



Aragalaya Protests, Government Counter Measures, and their Impact on Democracy in Sri Lanka



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Abbreviation

AL	:	GCE Advanced level
CWC	:	Ceylon Workers Congress
Front	:	Front Line Socialist Party
GGG	:	Gota Go Gama
GGH	:	Gota Go Home
GR	:	Gotabhaya Rajapaksa
JVP	:	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LGBTQ	:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
LTTE	:	The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MGG	:	Minah Go Gama
NGO	:	Non-Governmental Organization
OL	:	GCE Ordinary Level
PTA	:	Prevention of Terrorism Act
SLFP	:	Sri Lankan Freedom Party
SLMC	:	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
SLPP	:	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna
TNA	:	Tamil National Alliance
UNP	:	United National Party

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The political and social protests against the Sri Lankan state have a long history. From 1971 to 2009 most protests took a violent form. JVP uprisings of 1971 and 1987-1989 as well as the separatist struggle by the LTTE from 1983 to 2009 took a violent form resulting in mass destruction, large-scale loss of lives and democratic backslides of an irreversible nature. In contrast, the pro-democracy campaigns from mid- 2022 to September 2022 were largely of a peaceful character involving mass occupation by protestors of certain urban locations, display of placards, flags and other symbols, use of art, music and performance as well as social media to popularize pro-democracy agitations. These protests started out as countrywide consumer protests against fuel shortages, candle light vigils in Colombo against repeated power cuts throughout the country and largely youth protests in Galle Face Green, road front of the Temple Trees, the official residence of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and outstation protest sites in towns like Kandy, Galle, Matara, Anuradhapura and Badulla. These protests demanded the immediate resignation of the ruling government. These protests were epitomized in the slogans “Go Home Gota” (*Gotagohome*) and “Mynah Go Home” (*Mynagohome*), demanding the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the President of Sri Lanka and his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa, the then Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. These populist demands centred around the Galle Face Green, renamed by the protestors as Gotagogama village and the site opposite Temple Trees, the site renamed by the protestors as Mynahgogama.

In this research we have identified the larger protest movement as Gotagogama (GGG) movement, with GGG been identified as an important site of conscience for progressive democratic mobilization in the whole country. GGG survived as a site of popular public protest for over 100 days from April to September with a significant population of resident and visiting protestors including artists, media personalities, university students, social activists and faith actors from different communities. Similarly, MGG survived for over three months despite multiple effort by the security establishments to get rid of the protestors in this high security site. There was a pro-government violent attack instigated by supporters of Mahinda Rajapaksa on both these sites in Colombo and some of outstation protest sites on May 9th and May 10th, which severely affected the spirit of non-violence protest and pushed protestors to undertake counterattacks in variety of ways. Thugs owing allegiance to Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) attacked protestors in front of the Prime Minister’s residence and at Galle Face, opposite the Presidential Secretariat, leading to pitched battles and the destruction of protest sites in Colombo. The protests, however, were restarted within a few hours. Moreover, on the same night a widespread backlash against these pro-establishment attacks on the protestors, took a violent form targeting the houses, property and vehicles of selected government politicians throughout the country. The state responded to these developments by replacing the Prime Minister and the removal of four Rajapaksas in the cabinet and formation of a new cabinet with some new faces. These changes, however, did not satisfy the protestors who demanded

a complete regime change, constitutional reforms and participatory democracy from top to bottom. Subsequent protests leading to a mass invasion of the presidential mansion in Colombo forced Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country and submit his resignation from Singapore in July 2022. Using constitutional provisions available, Ranil Wickremasinghe was elected as the new president by the parliament in October 2022 and subsequently he appointed Dinesh Gunawardena as the new prime minister and a new cabinet from within SLPP and a number of breakaways from other parties in the parliament. Ranil Wickremasinghe opted to resort to state repression by introducing emergency measures and turning to the Prevention of Terrorism Act to arrest some of the key leaders of Aragalaya and detain them for extended periods without conducting a fair trial. This forced the termination of GGG, MGG and other places of occupation in provincial towns, but protests continued in the form of agitations against the arbitrary arrests of the key Aragalaya actors in selected locations in Colombo despite heavy presence of security forces and causing further arrests in many instances.

Against this background the current study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the background to and what were the underlying causes of the social protest movement?
2. Who were the attackers and who were the victims of the attacks in pro-government and anti-government violence?
3. What were the motivations for the different attacks? How and by whom the attackers were mobilized?
4. What is the role of state, political parties, the police, and the security forces in state repression targeting Aragalaya?
5. What is the role of Anthare student movement, GGG movement, class dynamics, spontaneous crowd behavior, trade unions and progressive social forces in resisting state repression?
6. What lessons can be learnt from these events for pro-democracy initiatives in the global south?

It was difficult to explore these issues in full due to the vested interest of the state and other actors to hide the information also in the light of widespread allegations against corruption, nepotism, misuse of power and human rights violations. Field research was difficult given the current security environment in the country and logistic constraints like severe shortages of fuel and other essential commodities and the resulting impact on transport services, power cuts and people having to spend long hours in queues for obtaining essential commodities. However, the unfolding social and political crisis in the country is too important to miss from the angle of pro-democracy and anti-democracy mobilizations and future strategies for democratization in the global south.

Against this background the study used the following research procedures.

1. A literature review covering the relevant global literature relating to the topic.
2. Review of secondary data including mass media and social media.

3. Key Informants Interviews with selected people including victims of attacks, observers, social media actors, You-tubers, journalists and social activists.
4. Online survey of 1200 people covering selected categories of respondents such as university students, social activists, community leaders and the public.

These research procedures adapted to the current situation in the country sought to assess the current knowledge relating to popular protest and democratization, review available information about the relevant incidents in Colombo, outstation protest sites and attack on key politicians connected with the ruling government and establish the views and opinions of key stakeholders about the social protests including the GGG movements and attacks on GGG activists and counter attacks. We completed this study in three months. The research team included a sociologist, political scientist, and a group of research assistants who were specially trained to collective sensitive data.

1. Online Survey Methodology

The survey form was developed in English by the research team, translated it into Sinhala and Tamil and pretested using university students and the questions were modified accordingly. The researchers used their contacts with university students, including post graduate students, Aragalaya actors, NGO personnel and the general public to encourage people to encourage them to respond to the online survey and complete the google form. In effect this sample is likely to over represent the pro-Aragalaya public. While this is by no means a random sample of respondents, it enabled to use to get public responses about Aragalaya from a relatively large sample within the time constraints of the study. What is important, however, is the fact that it helps us to explore the impact of anti-regime and anti-hegemonic sentiments on a multi-ethnic and multi-religious sample directly or indirectly impacted by the Aragalaya. The online survey was conducted from July to November 2022.

Table 1.1: Classification of the Sample by Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	699	58.3	58.3	58.3
Female	501	41.8	41.8	100.0
Total	1200	100.0	100.0	

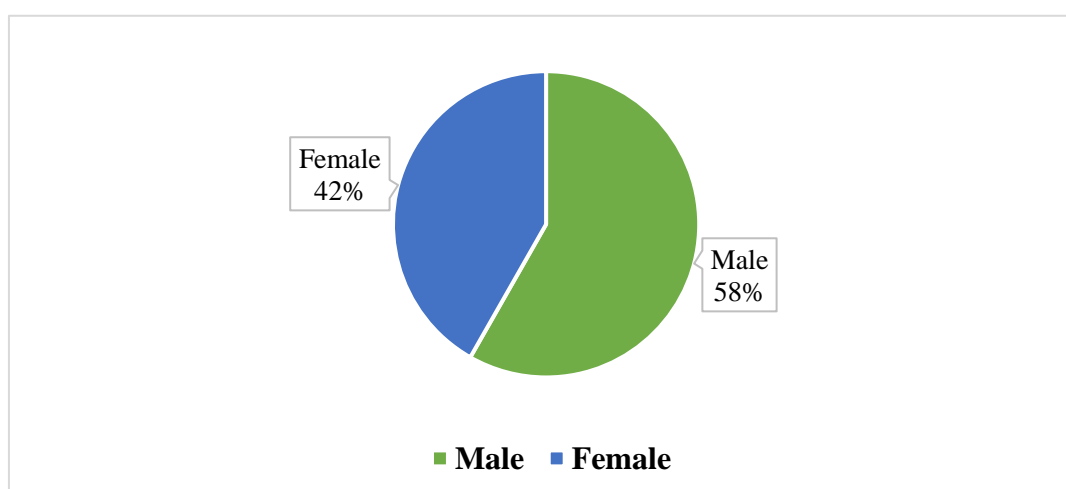


Figure 1.1 Breakdown of the Sample by Gender

Table 1 and Figure 1 present the gender breakdown of the sample. A total of 58% of all participants were male, and the balance was female. This enables us to explore the views of both males and females in respect of Aragalaya.

Table 1.2: Composition of the Sample by Religion

Religion	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Buddhism	599	49.9	49.9	49.9
Hindu	216	18.0	18.0	67.9
Islam	123	10.3	10.3	78.2
Catholic	121	10.1	10.1	88.3
Christian	116	9.7	9.7	97.9
Other	25	2.1	2.1	100.0
Total	1200	100.0	100.0	

Thus, the study sample was multi-religious representing all religions in the country, though not in the proportions they are found in Sri Lanka as a whole. A four-point Likert scale ranging from Agree to Strongly Agree and Disagree to Strongly Disagree was applied to assess the respondents' views regarding positive or negative attitudes relating to Aragalaya. A consistency in attitudes was established by comparing the attitudes of the respondents to positive and negative statements relating to aragalya.

Composition of sample by age:

Table 1.3. Age in years					
Age Group		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	15-24	183	15.3	15.3	15.3
	25-39	372	31.0	31.0	46.3
	40-60	410	34.2	34.2	80.4
	Above 60	235	19.6	19.6	100.0
	Total	1200	100.0	100.0	

The perception of the Aragalaya may change depending on the age distribution. It depends on their educational level and the experience they gained throughout their lifetime. Therefore, age has become an essential criterion to consider. According to the statistics, nearly 65 percent (782) of the total respondents are between the age of 25-39 and 40-60 and

19.6 percent of respondents are above 60. 15.3 percent (183) of the rest are below 25. The age distribution is shown in table 1.2.

