Humanitarianism, Development Assistance, Early Warning and Political Violence in South Asia in a Post-Liberal International Order

NUS National University of Singapore | ISAS Institute of South Asian Studies

Università di Napoli L'Orientale

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ISAS-University of Naples "L'Orientale" Webinar
Humanitarianism, Development Assistance, Early Warning and Political Violence in South Asia in a Post-Liberal International Order
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Executive Summary

In October 2025, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore, together with the University of Naples "L'Orientale", hosted an online roundtable bringing together scholars to examine how the convergence of global crises, including conflict, economic instability and climate change, is transforming humanitarian action and early warning systems. The discussions focused on South Asia and the broader Global South.

Titled 'Humanitarianism, Development Assistance, Early Warning and Political Violence in South Asia in a Post-Liberal International Order', the event featured speaker presentations and moderated discussions as well as an interactive session. It explored how overlapping emergencies or polycrises are placing unprecedented strain on the capacity of states and international institutions to respond effectively. These challenges are unfolding against the backdrop of a weakening liberal international order, characterised by declining multilateral cooperation, growing impunity for violations of humanitarian norms and shifts in the United States' (US) aid priorities since the Donald Trump era. The speakers highlighted how the erosion of neutrality, the politicisation of aid and the limitations of existing predictive tools are reshaping humanitarian practice and constraining timely intervention.

Greater transparency, data sharing and institutional cooperation are essential to bridging the gap between early warning and early response.

The discussions pointed to a clear tension between qualitative, context-rich systems and quantitative, high-precision models. It was emphasised that hybrid approaches, combining contextual understanding with quantitative rigour, offer the most promising way forward. Overall, the event underscored that while predictive technologies for conflict and humanitarian crises are advancing, implementation remains uneven. Greater transparency, data sharing and institutional cooperation are essential to bridging the gap between early warning and early response. The broader takeaway was that the future of humanitarian action will depend on cultivating a global culture of anticipation, one capable of navigating a fragmented international order and responding proactively to the complex crises of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Ruth Hanau Santini

In recent years, the interaction between conflict, economic instability and climate-related risks has intensified the frequency and severity of humanitarian crises across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Central America. In South Asia in particular, the rise of political protest, state fragility and transnational contestations around democratic dissent have contributed to heightened political violence and instability. Contemporary discourses on polycrises capture this growing entanglement of international and local challenges, which increasingly strain the capacity of individual states to anticipate, manage, and respond to crises. These pressures are unfolding within an international context in which coordinated responses are becoming progressively more difficult.

In South Asia in particular, the rise of political protest, state fragility and transnational contestations around democratic dissent have contributed to heightened political violence and instability.

Parallel to the crisis of the liberal international order, which has become increasingly evident since the second presidential mandate of Donald Trump, a broader crisis of liberal humanitarianism is also underway. This crisis is marked by the impunity with which governments in famine-affected countries commit starvation-related crimes, the inability or unwillingness of the United Nations (UN) to effectively address humanitarian violations, a severe funding shortfall affecting major aid agencies and a fundamental reconfiguration of the US' international aid practices.[1] In South Asia, recurring floods, droughts and food insecurity, combined with authoritarian statism, communal tensions and mass protest movements, demonstrate how humanitarian, developmental and political emergencies increasingly overlap and reinforce one another.

Over the past two decades, international organisations have invested heavily in early warning systems (EWS) as part of broader toolkits designed to forecast economic crises, climate shocks and political or security deterioration. These systems typically combine qualitative and quantitative analysis to anticipate interacting risks and their potential trajectories. However, significant challenges persist. Risk assessments generated by local organisations may be dismissed at the headquarters level. Warnings may be issued without triggering preparedness or preventive action. Duplication of systems or contradictory findings can

1 Alex de Waal, "The Return of Famines? The End of Liberal Humanitarianism", *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, Volume 6: Issue 2-3, 7 November 2024, https://www.manchesterhive.com/view/journals/jha/6/2-3/article-p69.xml.

undermine effectiveness. Donor-driven priorities, particularly demands to focus on specific countries or sectors, may weaken the overall accuracy and credibility of risk assessments.

In an era of expanding multi-sectoral weaponisation, humanitarian action risks a loss of legitimacy if excessive politicisation comes to dominate decision-making and operational priorities.

Since the election of Trump as the US' president in late 2024, substantial cuts in the US' funding to humanitarian and development agencies have produced cascading effects, including the development, refinement and operational viability of EWS. These funding reductions have coincided with an intensified politicisation of foreign assistance, increasingly framed as a tool of strategic influence with measurable returns for donor governments. Such trends threaten core humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. In an era of expanding multi-sectoral weaponisation, humanitarian action risks a loss of legitimacy if excessive politicisation comes to dominate decision-making and operational priorities.

The discussions in this publication are situated within a wider research agenda pursued at the University of Naples "L'Orientale", focused on the promises and pitfalls of political risk analysis. This broader project, led by an interdisciplinary team of scholars, including economists and linguists, has examined how political risk is conceptualised, measured, and operationalised across institutional contexts. A central strand of this research has focused on EWS developed by international organisations, particularly the UN and the European Union (EU), over the past several decades. The project has aimed to analyse how these systems function in practice, the assumptions underpinning their design, their structural limitations, and potential avenues for improvement.

