionally occupied by the Tamils and claimed as Tamil Eelam by the LTTE. Organized by families of victims of the civil war, civil society organizations, priests of different religions (Christianity, Hinduism and Islam) and Tamil politicians, this so-called "P2P" march aimed to alert the international community to the living conditions reserved for the Tamil and Muslim populations of the island since the end of the conflict in 2009 in a context of military escalation, authoritarianism and favoritism regarding the majority population of the island.
- 23 After decades of violence and mutual distrust, the joint participation of Tamils and Muslims in this march was unprecedented, as was its magnitude, which helped to revive a civil society turned away from vested interests and growing ethnic and religious polarization. This awakening of consciousness continued and grew to culminate in April 2022 in Galle Face Green, which from the 9th became "Gota-go-gama" (*gama* meaning "village" in Sinhala), the epicenter of the protest against the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government, with other (smaller) protest sites spreading to many

secondary towns across the country. The protests, which continued for more than four months, were mainly attended by representatives of the urban middle class, often the very people who had brought the Rajapaksa clan to power and who had enjoyed the favours of this ethnocracy until now. It is amazing to think that 13 years ago, when the civil war ended in May 2009, some Sri Lankans prostrated themselves before posters of President Mahinda Rajapaksa and worshipped them as a sign of gratitude. Even as the dead are still being counted (Harrisson, 2012), they did so in defiance of the alleged war crimes that were committed against minority Tamils in the quest to defeat Tamil separatists.

- 24 Moreover, one can only be struck by the discretion of the slogans written in Tamil in Colombo. Also the speakers from the minority are not very visible. It has to be said that for many Tamils, the demonstrations raise uncomfortable questions towards the Sinhalese, mainly concerning their non-participation and silence following the protests organized by the Tamil minority against enforced disappearances and war crimes. Many within the minority also feel angry about the election of Gotabaya, a president associated with war crimes. The *aragalaya* and more specifically the GotaGoGama movement show both the promises of unity and the fault lines, aspirations and anxieties that run through the island's ethnic and social relations. In short, this mobilization oscillates between bonding and bridging.
- 25 The demonstrators do not limit their demands to a resolution of the economic crisis. They also demand a profound system change. It is the whole political class that is discredited and the political system itself that is questioned by the movement of struggle. Some protesters denounce the practice of populist authoritarian governance that has relied on the promotion of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism at the expense of national unity and the socio-political inclusion of Tamil and Muslim minorities. Others condemn the impoverishment of the masses and the logic of development through dispossession where debt is the central element.
- 26 Some activists are also calling for justice and transparency to ensure that the Rajapaksas and their allies are brought to justice and answer to the charges of economic mismanagement of the country, nepotism, corruption, embezzlement of public money, political assassinations (of journalists, human rights activists, members of minorities) and war crimes committed during the final phase of the war (bombing of civilians in the no-fire zone, massacres, disappearances, rape). There is a desire among some of the demonstrators to turn a page in Sri Lankan history once and for all, by removing the old political guard, which has ruled the country for decades and which is considered responsible for the divisions of the Sri Lankan people on ethnic and religious grounds. The protesters demanded Gotabaya's resignation and the removal of the Rajapaksa family and their allies from politics. This peaceful mobilization against the Rajapaksa regime has not been stopped despite the curfews, the declaration of a state of emergency or the attempt to block social networks (April 3, 2022) to prevent them from organizing. On the contrary, in the face of this popular uprising, it was the president's party that disassociated itself. All the ministers and the cabinet resigned (including three members of the President's family: his brothers Basil and Chamal, as well as his nephew Namal), leaving Gotabaya and Mahinda alone to face their responsibilities and especially to face the protesters. The trade unions supported the demonstrators by organizing general strikes (school, hospital, railway and post office) which were very well attended. Faced with the challenge to their authority, the

Rajapaksa attempted on Monday, May 9, 2022, to mobilize some of their supporters in Colombo and incited them to attack the encampments of the peaceful demonstrators to dislodge them. In response, the protesters brutally repressed the attackers and stormed the Prime Minister's residence. Island-wide, properties of the Rajapaksa clan and their allies were burned or destroyed. The violence left nine people dead and more than 200 injured. Faced with the general anger, Mahinda submitted his resignation the same day.

