

Deepening Crisis and a New Prime Minister: What Lies Ahead for Sri Lanka?

Chulanee Attanayake and Shavinyaa Vijaykumarr

Summary

Island-wide protests turned violent on 9 May 2022 as Sri Lanka's former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa stepped down. His resignation incited violence and aggravated the unfolding political and economic crisis, with the Central Bank governor warning the country of reaching a point of no return. On 12 May 2022, Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed as the prime minister. This has been received with mixed reactions from within and outside Sri Lanka.

Unpacking the Chaos

The weeks long peaceful protests in Sri Lanka turned violent on 9 May 2022 when Mahinda Rajapaksa [stepped down](#) as Sri Lanka's prime minister, [citing](#) his brother, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's request to do so at the special cabinet meeting held on 6 May 2022. His resignation was followed by a group of his supporters attacking the protesters in front of the official prime minister's residence and *GotaGoGama* protest site. Troops were deployed early on 10 May 2022 to enforce a curfew after protests turned violent harming civilians and properties. This episode saw [eight people dead](#) and nearly 200 wounded, which prompted anti-government protesters to storm Mahinda's official residence in retaliation. A [rescue operation](#) was conducted to ensure the former prime minister's safety. Furthermore, rising unrest led to the issuing of a [shoot on sight order](#) and the deployment of security forces to enforce the curfew. This outbreak of violence results from rising tensions and uncertainties in the past weeks. Gotabaya and his brother's continued dismissal of the protesters' demands to step down has further worsened the situation. It led to the president declaring a [state of emergency](#) for the second time in five weeks.

Gotabaya's insistence on forming an all-party interim government was not welcomed by the protesters and the opposition. Even though the president reportedly [invited](#) opposition leader, Sajith Premadasa, to assume the prime minister's post and for his party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), to constitute an interim government, it was repeatedly [rejected](#) by the opposition. Premadasa had reportedly [listed](#) a series of conditions for him to accept the prime ministerial position; one of them being the [transfer](#) of some of the presidential powers to the parliament. In contrast, inner political circles had [assumed](#) that former prime minister would not step down and use his support bank to hold on to power.

Mahinda's resignation not only incited violence, but also aggravated the existing political and economic crisis with the Central Bank governor [warning](#) all political parties that the economy

will collapse to an irreversible state if a prime minister and a cabinet are not appointed soon. On 12 May 2022, after reaching out to multiple candidates, including [Sarath Fonseka](#), Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as the new prime minister. He was prime minister during the previous government, and he is the leader of the United National Party. His appointment was received with mixed reactions. [Religious leaders](#) and some [opposition](#) members of parliament (MPs) expressed their disapproval over the appointment claiming that the president has no right to go against the people's will and that Wickremesinghe has no legitimacy in the parliament. At the same time, his appointment was welcomed by the international community. Within minutes of his appointment, the United States embassy in Sri Lanka [tweeted](#) that it is looking forward to working with him to overcome the island's crisis.

What Lies Ahead?

Despite these developments, political uncertainty and instability is expected to continue. Protesters seem determined to oust Gotabaya from power. Trade unions have [declared](#) their continuous intention to hold general strikes and protests as long as the president is in power. The no-confidence motion (NCM) against the president will be taken up for [debate](#) on 17 May 2022. It is expected that the president will lose the NCM as he has lost significant support in the parliament, with some of his government's MPs acting independently. After being appointed, Wickremesinghe too stated that the GotaGoGama protests should continue.

If the president loses the NCM, new political instability is expected to emerge. Even though Wickremesinghe claims to have the majority command in the parliament, he is the only MP representing his party. It is also unclear if he will find the support sans Gotabaya as the president. Even though it is likely that the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna will support him, it is uncertain whether the independent groups within the government and the MPs from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, with whom his previous government was in a coalition, will support him. If the prime minister fails to command a parliamentary majority, the leadership will be left ambiguous. However, as evident from the past few weeks, the opposition is yet to be unified. Even though the two major opposition groups, the SJB and the National People's Alliance (NPP), led by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, have been demanding that the president steps down and the current government surrenders its power, they have not come to a united decision on how to lead once that is achieved. Both groups have been issuing their proposals individually and separately. The attack on the SJB's leader by the supporters of the NPP on 9 May 2022 has further [complicated](#) the possibility of them uniting to lead a government.

The NPP is in no position to form a government independently unless it is in a coalition with the SJB as it only has three seats in the parliament. However, the NPP's absence from a future government will be felt by the public as it is the political party leading the anti-government protests. Interestingly, the NPP is the only major political party that has not run the country.

With the 'Rajapaksa' name and reputation regressing in recent months, it appears Sri Lankans will only accept an option where the president steps down and the parliament is given more

power and say in the decisions made by the government. In the meantime, the tiny island state continues to suffer from political chaos and upheaval.

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Dr Chulanee Attanayake is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at chulanee@nus.edu.sg. Ms Shavinyaa Vijaykumarr is a Research Analyst at the same institute. She can be contacted at shav@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.