More specifically, the research assesses how EWS that integrate qualitative and quantitative methodologies have contributed to the anticipation of, and responses to, humanitarian crises. The case studies presented during the webinar focused on Asian contexts, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan, regions that are increasingly central to debates on political risk, humanitarian governance and early warning. Overall, the importance of examining not only the technical dimensions of EWS, but also how international, regional and local organisations are adapting their analytical tools and institutional frameworks within an emerging post-liberal international order was emphasised. As liberal humanitarianism comes under sustained pressure, humanitarian organisations are bearing significant operational and epistemic costs, with long-term implications for crisis prevention and response.

Early Warning and Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis

Andrea Novellis

The Sri Lankan case constituted one of the empirical components of a broader research project examining the design and functioning of EWS within international organisations. Sri Lanka offers a particularly revealing case because the crisis that erupted in 2022 was neither sudden nor unforeseeable. Rather, it was preceded by clear and observable warning signs. The failure lay not in the absence of information, but in the inability of international early warning architectures to recognise the crisis as it was taking shape.

Sri Lanka offers a particularly revealing case because the crisis that erupted in 2022 was neither sudden nor unforeseeable.

In mid-2021, the Sri Lankan government abruptly banned all chemical fertiliser and agrochemical imports, presenting the decision as a rapid transition to organic agriculture. Domestic agronomists, farming associations, food-security experts, and opposition politicians quickly raised concerns. They warned that agricultural yields would decline sharply and that reduced output would compound existing vulnerabilities, including fiscal fragility, foreign-reserve shortages, and pandemic-related shocks. These warnings were consistent, detailed, and sustained over several months.

The crisis that subsequently unfolded can be characterised as a polycrisis with a cascading structure. The fertiliser ban depressed agricultural yields, contributing to food inflation, rising import dependence, a worsening balance-of-payments position, foreign-reserve depletion, fuel shortages, and ultimately a humanitarian emergency. This economic and social deterioration coincided with mass mobilisation and state paralysis. By the time large-scale protests emerged in early 2022, the core elements of the crisis had been visible for more than a year. The central puzzle, therefore, is why no major international EWS within the UN, the EU or other multilateral actors issued a clear warning of an impending humanitarian crisis, despite the availability of abundant signals. Recognition came only once the situation had already escalated into a full-blown emergency.

Conventional explanations for early warning failures often point to a 'warning-response gap' in which warnings are generated but not acted upon. The Sri Lankan case does not conform to this pattern. Instead, the failure occurred at an earlier stage, namely at the level of recognition. The crisis was not perceived as a single, integrated phenomenon.

Process tracing of the 2021-22 period, combined with interviews with officials across UN agencies, EU delegations and specialised bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as analysis of internal and public documents, reveal a consistent pattern. Each organisation interpreted developments in Sri Lanka through a sectoral lens shaped by its mandate, institutional routines, and political priorities. These sectoral lenses functioned as knowledge filters, defining what counted as risk and how warning signals were interpreted.

The EU delegation, for example, focused primarily on political rights, governance and conflict-related dynamics.

The EU delegation, for example, focused primarily on political rights, governance and conflict-related dynamics. Sri Lanka was framed mainly as a country at risk of democratic backsliding and rights deterioration, rather than as a context in which agricultural policy could trigger a humanitarian crisis. Consequently, macroeconomic and food-security risks did not feature prominently in its situation assessments during 2021.

The WFP and FAO approached Sri Lanka through established food-security and agricultural frameworks. Seasonal assessments and integrated food security phase classification analyses were based on assumptions of normal or near-normal production conditions. As these models placed greater weight on climatic factors and gave less attention to policy-driven shocks, they continued to project stable or above-average harvests. As a result, Sri Lanka was effectively coded as following a 'normal' trajectory, even as local actors reported significant deterioration.

The IMF identified macroeconomic vulnerabilities more clearly. Staff reports and Article IV consultations flagged debt unsustainability, fiscal imbalances and reserve depletion. However, the IMF is constrained by state consent and cannot issue public crisis alerts without government agreement. In addition, the IMF's assessments were rarely integrated into humanitarian early-warning pipelines, limiting their impact on anticipatory action.

This configuration produced a pattern of cognitive partitioning, whereby each organisation processed only those signals that aligned with its mandate. Two additional mechanisms further contributed to the failure. The first was technocratic depoliticisation, referring to the tendency of early-warning assessments to avoid politically sensitive interpretations. In Sri Lanka, acknowledging that the fertiliser ban would lead to a

collapse in agricultural output required direct engagement with a politically defended government policy. Several agencies were reluctant to produce assessments that could be read as explicit criticism of a sovereign decision. As a result, the crisis was framed in technical terms, attributed to weather variability or supply chain disruptions, while its political origins were downplayed.

The second mechanism was procedural inertia, embedded in the escalation processes of EWS. Many UN agencies rely on multi-stage, consensus-based validation procedures that are inherently slow. Even when field-level staff detected emerging problems, these observations did not rapidly translate into system-level warnings. In Sri Lanka, inconsistencies across organisations, with the FAO projecting normal harvests, the IMF warning of insolvency, and the EU focusing on governance, meant that no single institution felt authorised to declare a crisis. The absence of cross-sectoral synthesis effectively stalled escalation.