- 27 After the forced resignation of his brother, Gotabaya played his last card by appointing Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister on May 12, 2022. He is a very experienced politician, the longest serving member of the United National Party (the UNP led the 1948 independence negotiations with Britain). He is 73 years old and has been Prime Minister five times, but has never completed a single term (of five years). He is a center-right liberal and supporter of free trade, who also has the advantage of having successfully negotiated a deal with the IMF during one of his terms as Prime Minister in 2016. In the August 2015 poll for parliament, Wickremesinghe won more than half a million votes in the Colombo district. Five years later, however, he was able to garner barely thirty thousand votes and found himself shut out of Parliament. He was far from alone: the UNP as a whole failed to win a single seat and went from 105 MPs to zero, although it eventually won a seat based on its share of the island-wide vote. Wickremesinghe took that single seat and is therefore the sole UNP representative in the 225-member unicameral national legislature. In 2015, during his third stint as prime minister, Wickremesinghe tainted his reputation by being accused of being involved in a multi-million dollar bond scandal<sup>18</sup>. He then compounded his situation by blocking attempts to prosecute the Rajapaksas for their misdeeds. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that many people suspect that Gotabaya made a deal with the Prime Minister to shield the Rajapaksa clan from liability once again.
- 28 To ease tensions, Wickremesinghe presented a new draft of the 21st amendment to the constitution to the cabinet, which aimed to reduce the extensive powers of the office of the president in favour of parliament, in order to meet one of the demands of the protesters. Wickremesinghe wants to negotiate with the IMF for an emergency loan and then a "sustainable loan package" to put the country's finances in order and to help it to restructure its debt. For this to happen, the government must demonstrate its ability to restore political stability and appear legitimate. It will also have to show its ability to implement the austerity measures that will accompany the aid and restructuring plans recommended by the IMF: budget cuts, tax increases, gradual removal of import restrictions, end of government intervention to stabilize the rupee, growth-enhancing structural reforms, sale/privatization of state-owned enterprises, deregulation of electricity prices, *etc.*
- 29 Wickremesinghe has announced an overhaul of the tax system. The aim is to increase state revenues by increasing value-added taxes (from 8 to 12 per cent as of May) and corporate taxes (from 24 to 30 per cent in October), and by considerably reducing the tax breaks granted to individual taxpayers. The Prime Minister has warned his compatriots that they will have to be prepared for difficult times in the coming months. Increases in the price of gasoline (20 to 24%), diesel (35 to 38%) and electricity (264%) have been announced and are expected to be passed on to transport and food prices. Inflation could increase further.

