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Contents

Introduction

From early 2022 to late 2024, Sri Lanka went through an intermittent, uncertain, but ultimately momentous change in its political leadership. In early 2022, in response to a severe economic crisis, massive protests forced from office then president Gotabaya Rajapaksa and other members of the powerful Rajapaksa political dynasty. He was succeeded by Ranil Wickremesinghe, another member of the discredited political elite, who held office for the next two years. In late 2024, new elections brought to power a leader and political party that had been long opposed to the country's traditional political and economic elites. Sri Lanka's political transition is notable both because it is a rare democratic success story in an era marked by democratic backsliding around the world and because it highlights the potency, though also some of the inadequacies, of political protest movements.

The 2024 elections, won by Anura Kumara Dissanayake and the National People's Power (NPP) coalition, represent a dramatic repudiation by Sri Lankan voters of the country's deeply entrenched political establishment. While it was the electoral process in 2024 that ultimately resulted in the rejection of the government headed by Wickremesinghe, it was the Aragalaya (Sinhala for "struggle") protest movement during the first half of 2022 that dealt the initial body blow to Sri Lanka's political establishment by demanding the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa and other members of the political elite and calling for fundamental changes to the country's political system (what protesters called "system change"). In just four months—between March and July 2022—the Aragalaya movement succeeded in forcing from office first prime minister and former president Mahinda Rajapaksa (the president's brother) and then president Gotabaya Rajapaksa himself.[1]

In the wake of these resignations, Ranil Wickremesinghe, a prominent member of Sri Lanka's political elite, first was appointed by Gotabaya Rajapaksa as prime minister and then was selected by Parliament to succeed him as president.[2] Wickremesinghe's ascendancy

to the presidency (technically called the "executive presidency") was an adept political feat made possible by the political disarray created by Aragalaya as well as the close-knit nature of Sri Lanka's political elite. As soon as Wickremesinghe came to power, he repressed the protests, arrested protesters, and refused to hold local elections that almost certainly would have weakened his political position.

Wickremesinghe's ascendancy to the presidency in July 2022 diminished the apparent significance of Aragalaya and dimmed hopes for system change. But the outcome of the 2024 elections now makes it clear that the protest movement, despite its brevity, had a lasting and significant impact. Drawing heavily on interviews and published perspectives across Sri Lankan society, this paper examines the protest movement and its impact on Sri Lankan politics.[3] While it is principally intended to be of use to scholars, politicians, and activists focused on Sri Lanka, it also seeks to contribute to a wider understanding of protest movements that periodically erupt—and frequently falter—globally.[4] It provides insights into the dynamics of protest and civil resistance movements, including: the interplay of protest movements and political parties, the efficacy of what are known as "leaderless" or "horizontal" protest movements, the fickle role of the middle class in protest politics, and the vexing issue of whether and when extra-constitutional political action is justified in response to harmful governance and widespread demands for political change.

The paper begins with a brief description of the political and economic conditions that catalyzed Aragalaya. It then describes the key periods during the movement's short but intense life and how Sri Lanka's political parties and leaders reacted to the political upheaval. This includes a focus on how Ranil Wickremesinghe was able to become president by capitalizing on the political vacuum created by the ouster of the Rajapaksas and how he sought to repress protests and elections that might pose challenges to his leadership and policies. It then turns to the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections and briefly shows how their outcomes represented a rejection of the Wickremesinghe government and the political establishment more generally. It concludes with an assessment of Aragalaya that examines seven features of the movement that made it unprecedented in Sri Lanka and relates them to the experiences of other protest movements.

The Rajapaksa Regime and the Political Economy of Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis

The eruption of Aragalaya in early 2022 needs to be viewed in the context of three key and intertwined aspects of Sri Lanka's political economy at that time: 1) the dominance of the Rajapaksa political dynasty, 2) Sri Lanka's increasingly dysfunctional political economy, and 3) the resulting economic crisis.

Sibling Sovereigns

To appreciate the significance of Aragalaya, it is first necessary to understand how powerful and politically embedded the Rajapaksa family had become. They were an archetypal political dynasty in full bloom. From late 2005 to early 2015, and then from 2019 to May 2022, two brothers, Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, served as either prime minister or president. Another brother, Basil, headed the family's political party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), and served as minister of finance in 2021–2022. A fourth brother, Chamal, was speaker of the Parliament between 2010 and 2015. Mahinda's oldest son, Namal, was minister of youth and sports from 2020 to 2022 and remains a member of Parliament (MP).

Gotabaya was defense minister when Mahinda was president (2005–2015) and was credited by many Sri Lankans with ending the twenty-six-year-long civil war by militarily defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. However, in the 2015 presidential election, opposition parties joined forces and mounted a successful challenge to Mahinda's reelection by criticizing the apparent corruption and heavy-handed rule associated with the Rajapaksas. This reform-oriented interregnum was short-lived. In the wake of the April 2019 Easter Sunday bombings by Islamist terrorists, many Sinhalese viewed Gotabaya as the proven protector of the nation.[5] Gotabaya ran for president in 2019, basing his campaign on his record as a defender of the nation's security. He also explicitly embraced Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, building on Mahinda's years of ethnonationalist rhetoric and base building with the Buddhist establishment.[6] He was overwhelmingly elected president in November 2019, and the SLPP won a two-thirds majority in the August 2020 parliamentary elections.[7] During Gotabaya's presidency, other members of the Rajapaksa family headed six ministries. With the SLPP's supermajority in Parliament, the party could pass legislation and amend the constitution at will. The twentieth amendment, passed in 2020, further strengthened the powers of the executive presidency.[8]

An Increasingly Dysfunctional Political Economy

In the first two decades of this century, Sri Lanka's relatively good socioeconomic indicators and its attainment of upper-middle-income developing country status disguised a political economy that was becoming increasingly dysfunctional. Several aspects deserve brief mention because of their continuing saliency. First, the Sri Lankan economy combines a mix of quasi-neoliberalism and statist/socialist traditions. Beginning in the late 1980s, portions of the economy were deregulated, privatized, and opened to export- and tourism-oriented foreign investment. But reflecting the country's statist/socialist past, there was a continued reluctance to reduce the size and role of government, end a range of subsidies, or privatize healthcare, education, and many state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

Second, Sri Lanka has maintained a large and increasingly dysfunctional civil service. Since the late 1970s Sri Lanka's civil service has been seriously damaged due to the politicized dispensation of government jobs along party, ethnic, and clientelist lines, and inadequate investments in skills development, technology, and other workforce development practices. Additionally, the level of military expenditures and the size of the country's Armed Forces have not declined significantly since the end of the civil war in 2009.

Third, the government's economic policies and programs are widely viewed as having been distorted by patronage and corruption. Patronage has been a key factor in the provision of jobs in government and SOEs, awarding of government contracts, access to Samurdhi welfare programs and other welfare benefits, and school enrollment.[9] The perception of high-level corruption—and especially corruption claims associated with the Rajapaksa government's large, foreign-funded projects—contributed to the defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2015 and was widely viewed as a major cause of the 2021–2022 economic crisis.