2. Social background of Aragalaya actors

The following sections covers social background of Aragalaya actors in terms of education, occupation, ethnicity, political affiliation, etc.

Sample by Educational level:

Education level	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Below GCE OL	3	.3	.3	.3
O/L	54	4.5	4.5	4.8
A/L	253	21.1	21.1	25.8
Undergraduate	199	16.6	16.6	42.4
First degree	336	28.0	28.0	70.4
Post-graduate qualifications	355	29.6	29.6	100.0
Total	1200	100.0	100.0	

Under the socio-economic background, educational qualification is an undeniable criterion to be concerned with when selecting respondents. The highest number of respondents are postgraduates and they are 26.9 percent of the total number of respondents. 28 percent of them are first degree holders and 21.1 percent of the respondents are at Advanced Level. Of the rest, 16.6 percent of respondents are undergraduates and less than 5 percent of the respondents study at Ordinary Level and below Ordinary Level. As we run an online survey, it enabled largely the educated and those use/conversant with social media networks to fill out the questionnaire – which seems to be the reason for the higher representation of graduates in the sample frame. Table 2.3 indicates the educational qualifications of the respondents.

Employment status of respondents

Current Employment Status	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Unemployed	269	22.4	22.4	22.4
Employed (public sector)	311	25.9	25.9	48.3
Employed (private Sector)	283	23.6	23.6	71.9
Employed(NGO)	89	7.4	7.4	79.3
Self-employed	129	10.8	10.8	90.1

	Business	119	9.9	9.9	100.0
	Total	1200	100.0	100.0	

The employment status of the respondents in the survey varies from unemployed to employed in public, private or NGO sectors. As this is a survey of people's perception relating to the Aragalaya, it is important to know how it varies according to the occupational status. The survey covers the employment status including, employed (public sector/private sector), self-employed, unemployed, employed in NGOs and businesses. Of the total number of respondents, 25.9 percent of the total respondents are employed in the public sector, while 23.6 percent of them are employed in the private sector and 22.4 percent of them are unemployed. The other respondents are NGO workers which are 7.4 percent, and 10.8 percent are self-employed. The rest are engaged in businesses and that is 9.9 percent.

Political Affiliation of respondents

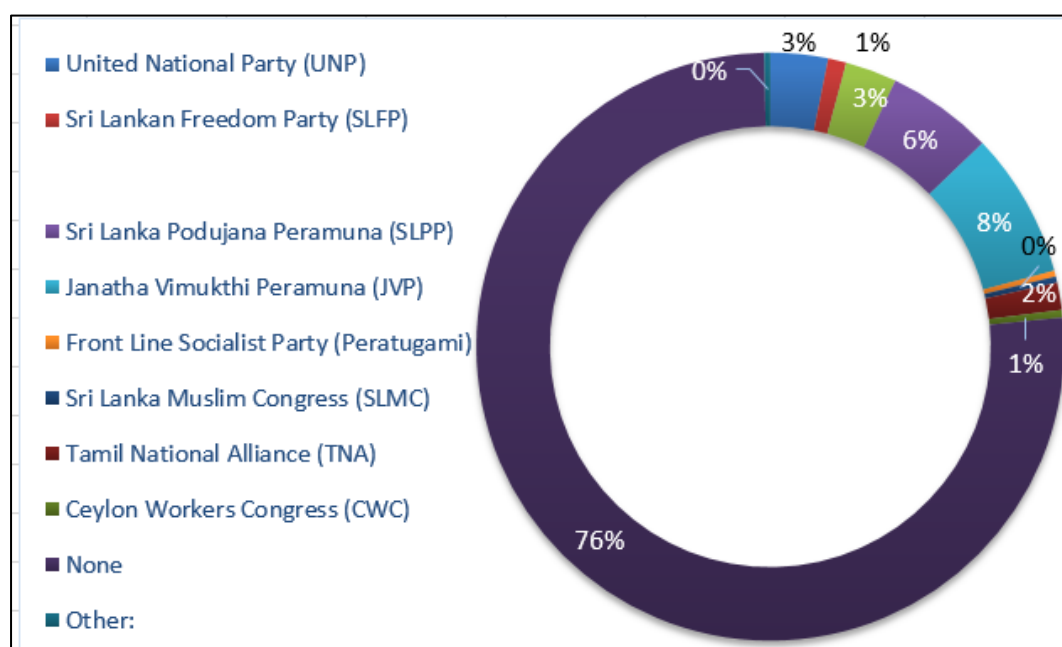


Figure 1.2: Political Affiliation of respondents

Aragalaya made history by being the site of Sri Lanka's first-ever non-party affiliated rebellion against the government. This was entirely a populist protest against the administration, started by locals in response to the excruciating crisis they had to endure in recent months. This is clear from the responses to the question about Aragalaya's political affiliation. In the light of this, the vast majority of respondents (76.3 percent) were politically neutral or unaffiliated with any of the political parties. Despite being part of the widespread protests against the government at the time, only 8 percent of the respondents belonged to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, who played an active role in Aragalaya as it progressed. However, a total of 23.4 percent of the respondents were linked to one or the other political party.

Sample composition by Ethnicity

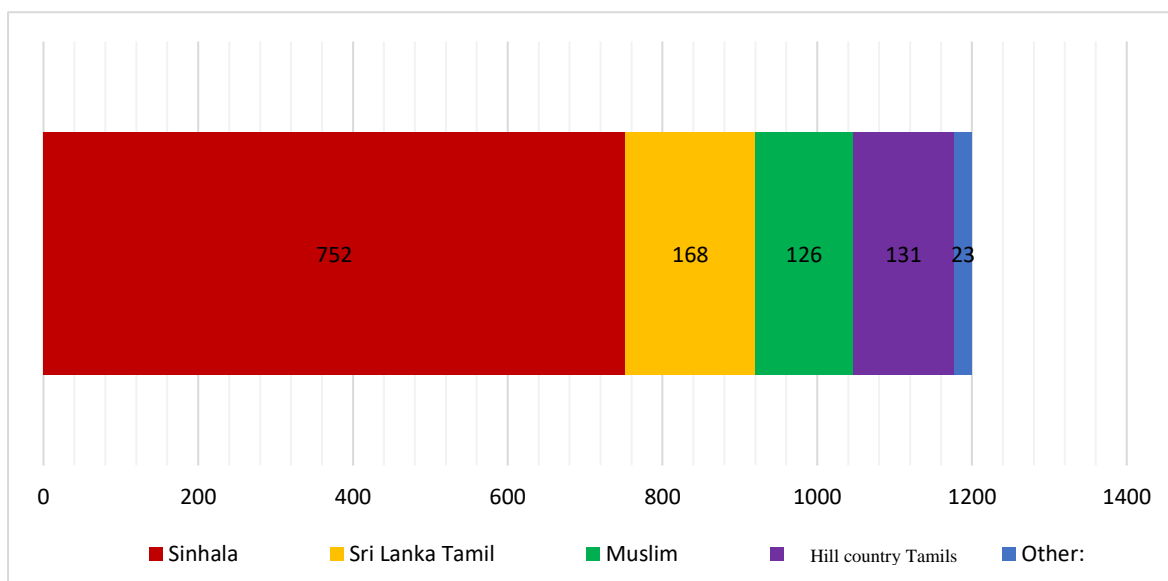


Figure 1.3: Sample composition by Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a foremost feature in the population and politics in Sri Lanka. In recent times the Sri Lanka politics has centred around ethnicity. A total of 62.7 percent of those who participated in the online survey were Sinhalese and others were Sri Lanka Tamil (14.0), Indian Tamil (10.9), Muslim (10.5), and others (1.9). Figure 1.3 indicates the respondents according to ethnicity. The sample in the online survey was ethnically diverse and, therefore, the online survey captures the views of all ethnic groups to varying extents.

Thus the respondents in the survey came from diverse backgrounds, with those unaligned with any political parties at the time of the survey forming a vast majority. There was substantial diversity among the respondents in respect of gender, ethnicity and religious identity. The sample was educationally diverse with those with higher educational qualifications forming a majority, as is typically the case in many online surveys. Nearly three quarters of the respondents were employed at the time of the survey as against the remaining one quarter that was unemployed. These characteristics of the sample may make it atypical of the population at larger, but it makes it possible for us to explore how their opinions about Aragalaya differ according to the differences in their demographic characteristics and socio-economic features.

Chapter 2:

Aragalaya as an Urge for Democratization in Society: Perspectives Relating to Aragalaya and Its Impact on Democracy

2.1 Introduction

“When an elected authority abuses power, people can exercise sovereignty through expressing views, opposition, protest and even rebellion” as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says. Thus, Sri Lankan citizens demonstrated their discontent over the persistent mal governance and demanded more democracy through spontaneous protests for over 100 days. Aragalaya showed that the social contract has been broken and is a clear rejection of their representatives by the sovereign people. The people questioned the constitution’s legitimacy, rendering it illegitimate. However, a distinctive characteristic of Sri Lanka’s current situation is the democratic political thinking expressed via the slogans and demands of the Aragalaya and the resistance movement. The Aragalaya has given a new dimension to our politics, characterized by a transformation in people’s roles in politics from being passive bystanders to vigilant or assertive citizens. The right to recall elected officials and other direct democracy mechanisms, checks and balances against abuses of power by political and bureaucratic elites, anti-corruption, asset declaration, greater transparency and accountability, revering stolen money, reducing powers of the President, constitutional reforms and direct participation in policy deliberations through people’s councils are some of the ideas that sought to address the shortcomings or steady decline of representative-parliamentary democracy through the Aragalaya.

2.2 Democratic features of Aragalaya and people’s participation

People’s involvement in Aragalaya was extremely high and rare democratic moment in post-independent Sri Lanka. There were numerous reasons as to why the involvement, attraction, and sensation was high throughout the Aragalaya. As such, the Aragalaya site as citizens' movement was an open space to all who share the same core demand for the removal of the autocratic President and his family - diverse groups began taking space at the same site ranging from the deaf people to disabled ex-military, Buddhist monks and Christian clergy, the victims of the 2019 Easter Sunday attack, good governance campaigners, human rights defenders, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ groups, women, children, university students and many more. Excluded social groups empowered through Aragalaya to express their sufferings, agony, grievances, discriminations, exclusions faced in the Sri Lankan society and polity for several decades. They became part of mainstream politics during the Aragalaya and for the first time, they experienced democratic values and principles – which was a rare moment in

the post independent Sri Lanka. Because Sri Lankan state has always been exclusive, discriminatory, majoritarian, oppressive, authoritarian and ethnocentric or ethno-religious centric.