- 30 Despite these initial measures, a new mobilization was organized in Colombo. The presidential palace was stormed and occupied by the protesters, while the Prime Minister's residence was set on fire. On July 13, 2022 Gotabaya fled to the Maldives, which he left the next day to reach Singapore (before arriving in Thailand on August 12, 2022), to end his exile on September 2. He resigned from the city-state and gave his powers to Prime Minister Wickremesinghe under Article 37 of the Constitution until his successor was elected by parliament. Supporters of the *aragalaya* are opposed to Wikremesinghe remaining in power, as he is seen more than ever as a compromised politician who defends the interests of the Rajapaksas at the expense of the people. On July 17, 2022, Wickremesinghe introduced a state of emergency that gave the armed forces and police broad powers to arrest suspects and hold them for long periods without charge. On July 20, 2022, Wickremesinghe, who was the only member of his party in the national assembly, was elected President by a wide margin, thanks to the support of the Rajapaksa's SLPP MPs, who had a majority in Parliament. Wickremesinghe appointed Dinesh Gunawardena, a close associate of the Rajapaksa clan, as Prime Minister the next day.
- 31 At 1 a.m. on July 22, Wickremesinghe sent security forces in riot gear, armed with automatic assault rifles, to dislodge the protesters, dismantle the barricades and surround the Presidential Secretariat complex. The protesters, journalists and lawyers were brutally assaulted and the security forces attempted to erase the footage of the intervention.
- 32 This attack raised the indignation of the international community (UN, Western chancelleries) and the anger of supporters of the *aragalaya* who had already announced that they would peacefully withdraw from the building in the afternoon of July 22. They also denounce the illegitimacy of the proclamation of the state of emergency which is used as a means of intimidation of the protesters to prevent them from demonstrating again in the streets.
- 33 Since this intervention, the ruling power has prevented foreign journalists from visiting the island to cover the developments. Several leaders of the *aragalaya* have been arrested and arrest warrants have been issued for others<sup>19</sup>. The method is also condemned. In terms of governance, it seems that nothing has changed! The SLPP MPs are increasing their provocations and even broadcasting comments denigrating the demonstrators inside and outside the parliament. Some even associate the *aragalaya* with the LTTE or groups linked to the Easter Sunday attacks to sow disunity among the people and the protesting public.
- 34 On July 27, the state of emergency was extended by parliament despite protests from the opposition and the street. The government wants to challenge Sri Lankans' freedom to assemble and demonstrate freely and peacefully in public spaces and on social networks. The ongoing crackdown should also be seen as a warning signal from the regime to those who would protest against the austerity measures that are likely to be unleashed on the population as a solution to the economic crisis with the blessing of the international financial institutions. The leaders of the *aragalaya* are calling on the people to stand united and peacefully oppose the repression to protect democracy and prevent economic dispossession. The people and civil society demand the release of the imprisoned activists and are determined to continue the struggle to defend the future of future generations. The battle is more than ever between the parliamentary political class and the people.

35 While the state of emergency was lifted on August 18, it can be legally renewed every month. Negotiations with the IMF to finalize an exit plan with the Wickremesinghe government resulted in the government receiving \$2.9 billion in aid to put the country's finances on a sound footing. While negotiations were underway with the IMF, a conference entitled "The People's Alliance" was organized by the Alliance of Trade Unions and Mass organizations (ATUMO). In addition to trade unionists, diplomats, opposition politicians, students, religious representatives, lawyers and journalists gathered to protest against the repression of leaders and ordinary participants in the *aragalaya*. They demanded their release and an end to the abuse of power by Wikremesinghe. The situation remains explosive on the island and offers a window of opportunity for its creditors to reposition themselves. After a period in which the use of street mobilizations waned due to repression by the security forces, thousands of protesters joined the student, trade union and human rights movements in Colombo on October 27, 2022, to voice their dissatisfaction with the economic situation and the brutal repression of previous protests.

## Towards a strategic geopolitical repositioning?

36 Throughout the Rajapaksa reign, foreign borrowing increased dramatically, and China's political presence increased after 2009. This included a significant increase in short-term private credit and loans to finance the balance of payments gap. Most of the speculation has taken the form of bonds issued by state-owned banks and sold to private investors who focus mainly on high-profile real estate projects such as hotels, casinos, and large real estate projects.

37 To get out of this crisis and renegotiate its \$51 billion foreign debt, Sri Lanka is trying to get support from the IMF but also from its Asian creditors. China, which became one of the country's main creditors under the Rajapaksa presidencies, may see its influence challenged by this crisis. Although China now holds 10 per cent of the country's external debt, the country was no longer willing to support the Gotabaya regime by facilitating a new loan to avoid default. Instead, Gotabaya's economic mismanagement made China cautious. China has also seen its image tarnished on the island. Many locals blame China, albeit with the complicity of the Rajapaksas, for being trapped by debt. The precedent of the loss of state sovereignty over the port of Hambatota has left a lasting impression on people's minds, who fear that the latest projects financed by Chinese funds in Colombo could become a pretext for China to take control of them or to ask for strategic sectors (tourism, garments) or raw materials to be handed over as compensation for probable unpaid bills. But for the Rajapaksas, Beijing is above all an important ally that helped them to obtain, in 2009, the support of third countries to present a draft resolution preventing the UN, supported by the West, from opening an investigation into possible war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the last months of the conflict.