Finally, over the past two decades Sri Lanka's economy has become increasingly vulnerable to external shocks because of its reliance on tourism, apparel and tea exports, and remittances. The economy was made more vulnerable by misguided economic policies, some long-standing in duration and others introduced by the Rajapaksa government. Over the past twenty years, Sri Lanka shifted from being a relatively high-tax economy to a low-tax one.[10] Tax revenue declined from a high of about 20 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the late 1980s to about 12 percent of GDP in 2007 and a dismal 8.7 percent in 2021.[11] During Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency, government borrowing grew rapidly to finance not only necessary postwar reconstruction and infrastructure but also questionable megaprojects such as a cricket stadium, port, and airport in the family's home area of Hambantota. Between 2008 and 2019, public debt rose sharply from 78 percent to 125 percent of GDP. And in those same years, external debt doubled, from about 30 percent of GDP to over 60 percent, and was increasingly held by private sector creditors in the form of international sovereign bonds. Interest payments on external and domestic debt as a percentage of total government revenue averaged 30 percent during the period 2000–2008, but rose sharply to over 70 percent in 2020. Similarly, the country's debt service ratio (meaning the amortization of external debt and interest payments as a percentage of total export earnings) averaged around 12 percent during the period 2000–2008, and also experienced a sharp increase to 30 percent in 2021.[12]

Economic Crisis

These aspects of Sri Lanka's political economy both underpinned and intensified the economic crisis that erupted in 2021. The economy was on increasingly precarious ground in early 2019 due to the damage to tourism done first by the Easter Sunday bombings and then the COVID-19 pandemic. The combination of the two decimated tourism, damaged economic growth, and required the government to increase social spending. And in April 2021, the Rajapaksa government suddenly banned the importation of chemical fertilizers

and pesticides.[13] The ban led to huge losses in Sri Lankan rice production—a basic foodstuff and a blow to a country that was self-sufficient in rice. The imposition of the ban triggered protests in June, and in September the outrage was compounded when organic fertilizer imported from China was found to be contaminated with bacteria.[14]

In late 2021, Fitch Ratings and S&P Global Ratings each downgraded Sri Lanka's sovereign debt.[15] With its access to international capital markets severely curtailed, Sri Lanka had to use its official reserves and domestic borrowing to service its external debt and pay for its imports. By the beginning of December 2021, the country's foreign exchange reserves covered only one month of imports, and the Ministry of Finance, faced with a severe dollar shortage, was unwilling to release significant amounts of foreign exchange reserves to purchase fuel.

Despite this hemorrhaging of the country's reserves, the Rajapaksa government initially refused to enter into negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a financial rescue package or to explore debt restructuring.[16] It was not until mid-March 2022 that the government agreed to begin talks with the IMF.[17] In early April, the central bank announced Sri Lanka would default on foreign debt interest payments. After this announcement, the country lost access to global capital markets as the major credit ratings agencies downgraded the country's rating to default.[18]

Beginning in early 2022, Sri Lankans were faced with widespread and acute shortages of fuel, food, essential medicines, and other imports. Hours-long power outages became a daily occurrence. Gasoline shortages severely limited all forms of transportation, prompting the closures of offices and schools. The sharp decline in the Sri Lankan rupee and the widespread shortages caused inflation to climb to 34 percent in April and reach a high of 74 percent in September.[19] As the economy ground to a halt, growing numbers of Sri Lankans became un- or under-employed. By June 2022, the UN estimated that 6.3 million people, or 28 percent of the population, were moderately or severely food insecure.[20]

The economic crisis was, as the Voice of America observed, "a rude shock for a nation once hailed as a success story among developing countries with [its] well-educated population and a large middle class."[21] It affected virtually everyone, island-wide, although not equally. Given the challenges the poor and vulnerable had faced since 2019, most had little cushion when the full-blown crisis erupted in late 2021. For members of the urban middle class, who were largely insulated from the economic costs of the long war with the LTTE, the severity of the shortages and inflation were unprecedented. For some Sri Lankan Tamils in the north, remittances from the large Tamil diaspora helped to lessen the impact of the crisis. And ironically, for other Tamils the impact of the economic crisis might not have seemed so severe because they were used to coping with economic hardship.

Aragalaya and the Struggle for Leadership Change

The Aragalaya protests erupted in early 2022 in response to the economic hardships most Sri Lankans were experiencing. They were fueled by widely shared grievances and anger—and not by any particular political orientation or ideology. Protesters saw the country's economic crisis and their own economic hardships as due principally to the mismanagement, profligacy, and apparent corruption of the Rajapaksa-led government. The protesters' central goals were to oust the president, hold the political class accountable for the damage it had done, and initiate broader "system change." The calls for "system change" were a recognition that solving the country's problems required more than just ousting the incumbent leadership.

Aragalaya was essentially organic, spontaneous, and leaderless. But it was influenced by experienced political activists, and mobilization was bolstered by social media as well as trade unions, student federations, and other political groups. The movement included Sri Lankans of all ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic classes. University students and other activists played key roles in organizing protests and mobilizing people via social media. Multiple trade unions and federations were pillars of Aragalaya. Many business owners supported it. Urban middle-class families and professionals joined it.[22]

Key Events

Aragalaya lasted only a short time—four months. The timing and nature of the protest events were shaped by the initiatives of protesters, social media campaigns, and the statements and actions of politicians and security forces. While Aragalaya ebbed and flowed over four months, several key periods, each lasting about a week, were critical to determining political outcomes. Here the key events are briefly described to give a sense of the dynamics of the movement and interplay between the protests and the responses of the Rajapaksa government.

Beginning in early 2022, the growing economic crisis and a series of disconnected developments eroded Gotabaya Rajapaksa's image of competency.[23] Issue- and sector-specific protests grew in size and frequency.[24] In March, progovernment (#WeAreWithGota) and antigovernment (#GoHomeGota) hashtags started to appear on social media. At the beginning of April, before Aragalaya coalesced, Rajapaksa sought to manage the political fallout from the economic crisis by replacing senior members of his government. On April 3, his entire cabinet—including three relatives but excluding Mahinda—resigned so that the president could form a new cabinet. Despite this, during the first week in April, peaceful protests grew in size and duration. Then, in the evening of April 9:

> "a handful of protestors setup tents to continue the demonstration. Later, the numbers of protestors grew exponentially and they transformed the area near the Presidential Secretariat into a permanent protest site named *GotaGoGama*. With mobile toilets and health facilities, the Galle Face protest site became a protest village. The protest village expanded gradually with more features such as a library, a public university and a community kitchen."[25]

By mid-April, there had been 240 protests of varying sizes and involving a wide variety of groups around the country.[26] On April 19, security forces used weapons against protesters for the first reported time, and one person was killed when police fired live ammunition to disperse a protest in Rambukkana, Sabaragamuwa Province.[27] On April 25, tens of thousands of teachers took part in a one-day strike to protest the hardships teachers and students were facing. On April 28, a second nationwide strike, in solidarity with Aragalaya, involved over 1,000 public and private unions. In response, on May 6, the government declared a state of emergency. Despite the proclamation, calls for the president's resignation intensified as unions around the country launched another nationwide strike. U.S. Ambassador Julie Chung expressed her concern about the declaration of a state of emergency, posting on X that, "The voices of peaceful citizens need to be heard."[28]

May 9 would become one of the most significant days in the trajectory of the Aragalaya protests. On the morning of that day, after meeting with Mahinda Rajapaksa at the prime minister's official residence, hundreds of his supporters violently attacked peaceful protesters who were demonstrating outside.[29] This led to a counterattack by the protesters, who burnt or damaged the houses and vehicles of forty MPs belonging to the ruling SLPP. That evening, Mahinda resigned as prime minister, and the next day he and his family were flown in an Air Force helicopter to a naval base in Trincomalee, on the east coast of Sri Lanka.[30]

On May 9, the U.S. ambassador "condemned the violence against peaceful protestors" and "called on the government to conduct a full investigation, including the arrest & prosecution of anyone who incited violence."[31] On May 10, Michelle Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, called on the Sri Lankan government "to prevent further violence" and "urged restraint and meaningful dialogue to address the grievances of the population."[32] On May 11, UN Secretary General António Guterres condemned all violence and called on all parties in Sri Lanka to exercise restraint.[33]

On May 11, Gotabaya Rajapaksa addressed the nation and promised to appoint a new government. But a day later, on May 12, he appointed Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister. With the appointment of Wickremesinghe, a prominent member of the political elite who had previously served as prime minister five times, the participation in and support for Aragalaya among many in the middle class and business community diminished significantly. During June, nonviolent antigovernment protests continued, and multiple protesters were arrested.

