

## 'Struggle' (Aragalaya) of Sri Lanka

Prof. Lal Mervin Dharmasiri

Prof. Praveen G. Saptarshi

### *Abstract*

*The present study is based on in situ observations of the mass movement going on in Sri Lanka. It discusses the brief background of the situation as traced from various political events in the recent past and present economic crisis. Events leading to the present crisis are narrated. The paper underlines the strength and relevance of Gandhian principles in the context of the crisis. Questions about the future i.e. the future of people of Sri Lanka have also been posed.*

### **Introduction:**

Sri Lankan people are facing dire situation. Even basic necessities such as food, fuel, clean water, etc. have become extremely difficult to meet. Public support systems have ceased to function. Why did this happen? The situation demands analysis from various academic disciplines. The authors intend to call upon fellow geographers to utilize their training to assess the situation by setting present study as an example. Several countries including India are gripped by rising fascist sentiments. Fueled by religious hatred, fascism is being established through democratic processes, leading to violation of civil rights. Propaganda campaigns are designed to exploit religious sentiments. The underlying spiritual philosophy is nowhere in the picture. This is funded by crony capitalism. This means many business houses achieve growth by killing others, consequently destroying livelihood resources of certain class of population, usually at the bottom of the pyramid. Most importantly, this can sustain by compromising freedom of press, independence of various institutions including judiciary. It is blatantly visible in Sri Lanka. One is tempted to lose hope, thinking 'nothing can be done'. On the contrary, the situation demands nonviolent action, guided by Gandhian philosophy of 'Satyagraha', to achieve revolutionary change.

In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi advocates 'production by masses instead of mass production'. He argues against a civilization based on indiscriminate use of machines where human values have no place. This needs to be considered when designing solutions to the present crisis in Sri Lanka.

### **Sri Lankan Economy:**

Sri Lanka is an Island nation, which has about 22 million people with diverse culture and languages and ethnicities. Sri Lanka is a developing country like India and ranking 72<sup>nd</sup> on the Human Development Index. It is notable that the highest-ranked South Asian nation in terms of development and has the second-highest per capita income (US\$ 4100) in the South Asia. By 2019, the World Bank ranked Sri Lanka as an upper middle-income country. But the country is debt on around 51 US\$ Billions. At present the nation is in danger with severe social-economic, political crisis. The currency is crashed due to hyperinflation, money printing and Dollar crises and many more reasons. This may be attributed to the policies adopted by Rajapaksha regime.

### **Emerging Rajapaksha Regime**

Former President Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksha (MR) who came to power in 2005 on an anti-separatist and Sinhalese-nationalist and Sinhala Buddhist platform and decided to go to war with the Tamil Tigers in 2006. After a decade, the country had become a place where one family of Rajapaksha can do business. In the family Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksha (GR), who was a retired lieutenant colonel of the Sri Lankan army and dual citizen of the United States, had taken charge as defense secretary. After winning the war he shone as secretary of the urban development ministry.

MR was voted out of office in 2015, but the family did not remain sidelined for long period. In 2019, a series of suicide attacks by Islamic terrorists created a new wave of Sinhalese-Buddhist majoritarian nationalism, which demanded a strong leader. The nationalist allies put up GR as their presidential candidate in 2019 on the strength of his war-winning ways. He swept the elections. One important fact must be noted here. His cruel act of killing surrendered LTT soldiers was made viral on social media before the election for creating vote bank of Sinhala Buddhist. This is how fascist forces emerge if people forget human values as they become too much emotional and easily get dominated by hatred.

After becoming the President of Sri Lanka, GR started replacing civilian officials with retired military officers in key posts, and it has deteriorating the civil services and activities of the country. In additions, whole family of the Rajapaksha became Ministers. For example, MR became Prime Minister, Basil Rajapaksha became the Minister of Finance, Chamal Rajapaksha became Minister of land and Irrigation, Narmal Rajapaksha became Minister of Sports. It was estimated that about 65% of the government expenditure was allocated for the Ministries of the Rajapaksha family. Apart from the Rajapaksha family, many more relatives of their family also became Ministers.

Initially, many actions of GR were populist but at the cost of the treasury. He announced tax cuts, which reduced revenue. He recruited 100,000 unemployable university graduates to government jobs. He also went against the Muslim minority, seeing them as terrorists or jihadists. A popular Buddhist monk who supported his victory was appointed to prepare a 'One law, one nation policy' for avoiding secularism. As a result religious, ethnic, economic and social disintegration of the country started. This is the main reason for the collapse of administration.

#### **Fertilizer-ban:**

In Sri Lanka, the agricultural sector contributes about 7% to the country's GDP but employs about 27% of the workforce. The Government of Rajapakshaha banned the import of chemical fertilizer and agro-chemicals in autocratic way. As its impact big problems in the agricultural sector were created. Crop failure, low production and low income from agricultural activities caused decrease of farm income generation, increase of poverty and many more associated problems.

#### **Economic crises:**

The people realized that economic mismanagement by the government has been responsible for weakening Sri Lanka's public finances, leaving national expenditure in excess of income and the production of tradable goods and services at inadequate levels and in turn destroying the distribution system. The problems seem to be started by tax reduction policy enacted by the government soon after it took office in 2019. Later, the COVID-19 pandemic struck to the nation's economy. A few businessmen who are believed to be Rajapaksha clans earned a huge profit due to tax exemption. It was similar to that in India as few corporates earned windfall profit and large section of society could not have access to food and healthcare during the same period.