38 India seems to have taken advantage of this crisis to move closer to Sri Lanka. Thanks to the release of credit lines of several billion rupees to finance the purchase of food, medicine and fuel, India appears to be a valuable support for the Sri Lankan population and state in times of crisis. It also provides direct humanitarian assistance (medicines, food) that allows its neighbor to reduce the suffering associated with shortages of essential materials. India will also play a facilitating role within the IMF to support its

neighbor. This is unprecedented because since the Indian interference in the Sri Lankan inter-ethnic conflict and the failure of the Indian Peace Keeping Force, present in the island from 1987 to 1990, to disarm the LTTE and ensure the security of the population in the northern and eastern provinces of the island, bilateral relations between the two countries had deteriorated (Madavan 2013). It should also be remembered that Tamil Nadu has long served as a rear base for the LTTE by hosting training camps.

- 39 Since the election of Mahinda Rajapaksa as president of Sri Lanka in 2005, India has not played its role in the region and Colombo has distanced itself considerably from Delhi in its diplomatic relations.
- 40 In addition to loans from Delhi, the state government of Tamil Nadu in India, led by Chief Minister MK Stalin of the DMK party, also sent shipments of food and medicine to the island. Political parties in Tamil Nadu, concerned about the future of the Tamil minority, are pressuring the central government to step up aid.
- 41 This crisis seems to be redrawing Sri Lanka's geopolitics vis-à-vis its two main partners. But Colombo will still have to be careful not to alienate one of its two creditors in order to avoid reprisals, as the delicate reception given to a Chinese research and study ship that arrived in the port of Hambantota on August 16 and which has been accused of espionage by the Indians can already attest. To defend its interests, New Delhi offered a maritime reconnaissance aircraft. During the tensions between its two creditors, Colombo insisted that India and China are two friendly countries that are helping it.

## Conclusion

- 42 Sri Lanka's economic crisis has now created a humanitarian crisis. The anger of Sri Lankans over shortages and inflation has translated into a popular uprising and a political crisis after Gotabaya, and now Wickremesinghe, refused to resign. This democratic mobilization must be seen by some as an opportunity to rethink the political system and Sri Lankan society to make it more just and inclusive in order to foster national unity. It remains to be seen whether the issue of justice and redress for the predation of the Rajapaksa clan can be an opportunity to unite demands over time and allow for the emergence of a united civil society across ethnic, religious and linguistic divides. The *aragalaya* marks a particular temporality: that of questioning.
- 43 The *aragalaya* effectively means the emergence of a questioning on social justice, on the challenge to a clan, to a political system, to an authoritarianism that led to the abolition of the 20th amendment. But how will the time of the democratic transition be negotiated? This second stage is not easy in a country that has long functioned as an ethnocracy. The transition to building a lasting peace did not take place at the end of the conflict. Quite the contrary. This self-critical examination has also been stifled by developmentalist rhetoric and belief in trickle-down theory. Since 2009, believing in this rhetoric, even if it means dispossession for those living in the shadow of the metropolis, has not allowed Sri Lanka to shed its "fantasies", the quasi-atavistic violence of the civil war which is reformulated along new lines of cleavage (Veyret and Goreau-Ponceaud, 2022). This call by the people to change their frame of reference is confronted with macroeconomic pressures and international policies. The government's desire to save the country's weakened economy through the intervention of the IMF is synonymous with very hard restructuring for the people.

Finally, the interests of the Sri Lankan people, who have been mortgaged by incompetent leaders, may also be overshadowed by the strategic challenges of China and India.