The second critical period for Aragalaya was the second week of July. On the morning of July 9, thousands of people poured into Galle Face Green facing the president's office. Still demanding the president's resignation, protesters disregarded security forces, who then acquiesced, and occupied the presidential secretariat office, the president's residence, and the prime minister's official residence.[34]

However, later in the day, a portion of the largely peaceful protests turned violent. At around 9 p.m., protesters set Wickremesinghe's personal residence in Colombo on fire. Shortly thereafter, Gotabaya Rajapaksa informed the speaker of Parliament that he would resign by July 13.[35] Wickremesinghe said he was willing to resign to make way for an all-party interim government.[36]

On July 10, the U.S. Embassy issued a statement calling for

> "all parties to cooperate to achieve a peaceful, democratic transition of power and [urging] any new, constitutionally-selected Government to work quickly to identify and implement solutions that will achieve long-term economic stability and address the Sri Lankan people's discontent over the worsening economic conditions, including power, food, and fuel shortages."[37]

On July 11, Guterres posted on X: "I stand in solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka & call for dialogue to ensure a smooth transition of government & to find sustainable solutions to the economic crisis. I condemn all acts of violence and call for those responsible to be held accountable."[38]

Early in the morning on July 13, Rajapaksa flew to Maldives on a military jet, but without having formally resigned. That evening, he appointed Wickremesinghe as acting president in his absence. Enraged by the appointment of Wickremesinghe, thousands of protesters stormed Wickremesinghe's office.[39]

In a televised address on the evening of July 13, Wickremesinghe warned protestors that he had ordered the military to do "whatever is necessary to restore order." He said, "We can't tear up our constitution. We can't allow fascists to take over. We must end this fascist threat to democracy."[40] But protesters vowed not to leave the streets until both Rajapaksa and Wickremesinghe vacated their positions. They were incensed that Rajapaksa had been allowed to leave the country, believing that he would escape being held accountable for his catastrophic policies.[41]

On July 14, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, then in Singapore, formally resigned as president, and on July 15, Wickremesinghe was officially appointed acting president. On July 18, Wickremesinghe declared another state of emergency, expanding the authority of the police and Armed Forces to arrest and detain protesters. On July 20, in compliance with the constitution's provision that the Parliament chooses the president in the event that the office

is vacated, Wickremesinghe was elected by a large margin in a three-way race.[42] On the morning of July 22, in one of the first acts of his presidency, he ordered the security forces to engage in a heavy-handed show of force when they attacked, arrested, and dispersed the remaining protesters at Galle Face Green—even though the protesters had agreed to vacate the park later that day.[43] As one protester observed, "It was the first time in a very long time Sinhalese people faced what the military can do if they want to do [it]."[44] The UN Human Rights Office stated that "Sri Lanka's economic and political crises cannot be resolved by force" and expressed its concern that "the raid on the camp sends a chilling message to peaceful protesters, including elsewhere in the country."[45] The European Union delegation to Sri Lanka said, "Freedom of expression proved essential to Sri Lanka's current transition. Hard to see how restricting it severely can help in finding solutions to the current political and economic crises."[46]

As July came to a close, the Aragalaya protests had successfully ousted the Rajapaksas, but Ranil Wickremesinghe, with the support of the SLPP, had ascended to the presidency. While his ascendancy was constitutional, many Sri Lankans did not consider it legitimate. Moreover, close associates of the Rajapaksas remained as prime minister and speaker of the Parliament, which continued to be controlled by the SLPP. Many in the middle class had disengaged from Aragalaya, and Wickremesinghe expanded his hardline approach to protests.

Sidelining of Political Parties

Many participants in Aragalaya were wary of the movement being captured by political parties or by other groups they viewed as being partisan or militant. Their wariness was warranted: If parties had played a prominent role, it could have been divisive and made the movement vulnerable to accusations of being a front for partisan actors. And given the militancy of some political groups, it would have increased the risk of violence. The concern was mostly about leftist parties and federations such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), the Inter-University Students' Federation (IUSF), and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).[47] These groups espouse neo-Marxist or other leftist ideologies, are well-organized and cadre-based, and have a long history of organizing confrontational protest marches and strikes. Although the JVP—the dominant member of the NPP coalition—had successfully cultivated a more mainstream image, its history included launching two bloody armed uprisings (in 1971 and 1987–1989).[48]

The protesters also had good reasons to be cynical about Sri Lanka's political elite and parties. Since 2005, the presidency and the prime ministership had been passed around among just seven men.[49] Sri Lanka's political parties increasingly suffered from a mix of personalization and factionalization. The political dominance of the Rajapaksa family, based largely on their appeal to the country's Sinhalese Buddhist majority, seriously weakened the two historically dominant parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP). Parties increasingly became the vehicles of individual leaders, which contributed to factional splits. The parties representing Sri Lankan Tamils were, for the most

part, stagnant and ineffectual. Many Sri Lankans viewed parties as vehicles for controlling ministries, enriching their leaders, and accessing and distributing patronage resources. An exception to this was the leftist NPP, formed in 2019 as a rebranding of the Marxist-Leninist and militant JVP.[50] The NPP had earned the respect of many Sri Lankans for its commitment to leftist ideology and a clean image. However, others viewed it as too radical and inexperienced to be trusted with power.

While Aragalaya remained largely nonpartisan, the protests presented the traditionally militant parties and groups with political opportunities and risks. The IUSF and FSP were visibly active in the movement, prompting Jayadeva Uyangoda, a professor at the University of Colombo and one of Sri Lanka's most respected political scientists, to write that the FSP was a "major voice" of the protest movement.[51] The NPP, despite the JVP's history of militancy, was much more restrained in its involvement in Aragalaya. According to one NPP leader, the party intentionally avoided having an organizational presence to assuage protesters' concerns that the movement might appear to be influenced or controlled by any political party.[52] Within the NPP there was concern about being too closely associated with the more militant FSP. But the NPP did not completely refrain from participating in the Aragalaya protests—members took part in the July 11 protest outside Parliament, which later turned violent. The NPP insinuated that the protest had been hijacked by violent actors associated with other parties, by which it meant the FSP, which in turn pointed fingers at the JVP.[53]

Members of the mainstream opposition parties (including the SJB and UNP) accused both the NPP and FSP of trying to influence the Aragalaya protests, alleging that they manipulated both the protesters and the protest site—especially after the violence in May.[54] Others in the political establishment were predisposed to assert that a citizen movement would be vulnerable to capture by partisan actors. As one senior government official asserted: "As was predictable, other forces took over."[55] However, the view of most activists involved in Aragalaya is represented by the observation of one, who said of the political parties: "They were there, but they didn't push their party agendas . . . [Aragalaya] wasn't captured . . . it was the people's struggle, not the party's struggle."[56]

The Role of the Police and Army

Aragalaya presented Sri Lanka's security forces with an exceptionally complex and challenging situation. They had never faced such massive protests—and protests involving middle-class Sinhalese. And they had not experienced crowds of citizens occupying the seats of government power in Colombo. The security forces likely viewed the outbreaks of violence and destruction, though small in number and scale, as harbingers of wider political and social chaos.