The second mechanism was procedural inertia, embedded in the escalation processes of EWS.

As a result, early warning assessments converged only once the crisis had become highly visible, marked by fuel queues, prolonged power cuts and mass protests. Coordination mechanisms were activated at that point, but opportunities for early action had already passed.

The Sri Lankan case yields several broader insights.

First, early warning failure is not necessarily a function of insufficient data. It is often a failure of integration, reflecting an inability to connect political, economic and agricultural indicators into a unified risk assessment.

Second, predictive architectures remain deeply shaped by organisational mandates and institutional boundaries, while polycrises cut across governance, economic, climatic and food systems in ways that do not align with these divisions.

Third, the case underscores the need for international organisations to treat local expertise as a core analytical input rather than as anecdotal evidence. In 2021, domestic agronomists and food security experts

identified the emerging crisis well before international actors did.[2] Their assessments were accurate, but they did not penetrate institutional early-warning pipelines.

Recognising a crisis is never a purely technical exercise – it requires linking risks across sectors and confronting politically sensitive implications.

Finally, the Sri Lankan experience highlights the inherently political nature of early warning. Recognising a crisis is never a purely technical exercise – it requires linking risks across sectors and confronting politically sensitive implications. Without institutional capacity to undertake this form of synthesis, EWS will continue to fail, not because crises are inherently unpredictable but because the systems designed to detect them are not equipped to recognise how political decisions, economic fragility, and social pressures interact.

2 Thayalini Indrakularasa (Associate Reporter), "Food Crisis Looms as Rice Production Nosedives", Special Report, *Global Press Journal*, 19 June 2022, https://globalpressjournal.com/asia/sri_lanka/food-crisis-looms-rice-production-nosedives/#:~:text=A%20nationwide%20survey%20of%20farmers%20in%20July,requested%20more%20than%20one%20year%20to%20transition.

Evaluating Early Warning Systems for Conflict Risk Analysis

Federico Maciocia

In a context in which climate shocks, political instability and social unrest increasingly reinforce one another, the capacity to anticipate crises before they erupt has become essential. The research presented focused on EWS for conflict, examining how these predictive models are designed, how effective they are, and how they are used by international organisations.

Historically, EWS relied primarily on qualitative analysis, expert judgement, diplomatic reporting and contextual interpretation. With advances in data science and artificial intelligence, however, there has been a marked shift towards quantitative models that forecast conflict using statistical and machine learning techniques. Despite these developments, persistent challenges remain, including limited data transparency, weak institutional coordination and difficulties translating early warnings into preventive action.

Historically, EWS relied primarily on qualitative analysis, expert judgement, diplomatic reporting and contextual interpretation.

The research pursued two main objectives. First, it aimed to analyse and compare the principal EWS for conflict with 11 systems examined at the global level. Second, it sought to assess how international organisations and scholars employ these systems in decision-making processes.

Methodologically, the project combined a systematic literature review, drawing on databases such as Scopus and Journal Storage with a comparative assessment based on five criteria: data sources, transparency, analytical methods, evaluation metrics and practical applications.

The evaluation of EWS relied on established performance indicators, including the Area Under the Curve (AUC), Brier Score and prediction accuracy. These metrics were used to assess how effectively models distinguish between conflict and non-conflict cases, as well as between true and false positive predictions.

Among the systems analysed, two exemplify the dominant methodological approaches in the field. The first is the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) of the African Union (AU), which follows

a predominantly qualitative model embedded within the African Peace and Security Architecture. The second is the Violence Early Warning System (ViEWS), developed by Uppsala University, which represents a quantitative and data-driven approach.

Each system has distinct strengths and limitations, reflecting the institutional and political environments in which it operates. The CEWS relies on regional analysts who interpret political, economic, social and environmental indicators to advise AU decision-making bodies. This approach provides valuable contextual insight, but it limits predictive precision and constrains rapid response.

By contrast, the ViEWS is a quantitative, data-driven and fully open-source model that employs machine learning and dynamic simulations to forecast political violence on a monthly basis at national, international, and subnational levels. The ViEWS is widely recognised as one of the most advanced EWS currently available. Its effectiveness is reflected in strong predictive metrics, including an AUC of 0.94 and a Brier score of 0.00006, as well as its high levels of transparency and operational accessibility. The system is open access, regularly updated and integrated into the UN Sahel Predictive Analytics Project, where it has successfully forecasted escalations of violence in countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia and Mali. For these reasons, the ViEWS was selected as the central reference point of the research and serves as the benchmark against which other systems are compared. A dedicated section of the project examines its internal logic and functioning in greater detail.

Qualitative systems capture local dynamics more effectively but depend heavily on political will and subjective interpretation.

The contrast between the ViEWS and the CEWS highlights a broader tension between quantitative and qualitative approaches in early warning research. Quantitative systems offer precision and replicability but risk abstraction and loss of contextual nuance. Qualitative systems capture local dynamics more effectively but depend heavily on political will and subjective interpretation. Both approaches, therefore, exhibit inherent limitations.