- 44 But the *aragalaya* itself should be questioned. As pointed by Tudor Kalinga Silva and Wasantha Athukorala (2022), “the protestors came from diverse backgrounds including liberal groups like the Black Cap movement, the radical Interuniversity Student Federation (popularly known as Anthare), youth wings of some established left-wing political parties like the Socialist Frontline Party (also called Peratugami) and Janatha Vimukthir Peramuna. What the current repression of *aragalaya* by the law enforcement agencies can do to youth aspirations? This repression may risk them to push towards a reversal to violence and push them towards regrouping as anti-state insurgencies as it happened in the 1970s and 1980s. *Aragalaya* is going through a tough time now not only due to vigorous state repression but also due to surfacing of internal differences and the inclination of sections of the protestors (especially pro JVP and peratugami) for violence.

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## NOTES

1. Source: <https://www.wfp.org/stories/how-wfp-assists-pregnant-women-amid-sri-lankas-economic-crisis>
2. During the colonial period, Jaffna Tamils were given a disproportionate share of positions in the civil service. This success in competing for these positions has much to do with Jaffna's history. As Pfaffenberger mentions, "in seeking to abolish slavery and divide Sri Lanka's trade from that of India, the British administration put an end to a thriving tobacco industry in the Jaffna Peninsula that had, at one time, been one of the most profitable sources of revenue in the Dutch empire. Seeing which way the wind was blowing, the Tamils of Jaffna took up English instead of farming, and with the benefit of an excellent American missionary school system, quickly won favor in the meritocratic colonial appointment scheme" (1995: 125).
3. There is a shared culture, between South Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils (whose main elements are Shivaism, the cult of the god Murugan and language) constructed as a political imperative allowing the safeguarding of Tamil identity in the face of the domination, on the one hand of Sinhalese nationalism, in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils ; and on the other hand in the face of the national hegemony of Hindi speaking people in the case of Indian Tamils (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2014).
4. According to Pierre Muller, from a cognitive approach, "public policies are not only spaces where actors confront each other according to their interests, they are also the place where a given society constructs its relationship to the world and thus the representations it gives itself in order to understand and act on reality as it is perceived" (2010: 555).
5. The ambiguity here arises from what is considered a city, the terminologies used to define what is urban or rural, even though an UN-Habitat report (<https://unhabitat.lk/projects/active-projects/state-of-sri-lankan-cities-report/>) shows a trend of urban expansion unprecedented in the island's history. According to the same report, a preliminary spatial analysis suggests that in the capital, Colombo, the built-up urban area has increased from about 41 km<sup>2</sup> in 1995 to 281 km<sup>2</sup> in 2017, while the undeveloped area has decreased from 125km<sup>2</sup> to 10km<sup>2</sup>
6. A new constitution was adopted on 31 August 1978, replacing the previous parliamentary system and renaming the country the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. This was also a turning point for the island: the policy that had prevented foreign banks from opening branches in Sri Lanka since the early 1960s was changed in 1977, and ten new foreign banks opened branches in 1979 and 1980 alone. Generous tax incentives were introduced to encourage foreign direct investment. The Greater Colombo Economic Commission (GCEC) was also established in 1978 with powers to develop and revive the economy, largely focused on the capital city.
7. In June 2022, the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment reported that more than 200,000 people had gone abroad to work – up from 120,000 for the whole of 2021 – and many of them were following the familiar path of the Middle East. Host countries are poised to take advantage of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka by increasing the number of migrants they take in. Saudi Arabia recently announced that it would increase the number of Sri Lankan skilled workers from 180,000 to 400,000. Malaysia has said it is ready to take in Sri Lankan workers.
8. A measure taken in April and lifted in November 2021, which has had the corollary of fuelling a controversy in France concerning the viability of such a mode of production: some elected officials perceive a mechanical effect between this choice of organic farming and the multiform crisis that is affecting the island.

9. In 2021, tea accounted for 10.6% of total exports while garment and textile sales accounted for 43.5% (the island's third largest export source is the sale of rubber products).

10. After a first devaluation of 32% in early 2022.

11. For several months now, Indian authorities have been witnessing a reactivation of the flow of migrants from Sri Lanka to India after it had been interrupted. Candidates for emigration are joining family members settled in one of the 106 camps scattered throughout the state of Tamil Nadu (Bentz and Goreau-Ponceaud, 2020; Goreau-Ponceaud, 2014). Other, more unprecedented flows are taking place. This time it is Sinhalese who leave Colombo by boat for the island of Reunion. In both cases, these flows are sporadic but bear witness to the violence and harshness of the crisis

12. Source: <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2022/04/01/37-people-injured-in-mirihana-protest/>

13. Social capital being understood here as "the raw material of a society, necessary for the proper functioning of institutions" (Angeon and Callois, 2016: 58).