What went on within the police and Army during Aragalaya is not well understood and deserves further study. Presumably both the leadership and the rank and file had to grapple with conflicting loyalties and perspectives on the situation. But whatever the proclivities of the leadership of the police and army, over the course of Aragalaya, civilian leaders declared a state of emergency three times (on April 1, May 6, and July 18) and called for forceful responses by the security forces. The Army acted with a degree of restraint. In mid-April, former Army commander Sarath Fonseka was reported to have stated that troops must think "before acting on unlawful orders." The Army then released a statement noting that it was not interfering in peaceful protests or acting "against the interests of the State."[57] On July 13, after Wickremesinghe ordered the military to do "whatever is necessary to restore order," General Shavendra Silva, the country's defense chief, said that "so far the tri forces [the Armed Forces] and Sri Lankan police have acted as per the Sri Lankan constitution."[58] He also called for "political leaders to decide the way forward till a new President is sworn in and notify us and the public by this evening."[59]

In some instances, the security forces did not intervene at all or were restrained in their use of force. But in many other cases security forces, particularly the police, responded excessively and indiscriminately. In its comprehensive report on the government's responses to the protests, the French human rights organization International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) noted that in many instances police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse demonstrations that were peaceful, orderly, and respectful of private property.[60] Additionally, according to FIDH, journalists covering protests were attacked on numerous occasions by security forces, "despite the fact that they wore identification or accreditation tags, were on official duty, or had informed the authorities that they were journalists."[61] And at least two separate times, live ammunition was fired at protesters, resulting in one fatality and many injuries.[62]

The other principal response to the protests was the widespread arrest of protesters. Both the Rajapaksa and Wickremesinghe governments used arrests to punish protesters and discourage future protests.[63] The Wickremesinghe government arrested several protest leaders under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), a 1982 law that allows security forces to search, arrest, and detain suspects without charges for up to eighteen months. In response, Amnesty International noted, "While the police may legitimately investigate serious offences committed during violent or unlawful incidents, including arrests, searches or obtaining travel bans, overall, their actions show that they are not driven by a genuine approach. Rather, the police has [sic] employed a sweeping approach showing a clear intention to repress protest and to intimidate protesters and activists."[64]

Wickremesinghe Ascends to the Presidency

The Failure to Form a Unity Government

In response to protesters' demands that he step down, Gotabaya Rajapaksa expressed his willingness to form an all-party or unity government to address the crisis. However, the unity government he envisioned would have left Mahinda as prime minister and himself as president. If opposition parties joined the unity government, they would have become more directly associated with the government's actions, without having a deciding say in them. So the three major opposition parties—the SJB, SLFP, and NPP—rejected a Rajapaksa-led unity government.[65]

In late April, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) issued a thirteen-point Proposal to Restore Political and Economic Stability in the Country.[66] Members of the BASL actively protected the rights of protesters, so BASL and its head, Saliya Pieris, emerged as important voices that created a bridge between Aragalaya and political leaders. The BASL proposal called for creating an interim government, ending the executive presidency, and holding early elections.[67] The BASL proposal was presented to party and religious leaders and briefly became a generally accepted framework for a political transition.

After Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned, Gotabaya once again called for "all political parties represented in the Parliament to come together to accept ministerial portfolios in order to find solutions to this national crisis."[68] The largest opposition party, the SJB under Sajith Premadasa, again rejected the proposal for a unity government.[69] On May 12, the president appointed Wickremesinghe as prime minister, a move that was criticized by all the major parties.[70]

Throughout May and June, Gotabaya continued to be adamant about remaining in office. In an interview on June 6, he said: "I can't go as a failed president," but he also said he would not seek reelection.[71] In June and early July, participants in Aragalaya and members of the political parties continued to call for an interim all-party government to replace the president followed by the holding of elections. During the second week of July, events leading to the end of the Rajapaksa government unfolded rapidly. On July 10, the day after Gotabaya said he would resign, it appeared the main opposition parties had agreed to form an all-party interim government.

The Parliament Elects Wickremesinghe President

But there would be no all-party interim government. After leaving Sri Lanka on July 13, Rajapaksa appointed Wickremesinghe as acting president.[72] The SLPP-dominated Parliament moved quickly and, pursuant to the constitution, on July 20 voted to select a new president. With support from the SLPP, Wickremesinghe was elected by a large margin. The dynamics of Wickremesinghe's election were both driven and constrained by the relative strength

of the political parties sitting in Parliament as determined by the 2020 parliamentary elections.[73] This meant that the Rajapaksas and the SLPP MPs continued to dominate the process of leadership succession even though Aragalaya had resoundingly rejected them. It also meant that as Wickremesinghe maneuvered to fill the leadership vacuum, he did so as someone whose own party, the UNP, had been so decisively rejected in the 2019 and 2020 elections that he held the sole national list seat the party won in 2020.

For some Sri Lankans, Wickremesinghe's ascension to the presidency was viewed as the patriotic act of a highly experienced leader who stepped forward at a critical juncture to lead the country out of its economic and political crisis.[74] Throughout his long political career, Wickremesinghe had played by the constitutional rules of the game, becoming prime minister multiple times and relinquishing the position based on the dictates of the constitution and electoral outcomes. During his stints as prime minister, he was technocratic, non-chauvinistic, and internationally oriented. His supporters viewed him as a capable leader with a strong commitment to neoliberal economic policies. He also was seen as being responsive to the needs of the Tamil and Muslim minorities, tolerant of civil society and the media, and respectful of international human rights norms.[75]

However, many protesters viewed Wickremesinghe as a member of the entrenched political elite that Aragalaya sought to oust. They saw him as a political opportunist willing to ally with and protect the Rajapaksas in order to become president—the office that had eluded him over his long political career. Moreover, as a proponent of neoliberal economic policies, he was viewed as complicit in causing the economic crisis. And as a member of the country's Colombo-based elite, he was seen as being disconnected from the Sri Lankan people and their needs.[76]

While Wickremesinghe's election by the SLPP-dominated Parliament was constitutional, many protesters viewed it as illegitimate and contrary to the goals of Aragalaya. As IUSF leader Wasantha Mudalige observed:

> "The parliament elected a new president today, but that president is not new to us, it is not the people's mandate. . . . We managed to kick out Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who secured 6.9 million votes, but Ranil Wickremesinghe has now secured that seat from the back seat. Ranil isn't our president . . . the people's mandate is on the streets."[77]

Many also doubted that Wickremesinghe would be willing or able to hold the Rajapaksas and other members of the political elite accountable for the damage done to the country. As Jehan Perera, a civil society leader and columnist, observed: "It was felt, and continues to be felt, that President Wickremesinghe's stepping forward at the time he did, has saved those who are corrupt and abusers of powers, and preserved them for future reappearance, which appears to be now in the offing."[78]

For many protesters, Wickremesinghe's ascendancy demonstrated the enduring power, cohesion, and impunity of the country's political elite. With Wickremesinghe and the SLPP in power, it appeared that there would be no real change in the political establishment. The view that Aragalaya failed to produce meaningful changes is well represented by Thusiyan Nandakumar, a Tamil journalist, who wrote in February 2023:

> "Just a few short months later, however, those hopes of change have been dashed. Rajapaksa soon returned to the island and was even welcomed by supporters at Colombo airport. Close allies have replaced him in office and his political party is currently plotting its next return to power, its reputation seemingly unscathed. Rajapaksa faces no investigations for any of his crimes, from his cronyism and corruption to the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians more than a decade ago. Many of the protests have now been dispersed and public outrage with the Rajapaksas quelled. The so-called aragalaya, or "people's protest," which seemed to be on the brink of a spectacular revolution, has roundly failed."[79]

According to a survey conducted in June 2023, only 11 percent of respondents thought "the wishes/aspirations of the people" were "mostly met" by Aragalaya, while 60 percent of respondents thought that they were "mostly not met."[80]

The Government's Heavy-Handed Efforts to Restore "Stability"