The research suggests that the most promising path forward lies in hybrid models, in which algorithmic forecasting supports rather than replaces expert judgment. Such integration can enhance both analytical accuracy and contextual relevance.

The study also examined how international organisations incorporate EWS into their preventive frameworks, focusing on four institutions: the UN, the EU, the AU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). A key structural limitation identified was the absence of academic literature detailing how EWS are operationalised within these organisations. As a result, the analysis relied on official reports and documented case studies to trace their application.

The UN, for example, employs the ViEWS within the Sahel Predictive Analytics Project, where predictive analysis is linked directly to humanitarian planning, illustrating a coordinated approach to early action. The EU uses the internally developed Global Conflict Risk Index, supplemented by data from the People's Under Threat system. This model forecasts risk trends over a one- to four-year horizon and informs EU resource allocation and preventive diplomacy.

The AU continues to rely on the CEWS, which remains an important tool for mediation but is constrained by political dynamics that limit operational follow-up. NATO, by contrast, does not employ a formal early warning system. Its approach remains largely reactive, with intervention occurring only after crises have already escalated.

Independent initiatives, including the Water, Peace and Security Project, the Atrocity Forecasting Project and the Early Warning Project, have contributed significantly to methodological innovation in the field. However, the research confirms that technical sophistication alone is insufficient. An EWS is effective only when embedded within institutional mechanisms capable of translating alerts into preventive action.

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In conclusion, EWS for conflict represent an evolving intersection of science, policy, and moral responsibility. They are not merely analytical tools, but frameworks of predictive governance that link data-driven foresight with diplomatic and humanitarian decision-making. The central lesson of this research is that prediction has value only when it enables prevention. While algorithms can identify risk, meaningful action ultimately depends on institutions, political leadership, and policy choices. The challenge ahead lies in transforming early warning into a culture of anticipation, in which foresight replaces reaction, and the prevention of violence becomes both a technical objective and a moral imperative.

Peacebuilding and Early Warning in Pakistan

Zahid Shahab Ahmed

Many states in the region remain ill-prepared to respond effectively to these events.

In South Asia, this time of the year is historically prone to natural disasters caused by monsoon rains and, increasingly, by glacial lake outburst floods originating in the Himalayas. Many states in the region remain ill-prepared to respond effectively to these events. The polycrisis framework is useful to understand the interconnections between governance, political, environmental and economic crises. In South Asia, the decline of the international liberal order coincides with a weakening regional order, as China's influence expands through the Belt and Road Initiative and India responds strategically. The smaller South Asian states are engaging in hedging strategies, which have significant implications for regional cooperation and coordination.

The politicisation of humanitarian aid further complicates the context. Much Western aid has recently been redirected toward Ukraine and Israel, leaving lower and middle-income countries that depend on aid to cope with limited resources. Regional cooperation has declined in part due to India-Pakistan tensions. Critical issues such as transboundary river management require collaboration, but early warning mechanisms are often affected by political considerations. For example, Pakistan relies on India, as the upper riparian state, for early flood warnings. However, these warnings are often transmitted through foreign ministry channels rather than technical bodies such as the Indus Commission, causing delays in timely dissemination.

Pakistan's domestic context adds further complexity. Governance is shaped by an entrenched civil-military dynamic, with the military exercising direct rule for roughly 30 of the country's 70 years of independence and continuing to dominate key institutions, including those responsible for disaster response. Agencies such as the National Disaster Management Authority and the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority are led by serving or retired military officials. This duality creates challenges, as civil and military institutions operate under different mandates and priorities.

Politically, the country remains unstable, with major party leaders imprisoned and frequent protests over political and economic issues. The current hybrid regime, combining civilian and military authority,

prioritises political stabilisation and economic recovery, often relying on support from institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF or the Gulf countries and China. Consequently, sectors such as peacebuilding, disaster management and climate change receive limited attention and are heavily dependent on foreign aid. When funding is interrupted, projects frequently halt. Even participation in international climate initiatives is often framed in terms of compensation from wealthier countries, rather than domestic problem-solving.

Transparency and access constraints significantly hinder the peacebuilding sector. Following the 2011 Abbottabad operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the government increased scrutiny of international non-government organisations, accusing some of espionage or subversive activities. Many international organisations subsequently closed offices, reducing civil society space. Government control over information, particularly regarding violence, economic indicators and crisis statistics, is extensive. Data are often manipulated or withheld, limiting the ability of local and international actors to use EWS effectively. Technological initiatives, such as Safe City surveillance projects, are frequently underperforming, with many systems non-functional.[3]

Pakistan faces structural challenges in capacity, coordination and transparency.

Pakistan faces structural challenges in capacity, coordination and transparency. Civil-military imbalances hinder communication between agencies and policy responses are fragmented, despite the interconnected nature of violent extremism, natural disasters, and economic distress. Early warning mechanisms are critical but constrained by limited access, secrecy, and institutional dysfunction. Civilian leaders often lack visibility into areas controlled by the military, making it difficult to validate data or implement preventive frameworks. Even predictive models such as the ViEWS, while capable of identifying trends, have limited accuracy in Pakistan due to these structural constraints.