It is possible to argue that Aragalaya was common space for Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese to express their independent views and grievances over national political and economic issues of the country. Because Sri Lankan state, since the 1970s to date, remains a National Security State, was an instrument effectively used to repress ethnic minorities in general, Tamils specifically. During JVP uprisings the same security state used violence against the rebels to suppress them. The state was largely securitized so that a sense of fear was deliberately imposed among the public to prevent expressing independent views against the government. Yet, the Aragalaya reversed the situation. Some ethnic minority respondents were of the view that issues of the minorities in general and Tamils in particular were not sufficiently discussed and debated in the Aragalaya site and there were some nationalist and chauvinist elements opposing power sharing, transitional justice, etc. Nevertheless, a significant number of participants stated that a large majority of the Aragalaya movement were supportive of addressing minorities' issues. For instance, on May 18, hundreds of Sri Lankans including Sinhalese gathered in Galle Face Green, to mourn the 2009 killings of Tamil civilians in the last battle the army had fought with the LTTE at Mullivaikkal. It was the site, where for more than a decade, successive governments had celebrated the war victory day to hail the Sri Lankan army's win in the war, to remind the fact that Sri Lanka is a Sinhala –Buddhist nation. Some Tamils believe that the Aragalaya was an opportunity for people living in the south of the country to finally understand what Tamils had gone through during the civil war.

Further, people from all walks of life celebrated Sinhala –Tamil New Year, Ramazan Festival, Poson and Vesak festivals, and victims of Easter attack came to the site to mourn their relatives who lost lives during the attack. Muslims got an opportunity to mingle with larger Sri Lankan society after the Easter Sunday carnage and subsequent onslaught on all Muslims by the majoritarian mindset. Most importantly, the LGBTQ+ community held an 'Aragalaya Pride March' on the 25th of June followed by 'colors of revolution and a pride concert' at the Aragalaya site. The Pride March was the first Pride March ever held in Sri Lanka to make community's opposition to the repressive government. Yet, it was found during the interviews with key informants that the LGBTQ+ community as well as women who willingly participated in Aragalaya were subjected to various forms of discrimination and exclusion in the decision -making process, implying that Aragalaya was not entirely free of the institutionalized male domination in social life.

Citizens from all walks of life owned the Aragalaya site with a sense of feeling that it was the place for them to raise voices against governance failures, institutionalized corruption and socio-economic issues, injustice and inequality. People from all corners of the island arrived in droves to proclaim a range of grievances, which had previously been met with apathy or suppression. The Aragalaya site was a flourishing site equipped with a community kitchen,

portable toilets, a first aid center, a recycling center, solar power, a makeshift library, a legal aid office, international media unit, a people's university, and an art gallery. In the evening hours as well as weekends, the atmosphere thickens into a vibrant blur of emotion, with impassioned speeches, silent protests, teachings, poetry readings, and open-air dramas amplifying the enthusiasm of the protestors' demands. The Gota Go Gama College and people's university had arranged a series of discussions and debates covering a range of topics including politics, democracy, governance, caste, gender justice, electoral reforms, environmental justice, economic crisis, nation state, etc. All of which helped enlighten people.

2.3 Drivers of Aragalaya

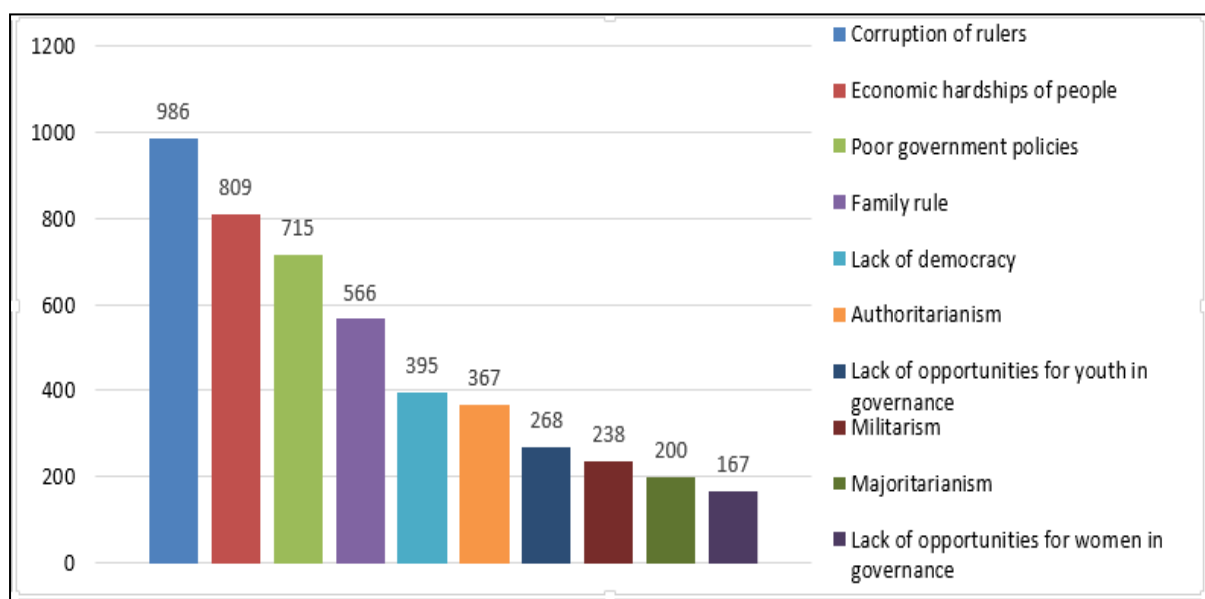


Figure 2.1: Influential Factors in Aragalaya

We asked the respondents which of the specified factors most significantly influenced the people's decision to join Aragalaya. According to their responses, the leading trigger for Aragalaya was corruption in the regime, followed by economic hardships, poor government policies, family rule, lack of democracy, authoritarian tendencies, lack of space for youth in governance, militarization of rule, majoritarianism and lack of space for women in governance. Economic hardships all sections of the population at the time and other factors may be seen as factors that contributed to the ongoing economic crisis.

Further analysis of the drivers of Aragalaya is provided in Table 2.1 and Figure 2.2.

Table 2.2: How important were the following factors as drivers of Aragalaya

No	Factors	(N=1200)	%
1.	Corruption of rulers	986	82.17
2.	Economic hardships of people	809	67.42

3.	Poor government policies	715	59.58
4.	Family rule	566	47.17
5.	Lack of democracy	395	32.92
6.	Authoritarianism	367	30.58
7.	Lack of opportunities for youth in governance	268	22.33
8.	Militarism	238	19.83
9.	Majoritarianism	200	16.67
10.	Lack of opportunities for women in governance	167	13.92

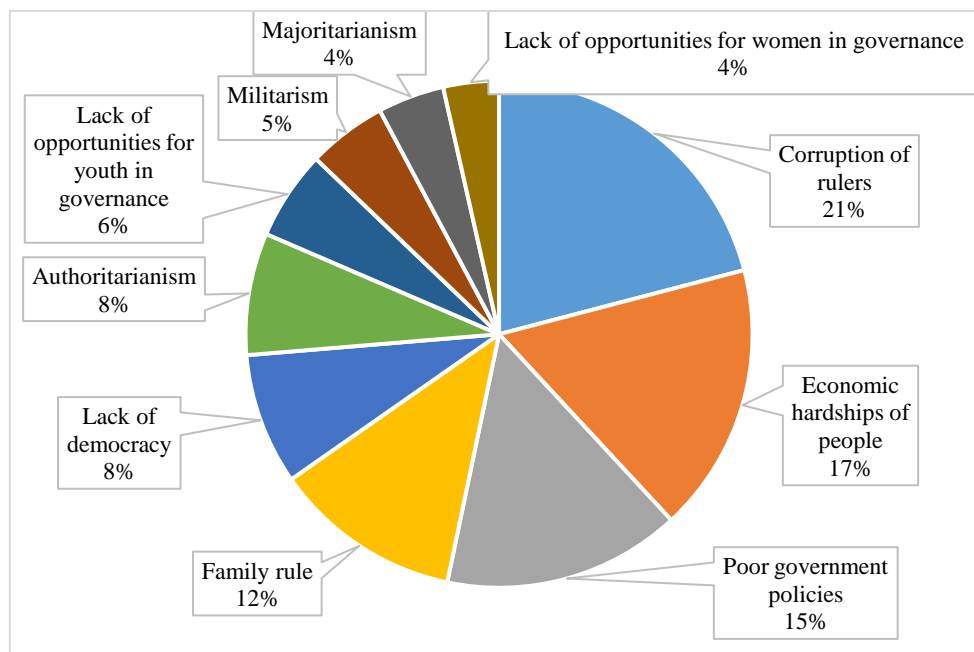


Figure 2.2: Active participant in the larger social movement

Aragalaya could be identified as a volcanic activity of social distress which has been fed by diverse factors. When they were evaluated, 82.17 percent indicated corruption of rulers as the key issue contributing to the Aragalaya. Economic hardships of the people came second with 67.42 percent of votes. Poor government policies came third with 59.58% percent of votes. These were the three most important factors that led the Aragalaya. The respondents' perceptions of the drivers of Aragalaya indicated a particular reading of the economic crisis that the nation had plunged into. Under the influence of Aragsalaya the unfolding economic crisis was attributed to a range of related factors including corruption of the leaders, family rule, poor governance, lack of democracy, authoritarianism, majoritarianism and militarism.