Once in power, first as prime minister and then as president, Wickremesinghe moved forcefully to debilitate the protest movement. The protests represented a continuing challenge to the legitimacy of his leadership and his policies. And he saw the restoration of law and order and political stability as being essential for reviving the economy.[81] An important aspect of this was the need to reassure the IMF as well as foreign debtors and investors.[82] To secure funding from the IMF, the government adopted wide-ranging, contentious socioeconomic and fiscal policy reforms. These included cutting government spending, raising taxes, passing a new anticorruption law, and reforming the Samurdhi social welfare program.[83]

On July 18, while still serving as acting president, Wickremesinghe declared a new state of emergency, and in late July, Parliament approved new emergency regulations. The period of arbitrary detention was raised from twenty-four hours to seventy-two hours, and the range of criminal offences, including those related to mischief, increased in number and punishment severity, with severe punishments lasting up to twenty years.[84] In late August, Wickremesinghe invoked the PTA, detaining without charges three prominent student leaders who had played leading roles in the protests.[85] And in late November, he stated that he would deploy the military to counter the development of further mass protest movements.[86]

FIDH pointed out that, "organizers of student and youth protests were specifically targeted for arrest." A lawyer quoted by FIDH observed that "The government is extremely worried about the IUSF, it is also a way of crushing the younger leadership [and] any future political engagement of the younger group of people."[87] According to one activist, the government's relentless arrest and harassment of protest leaders "really broke the movement."[88] In early 2024, Amnesty International reported that, "Despite widespread violations by law enforcement agencies and security forces, not a single police officer or member of army personnel has been prosecuted or convicted for the unlawful use of force during protests in 2022 and 2023."[89]

The Wickremesinghe government also refused to hold constitutionally mandated local elections scheduled for March 2023. Had the elections gone forward, they would have served as a referendum on both Wickremesinghe's ascendancy to the presidency and the Rajapaksa-led SLPP. It seemed likely that NPP and SJB candidates would have done well and SLPP and UNP candidates would have fared disastrously. A strong showing by the NPP and/or SJB could have further reduced the legitimacy of the Wickremesinghe government, and by doing so could have intensified calls for the president to dissolve Parliament and hold elections. A strong showing by the NPP also would have catapulted them into a much stronger position to criticize the Wickremesinghe government and its policies—including, probably, the agreement being negotiated with the IMF. Wickremesinghe objected to holding the local elections on a series of flimsy financial, bureaucratic, and legal grounds. The Supreme Court ruled that the government could not withhold funding for the elections, but Wickremesinghe ignored the court's ruling and the elections were not held.[90]

The Wickremesinghe government introduced two pieces of legislation that domestic and international human rights groups viewed as further empowering the government to suppress its critics. Beginning in March 2023 the government twice introduced in parliament and then withdrew the an Anti-Terrorism Bill, which was intended to replace the draconian PTA. Local and international human rights groups have been highly critical of the bill, arguing that the definition of terrorism was overly broad and that the bill would hand excessive power to the president to arrest critics of the government.[91] In January 2024 the government submitted the bill for a third time, but in the face of widespread criticism and with elections approaching, it never moved beyond a first reading.[92]

The second piece of legislation, introduced in September 2023, was the Online Safety Act (OSA), which proposed to establish an online safety commission responsible for determining if online speech was false or harmful. Human rights and industry organizations criticized the legislation for potentially threatening freedom of expression, stifling dissent, and constraining the development of the country's digital economy.[93] The OSA was passed with only a brief debate in January 2024 and was amended in August 2024.

Finally, from the outset of his presidency, Wickremesinghe, his political allies, and their supporters in the media sought to discredit the Aragalaya protests. They persistently portrayed Aragalaya as having been captured by militants, fascists, and terrorists and asserted that continued protests would cause chaos that would jeopardize the country's

economic recovery. An analysis of local media done by the think tank Verité Research in early April 2023 noted that "trade unions have been labelled as 'terrorists', 'saboteurs' and 'destructive forces' disrupting the revival of Sri Lanka's ailing economy."[94] Another Verité analysis of media commentary done on the first anniversary of the events of May 9, 2022, observed:

> "Government officials and pro-government media, by reflecting on the violence that erupted on May 9, especially the violence targeting government MPs, voices appeared to discredit and delegitimise the aragalaya. . . . Additionally, some government MPs negatively portrayed the JVP to be behind the aragalaya**.** By drawing on the past legacy of violence associated with the JVP, government voices positioned the JVP as perpetrating violence on May 9."[95]

Supporters of the Rajapaksa family and other nationalists also have tried to delegitimize Aragalaya by portraying it as having been foreign funded. In early 2023 Wimal Weerawansa, an SLPP MP and leader of the ultranationalist National Freedom Front, published a book claiming there was a foreign conspiracy to topple the Rajapaksa government.[96] In early 2025, after U.S. President Donald Trump administration's eviscerated the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Weerawansa and other ultranationalists used the administration's derogatory portrayal of USAID's programs to claim that USAID supported the Aragalaya protests.[97]

The Repudiation of the Political Establishment in the 2024 Elections

Ranil Wickremesinghe's two-year presidency was finally subjected to the judgment of Sri Lankan voters when the presidential election was scheduled for September 2024. In advance of the election, Wickremesinghe pursued several legal maneuvers to avoid or postpone holding the election—including moves to amend the constitution and abolish the presidency. There was also speculation that the international community would support a postponement on the grounds that a change in leadership could jeopardize the continuation of the IMF program.

The Presidential Election

Wickremesinghe's efforts failed, and the election was held on September 21. A record thirty-nine candidates contested the election, but the contest was mainly between Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sajith Premadasa, and Anura Kumara Dissanayake.[98] Wickremesinghe

ran as an independent candidate, with an election manifesto highlighting how the economy had stabilized since he assumed office. Premadasa's manifesto focused on five pillars: "building a resilient economy, empowering every citizen, enhancing government services, protecting quality of life, and safeguarding the nation."[99] Dissanayake promised to address corruption and other long-standing issues that had emerged during the Aragalaya protests. Dissanayake's proposals under the NPP also included renegotiating the IMF agreement to reduce the burden of austerity measures on the poor, introducing a new constitution, abolishing the executive presidency and the PTA, and eliminating corruption.[100]

The presidential election was the first election in which parties did not depend primarily on appeals along ethnoreligious lines to mobilize votes. However, it still mattered who the country's small ethnic parties, particularly the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), would support. The SLMC supported Premadasa and the SJB, while the ITAK initially could not agree on whether to support Wickremesinghe, Premadasa, or a Tamil Common Candidate.[101] After it appeared that ITAK might split, an agreement was reached to support Premadasa.[102]

Preelection surveys indicated that Dissanayake and Premadasa were the front-runners.[103] The central issue was what percentage of voters would embrace the relatively less-well-known and untested Dissanayake and the NPP. Dissanayake won the election without securing a majority of the votes in the first count, and for the first time in the country's history, second-preference votes were counted, resulting in Dissanayake's victory.[104] His victory included high-margin wins in traditional SLPP areas, including in the south, where the Rajapaksa family traditionally had a strong hold, and in other Sinhalese-dominated areas.[105] Wickremesinghe, despite endorsements from several smaller political parties, secured only 17 percent of the vote.[106]

Wickremesinghe's poor showing seems to reflect the public's dissatisfaction with his IMF-driven economic policies and his failure to hold the Rajapaksas and the SLPP accountable for the economic crisis.[107] Dissanayake's victory was attributable to voters' desires for change, his pledge to curb corruption, and his nonelitist personality. His victory represented a departure from traditional election outcomes, marking a breakthrough for a third party.