Pakistan's experience illustrates the need for a holistic, integrated approach to peacebuilding, crisis management and early warning. Institutional barriers, political interference and limited transparency

3 Ayang Macdonald, "Pakistan safe city project stalls with nearly 1K facial recognition cameras not functioning", Biometricupdate.com, 13 September 2022, https://www.biometricupdate.com/202209/pakistan-safe-city-project-stalls-with-nearly-1k-facial-recognition-cameras-not-functioning#:~:text=Categories-,Pakistan%20safe%20city%20project%20stalls%20with%20nearly%201K%20facial%20recognition,ensuring%20the%20.

continue to undermine preventive capabilities, highlighting the importance of strengthening coordination, data access and the capacity to act on early warning signals.

Rebuilding Political Institutions in Bangladesh

Asif M Shahan

In Bangladesh, the authoritarian regime that lasted 16 years finally came to an end on 5 August 2024 through a mass uprising. This movement was largely led by students attending universities and colleges and formed part of the broader global wave of youth-led mobilisations, sometimes referred to as the Gen Z revolution. Interestingly, the government that transformed into an authoritarian regime had initially come to power through a democratic election in 2008. Once in office, it leveraged its parliamentary majority to manipulate the constitution, gradually undermining institutional checks and consolidating power. This pattern of using electoral victories to extend and entrench authority has been a recurring feature of Bangladesh's political history.

This pattern of using electoral victories to extend and entrench authority has been a recurring feature of Bangladesh's political history.

Following the country's democratic transition in 1991, Bangladesh successfully held four free and fair elections. However, each ruling party repeatedly sought to manipulate the constitution to maintain power, undermining institutions in the process. This not only affected political institutions but also weakened social institutions, including youth clubs, local government bodies and rural centres, which were politicised and co-opted to serve the interests of the ruling party. Bureaucracy became politicised, oversight institutions were weakened and the armed forces were partially co-opted with commercial incentives and loyalty secured by political actors. Attempts to amend the constitution in 1996 and 2006 failed, but the last government eventually succeeded in consolidating constitutional power. A key safeguard in the 1991 constitution, which required caretaker governments to hold elections within 90 days to ensure the alternation of power, was eliminated in 2011, marking the effective beginning of the authoritarian regime.

Over time, the authoritarian government became highly resilient. The regime used economic performance as a justification for undemocratic rule, promoting the argument that as long as citizens had access to food and services, democratic rights were secondary. Surveys conducted by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development[4] showed that in 2017, around 70 per cent of the population believed the country was moving

4 "Survey: Bangladesh's changing perceptions on political, economic, social landscape", *Dhaka Tribune*, 29 August 2023, https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/323891/survey-bangladesh%E2%80%99s-changing-perceptions-on?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

in the right direction economically but this support declined significantly during the Covid-19 period – decreasing to 62 per cent in 2018 and further to 37 per cent in 2022. This decline revealed vulnerabilities in the regime, signalling early warnings of public dissatisfaction.

The authoritarian government fell into a confidence trap, assuming that elite co-optation and coercive measures, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and repression, would maintain its control. The regime built a winning coalition of business elites, the bureaucracy and the armed forces and held an election in January 2024 in which no major political party participated. Despite limited international criticism, several countries, including India, Russia and China, recognised the government. Confident in its control, the regime underestimated the potential for public mobilisation, and in July 2024, a student-led movement demanding the protection of civil service job quotas unexpectedly escalated into a nationwide uprising. Initially focused on positive liberty issues, such as maintaining civil service reservations, the movement quickly broadened to encompass democratic demands as citizens experiencing worsening economic conditions joined the students.

Calls for a new social contract emerged, emphasising governance, accountability and a more compassionate society.

By 3 August 2024, two days before the movement's success, students held a massive rally, joined by citizens from across the society. The uprising demanded not only the removal of the authoritarian ruler but also systemic reforms to prevent the emergence of future authoritarian governments. Calls for a new social contract emerged, emphasising governance, accountability and a more compassionate society. Notably, the movement was not driven by ideology but by practical aspirations to reform political structures and institutions.

Following the fall of the authoritarian government, an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus was established, with three main objectives: reform the political system, hold free and fair elections and ensure justice for victims of the previous regime. Over the past year, the government introduced 11 reform commissions tasked with constitutional reform, electoral system change, and public administration reform. Major political parties were invited to participate in these commissions to develop a consensus-based charter. From 166 recommendations, 84 were selected to form the July Charter, reflecting the outcomes of the uprising and proposed structural reforms.

However, the reform process has faced significant challenges. Major political parties, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have resisted structural changes that would limit executive authority, arguing that such reforms would weaken government performance. While the commissions recommended measures such as establishing an upper chamber to prevent arbitrary constitutional amendments and maintaining the independence of oversight institutions like the anti-corruption commission and the human rights commission, these proposals were opposed by parties expecting to come into power. They argued that checks on executive power would reduce efficiency and hinder government performance.