The most remarkable feature of all is the scale of coordination and camaraderie among the protestors. Despite hundreds in attendance from various backgrounds, Aragalaya remained orderly, peaceful, and tolerant—this in a country not far removed from a 30-year civil war

(Ranaraja, 2022). After all, the Aragalaya came to be seen as a symbol of unity, creativity, and political enlightenment. Its spirit began to spread nationally, as offshoots of Aragalaya sprang up in Kandy and Galle. Sri Lankans worldwide have also been inspired by the Aragalaya, and protests have appeared in cities across Australia, Europe, and the United States in support of friends and family back home. Dissent against the government is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka, but the peaceful ethos of Aragalaya along with its leaderless and nonpartisan status, made it different from past uprisings that have been marred by violence and propaganda. The movement has drawn strength and popularity from its capital location and youthful leadership, in stark contrast to previous uprisings. These public demonstrations of unity are an historic phenomenon in a country that has been deeply divided along ethno-religious lines for decades. Regimes both past and present have pandered to the Sinhala Buddhist majority at the expense of the Tamil and Muslim minorities and used the resulting racial tensions to propel themselves into positions of power and impunity. The government was shaken by Aragalaya actions due to widespread support from public sector- they are usually loyal to the government of the day - as well as small business operators and workers, rural traders, farmers and fishers, and women workers from the export processing zones. The power of the working class to cripple commercial activity and disrupt normalcy was a greater immediate threat to the state.

The peaceful Aragalaya showcased the spirit of Sri Lankan diversity, and surely is our most inclusive movement since Independence. The social oppression based on the issues of caste, ethnicity, religion and gender worked as an important factor that strengthened the Aragalaya. There were also discussions about the notion of a secular state for Sri Lanka amidst growing dissent on the part of Buddhist monks and some nationalist elements. The Aragalaya highlighted the need for a parallel system of People's Assemblies for direct representation and making decisions on crucial issues. One respondent stated that "Aragalaya was democratic as it never had a clear leader - everybody shared equal responsibility for the spontaneous project, in such a way that all were leaders." Another respondent from an ethnic minority background claimed that "Aragalaya formed citizens fit for true democracy and gave us a glimmer of hope in democracy, not just in name but in practice." Some respondents argued that "people were unaware of the power of popular sovereignty and how to use it until the Aragalaya broke out."

We posed a question in the online survey as to the specific aspect of Aragalaya that they liked most. Social harmony, diversity and the ways in which ideas were expressed over economic issues had largely inspired Sri Lankans during Aragalaya.

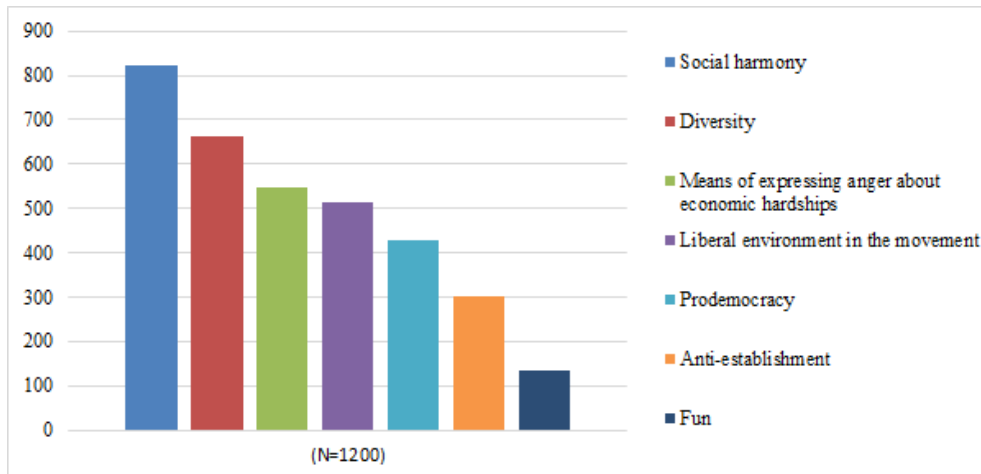


Figure 2.3: Most likeable aspect of the Aragalaya

This indicates that social harmony, diversity and space given to express anger over economic hardships and mal-governance had largely attracted Sri Lankans to visit Aragalaya site and unconditionally support their cause for the democratic, inclusive and corruption free Sri Lanka. Before the Aragalaya broke out, democratic attitudes of a large segment of Sri Lankan citizens were at a low point. Analysis of the empirical evidence shows that an elite responding with minor or tokenistic measures to address the citizens uprising is unlikely to suppress the grassroots level demands for democratization, good governance and transparency of decision making.

“The series of events related to the Aragalaya that caused Mahinda Rajapaksa to lose premiership and Gotabaya to lose the Presidency has led the people to believe that through a public uprising outside a parliamentary election could bring about a change in the government (Ivan, 2022). This situation increased the strength, appearance and the public base of the Aragalaya enhancing its ability to hold onto it persistently. Aragalaya depicted the fact that popular mobilization outside the established constitutional framework can also change the traditional dimensions of the political power struggle. It was found in the online survey that 92.5% of the respondents agreed with the point that Aragalaya served to enhance people’s power to protect democracy and hold the government accountable. Around 92.2% stated that Aragalaya was triggered because of corruption and misuse of power by rulers. During the interview, one respondent stated that “We managed to give a red signal to Rajapaksa family’s authoritarian power.” Another respondent noted that “Sri Lanka’s power structure has been built around certain families and everything is being handled in the country by those families. We have flashed a red light to that hegemonic system, asking for a more democratic way of governance”. All of these viewpoints show a great deal of discontent over the power structure that prevailed in society.

The Aragalaya is regarded as a watershed moment in Sri Lankan history because it affected the entire nation and made long-term political change feasible. This demonstrated that a

population's active involvement in a protest may have a significant impact and possibly spark a social revolution of a kind. From this angle, it is possible to view the former president's resignation as a defining moment for Aragalaya.

2.4 People's Involvement in Aragalaya

A question was asked from the respondents if they actively participated in Aragalaya. The result is given in Figure 2.4.

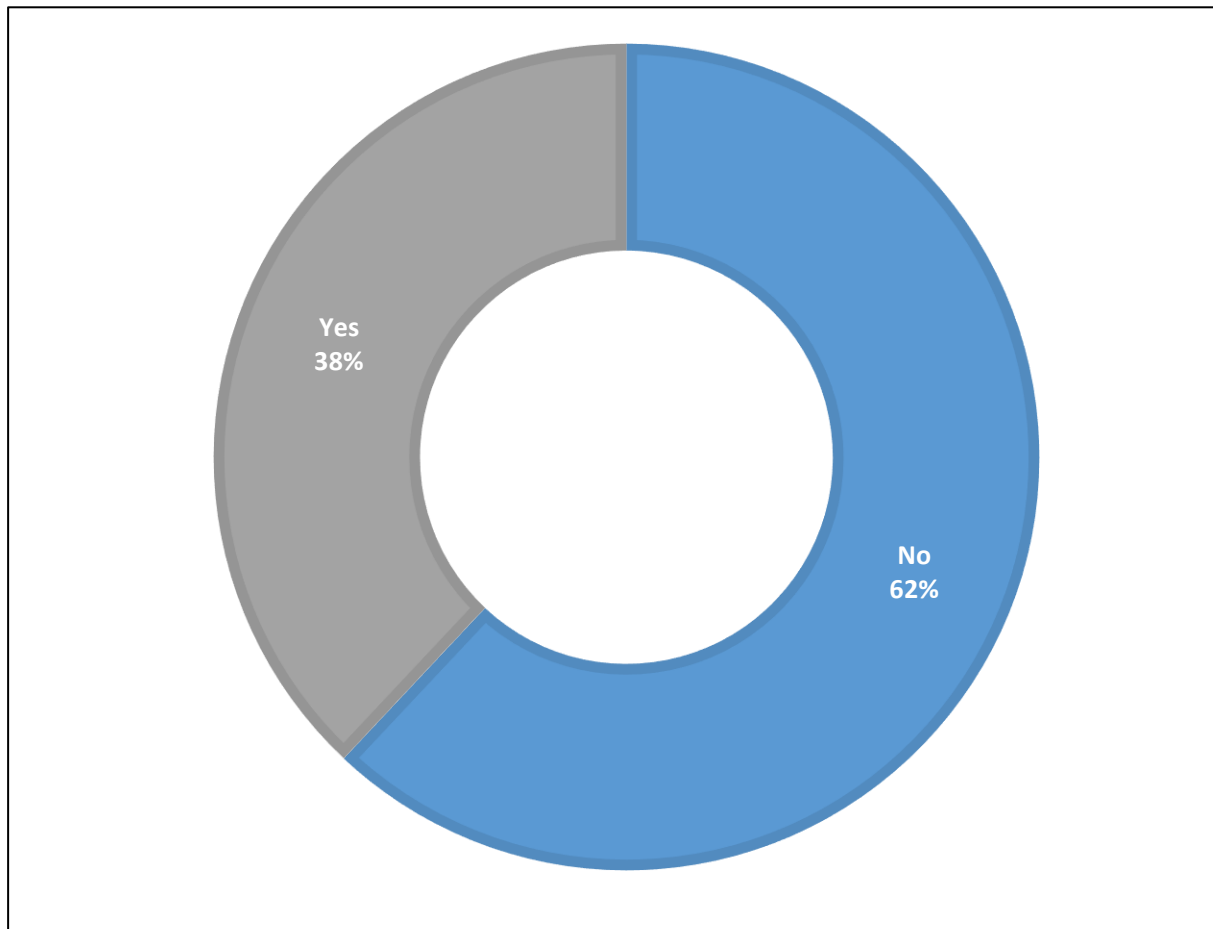


Figure 2.4 Active participant in the larger social movement

Some 38% of the respondents admitted having actively participated in Aragalaya in the form of participation in protests, visits to protest sites or sharing relevant posts through their face books. This indicates that even in a relatively pro-Aragalaya sample like the one used in the current study, the active participation in the protests was limited to less than 40% of the respondents. This is, however, the general expected pattern in a population survey.

We also explored how the response to this question varied according to the ethnic identity of the respondents. The resulting data are given in Table 2.3.

Ethnicity:		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Sinhala	No	454	60.4	60.4	60.4
	Yes	298	39.6	39.6	100.0
	Total	752	100.0	100.0	
Sri Lanka Tamils	No	126	75.0	75.0	75.0
	Yes	42	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	168	100.0	100.0	
Muslim	No	85	67.5	67.5	67.5
	Yes	41	32.5	32.5	100.0
	Total	126	100.0	100.0	
Hill Country Tamils	No	67	51.1	51.1	51.1
	Yes	64	48.9	48.9	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	
Other:	No	12	52.2	52.2	52.2
	Yes	11	47.8	47.8	100.0
	Total	23	100.0	100.0	

On an Ethnicity basis, the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils (75%), Muslims (67.5%), and Sinhalese (60.4%) were not actively involved in the protest. But a key finding of this study was that the Hill Country Tamils reported the highest percentage of active participation in Aragalaya, namely 48.9 percent of all respondents from this community. By comparison, the Sri Lanka Tamils reported the least active participation in the Aragalaya (25%). During the interviews, it was found that there was broad-based participation of people across all ethnic and religious lines.