14. The island's political regime has often taken on the appearance of an ethnocracy, allowing "the expansion, the ethnicization of a territory and a state contested by a dominant ethnic nation, although it asserts its democratic character" (Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004: 649).

15. For example, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) is dedicated to the pursuit of non-partisan policy alternatives and the defense of democracy. For more information, please visit: <https://www.cpalanka.org/>

16. Source: <https://southasiasolidarity.org/>

17. Tamil resistance manifested itself in the formation of a series of separatist groups, the largest and most powerful of which was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a paramilitary organization formed in 1976 by Velupillai Prabhakaran. The LTTE sought to fight the Sri Lankan state through armed conflict and claimed to represent the interests and aspirations of the Tamil community – a population that, far from being monolithic, was and continues to be "geographically, socially and politically fragmented" (Korf, 2006: 275). Although there were, and still are, Tamil communities scattered throughout the island, including in the capital Colombo, the LTTE's armed campaign focused specifically on acquiring and claiming Tamil territory corresponding to the predominantly Tamil-populated areas of the north and east of the island. Before being completely annihilated by the Sri Lankan army in May 2009, the LTTE had largely succeeded in establishing a quasi-state or de facto state exercising administrative, military and political control over Tamil-populated villages and towns in the northern and eastern districts. The emergence of this quasi-state can be attributed in large part to the "breathing space" provided by the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire treaty of 2002 (Stokke, 2006).

18. Source : <https://www.firstpost.com/world/ranil-wickremesinghe-the-corruption-scandal-that-tarnished-sri-lankas-mr-clean-10933831.html>

19. Several trade unionists and activists have been arrested by plainclothes men or abducted before their arrest is acknowledged by the authorities (recalling the notorious "white vans", unmarked vans used by members of the state security forces to abduct and torture Tamils suspected of being close to the LTTE separatists or representatives of civil society critical of the Rajapaksa regime).

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## ABSTRACTS

Sri Lanka is experiencing its worst economic crisis since its independence in 1948. Shortages and inflation of basic necessities (food, fuel, medicines) have provoked an unprecedented popular uprising of Sri Lankans since March 2022, across ethnic and religious divides, which led to the flight of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on July 9, 2022, and his resignation a few days later, putting an end to almost two decades of rule by the Rajapaksa brothers. This article looks back at the causes of this political, economic, social and now humanitarian crisis to glimpse the unprecedented nature of this protest and to question the mobilization of civil societies in an island long marked by the polarization of political life, and finally the geopolitical effects of this multifaceted crisis.

Sri Lanka connaît sa pire crise économique depuis son indépendance (1948). Les pénuries et l'inflation des produits de première nécessité (denrées alimentaires, carburant, médicaments) ont provoqué, depuis mars 2022, un soulèvement populaire sans précédent des Sri Lankais, au-delà des clivages ethniques et religieux, qui a entraîné la fuite du président Gotabaya Rajapaksa le 9 juillet 2022 puis sa démission deux jours plus tard ; mettant fin à quasi deux décennies de règne des frères Rajapaksa. Cet article revient sur les causes de cette crise politique, économique, sociale et désormais humanitaire pour entrevoir le caractère inédit de cette protestation et se questionner sur la mobilisation des sociétés civiles dans une île longtemps marquée par la bipolarisation de la vie politique, pour finalement envisager les effets géopolitiques de cette crise multiforme.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, Aragalaya, Rajapaksa, GotaGoGama, Wickremesinghe, crisis, Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims

**Mots-clés:** Sri Lanka, Aragalaya, Rajapaksa, GotaGoGama, Wickremesinghe, crise, Cinghalais, Tamouls, Musulmans

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