The Parliamentary Elections

Soon after becoming president, Dissanayeke called for parliamentary elections, which were held on November 14, 2024. The outcome was a landslide victory for the NPP, which won 159 of 225 seats—the highest number ever won by a party—giving the party the two-thirds majority needed to change the constitution. The parliamentary elections saw a significant turnover in the voting patterns in the Northern, Eastern, and Central Provinces compared to the presidential election, with a considerable shift in favor of the NPP.[108] Many attributed

this turnaround in the Northern and Eastern Provinces to a loss of trust in Tamil political parties advocating for Tamil nationalism. These parties were widely perceived as unable to constructively uphold their demands or foster a unified political approach. Some argued that fragmentation among Tamil parties ultimately led many voters to turn to the NPP.[109]

The NPP's electoral success reflected its strengths as a political party. As British scholar Mick Moore has noted, it has a real base of committed members who identify with and work for the party, it practices a degree of internal democracy, and it is run by its cadres and the leaders they choose, rather than notables with ownership rights.[110] According to Moore, the election of the NPP government "represents a major departure from a kind of politics that had become normalised."[111]

The NPP Government

In addition to serving as Sri Lanka's powerful executive president, Dissanayake also the heads two key ministries, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Finance. Many Sri Lankans celebrated Harini Amarasuriya's appointment as prime minister as a progressive milestone, as she is a respected academic and vocal advocate for civil rights. However, according to some observers, her role appears constrained, with the real power residing within the inner circle of JVP loyalists.[112]

The cabinet is composed largely of academics, professionals, and civil society figures with little prior experience in governance. On the surface, this signals a refreshing alternative; however, most key portfolios are held by people associated with the JVP. The party remains highly centralized and resistant to ideological diversity. It exercises strict control over its MPs and legislative initiatives. To date, there is little evidence of internal contestation or pluralistic debate within the NPP coalition.[113]

So far Dissanayake and the NPP have not sought to make radical political or economic changes. They have largely continued the Wickremesinghe government's economic and foreign policies. However, they demonstrate greater respect for the rule of law and, to date, there are no indications of high-level corruption.[114] With regard to the economy, despite the NPP's electoral vow to renegotiate the agreement with the IMF, it has not sought to do so.[115] Instead, the government has continued with the same set of economic reforms agreed upon by the Wickremesinghe administration. While some of this continuity may reflect strategic pragmatism given the constraints of the post-economic-crisis context, it also raises questions about the extent to which the NPP is willing or able to depart from established governance patterns and deliver the systemic change it promised.

The NPP's approach to inclusion has been to assert that all Sri Lankans will be treated equally without regard to their ethnicity or religion. But in practice, the NPP faces a challenge of satisfying the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority while also honoring the trust placed in them by minority communities during the elections. Government appointments to committees and decisionmaking bodies—including administrative appointments in

the predominantly Tamil east—have been highly Sinhalese and male, with little or no representation of ethnic and religious minorities or women.[116] At the same time, the NPP has started to take steps to address some of the demands from Tamil and Muslim communities. This includes reducing military checkpoints in the north and east, committing to returning military-occupied land to local ownership, and responding to ongoing calls for the repeal of the PTA.[117] However, the party has yet to adopt a proactive stance on issues related to postwar accountability and justice.

Contextualizing Aragalaya

The landslide election of a new, antiestablishment leader and government was due in large part to Aragalaya's disruptive impact on the political environment in Sri Lanka. It is important, therefore, to understand Aragalaya's strengths and shortcomings. Seven features of Aragalaya demonstrate its uniqueness in the context of Sri Lankan politics and also provide the basis for assessing Aragalaya relative to other protest movements around the world.

Spontaneity and brevity. The sector-specific antigovernment protests, which then morphed into the multisectoral Aragalaya protests, together lasted for only four months. The brevity of Aragalaya reflected in part the inability of Sri Lankan civil society, labor unions, and other politically concerned groups to form broad coalitions. As Sidney Tarrow, the eminent scholar on social movements, has observed,

> "The presence of even a large number of protest events does not, in itself, constitute a social movement. Actors must, first, find ways to coordinate contention and organize their followers for sustained mobilization. That depends on their capacity to construct formal organizations and build coalitions to maintain solidarity and aggregate resources."[118]

And according to political scientist Erica Chenoweth, "movements that engage in careful planning, organization, training, and coalition-building prior to mass mobilization are more likely to draw a large and diverse following than movements that take to the streets before hashing out a political program and strategy."[119] Aragalaya's brevity deprived it of the time needed to build trust and come to agreements on tactics and strategies.

Absence of recognized leaders and organizational structure. Like protest movements in many other countries over the past two decades—such as large-scale protests in Bangladesh, Chile, Greece, Hong Kong, Spain, Thailand, and the United States—Aragalaya was horizontal, meaning there were no recognized leaders or an agreed-upon process for collective decisionmaking. Having no identifiable leadership or organizational structure was intentional. This approach, many protesters felt, allowed for the broadest possible participation and support. No one—and no political orientation—was privileged, alienated, or excluded.

In practice, a number of experienced activists and groups played important informal roles, including organizing and coordinating specific protests, convening consultative meetings, and issuing statements. Certain individuals came to be identified as informal leaders or representatives of Aragalaya. And multiple groups issued statements that explicitly or implicitly claimed to represent the demands of Aragalaya protesters. But the absence of formally designated leaders and an organizational structure limited the movement's coherence as well as its ability to respond effectively to a rapidly changing environment. As one activist observed, "Lack of leadership was its biggest strength and weakness."[120]

Chenoweth notes that "tactically, governments have a harder time decapitating a movement through arrests or subverting it through infiltration if a movement does not have clear leadership. Ideologically, leaderless movements can genuinely appeal to people who are fighting against oppressive structures, hierarchy and corruption."[121] But leaderless movements also have a harder time building coalitions, formulating coherent strategies and tactics, managing public relations and strategic communications, and negotiating effectively. This is particularly true, as Chenoweth points out, if "movements do not find a way to build and sustain some organizational form that can coordinate many groups and demands into effective action."[122] In the case of Aragalaya, the absence of recognized leaders, combined with the diversity of the participants, made it extremely difficult to create a common vision, strategy, and tactics for sustaining the movement and its influence beyond ousting the Rajapaksas.

Crucial role of social media. As with every other contemporary protest movement, social media was critical to mobilizing support for Aragalaya and was also an arena within which supporters and opponents contested each other. Social media was used in a variety of ways, including: 1) generating hashtags like #GotaGoHome that framed and unified the protests; 2) announcing times and places for protests and sharing news and images on events as they unfolded[123]; and 3) live streaming speeches, events, and discussions at the protest site GotaGoGama and elsewhere.[124] As a result of social media, new activists and influencers who supported the Aragalaya movement emerged. They did not have a history in politics and were not very well known, but they gained credibility through their involvement. Social media helped these new leaders grow and guide their followers in supporting Aragalaya—both in positive and negative ways.

When the violence erupted on May 9, social media became a battleground for users debating how to protest effectively and how to engage in a nonviolent struggle. Users began shifting blame among different parties (including prominent protesters, the FSP, and the IUSF) for triggering the violence and transforming a nonviolent protest into violent clashes. There was an extensive debate after the burning of Wickremesinghe's house and library, with some—mostly members of Colombo's middle and upper middle classes—condemning the arson and others defending it. These instances showed that social media discourse was very fragmented during Aragalaya.

Inclusion of an exceptionally broad and diverse swath of Sri Lankan society. For many in the urban middle class—in Colombo and other cities—taking part in the Aragalaya protests was the first time they had participated in a protest. As a result, during the protests, first-time protesters mingled with experienced activists representing a range of backgrounds and interests. Owners of businesses (many of them Muslim) enthusiastically contributed food, water, and medical supplies.[125] Artists visited the Galle Face Green protest site and gave performances in solidarity with the protesters.[126] Academics, veteran activists, and religious leaders used the opportunity to educate protesters on a wider range of social and political issues.