As a result, the likelihood of meaningful reforms being implemented before the upcoming national election is low. Limited agreements, such as a two-term limit for the prime minister and reforms to the Election Commission, remain incomplete and flawed. The reform process has been largely elite-driven. Despite the mass uprising, citizen participation in shaping the July Charter has been minimal. Surveys were conducted but their inputs were largely ignored. Even the proposed referendum to approve the charter is being framed and managed by political elites, with little effort to inform the public about its content or implications.

Despite the mass uprising, citizen participation in shaping the July Charter has been minimal.

At the same time, civil society organisations, weakened over the past 15 years by co-optation and adaptation to authoritarian rule, have little influence in shaping reforms. Law and order has declined, mobocracy has risen, and radical right-wing groups have become increasingly visible, further complicating the reform environment. Efforts to implement reforms in public administration have often been superficial, such as providing washrooms at petrol stations, rather than introducing structural changes or accountability measures.

The student-led movement that initially sparked the uprising has also struggled to navigate the political process. Rather than engaging citizens in explaining their reform agenda, student representatives entered the political bargaining process, which is heavily skewed in favour of traditional elites. This asymmetry, combined with elite resistance, limited citizen participation, and historical patterns of crisis-driven governance, has created a vicious cycle that undermines meaningful reform. As the country approaches the national election, faith in systemic change is waning, and there is a real risk that Bangladesh may revert to entrenched political patterns, leaving the aspirations of the 2024 uprising unfulfilled.

Crisis, State Capacity and Early Warning in Sri Lanka

Rajni Gamage

In Sri Lanka, this process has included legitimising an ethnocratic agenda of majoritarianism, in which both institutions and society were reorganised along ethnic categories.

The EWS lens provides a framework to understand how crises and polycrises unfold, such as in Sri Lanka, and to assess the capacity of the state and its institutions to respond. From the standpoint of state formation, the Sri Lankan state has been in a process of constant crisis since independence, most visibly manifested in the 30-year civil war, other forms of political violence during that period and in the post-war environment. The state and its institutions are not static entities; they are continually shaped through contestation among different social groups. In Sri Lanka, this process has included legitimising an ethnocratic agenda of majoritarianism, in which both institutions and the society were reorganised along ethnic categories. When crises are triggered by the state or its institutions, questions arise regarding the ability of those institutions to prevent or mitigate crises through coordination, functionality, and responsiveness.

As crises deepen, institutions become sites of contestation. The feedback that states respond to and the actions they undertake become highly contested, and institutions themselves are arenas where resistance and negotiation emerge. State-building and policy formation are shaped by social conflict over resources and authority, with elite interests dominating formal processes, while less powerful groups contest them within and outside formal political spaces. This ongoing process of formation, resistance, and contestation means that crises should not be viewed solely as failures but as articulations of demands for rights, equity and more accountable governance.

Since the 1980s, under the influence of the liberal international order, strengthening and refining institutions has been widely considered the primary solution to preventing crises in Sri Lanka. During this period, political violence was understood in two main ways: as a result of hollowed-out institutions failing to meet ideal benchmarks or as extra-institutional challenges to authority. This perspective persists over the following few decades. In the 2015 elections that brought the *Yahapalanaya* (Good Governance) government to power, for example, reform priorities included constraining the executive, pursuing constitutional reforms, establishing reconciliation institutions and strengthening accountability. This emphasis on institutional refinement continues until the 2022 crisis.

The 2022 crisis marked a rupture in prevailing understandings of the importance of institutions. The *Aragalaya* (People's Protests) articulated a demand for systemic change that extended beyond simply reinforcing democratic institutions. Public demands were concentrated on anti-corruption and economic rights, reflecting both the history of governance demands since 2015 and the intensity of the economic crisis. Two dominant strands emerged within the movement regarding institutional reform. One strand argued that current institutions were not delivering and advocated for alternative arrangements outside the formal democratic system, including the creation of people's councils that would form a national council. The other strand argued for reform from within the existing system, demanding greater articulation and accountability. Both approaches coexisted and reflected different strategies for institutional change.

The government under President Ranil Wickremesinghe co-opted some of these aspirations by initiating mechanisms such as the *Janasabha* (People's Council) and the National Council and incorporating more youth into parliamentary sectoral oversight committees. However, structural issues remained largely unaddressed, and public dissatisfaction persisted. The National People's Power (NPP) rose to power as an extension of the demand of the *Aragalaya* to improve institutions from within. Assessing whether institutions are now more capable of preventing crises or responding to public frustrations remains challenging, as the NPP government is in its first year. The anti-corruption agenda has been placed at the centre of government discourse, while ethnoreligious concerns and questions of power decentralisation have been reframed primarily as economic issues.

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While sidelining nationalism may appear positive, the core majority-minority fault line in Sri Lankan politics continues to exist. Economic and anti-corruption issues are prioritised, often framed as solutions to inequality and poverty but deeper structural reforms remain unaddressed. Financial logic increasingly dominates state reasoning, entrenching both local and international capital and legitimising greater centralisation of power. This is evident not only in the anti-corruption agenda but also in initiatives such as anti-drug campaigns under the 'Clean Sri Lanka' umbrella.

This centralisation of power limits the capacity of institutions to absorb or respond effectively to structural issues.