The reported highest participation in Aragalaya among Hill Country Tamils may be due to their marginalized position in Sri Lanka society, the significant impact of economic hardships on this community as well as their more proactive role in Aragalaya not only in GGG, but also in places like Kandy and Badulla. We should also not forget the fact that one of the key actors in Aragalaya was Father Jeevantha Peiris who was from the Indian Tamil community.

In a democratic country like Sri Lanka, a people's uprising is unquestionably admirable, and people have the right to rebel against a corrupt government. Thereby, Aragalaya is a people's phenomenon in which a majority of the population was involved in either physical or conceptual ways. When this was put forward 81.5 percent of respondents were admiring Aragalaya and 18.5 percent were not admiring, implying that more than half of the population was admiring the Aragalaya. Further, it was raised again whether the respondents hold a neutral stance on the Aragalaya, with 55.9 percent of respondents objecting to the idea. They were thinking about making an active contribution to the Aragalaya, but 44.1 percent hold a neutral stance on it. When the question of whether they are opposed to protest was posed,

92.3 percent stated that they are not opposed to protest, while 7.7 percent were opposed to protest.

The justifications for the protest are the most important factor here. The majority of respondents are not opposed to the protest because they are aware of the tragedies occurring in the country and believe that a protest is required to bring about a substantial shift. The question of whether the economic situation is the only motivator for people to participate in the Aragalaya was also raised. While 28.1 percent of respondents said it is the primary reason they are protesting. However, 71.9 percent of respondents said it is not the only factor. The majority of respondents believe that there are other reasons for the Aragalaya, as this protest was followed by other tragedies in the country.

2.5 Concerns about Aragalaya

Aragalaya was raised by the public without prior planning or structure. A majority of the public embraced it actively in the very same form. Further, for the same reason the Aragalaya was later claimed and manipulated by many organizations and institutions, which drastically affected the prospects of continuity of Aragalaya in the end. When the respondents were asked if they were concerned at any stage that Aragalaya was disorderly, 62.7% answered in the positive. Similarly, asked if they were concerned at any stage that the Aragalaya was violent-prone, their responses are given in Table 2.4

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	585	48.8	48.8	48.8
Yes	615	51.2	51.2	100.0
Total	1200	100.0	100.0	

Thus 51.2% of the respondents answered in the positive, meaning that they were concerned about the violence-proneness of the protest movement. Table 2.5 provides a more detailed picture regarding the attitudes of the respondents regarding Aragalaya.

Table 2.5: Overall Perceptions on Participation in Aragalaya

No	Questions	Sinhala		Sri Lanka Tamil		Muslim		Hill country Tamils		Other:	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
2.1	Active participant in protest?	39.6	60.4	25	75	32.5	67.5	48.9	51.1	47.8	52.2
2.2	Active participant in the larger social movement?	34.4	65.6	38.1	61.9	33.3	66.7	58	42	65.2	34.8
2.3	Are you a supporter of the Aragalaya?	68	32	73.8	26.2	86.5	13.5	93.9	6.1	87	13
2.4	Are you an admirer of the Aragalaya?	83.2	16.8	67.3	32.7	85.7	14.3	84	16	91.3	8.7
2.5	Do you hold a neutral position in regard to Aragalaya?	38.7	61.3	53.6	46.4	57.1	42.9	51.9	48.1	34.8	65.2
2.6	Are you opposed to protest?	9	91	6.5	93.5	6.3	93.7	2.3	97.7	8.7	91.3
2.7	Is the economic crisis of the country the only reason you got involved in the protest?	32.6	67.4	13.7	86.3	30.2	69.8	17.6	82.4	34.8	65.2
2.9	Were you concerned at any stage that Aragalaya was disorderly?	62.5	37.5	68.5	31.5	52.4	47.6	70.2	29.8	43.5	56.5
2.10	Were you concerned at any stage that Aragalaya was violent-prone?	45.2	54.8	69	31	47.6	52.4	70.2	29.8	30.4	69.6

When assessing the participation in Aragalaya according to ethnicity some important differences show up. The reported active participation in Aragalaya ranged from 48.9% among Hill Country Tamils to 25% among Sri Lankan Tamils, with Sinhalese reporting 38% active involvement and Muslims reporting 32.5% active involvement. These variations must be analyzed bearing in mind that the study sample was not a random sample indicative of general trends in the population. Sri Lankan Tamils' lower level of active engagement in Aragalaya confirms the view that many of them perhaps identified Aragalaya as an internal problem among people in the south rather than a national problem where they too were involved. On the other hand, the highest active involvement of Hill Country Tamils indicate that they identified with the Aragalaya even more than the majority community.

Overall, the majority of respondents declared themselves to be supporters of Aragalaya. The highest support came from the Hill Country Tamils (93.9%), followed by Muslims (86.5%), Sri Lanka Tamils (73.8%) and Sinhalese (68%). Asked if they considered themselves admirers of Aragalaya, once again the Hill country Tamils topped the list (91.3%), followed by the Muslims (85.7%), Sinhalese (83.2%), and Sri Lankan Tamils (67.3%). When asked if they have joined Aragalaya solely because of the economic crisis, higher proportion answered in the negative in all communities. Interestingly economic crisis appears to be a leading driver for Aragalaya participation among the Sinhalese, followed by Muslims, Hill Country Tamils and Sri Lanka Tamils.

These results indicate that people from different communities joined Aragalaya for some common as well as different reasons. Immediate economic hardships were a major driver for their involvement in Aragalaya for Sinhala respondents whereas for others, certain other drivers seemed to have been more important. On the other hand, concerns about disorderly nature and violence appear to have been more applicable in the case of Hill Country Tamils, compared to other communities. Majority-minority dynamics in the country and in the political system may also have been in operation in determining the nature and extent of participation in Aragalaya on the part of different communities.

Since Sri Lanka is experiencing a radical public protest of a peaceful nature for the first time, Sri Lankans are protesting together, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status, against the increasing sufferings brought on by the country's worst economic crisis since independence. The Sinhala and Tamil New Year, which is traditionally celebrated at home with family and relatives, took a different turn in 2022. Massive crowds flocked to the Galle Face Green to engage in the protest and many people brought traditional New Year's food and sweets to the area to show their support to the protest¹². During the protests, there was evidence of religious unity, which is unusual in a country that has long struggled with minority marginalization³. In light of this, Social harmony, Diversity, and Means of expressing anger about economic hardships are the most favoured features of the Aragalaya. Whereas 68.67 percent likes the Social harmony which emerged from the Aragalaya, 55.33 percent prefers the diversity of the people engaged in the protest and 45.5 percent likes how they expressed their anger about the economic hardships. Even though some critics of Aragalaya claimed the protest was organized for mere fun, the statistics show that only 11.08 percent joined Aragalaya purely for its entertainment value.

¹ BBC News (2022-05-21) "Sri Lanka: Why is the country in an economic crisis?"

² Newsfirst (2022-04-11) "'GotaGoGama' protest village pops up as protestors occupy Galle Face"

³ Newsfirst (2022-04-14) "Occupy Galle Face protest welcomes the New Year"

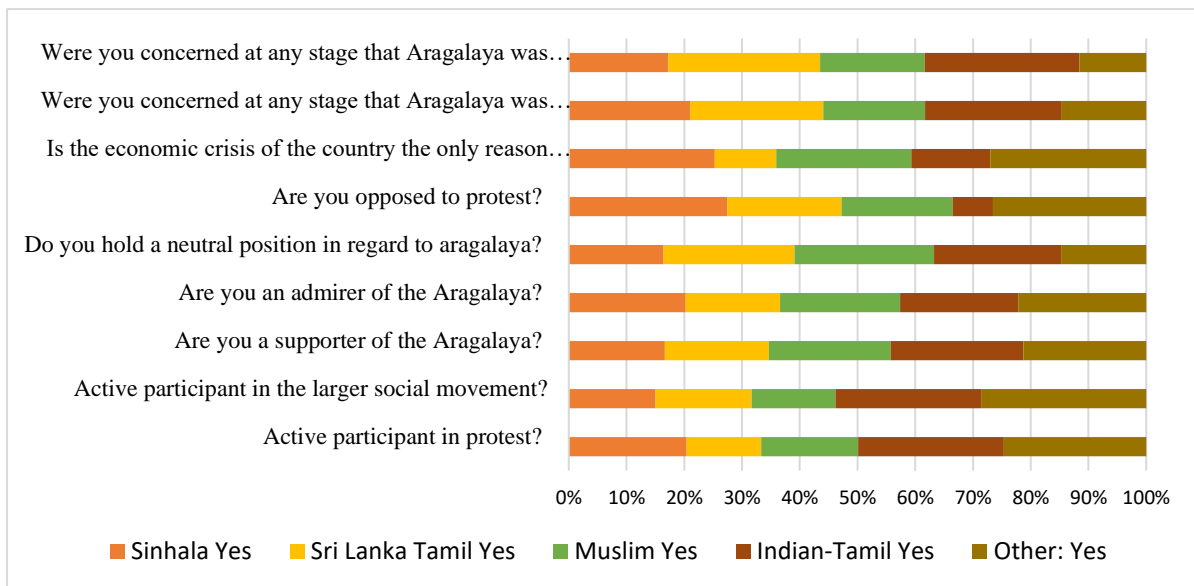


Figure 2.5: Perceptions on Specific Aspects of Aragalaya by Ethnicity

2.6 Drawbacks, challenges and prospects of Aragalaya

Overall the Aragalaya was appealing to most segments of the population as it reacted against the unfolding economic crisis as well as other issues confronting the country as a whole. However, there were some emerging concerns as well. For instance, 71.8% of the respondents stated that manipulations done by certain groups made them worried about the future of Aragalaya. Because the Aragalaya was initially carried out as a non-political party driven protest, the affiliation of some political parties served to discourage some of the original participants. With increased infiltration of party affiliations, the likelihood of it being manipulated by particular groups increased. Similarly, 53% of the respondents stated that the lack of direction in the campaign made them dislike the Aragalaya. The protesters lacked a solid strategy for carrying out the Aragalaya beyond the forced resignation of the key political leaders in the country.