To a greater extent than in the past, the protesters bridged Sri Lanka's acute ethnic and religious divides. Buddhist monks, Catholic priests, and Muslim imams were prominent figures at Galle Face Green. Protesters made intentional efforts to demonstrate ethnic and religious inclusion. As the Sri Lankan Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) observed, "most of the citizens' uprisings since independence have either been ethnically organized or at least seen (or presented) as struggles related to a particular ethnic community." A survey done by the CPA suggested that "a considerable percentage of each ethnic community participated" in the protests.[127]

However, minority groups had complex and varied responses. Tamil perspectives ranged from cynicism to qualified and cautious support. Skeptical Tamils made comments such as, "the Sinhalese haven't supported Tamil causes, and now they want us to support theirs," and "it's their government, not ours; so it's their problem." Tamils who were more supportive of Aragalaya sought to be careful so that their participation would not make the movement appear to be overly pro-Tamil, which might have been divisive. Within the larger Tamil diaspora outside of Sri Lanka, there was cautious and qualified support.

Many Sri Lankan Muslims, who blamed Gotabaya Rajapaksa for demonizing them after the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, were very supportive of Aragalaya. Although the Muslim business community initially supported the protests, support waned after Wickremesinghe became prime minister and then president.

The desire to ensure Aragalaya was inclusive limited the movement's ability to develop a set of widely agreed-upon goals beyond ousting Gotabaya Rakapaksa and a vague aspiration for system change. Other politically sensitive issues fundamental to Sri Lanka's future, such as curtailing ethnoreligious majoritarianism and imposing accountability for past human rights abuses, were seen as being divisive and for the most part were not emphasized. As Harshana Rambukwella, a scholar who studies the intersection of religion, culture, and politics in Sri Lanka, observed, "the very diversity of the Aragalaya also meant that many contradictory forces operated within it and these contradictions in turn speak to the limits of what the Aragalaya represented."[128]

Major role of nonparty (and nonunion) activists. Historically only Sri Lanka's main political parties, and to a lesser extent its labor unions, have had the organizational capacity to mobilize large numbers of people nationally. But as the Centre for Policy Alternatives has noted:

> "Aragalaya was the exception to the rule, continuing actively for more than three months without the active involvement of any particular political party. Although opposition parties played a critical role at the very beginning of the protests, once it started to gain momentum, protestors consciously distanced themselves from political parties. In fact, young activists proudly referred to their struggle as a *nirpaakshika* (non-partisan) Aragalaya."[129]

Tarrow has observed that "new social movements—especially those that are empowered by younger people—are likely to reject partisan entanglements, often regarding parties as part of the institutional armature of the state."[130] In the case of Aragalaya, many protesters were understandably disgusted with the mainstream political parties—and some were fearful of the influence of more militant leftist parties. But as academic and activist Dileepa Witharana has noted, "sending a regime home is very political. It can't be done by *nirpaakshika* groups alone. If it is a political struggle, then political parties have to play a role."[131] Ultimately Aragalaya produced ad hoc proposals and initiatives intended to influence the political transition. But absent leaders who could both speak for and demonstrate a degree of control over the movement, Aragalaya was unable to exert influence over the process of leadership succession that it had triggered.

Substantive proposals for political change. During Aragalaya's brief life, activists and academics scrambled to develop proposals for both a post-Rajapaksa political transition and for longer-term system change. Despite the lack of a single, unified voice for Aragalaya—or a longer-term strategy for political change—between May and July a number of groups proposed processes to form a transitional government following the anticipated resignation of President Rajapaksa.[132] As noted, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka's thirteen-point Proposal to Restore Political and Economic Stability in the Country briefly became a widely discussed framework for a political transition.[133]

Other groups also issued proposals to resolve Sri Lanka's political and economic crisis. Their proposals ranged from quite specific to amorphously aspirational. These included calls to rewrite the constitution, end corruption, create new mechanisms for more direct democracy such as forming peoples' councils, and change the prevailing political culture, including ending the manipulation of ethnoreligious differences. Some academics, along with members of trade unions and other collectives, drew attention to the consequences of the IMF agreement, its impact on informal workers, and the changes needed in the economic system to accommodate marginalized groups.

Ultimately, given the short duration of Aragalaya and the absence of unified leadership, it was impossible to reach broad agreement on anything beyond ousting Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the general elements for a transition to a new government. Many knew that the removal of Rajapaksa alone would not result in system change, but the vague aspiration was something that everyone agreed on.

Reverberations of two episodes of violence. The vast majority of Aragalaya protesters were nonviolent and respectful of private property. The generally peaceful nature of the protests was impressive given both Aragalaya's lack of coherent leadership and the proclivities of some of the more militant participants.[134] Underpinning this broad-based aversion to violence might have been the ingrained fear of political violence felt by many Sri Lankans—which is understandable given the country's history of lethal political violence.

But as noted, episodes of significant violence and destruction of property occurred on May 9 and July 13. While these two incidents of violence were noxious, the violence in May was largely a reaction to abusive behavior by government supporters and security forces. And the two episodes of violence cannot be viewed in isolation from the longer history of state-sanctioned violence. As Ambika Satkunanathan, former commissioner of Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission, observed:

> "Violence as a response is not surprising in a society where violence is normalized. State violence is normalized, and the state wants people to accept it as normal. . . . The state behaves as if it is entitled to use arbitrary, unchecked, extralegal, brutal violence, but expects citizens to act in a measured, reasonable and non-violent way within the legal framework when responding to authoritarianism, systemic state violence and human rights violations."[135]

As has been the case with predominantly nonviolent protest movements in numerous other countries, the consequences of even what researchers call "fringe" violence are often significant. Chenoweth has observed that,

> "Fringe violence often complicates the narrative of a movement both internally and externally. Movements that have to spend time defending tactical choices have a harder time keeping the public's focus on the overwhelming nature of the state's violence—and the legitimacy of the movement's claims."[136]

In the case of Aragalaya, it may be that the violence on May 9 bolstered the power of the movement by showing the Rajapaksas that there was the potential for more widespread violence. But the two episodes of violence, and particularly the burning of Wickremesinghe's house, also had negative consequences: They reduced middle class support for the movement, and they allowed the government to portray the movement as violent and terroristic. As Rambukwella has observed, "in a deeply conservative political culture where revolutionary political action is viewed with extreme suspicion, May 9th marked a loss of innocence for the Aragalaya."[137]

Aragalaya's Significance

Tarrow writes that there are three kinds of "long-term and indirect effects" of social movements:

> "The first is their effect on the political socialization and future activism of the people and groups who participated in them; the second are the effects of their struggles on political institutions and practices; and the third are their contributions to political culture."[138]

Aragalaya has had important if limited effects in all three ways. Aragalaya's greatest accomplishment was ousting the Rajapaksa family from the country's two highest political offices through a largely peaceful exercise of people power. As one activist put it, ousting Gotabaya Rajapaksa was as if "the people overthrew the king." And having been able to do that, "now anything is possible."[139] As Rabukwella described it, "the aragalaya rattled a complacent political class that imagined it was secure within an entrenched patron-client political system."[140] And according to Uyangoda, "it has shaken the very foundations of an autocratic-authoritarian regime that was up until now perceived to be as strong as an immovable rock."[141]

While Aragalaya had the power to oust the Rajapaksas, it did not have the leadership or organizational wherewithal needed to influence the process by which new leadership was chosen. Because of the weaknesses of the movement, disunity and hesitancy on the part of leaders of the political opposition, and the strong inclination of Sri Lankans to adhere to constitutional processes, it was Ranil Wickremesinghe, with the support of the SLPP, who initially capitalized on the opportunity for leadership change created by Aragalaya. His ascension largely ended middle class participation in the movement, resulted in heavy-handed suppression of protests and individual protest leaders, and contributed to divisions within civil society. The government's largely successful suppression of protests further demonstrated that the movement did not have the leadership or organizational wherewithal to sustain itself. However, the ouster of the Rajapaksas disrupted the pre-Aragalaya status and power of Sri Lanka's political parties, which then created the opportunity for Anura Kumara Dissanayake and the NPP to come to power through democratic elections in 2024.