Institutions in Sri Lanka currently show limited capacity to anticipate or prevent crises. This situation is further compounded by the fact that governments, such as the NPP, which seek popularity with their core voter base do not necessarily ensure inclusion. This centralisation of power limits the capacity of institutions to absorb or respond effectively to structural issues. Changing demographics, including an increasingly atomised society and a new generation of youth making electoral decisions shaped by post-war neoliberal development and rapid material aspirations, indicate that future crises may take forms for which existing institutions are increasingly ill-equipped. Effective responses will require more agile mechanisms capable of processing and acting on public feedback more rapidly than current institutional processes can accommodate.

The Way Forward

The discussions on early warning, governance and humanitarianism point to several critical lessons and pathways for future action. EWS must not be treated as purely technical tools. They are deeply political and operate within broader governance frameworks at international, regional and domestic levels. When early warnings are made public, but action is not taken, this represents a distinct governance failure. Addressing this requires integrating early warning mechanisms into a comprehensive political and institutional agenda that ensures timely decision-making, accountability and responsiveness.

The evolving landscape of humanitarianism highlights the importance of national and local ownership. In an era of declining global aid and constrained political will, countries must explore pathways to greater self-reliance while ensuring that critical humanitarian needs are met. This shift requires rethinking the role of external actors and acknowledging the emergence of new, non-liberal actors who may seek to fill governance or service delivery vacuums. It also calls for mechanisms that maintain accountability and protect vulnerable populations from the politicisation of aid, whether by non-state armed groups or external states.

The evolving landscape of humanitarianism highlights the importance of national and local ownership.

The increasing complexity of crises, often described as polycrisis, also underscores the need for governance systems capable of capturing the interconnectedness of political, economic and climate dynamics. Institutions must be equipped not only with analytical tools but also with personnel trained to understand and respond to these interlinked challenges before they escalate. This includes fostering coordination across public administrations, developing interdisciplinary capacities, and strengthening adaptive decision-making frameworks that can respond to multiple, simultaneous pressures.

Appendix 1
About the Roundtable

Programme

Welcome Remarks
Dr Rajni Gamage
Research Fellow
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

Joint Roundtable
Chairperson
Dr Ruth Hanau Santini
Associate Professor
University of Naples "L'Orientale", Italy

Early Warning and Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis
Dr Andrea Novellis
Postdoctoral Researcher
University of Naples "L'Orientale", Italy

Early Warning Systems for Conflict – Literature Review
Mr Federico Maciocia
Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa, and
School of International Studies, University of Trento, Italy

Peacebuilding and Early Warning in Pakistan
Dr Zahid Shahab Ahmed
Honorary Fellow, Deakin Institute of Citizenship and Globalization,
Deakin University, Australia; and
Non-Resident Fellow
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

Protest and Governance in Bangladesh
Dr Asif M Shahan
Professor, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka,
Bangladesh; and Senior Research Fellow,
BRAC Institute of Governance and Development

Protests and Political Instability in Sri Lanka
Dr Rajni Gamage
Research Fellow
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

Interactive Session

End of Roundtable

Appendix 2
About the Chairperson and Panellists

Dr Ruth Hanau Santini is an Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Naples, Italy. Her research deals with notions of security (including food security), democracy and citizenship, in particular applied to the Middle East and North Africa. She also writes on Italian and European foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa, geopolitics of the Middle East and issues of citizenship in North Africa. She was previously Visiting Fellow at The Brookings Institution in Washington DC and Associate Fellow at Johns Hopkins University, SAIS Europe, and, more recently, served for three years as conflict advisor to the World Food Programme in Rome.

Dr Santini co-edited *Hybrid Governance in the Middle East and Africa* (with Abel Polese, Routledge, 2019) and *Rethinking Statehood in the Middle East and North Africa: Security, Sovereignty and Political Orders* (with Abel Polese, Routledge, 2018). Her monograph, *Limited Statehood in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia: Citizenship, Economy, Security*, was published by Palgrave in 2018. Her articles have appeared in several academic journals, including *Third World Quarterly*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, *The International Spectator* and *Middle East Policy*.

Dr Andrea Novellis is a political scientist based in Sri Lanka. Until recently, he was a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Naples "L'Orientale", with which he continues to collaborate on research examining how political risk analysis and conflict early warning systems function as both analytical and political instruments. He is also a Civil War Paths Fellow at the Centre for the Comparative Study of Civil War at the University of York. He is a member of the inter-university project, 'ITALIM: Italy and the International Politics of Food Security', funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Dr Novellis holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Milan, where his dissertation analysed rebel governance and ethnic relations in Syria, Sri Lanka and Nepal. His broader work explores governance and institutional change in (post-)conflict settings. His recent publications address Kurdish politics and rebel governance, and he has presented his research on early warning systems and Sri Lankan politics at international academic conferences.

Mr Federico Maciocia graduated with full marks (110/110 cum laude) from the University of Naples "L'Orientale", Italy, where he specialised in 'Early Warning Systems for Conflict: Comparative Analysis of Predictive Models, their Effectiveness and Connection with International Organisations'.

Mr Maciocia is currently a student in the joint Master's Degree in International Security Studies, jointly offered by the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa and the School of International Studies at the University of Trento.