After the resignation of the then prime minister and the president, the populace questioned what would come next. The protesters at that point were confused as to what to do next. The Aragalaya was confronted by a series of challenges due to internal conflicts, heightened state repression after the takeover by Ranil Wickremasinghe and the lack of a clear action plan to respond to the situation. Although, Aragalaya started out as a peaceful movement and carefully maintained it, after the government's mob attack and the counter attack on government politician by unknown parties Aragalaya itself was in the middle of a crisis in terms of continuing their agitations.

Nevertheless, a large majority of respondents (89%) agreed with the statement that Aragalaya was the best thing that happened to Sri Lanka's democracy in recent times. Further many respondents agreed with the statement that Aragalaya was a democratic social protest articulating the widespread grievances of the general public, as evident from Table 2.6.

Table: 2.6 Do you agree with the statement “Aragalaya was a democratic social protest articulating the widespread grievances of the general public”

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	43	3.6	3.6	3.6
Disagree	65	5.4	5.4	9.0
Agree	425	35.4	35.4	44.4
Strongly Agree	667	55.6	55.6	100.0
Total	1200	100.0	100.0	

Around 91 percent of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that Aragalaya is a democratic social protest that articulated the widespread grievances of the public. It publicly expressed various grievances of the public who belong to different classes, different ethnic backgrounds, different intellectual levels and different socio-economic categories. All in all it was a collective effort of the whole population confronted by common as well as different hardships. Aragalaya is more like a gathering or an activity where individuals come together to voice their concerns about a social issue in front of a large group of people. There are many possible objectives for the Aragalaya, including influencing public opinion, bringing awareness to and spreading information about an alleged injustice, gaining support from the public, advancing legislation or public policy, learning more about an issue, forming connections with like-minded people, speaking the truth, and bearing witness. Aragalaya can also inspire people and make them feel like they are a part of a bigger movement. Demanding change is the main goal of the protests. 75 percent of respondents believe that the Aragalaya should continue until the current crisis is resolved as the public was asking the protesters what their next target would be after removing the president. Therefore, they strongly believe that the Aragalaya should continue until the current crisis is resolved. Despite this, 25 percent of them believe that the Aragalaya is not necessary any longer.

The system change that was expected was not achieved. At this point the public opinion was divided with 52.8% of the respondents seeking to continue Aragalaya and its demand for system change, while the remaining 47% reporting that the new regime that emerged in the aftermath of Aragalaya must be given a chance to find solution to the country's problems. This clarifies the dilemma in which the country is placed at present with the population divided between working towards a system change as proposed by Aragalaya and allowing the new regime to address the immediate problems encountered by the public. Only about 24% of the respondents had any hope that the ultimate objectives of Aragalaya will be achieved in the end.

In summary the responses to the online survey clearly indicate that there was a broad support for Aragalaya from different segments of the Sri Lanka population crosscutting ethno-religious differences in the country. Widespread participation of all communities in the public protests

was significant considering tensions among different communities in the country in the preceding era, including ethnic riots, hate speech and lack of consensus about many issues. Many of the issues raised by Aragalaya remain unresolved. However, in so far as it demonstrated the capacity of public protests to change elected leaders who did not deliver what they promised to deliver, it provided important lessons about the vulnerability of so-called popular leaders to mass public protests at times of governance failures and the resulting economic downturn and multifaceted crisis in legitimacy of the existing rulers.

Chapter 3

Aragalaya and the Demand for Democratic Reforms

3.1 Introduction

Aragalaya has been a mass movement demanding democratic reforms and constitutional democracy. More than 88% of the respondents stood for a ‘system change’ – they basically demanded a system change in the way the country is governed. During the interviews, youth respondents expressed the point that struggles were led by a new generation and they showed the rulers that a country needs to be governed in a democratic manner and not according to the wishes of political and business elites. Some Sri Lankan scholars argued that Aragalaya redefined the relationship between citizen and the state; and the state and society. A leading figure of the Aragalaya claimed that Aragalaya demands are wake-up calls for renewal of social contract with new terms and conditions and turning point toward much needed political, economic and social reforms. Youth believed that an uprising of this scale and diversity will be hard for the rulers of Sri Lanka to ignore. As such, they put forward six point demands covering various aspects –including socio-economic and political issues, and some of them were directly linked with democratic and governance renewal. When we asked respondents on the biggest challenges to Sri Lanka’s democracy, they highlighted absence of rule of law, corruption, executive presidential system and religious interference in politics as the key challenges (Figure 3.1).

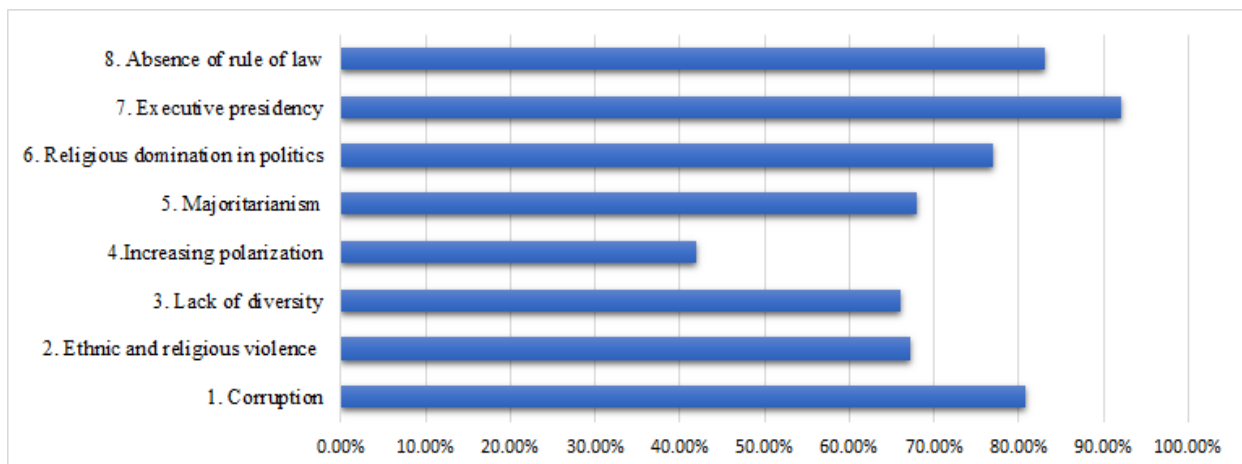


Figure 3.1: biggest challenges to Sri Lanka’s democracy

Against this background, the Aragalaya movement put forward the following demands.

1. A new constitution that affirms the power of the people
2. Abolition of Executive Presidential system
3. Just law for all

4. Strengthening democratic institutions
5. Carrying out audit investigation to recover all monies and assets stolen by the political leaders and punish those guilty of offenses according to the law.
6. A process that enable people to recall their representatives who are unaccountable to people

They also demanded that a new Constitution that endorses people's sovereignty to be established through a referendum as quickly as possible. The new constitution should address the following: the right to life to be recognized as a fundamental right; the Executive Presidency to be abolished; an appropriate process for a fair election; a process that provides the right to recall elected representatives who are not accountable to the people; a process that enables the people to participate in making and amending the law; address the limitations in the current Constitution on human rights and the rights of women and children and strengthen these rights; to eradicate racism and racial oppression and abolish the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

They also stressed strengthening the relevant legal foundations that affirm the equality of religion, language, sexuality, and other cultural identity as well as democracy and political freedom. It was found in the survey that 89% affirmed that the *Aragalaya* is led by civic minded youth with the aim of reforming the country to become a better democracy. 92.3% stated that "the most significant democratic change that took place in Sri Lanka recently was the *Aragalaya*." 94.5% stated that "Constitutional reforms are essential to overcome the current crisis." 78.6% stated that Executive Presidential system should be abolished and 86% were of the view that 20th amendment must be abolished, and it should be replaced by the 19th amendment. Importantly, 98% noted that politicians must be subjected to auditing and their unaccounted assets should be confiscated by the state. We corroborated these survey findings with the survey findings of the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and the Social Scientist Associations (SSA), and they did show almost similar patterns.

Analysis of empirical evidence collected through interviews reveals that perceptions of democratic representation, poor government performance and extent of corruption seem to have a significant impact on democratic discontent among Sri Lankans. Thus it is reasonable to expect that such contextual factors also affect public perceptions of the performance of the political system, implying a great deal of distrust in the latter. Existing scholarship claims that in a representative democracy, political parties play an important role that goes beyond competitive elections – they serve as a vehicle for citizens to articulate their political preferences and interests (Randall and Svåsand, 2002). Nevertheless, in Sri Lanka, with higher levels of electoral volatility and less stable party systems, these important functions are less likely to be carried out in a consistent manner, so political parties are largely controlled by the elite and serve as a vehicle for patronage politics.

In other words, the system of proportional representation distorted the relationship between representatives and citizens, unlike the system prevailed before 1978. Parties do not have firm policies and ideologies and they move in and out of parliament from election to election. For this reason only, Aragalaya called for strict legal measures to prevent party cross-over of representatives to secure their vested interests, blatantly violating people's mandate and aspirations vested on elected representatives through free and fair elections. Before the Aragalaya, young citizens showed a disinterest in politics due to their lack of trust in political actors, system and institutions and process. Moreover, dismal performance of Sri Lanka's political system and endemic corruption, weak rule of law and the non-functional bureaucratic system all decreased their interest in politics. Yet, due to Aragalaya, citizens learned about politics, social justice, redistribution, welfare policies, corruption, democracy, sovereignty, and representative democracy which have considerably reshaped their political attitudes and behavior.