Somewhat paradoxically, Aragalaya's success in forcing the Rajapaksas from office—which was an unprecedented extra-constitutional event—occurred in a political culture deeply committed to constitutional processes. But the subsequent adherence to the constitutional provision that Gotabaya's successor be chosen by the SLPP-dominated Parliament resulted in the election of another member of the political establishment. However, other aspects of constitutionalism ultimately resulted in a more legitimate process of leadership selection: The military remained apolitical, the judiciary demonstrated its independence, and perhaps most importantly, the 2024 elections were administered fairly. As some Sri Lankans have

noted with pride—and perhaps relief as well—the Wickremesinghe interregnum combined with competitive elections resulted in a degree of economic and political stability in Sri Lanka that so far seems to elude the current interim government in Bangladesh headed by Muhammad Yunus.[142]

In the context of the serious schisms that exist in Sri Lankan society, Aragalaya was an unprecedentedly broad and inclusive movement. British historian Timothy Garton Ash has observed: "One of the keys to effective mass social action is the forging of alliances between social groups that are usually separate from, if not indifferent or hostile to each other."[143] He notes that it is relatively easy to have solidarity against a common enemy ("them"), but movements also need to develop a shared identity ("us"). The editors of Sri Lanka's *Polity* magazine observed that "the uprising is the closest our post-colony of 74 years has been to a people's movement of national proportions, turned not one against the other, but together against those above us."[144] And to many participants, Aragalaya represented a rejection of the Rajapaksas' promotion of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. According to Witharana, "the regime represented the Sinhala nationalist extreme. So the collapse of the regime means the collapse of Sinhala nationalist extremism as well."[145] This optimistic conclusion seems to have been borne out by the NPP's 2024 electoral victories, but the enduring appeal of Sinhalese nationalism should not be underestimated.

In the eyes of some activists and observers, Aragalaya revitalized active citizenship and democracy. Researcher and lawyer Bahvani Fonseka noted this in an earlier Carnegie paper, when she wrote: "Amid the bleakness engulfing Sri Lanka, the power of citizen mobilization and resistance has captured global attention and injected much-needed energy, ideas and perspectives into the Sri Lankan opposition. These protests have also redefined the role of citizens and their relationship to the state."[146] And another activist observed, "people are thinking differently about politics."[147]

Aragalaya may have stimulated, at least temporarily, greater awareness among middle class Sri Lankans of the power of collective political action. And it may also have created a greater awareness among Sinhalese of the abuses that other groups have frequently suffered at the hands of security forces and of the pernicious militarization of Sri Lankan society over the past two decades. Satkunanathan has observed that:

> "The Aragalaya . . . saw a violent state response to mass protests centred mostly in the country's South, with the government employing the military in the manner it has long used in the North and East. Armoured personnel carriers were seen on the streets of Colombo, and the military used violence, surveillance and harassment against peaceful protesters, much as it routinely does against activists, journalists and many other groups deemed to be threats by the government, such as the families of the disappeared in war-torn regions. It was then that the Sinhala public in the South began to question the military's role in the civil sphere, and the term "militarisation" began seeping into public discourse in the South."[148]

Garton Ash has written that "the timescale for success of non-violent action can be long. . . . Often outcomes are ambiguous: what looks like failure in the short term may appear as success in the longer term, or vice versa."[149] During the Wickremesinghe presidency, the view that Aragalaya had failed seemed understandable. But in light of the 2024 election results, that view no longer holds. It is difficult to draw direct lines from the Aragalaya protests in 2022 to the 2024 electoral outcome. But it is clear that the majority of Sri Lankans wanted more than just economic stability—they wanted accountability and system change. The elections resulted in unprecedented leadership change, but it remains to be seen if this will produce genuine system change. Such change will require current and future leaders to be willing and able to address Sri Lanka's fraught ethnoreligious politics and its problematic political economy.

Aragalaya demonstrated the potential power of collective action by Sri Lankans. But it also showed—not for the first time—the difficulties of building and sustaining a broad-based civic movement given the multiple divisions within Sri Lankan society and the lack of interest among mainstream political parties in genuine political change. Sri Lanka continues to have a pressing need for new leaders, new approaches to politics, and new efforts at consensus and coalition building. For Sri Lankans seeking a more democratic and equitable future, this will require, as writer Vajra Chandrasekera has suggested, that they think of Aragalaya not as a noun—not as a completed event—but rather as a verb—as continuing struggle.[150]

About the Author

David G. Timberman is an independent scholar and development practitioner with almost forty years of experience addressing the challenges of democratic politics and governance in Southeast and South Asia. Over the past twenty-five years he has conducted multiple governance assessments and program evaluations in Sri Lanka. He was the director of Asia Programs at Freedom House from 2019 to 2022 and has previously written for Carnegie.

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Notes

1 Sri Lanka has a semi-presidential system with a directly elected president (technically called the "executive president") and a prime minister elected by Parliament. The president is both head of state and head of government. The president is commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, head of the Cabinet of Ministers, and can dissolve Parliament (two and a half years after a parliamentary election put a Parliament in place).

2 Ranil Wickremesinghe is the leader of the United National Party (UNP), one of Sri Lanka's longest-established political parties, now much diminished in size. Prior to succeeding Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister, Wickremesinghe had served as prime minister five times.

3 This paper attempts to provide a level of detail sufficient for readers not possessing a deep knowledge of Sri Lanka and the events of the past three years. It seeks to convey a variety of Sri Lankan perspectives. To accomplish this, the author conducted more than fifty in-person or virtual interviews with Sri Lankans between mid-June and early September 2023. Additional virtual interviews were conducted in April and May 2025.

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99 "Manifesto and Blueprint 3.0," Sajith Premadasa website, https://sajith.lk/manifesto.

100 See: "A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life," NPP, August 2024, https://www.npp.lk/up/policies/en/npppolicystatement.pdf.

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102 "TNA Decides to Back Sajith," *The Island,* September 2, 2024, https://island.lk/tna-decides-to-back-sajith.

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104 "Presidential Election Results 2024," Manthri.lk, https://manthri.lk/en/presidential-election-result-2024.

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112 Private communication with Sri Lankan political analyst, May 2025.

113 Based on author's virtual interviews, May 2025.

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115 See *Economynext*, "Sri Lanka's NPP manifesto reveals IMF renegotiation proposals," August 26, 2024. https://economynext.com/sri-lankas-npp-manifesto-reveals-imf-renegotiation-proposals-178061;

116 Author's e-mail communication with Sri Lankan political analyst, May 2025.

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118 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 97.

119 Erica Chenoweth, "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 69–84, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-future-of-nonviolent-resistance-2/.

120 Interview with author, Colombo, June 2023.

121 Erica Chenoweth, *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2021): p. 122.

122 Chenoweth, *Civil Resistance*, p. 122.

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124 In several instances, the government jammed networks in the GotaGoGama area to prevent people from going live. See: *21st Annual South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022-2023: Sri Lanka,* International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on behalf of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN), n.d., https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR22-23/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/IFJ_SRI.pdf.

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127 "A Brief Analysis of the Aragalaya," Centre for Policy Alternatives, p. 13.

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