

Sri Lanka's Evolving Crisis: What Next?

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Summary

During the past week, the evolving crisis in Sri Lanka escalated and led to the ouster of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Measures are underway to establish an interim, all-party government. As the economic crisis worsens and the prospects of a humanitarian crisis is imminent, new contradictions are expected on the question of political legitimacy and the people's protests.

Sri Lanka has been currently making global headlines due to its mass, anti-regime protests. The Gotabaya Rajapaksa government, in power since 2020, was fast losing popular legitimacy, which it had consolidated through a mix of authoritarianism, nationalism and economic populism. Poor governance, rooted in corruption and Rajapaksa family politics, accelerated the national economy's dual crisis – a foreign exchange and balance of payment crises. By April 2022, the government unilaterally [announced](#) that it was unable to service its foreign debt. On the ground, people faced serious livelihood challenges as the lack of foreign reserves resulted in a severe shortage of food, medicine, fuel and other essentials. In response, Sri Lankans stepped onto the streets, demanding the right to essentials, political accountability and reforms.

On 9 July 2022, tens of thousands of protestors stormed key sites of political power – the Presidential Secretariat, the official residence of the President and the official residence of the Prime Minister (Temple Trees). Towards the evening, a group of protestors torched the Prime Minister's private residence. Despite assurances by the President and Prime Minister that resignations were forthcoming, delays in doing so severely tested the protestors' patience. On 13 July 2022, the protestors attempted to breach the Parliament and the official residence of the Speaker of Parliament. Citing a "fascist threat to democracy", Acting President Ranil Wickremesinghe declared a state of emergency and [ordered](#) the armed forces to do "whatever it takes" to maintain order and stability in the country. Two days later, on 15 July 2022, the President handed in his resignation via email from Singapore, en route to another destination. Consequently, Wickremesinghe currently operates in the capacity of acting President.

As the Sri Lankan crisis evolves, the immediate question revolves around the issue of power transition. According to [Article 40 of the Constitution](#) and the Presidential Elections (Special Provisions) Act of 1981, the President's resignation must be followed by the appointment of an acting President and Prime Minister. The Parliament must then elect, through a preferential voting system, within a period of 30 days, one of its members as the President for the remaining presidential term, which ends in September 2024.

Currently, three candidates have publicly expressed their intention to run for presidency. They are [Sajith Premadasa](#), the leader of the opposition; [Dallas Alahapperuma](#), a senior

member of the ruling party (the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna [SLPP]); and [Anura Kumara Dissanayake](#), leader of the opposition Marxist-Leninist party (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna). Wickremesinghe is also expected to contest for the position, and the SLPP General Secretary, Sagara Kariyawasam, has [indicated](#) that the ruling party will back Wickremesinghe if he decides to contest. This is likely to cause a split in the SLPP votes, as Alahapperuma is also a contender for the position.

However, in the context of crisis and mass protests, the question of power transition is not quite as straightforward.

There is already unrest among the protestors at the prospect of a Wickremesinghe presidency. Many protestors and opposition parties have criticised Wickremesinghe for protecting Rajapaksa's interests. Examples of collusion given by the protestors include Gotabaya's [appointment](#) of Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister on 12 May 2022 and the former Yahapalana government (of which Wickremesinghe was the Prime Minister) not keeping the Rajapaksas accountable for suspected corruption and abuse of power, despite it being a key [campaign promise](#) in the lead up to the 2015 elections. As a result, any prominent role for Wickremesinghe in a future interim government, especially if backed by the ruling party, is likely to cause more volatility. This illegitimacy is likely to extend to any contender from the ruling party, the SLPP, given how it was founded by the Rajapaksa political leadership and commands a majority in a government that is blamed for the current crisis. Meanwhile, the opposition parties appear unable to reach a compromise on their various political interests to provide a common candidate. These power struggles, at a time of the crisis, reflect the deep-rooted disconnect between the political parties and the people's demands for a united, non-partisan crisis response programme.

As this political crisis unfolds over the next few days and weeks, the trajectory of the people's protests in Sri Lanka should be observed closely. The 9 July 2022 protests marked a new chapter in Sri Lanka's socio-political history. Prior to those protests, the protests had been [discounted](#) by some parts of political and civil society as lacking a viable political strategy and largely involving disillusioned and inexperienced youth. There was even a school of thought arguing that the protest movement (also known as '*aragalaya*' or '*struggle*') had reached its end following the island-wide civil unrest on 9 May 2022. However, the numbers, which turned up on 9 July 2022 and their success in ousting Gotabaya, has led to a reassessment of the political leverage of the protest movement. This has meant that any future interim or elected government must necessarily consult and commit to comprehensive reforms (over key issues such as abolishing the executive presidency, corruption, power sharing and accountability for war crimes, among others) that amount to the "system change" for which the protestors are demanding.

Another development in the 9 July 2022 protests was a sense that the protests were being "hijacked" by more radical, anarchist and far-left elements. However, the largely peaceful nature of the protests and the measured response of the protestors in withdrawing from occupied government buildings on 14 July 2022 indicate that alleged "violent" elements are by no means representative or dominant in the citizens' struggle.

There is a broad consensus that any resolution of the current crisis in Sri Lanka requires, at minimum, an extended fund facility lending arrangement and, eventually, a staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund. This requires political stability and a government with sufficient popular legitimacy to remain in power and continue these negotiations. However, the likelihood of such political stability depends heavily on the political composition of an interim government, which will be known in the coming week.

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