3.2 Aragalaya as a Reaction against Democratic Backsliding

Successive governments of Sri Lanka, since the independence, have failed to meet the expectations, demands and desires of Sri Lankans and it became aggravated after the introduction of the 1978 constitution which paved the way for the state capture by political elites and businesses. These developments increased the gap between governments' performance and achievements and the citizens' expectations in reality. In other words, after every election, citizens' expectations increased alarmingly while the governments continue to perform poorly, resulting in increasing grievances and feelings of deprivation. In a democratic system, if the government fails to address the perceived collective injustices and socio-economic and governance issues, it is likely to raise public anger over the government which is in power. As such, the long –standing grievances and feeling of deprivation over all the governments broke out in the form Aragalaya, demanding 225 parliamentarians and the president to resign and a complete overhaul in governance – which the protesters called system change. They adopted a unique model to democratize Sri Lanka's politics and governance. The Aragalaya increased citizens expectation for more democracy or deepening democracy and political liberalization – because the entire episodes of Aragalaya attacked the elite capture of state and politics. Protesters understood that given the historical context of protest and symbolic reform change would not come easily. This was the case in Middle East and North Africa as well -the unique protest model adopted in these countries facilitated a space which allowed democratization (see Szmolka, 2017).

After Rajapaksa family stepped down from positions, people began to assume that they can challenge and remove their democratically elected leaders if they fail to perform their duties or deliver their promise and respect people's mandate in between elections. This was evident throughout the Aragalaya where a great deal of emphasis was given to the notion of 'people's sovereignty', implying that political power lies with people which they can use to elect and remove a government when necessary. Until the Aragalaya broke out, ordinary citizens of the

country were not aware about the power of people's sovereignty. In this manner, one could argue that Aragalaya created 'demos' in Sri Lanka. This resonates with the views of Peter Mair (2013) who warned that the, in most cases, definition of democracy is leaving out its emphasis on popular sovereignty and the consequence of that would be a kind of democracy without the demos at its centre (cited in; Augustine, 2020:5).

This further corroborates with Weyland (2012: 917) who illustrates that Ben Ali's fall in Tunisia made people in the region to presume that they could successfully challenge their own autocrats. As in Tunisia, mass protest took place across the country gave the hope for more democracy and feeling of political liberalization. Sri Lankan case informs that when citizens are being backed by mass protest and mobilization irrespective of all differences, it is more likely to empower citizens to challenge undemocratic regimes. In other words, the more the people involve in the protest, the more the possibility to expect an impact and reforms—Aragalaya was unprecedented in nature, therefore led to unthinkable changes in 120 days.

The study finds that the current political and constitutional crisis is a continuation of the past -internal constitutional reorganization by amendment failed to fix Sri Lanka's constitutional crisis. As a result, the Aragalaya is a reflection of the public's lack of trust in these political institutions, as well as a rejection of those who rule for decades. The Aragalaya brought to the forefront the legitimacy of the constitution, emphasizing why a constitutional reorganization is long necessary. However, it should be noted that the current political rage in Sri Lanka is directed not just at the 1978 constitution and its Amendments, but also against the government itself. It is also an invitation to broaden the scope of Sri Lanka's democratic constitutional thought conceptual framework (Uyangoda, 2022; Fernando, 2022), namely constitutional democracy. The question is whether the government, opposition parties, and political elite can disregard Aragalaya's demand that an entirely new constitution be drafted to combine people's democracy with representative democracy.

The Aragalaya clearly marked a key turning point in that the social contract has been broken and it is no longer valid, and reminded the need for renegotiating the contract. The social contract is an actual agreement between society (citizens) and its state. This agreement has been said to be responsible for the bases of moral decisions and stances of government. Citizens merely abide by the government's rules and regulations in the hope that the government will act in the best interest of citizens, subsequently leading to a more secure and comfortable life. The social contract sets out the rights and duties of the citizens towards the State as well as rules, regulations, principles, powers and functions and limitations of government power (Muldeen, 2016). In other words, it spells out the terms and conditions of governance and involves reciprocal obligations and promises on part of the ruler and the ruled. The most important element of the social contract is the promise of obedience made by citizens and the reciprocal promise of protection of citizens and good governance ensured by the rulers. The contract enables people to give up some of their freedoms and rights in exchange for the protection of their remaining rights and the maintenance of social order. Yet, in the Sri Lankan case, the contract has been persistently violated or disregarded by the

rulers since the independence, leading to distrust, deprivation, desperation on the part of citizens. The Aragalaya is a clear rejection of their representatives by the sovereign people. The people question the constitution's legitimacy, rendering it illegitimate and demonstrated the necessity of renewing the social contract with a new set of terms and conditions which is possible through a new constitution.

All in all, a distinctive characteristic of Sri Lanka's popular protests is the democratic political thinking and ideas expressed via the slogans and demands and the resistance movement. It is possible to argue that Aragalaya strengthened democratic resilience at a time of growing authoritarianism, and illiberal and autocratic regimes in Sri Lanka. Democratic resilience is essential to counter authoritarian threats to democracy, responding to democratic backsliding and bolstering established democratic institutions. Thus the Aragalaya has contributed to democratic resilience through mass mobilization of citizens against the Rajapaksa regime and mal-governance.

The following analysis further builds on the above argument. After the powerful executive president Gotabaya Rajapaksa who was once considered as a war hero by Sinhalese was forced to leave office, there was a speculation that this might open up a chance for military rule in Sri Lanka due to persistent political instability, breakdown of law and order, and so on. Fortunately, it did not happen and it seemed that on that occasion military personnel respected democratic protests of the citizens as their rights and they remained silent, showing invisible support to the people who stormed the President's place, Presidential secretariat, Prime Minister's House and the Office. In fact, the military probably had an opportunity to capture the power after GR left Sri Lanka – by that time, the Parliament, Cabinet of Ministers, and Office of the President were almost paralyzed and the Judiciary was partly hibernated. Yet, military did not consider it as an option, rather they respected established democratic values and principles for peaceful power transition, depicted the long standing democratic tradition in Sri Lanka. Yet, military response may have been different if a protest initiated by ethnic minorities rose up to that level. It is possible to argue that Aragalaya was a spontaneous reaction/struggle inaugurated in Southern Sri Lanka during a serious economic crisis. Therefore, the law enforcement agencies played a passive role indirectly supportive of the people's struggle. It is also interesting that the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa could have used constitutional powers to declare war using emergency provisions so as to control the Aragalaya through military means, but he did not choose that option. It also depicted the respect for democratic values regarding power transition, on the one hand, and on the other, realization of worse consequences, if such options had been chosen during that time – because struggle went out of control and reached its maximum in all aspects including popular support.

Although Aragalaya could not accomplish the democratization agenda due to various reasons including state repression, intimidation, arbitrary removal of encampment and the protest location by using Police and military, internal splits based certain ideologies and ethno –

religious divisions, it has left a strong message for citizens of this country. It seems that Aragalaya created an enabling environment for re-democratization agenda. Post –Aragalaya moves of the protesters confirm this tendency. For instance, creating the movement for people’s councils at the district and divisional level is a significant move to foster people’s participation in governance process and educate them on democracy, politics, and governance. As Uyangoda rightly puts forth, youth involved in Aragalaya should now start a theoretical-ideological struggle for defending a stronger version of democracy, transcending the limits of liberal democracy to halt the elite-led de-democratization process, which entails the working out of a comprehensive reform agenda; a collective effort by an informal coalition of democratic constituencies. The Aragalaya revealed that although a large proportion of Sri Lankan citizens expressed great deal of discontent with the performance of democracy, they still tend to express strong support for its principles and values.

People’s uprising took place due to ill-treatment, loss of hope and mismanagement. Aragalaya was no different, it was triggered by the long-lasting failure of democracy which is seriously undermined by corruption, mismanagement and misuse of power by the politicians and authorities, where people have duly noted when 92.5% of the respondents stated that Aragalaya was triggered by corruption and misuse of power by the rulers, only 7.5% arguing against this statement. Aragalaya empowered the common citizens of Sri Lanka to come together against the status quo. A statistical proof of this is that 93% of the respondents supported the view that the Aragalaya served to enhance people’s power.

Table 3.1: Average perception scores relating to Aragalaya according to ethnicity

No	Questions	Sinhala	Sri Lanka Tamil	Muslim	Hill Country Tamil	Other:
3.1	Aragalaya is the best thing that happened to democracy in Sri Lanka in recent times.	3.32	3.57	3.47	3.59	3.57
3.2	Aragalaya was a democratic social protest articulating the widespread grievances of the general.	3.35	3.54	3.56	3.60	3.65
3.3	Aragalaya was staged by some anti-social elements opposed to the establishment	2.11	1.90	2.00	2.09	1.78
3.4	Aragalaya should continue until after the current crisis is resolved	3.05	3.13	3.10	3.24	3.30
3.5	Aragalaya should end here and give an opportunity for the new regime to find solutions to the country’s problems.	2.29	2.74	2.40	3.03	2.00
3.6	Aragalaya was good at first but now being manipulated by certain interested groups?	2.98	2.86	2.87	2.99	2.74
3.7	Aragalaya actors should form their own political party and contest all future elections.	2.47	2.54	2.39	2.56	2.39
3.8	Aragalaya is a legitimate response to the current economic crisis in the country.	3.24	3.42	3.10	3.37	3.48

3.9	Aragalaya was triggered by corruption and misuse of power by the rulers.	3.48	3.63	3.59	3.66	3.57
3.10	Aragalaya served to enhance people's power.	3.44	3.71	3.52	3.67	3.52

**Scores (Strongly Agree-4, Agree-3, Disagree-2, Strongly Disagree-1)*

The perception scores indicate that there was a marked agreement in all ethnic groups that Aragalaya was a positive thing from the angle of democratic reform. In respect of most statements (e.g. 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 3.7) the highest agreement came from respondents from the Hill Country Tamil community confirming the pattern noted in the previous chapter. There is, however, there is one significant variation from this pattern in statement 3.5, where the Hill Country Tamils show the highest agreement for the statement that the Aragalaya should end here, permitting the new regime to fix the problems at hand. Interestingly the poorest support for some of the positive statements relating to democratic urges in Aragalaya came from the Sinhale community (e.g. statements 3.1, 3.2, 3.9), perhaps indicating a reservoir of majoritarian support for the Rajapaksa regime in the Sinhala community.