It caused the huge reduction of revenue, mostly from the tourism sector. In addition, remittances from the Sri Lankans working abroad dropped drastically due to stagnating and inflexible foreign exchange rate. The value of the Sri Lankan Rupees has been collapsed by nearly 80% and it made imports more expensive. As a results, Island-wide power cuts, often mile-long queues for basic commodities like fuel, gas and even milk powder, not to mention the soaring prices of other everyday food items, have made life extremely difficult for the common people in Sri Lanka.

#### **Debt trap:**

Sri Lanka's external debt increased by 19% during the period from 2006 to 2012. It has been implausibly increased with many Chinese projects in Sri Lanka. It was noted that about 70 percent of the infrastructure projects of Sri Lanka are constructed by China. Most of the projects such as high

ways, harbor, International airport and cricket stadium etc. are funded by commercial borrowings at a higher percentage from China. It is observed that about 10 percent of Sri Lanka's foreign debt, which is around \$4.0 billion, is from China. In the year 2022 itself, the country needs to pay back nearly \$7 billion foreign loans.

The policy of suspending debt was implemented by April 2022 due to lack of foreign reserves resulted into down grading the Banks of the country according to Fitch Ratings. It created many more problems including underscoring by declining foreign exchange reserves, inability to borrow from outside sources and worsening external liquidity position of the country. Due to the unfavorable situation the Government were unable to maintain continuous supply of basic necessities of the people like food, fuel, gas and medicines and so on. This led to shortages in market and endless queues everywhere in the country.

### **Political crisis**

Sri Lankan political crisis is an ongoing political catastrophe in the country due to the power struggle between GR and the Parliament. It must be noted that the parliament has a majority of Presidents' political party. However, the participation of general public in huge number was mainly due to the economic crisis. Country wide anti-government protest has escalated soon. The anti-government sentiment of Sri Lanka has triggered political instability in which seeds of new socio-political system might be germinated. This is interim assessment as the crisis is not reached to its objective of better political system based on democracy, secularism, equity and ultimately wellbeing of the society.

### **Nature of Uprising of People:**

When the protest began ruling dynasty have underestimated the participation and will power of general public. No one has thought of such uprising of the people. This level of uprising could not be found in the literature or in the books. No one had an idea about the nature of uprising. The youths have been using new methodologies such as creativity and novelty rather than classical approaches. The theme of the whole process is based on peace and violence free movement. In addition it is showing their religious and ethnic harmony, corruption free society, classless and casteless society which can lead to just and lawful society. They are also demanding to recover the money stolen by the Reajapaksha family and his regime. There is no well known leadership and the decision making is based on collective intelligence. It is amazing to observe that there is no any party or organization guiding the agitation.

The people have widely used worldwide, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter for their propaganda. They started the campaign with the slogan of the President GR should go home (#GotaGoHome). It was trended in the worldwide on social media within a short period. The agitators have occupied near Presidential Secretaries where they are officially allowed to protest and established a place called Gota Go Gama (GGG) means a village of GR step down. It was interesting that they were able to get all types of supports from the local community as well as international community. People donated foods, medicines, books and many more things to protesters. The protesters use the platform not only for agitation against the government, but also for staging drama, films, music, sculpturing etc. Median center, legal aid center, library and many more centers established at the GGG by the protesters. Apart from the trade unions, many artists, Doctors, Lawyers, University teachers, Health workers, farmers, ordinary people and different organizations came to support them. Later they have expanded the GGG to the regional level. There are several branches of GGG all over the country. It helped to strengthen the activities and became a national moment.

The protesters forced to GR and his government to resign. They demand transformation of the society from the corrupt system to fair system in the country. The change includes the social power of

the working class, which has played a central role in the now three-month-old popular uprising against the government. However, replacement of existing government by an all-party government will resolve none of these crucial issues confronting workers, youths and rural poor. It will do nothing to end the unbearable living conditions produced by severe shortages and skyrocketing prices of essentials, including fuel, food, medicines, cooking gas, or the hours-long daily power outages.

### What is next?

Already President GR has resigned. MR was PM and he resigned. Mr. Chamal Rajapaksa and Mr. Namal Rajapaksha have resigned from their ministerial positions. GR has already left the country and seeks asylums. Now the Sri Lankans are happy that the Rajapaksha family was kicked off from the main political mainstream. But still they are playing the game of Daniel vs Miguel. However, it may end or it may not, but end it will and it can end by the end of Rajapaksha regime. However, the game is not over yet.

In the history, this struggle of the Sri Lankans has shown the new avenue for fighting against monarchy or regime. Now the Sri Lankans have been struggling to overcome the economic issues. Sri Lanka are expecting the support of the IMF, World Bank and friendly nations. India as a big brother has been supporting in many ways. Further both may support each other by achieving most needed change in political, economic and social system in both the countries. Sri Lanka can be a big brother so far as people's movement is concerned. Sri Lankan crisis has demonstrated how to achieve this to some extent and what are the innovative ways and means for concretization and motivation of masses. Salute to those, who have lost their life for the purpose.





Power of people (Thousands of people gather in front of GR office, Colombo)

In front of Presidential secretaries' office  
Protesters



\*Prof. Lal Mervin Dharmasiri  
University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka  
mervin@kln.ac.lk

\*\*Prof. Praveen G. Saptarshi  
praveen.saptarshi@gmail.com