

## **COVID-19 in Sri Lanka: A Litmus Test for the New Government**

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### **Summary**

*On 12 April 2020, the Sri Lankan government announced that universities and schools across the country would re-open for a new term in mid-May 2020, signalling that it is considering an exit strategy to end the island-wide curfew, the reason being that the virus outbreak has been contained to a manageable level. While retaining the COVID-19 curve without allowing an exponential spike is testimony to the government's success in its response to the pandemic, the real litmus test will be its success in managing the post-COVID challenges.*

### **The Situation in Sri Lanka**

Since reporting its first COVID-19 case on 27 January 2020, Sri Lanka has had [238 positive cases](#) with seven deaths and 65 recoveries as at 16 April 2020. While Sri Lanka was not affected by the first wave of the coronavirus outbreak, it is affected by the second wave, which shifted its epicentre to Europe and the United States. Within a couple of weeks from identifying the first local tested positive from the virus, Sri Lanka has now reached the Stage 3a in which home clusters of infected patients are formed. According to the [Director-General of Health Services](#), COVID-19 positive cases could reach 1,400 soon and that “it is essential for [at least] 80 per cent of the total population to be indoors in their homes in order to prevent the situation reaching [Stages] 3b and 4”.

The COVID-19 outbreak is uncharted territory for Sri Lanka. Despite being a middle-income country, with limited resources, its free and universal health service has achieved [remarkable progress](#) in most health indicators, including addressing communicable diseases. It has successfully battled several pandemics, such as [malaria](#) and [polio](#). The Sri Lankan health service has successfully managed a few recent problems, including the 2003 Avia influenza outbreak and the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. However, COVID-19 is its first experience in battling a global pandemic of this scale.

Apart from the novelty of this experience, the country is still under-resourced to face a community outbreak. According to the World Health Organization, Sri Lanka is only [moderately prepared](#) to face a global pandemic and its preparedness is below the world average. As of 2017, Sri Lanka had [492 intensive care unit \(ICU\) beds](#) for a population of over 22 million, which equalled 2.42 beds per 100,000 population. It is at the lower end of international standards, which stipulate between 1 and 30 ICU beds per 100,000 people. Patient to medical officer ratio in intensive care is at 3.30-4.24 in different categories of the hospitals, and ICU resident/patient ratio is at 1:5. The current capacity can accommodate around 2,000 COVID-19 patients. However, if the outbreak aggravates beyond this level, Sri Lanka's health sector will be overwhelmed. Current progress in maintaining the virus spread

to a manageable level is a result of the government's proactive measures and the agility of the health sector.

## **The Government's Response**

The government started taking preventive measures even before the Wuhan epidemic turned into a global pandemic. On 26 January 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa set up the National Action Committee to tackle the spread of the virus in the country.

While surveillance at airports, seaports, and fishery ports was immediately imposed, there was a temporary ban on visa on arrival for Chinese nationals. Employers too were instructed to restrict their employees with resident visas to their lodgings and workplaces. The government also evacuated 30 Sri Lankans stranded in Wuhan and quarantined them in Diyathalawa. The results of these measures paid off. There was no single case of transmission connected to China.

The local transmissions were first derived from tourists and Sri Lankan returnees from Europe following the global spread of the virus. In response to this phase, the government took a series of steps, including contact tracing using military intelligence and imposing an island-wide curfew. As a result, Sri Lanka has managed to contain the virus spread to a manageable level.

## **Political Leadership**

It is important to note how proactive political leadership has been a leading factor in this success. Such leadership dictates how public resources are used and how decisions are made to prevent and manage the situation. In this regard, Gotabaya is seen getting the support and advice from multi-sectoral experts at the right time in making appropriate decisions.

Similarly, government resources – both human and material – have been allocated appropriately. For instance, the military and police have been deployed in order to maintain quarantine centres, contact tracing and managing the public during the curfew. They also provide back-end support to the healthcare service where necessary; the reason being their ability to command and control in an emergency. Gotabaya and his government have proven their ability to adapt to the situation and rise to the challenge.

## **Challenges and Concerns**

The government's challenge will be in the aftermath of COVID-19. As it was reported on 12 April 2020, the government is considering an exit strategy by opening schools and universities for the new term. While it is imperative to return to normalcy, a miscalculated decision could lead to a second wave of infections resulting from an exponential spike in the number of patients.

In the long run, the government will face difficulties in reinstating the economy. In its effort to contain the spread of the virus, it has brought the economy to a standstill. All the main

manufacturing and other critical industries have stopped functioning. In 2020, Sri Lanka was hoping to come out of its sluggish growth and recover its tourism industry, which was affected by the Easter attack last year.

While other countries are inducing funds to maintain economic growth, this is not a luxury Sri Lanka can afford, given its current economic status. However, failure to bring the economy back on track will only make the public forget its good work in containing a global pandemic. Hence, the real test of the government's success is yet to come.

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