Dr Zahid Shahab Ahmed is an Associate Professor in Security and Strategic Studies, at the National Defense College of the United Arab Emirates. Prior to joining Deakin University as Senior Research Fellow in April 2016, he was an Assistant Professor at the Centre for International Peace and Stability, National University of Sciences and Technology, Pakistan. He is a prominent commentator on Pakistan's domestic politics and foreign policy.

Dr Ahmed has been associated with several think tanks in Islamabad, including the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad and Islamabad Policy Research Institute. During 2017-19, he was a non-resident research fellow with the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy. He is a board member of the International Peace Research Association Foundation and the secretary of the South Asian Studies Association of Australia. He is also a Non-Resident Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore.

Dr Ahmed has Master's degrees in Sociology and Peace Education and a PhD in International Relations. Among his publications is *Regionalism and Regional Security in South Asia: The Role of SAARC* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013). He writes regularly for several news outlets, including *The National Interest* and *Al Jazeera*.

Dr Asif M Shahan is currently working as a Professor at Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is also affiliated with the Governance and Politics Cluster of the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development where he is serving as a Senior Research Fellow. He has worked on different issues related with political institutions, administrative system, government performance, accountability, social protection and governance of Bangladesh for more than 18 years.

He received his PhD in Political Science from George Mason University in 2015 and a Master of Public Administration from the same university in 2011. His PhD thesis was on institutions of accountability. He explored the Government Accountability Office's role in the United States' political system and explained how the institution managed to maintain its autonomy while being relevant to the policy makers.

Dr Shahan has provided consultancy services to different agencies of the Bangladesh government (including the Prime Minister's Officer, Cabinet Division, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation) and international organisations, including the World Bank, the United Nations (UN) Development Programme, the UN Population Fund, the UN International Children's Emergency Fund, the World Food Programme, Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex), Agropolis France, Swisscontact Bangladesh, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, The Asia Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Centers on the Public Service and George Mason University, among others. He has authored a number of book chapters and several journal articles in different peer reviewed journals.

Dr Rajni Gamage is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Her research interests are the politics of governance and state transformation, and development and inequality in Sri Lanka. She holds a PhD in Political Science and International Relations from the School of Political Science & International Studies at the University of Queensland; a Post-doctorate from ISAS-NUS; an MSc in International Relations from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Relations (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, and a BSc in Political Science from NUS. She is also a Visiting Researcher at the Center for South Asian Studies, Gifu Women's University, Japan (April 2025 to March 2026) and a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the Dacca Institute of Research and Analytics, Bangladesh (January 2026 to January 2027).

Dr Gamage's PhD, titled 'Nation as Village: Historicising the Authoritarian Populist Regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka', was a critical analysis of the politics of Rajapaksism in Sri Lanka. Among her other publications are 'Sri Lanka's NPP Government: From System Change to Structural Compliance' (Institut français des relations internationales, 2025); 'Negotiating left politics in Sri Lanka: The NPP in government' (Green Agenda, 2025), 'Authoritarian Politics and Gender in Sri Lanka: A Survey' (Routledge, 2024), 'Reforms in Sri Lanka: Emerging Trends in Elite Politics' (*Economic & Political Weekly*, 2023), and 'Buddhist Nationalism, Authoritarian Populism, and the Muslim Other in Sri Lanka' (*Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 2021). Prior to joining ISAS, Dr Gamage worked as a researcher in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and as a senior analyst at RSIS, NTU.

Appendix 3
About the Editors

Dr Ruth Hanau Santini is an Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Naples, Italy. Her research deals with notions of security (including food security), democracy and citizenship, in particular applied to the Middle East and North Africa. She also writes on Italian and European foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa, geopolitics of the Middle East and issues of citizenship in North Africa. She was previously Visiting Fellow at The Brookings Institution in Washington DC and Associate Fellow at Johns Hopkins University, SAIS Europe, and, more recently, served for three years as conflict advisor to the World Food Programme in Rome.

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Ms Devyani Chaturvedi is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She graduated with a Master's in International Affairs from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS, specialising in International Economics and Development. She is interested in examining the intersection between international affairs, economic development and governance in developing economies of South Asia. Ms Chaturvedi has previously worked with the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi, where she examined India's trade, taxation and industrial policy. At the Council for Strategic and Defence Research, she was the research lead for policy analysis on the Indo-Pacific. She has also done research work at the Energy Studies Institute, NUS, and University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Advanced Studies.

Ms Chaturvedi has contributed chapters in the following publications, *Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: Conceptual and Operational Challenges* (Routledge, 2022), *Infrastructure in India: Investment Priorities, Opportunities and Key Challenges* (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2021) and *Evaluation of India's Faceless E-Assessment Tax Scheme* (NCAER, 2022). She has also presented in conferences, notably at the North Korean Review and Korean International Studies' Annual Convention in South Korea (2022), Evolving Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific in New Delhi (2021), Global Public Policy Network in London (2020) and Global Public Policy Network in Singapore (2019). She was awarded a three-month research fellowship by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability. She was awarded the second prize for her study on Sustainable Trade in Asia, by the Hinrich Foundation and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

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