To sum up the argument in this chapter, the Aragalaya was not merely a knee-jerk reaction to an unfolding economic crisis, but also against the backlash against anti-democratic developments in the country which in turn were identified as factors contributing to the economic downturn. Corruption and mismanagement of government, for instance, were seen as responsible for the economic crisis. On the whole, Aragalaya was a demand for democratic reforms including greater accountability and transparency on the part of ruling elite and inclusive governance with additional spaces for participation of women, youth and socially excluded. There was a broad-based support for Aragalaya from all communities with a marked enthusiasm for Aragalaya in the Hill Country Tamil and Muslim communities in particular. The gains made by Aragalaya within its heyday are significant, but its relative weakening towards the end despite its resilience as a mass movement is also an important point to consider. This, however, does not mean that the anti-democratic forces can regain power electorally using the same strategies that they used in the past. This is because that Aragalaya has made a permanent dent in their hegemony and legitimacy as a ruling clique.

Chapter 04

Pro-government Attack on Aragalaya and Counterattack on Government Politicians by Unknown Parties

4.1 Introduction

After a provocative meeting of over 3000 people held in support of the prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa in Temple Trees on May 9th, 2022 by his key loyalists in the government who pleaded the prime minister not to resign from his prime minister post as demanded by Aragalaya protesters, a group of ruffians who participated in the meeting left the meeting, some carrying sticks and started attacking the protestors in MGG and proceeded to attack GGG, setting fire to some of the tents and other structures in these protest sites. The police and security forces did nothing to prevent these attacks where some key government politicians were also involved. This was an important turning point in Aragalaya which pursued non-violent strategies of protest and agitations until that time. This also led to violent counterattacks by some Aragalaya supporters on people who launched the attack on Aragalaya, setting fire to the vehicles in which they had travelled to Galle Face and throwing some of the attackers to Beire Lake to expose and insult them in front of television cameras.

More violent counter attacks occurred later in the day, mobs in Nittambuwa killing a government MP and his bodyguard as they were returning to their base in Polonnaruwa. Much bigger mayhem occurred later at night as unidentified mobs attacked some 80 houses and office buildings belonging to selected government MPs, setting fire to the buildings, motor vehicles and other valuable assets of the politicians so targeted. In this section we try to understand the people involved, the motives for these attacks and their potential short-term and long-term impacts using the limited data available. As we could not get any firsthand information about the people involved obviously due to the sensitive nature of these events, we largely rely on unverified media reports on these events.

4.2 Social Background and Mortices of Progovernment Attackers and their Potential Motives

There is no clear information about the pro-government attackers on Aragalaya except to say that they came from the meeting with the Prime Minister in Temple trees, armed themselves with what they could obtain on the way to the protest sites and attacked the unarmed protestors and demolished or set fire to the structures and tents in the two sites. A few national-level politicians of the ruling party along with some elected representatives of the ruling party in local government agencies were seen leading the way, but the attackers were typical political juntas of government politicians including muscle men (some reports used the word thugs) deployed by the politicians to intimidate their opponents in political campaigns. Pro-Aragalaya social media featured them brutally assaulting Aragalaya

participants with sticks. For instance the video clip capturing the attack by mobs on one Christian priest went viral. The deliberate move by the large contingent of police officers present to stop the attacks was evident from the pictures and videos circulating in social media in particular. How far these attacks were pre-planned or of spontaneous nature cannot be determined with certainty with the limited information available. However, the fact that some of the progovernment politicians brought some of their muscle men for the meeting indicates that there was an element of planning in organizing the meeting and triggering the break out of violence. If any politicians connected with the ruling party influenced the police inaction in this instance as appeared to have happened, it further points to prior planning of the attack. The speeches by the key politicians at the Temple Trees Meeting may have also provoked the attack.

We can only speculate about the motives of the attackers and whoever who planned them. It is quite possible that they wanted to intimidate the Aragalaya participants and they assumed that destruction of their structures, placards and tents would see the end of Aragalaya reflecting a pattern of political violence well established in Sri Lanka. The initial retreat of Aragalaya protestors in response to the violence perpetrated by pro-government attackers may have confirmed the latter's expectations. However, the Aragalaya actors retaliated with reinforcements coming from construction workers from a nearby site, office workers from the Fort area and residents in nearby urban low income communities (wattas), perhaps indicate the strong support base and the social networks the protestors had in nearby areas. How this support base was mobilized so quickly we are uncertain, but it indicates that Aragalaya actors probably had a back up plan for a sudden attack of this nature, also knowing the past practices in the pattern of political violence in the country. The pictures from the attack reported in mass media and also some video clips in social media indicate that retaliation by the Aragalaya actors were largely of a humiliating nature seeking to expose the progovernment attackers on Aragalaya. The reports showed some presumably pro-Aragalaya supporters trying to prevent the victims of these attacks being admitted to a government hospital and there was also the report of a subsequent death of one of the victims of retaliatory action by Aragalaya supporters. These reports, however, must be understood in the light of deliberate efforts on the part of both print and electronic media as well as social media to hold certain parties accountable for the attacks and counter attacks depending on their own political agendas.

4.3 Backlash against Government Politicians

There were three separate retaliations against the government politicians following the attacks on MGG and GGG. All three were spontaneous retaliations against the attack on Aragalaya to varying degrees, also indicating a broader pattern of resentment against the ruling regime. The first retaliation was the one already described involving a confrontation between Aragalaya supporters and attackers during the morning of May 9th. The second was a confrontation between a mob and Amarakeerthi Athukorala, the government MP who was returning from the meeting in Temple Trees. It happened in Nittambuwa 30 km away from Colombo. This appears to be a completely spontaneous eruption where the government MP

was surrounded by a mob and he or his bodyguard shot at and killed one in the mob causing a retaliation by the mob and the murder of both the MP and his bodyguard. As the mob was a cross section of the population perhaps unconnected with Aragalaya, their reaction against the MP perhaps indicated the general resentment against government politicians triggered by the economic crisis brewing in the country. The third was a seemingly coordinated event targeting 74 government politicians who were identified as those loyal to the Rajapaksa regime. The attack by unknown persons resulted in the destruction of many buildings, and other valuable assets including motor vehicles as well as destruction of a monument erected for the parents of Mahinda Rajapaksa. As for the motive for this wave of attacks, it was clearly intended as a retaliation against the pro-government attacks in MGG and GGG even though only a few of those attacked had any known involvement in the Colombo attacks. Also we can guess that these counterattacks also sought to destabilize the rural bases of these politicians and their connectivity with the rural voters who were reeling from the economic collapse.

Some 3800 people from different backgrounds were arrested after the events of May 9 according to a newspaper report. However, none has been persecuted so far about any of these crimes.⁴ After the attack on politicians, many politicians complained about the failure of the security forces to prevent these attacks and take action against the wrong doers.

On May 18 Nalaka Godahewa, the cabinet spokesperson describe the attack on MPs well organized “May 09 was a result of a long organized series of events,”⁵ On May 29th, the minister Dinesh Gunawardena reported in the parliament was that the attack on government politicians was long hatched conspiracy by anti-government forces in the country.⁶ He blamed the security forces for not coming to safeguard the politicians under siege even after the ongoing attacks were reported by the affected people. It appears that the security forces did not try to stop these attacks for unknown reasons. A committee appointed by the president under the leadership of Admiral Karannagoda found many weaknesses in the response of police during the attack on government politicians. It is important to point out here that the official attention to attack on Aragalaya and counter attacks was vastly uneven with the latter receiving much greater attention and being used as a justification for enhancing repression of Aragalaya.

As for the wave of violence directed at government politicians on May 9th night, several accusations and counter accusations have been made by government politicians and Aragalaya leaders. The government politicians stated in the parliament that JVP and FFP were

⁴ . <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/220911/news/may-9-violence-and-protests-4000-arrested-494822.html>

⁵ . <https://economynext.com/sri-lankas-may-9-attack-on-ruling-mp-houses-well-organized-ex-cabinet-spokesman-94420/>

⁶ .

perhaps responsible for these attacks but they were denied by the parties concerned. The opposition politicians often reported these attacks as outcomes of public anger at government politicians triggered by the economic meltdown and breakdown of services such as electricity supply, fuel supply and transport services. A third party using attack on Aragalaya to further destabilize the state cannot be ruled out entirely based on the information available. Some of the key politicians affected by the attacks later made an official complaint against the police for failing to prevent the attack and being slow to react on this countrywide attacks. Ranil Wickremesinghe government has used the outbreak of violence on the part of anti-government groups as an excuse to step up state repression against all forms of protest with the ultimate objective of safeguarding the rulers and preserving the status quo under severe stress due to the still unsettled economic crisis and legitimacy crisis of the state. Failure of the security forces to prevent pro-government and anti-government attacks is clearly evident. This may also reflect the contradictory pressures the police and security forces were subjected to in handling Aragalaya and related outbreak of violence whether pro-government or anti-government.

4.4 Future of Aragalaya and the Ongoing State Repression against Aragalaya

As for the future of Aragalaya at least three different opinions came out of the survey and key informant interviews conducted.

The first and the more widespread opinion is that the Aragalaya should continue until after the crisis at hand is resolved.

The second opinion was that Aragalaya should give way to another form of mobilization taking into consideration the ongoing state repression. The demand for democratic elections is also connected with this alignment. Connected with this opinion, another view is that Aragalaya actors should aim to establish their own political party or coalition of parties that should contest future elections. This view however, does not have the support of some key Aragalaya actors who see existing politics as corrupt and incorrigible and any effort to join the same political process is on the part of Aragalaya actors is self-defeating and goes against the Aragalaya thought altogether.

A third opinion is that the new leaders in the country must be given a chance to address the huge problems in the country during their remaining period and Aragalaya in its current form must be stopped for this purpose. In this view Aragalaya leaders have to wait and see what happens next and adapt accordingly. Each of these positions presents specific challenges.

Position one remains powerful among some of the key actors in Aragalaya. But it has to encounter the ongoing state repression and the resulting possibility of many Aragalaya leaders ending up in jail with the resulting impact on Aragalaya campaigns. Also, the possibility of the public losing interest in Aragalaya as their immediate needs are met and the economy starts moving again cannot be ruled out. The long-term implications of public inconvenience by mass protests in urban centres and also their implications for economic recovery in sectors such as tourism must also be looked into. Here it must be recognized that the opposition made by some tourist guides and the like when efforts were made to recommence Aragalaya is not merely a tactic used by pro-government actors, but a genuine concern among people concerned whose livelihoods were closely connected with tourist industry which has shown signs of recovery in recent months. Another concern is the challenge for potential reunification of the Aragalaya support base already split along organizational and ideological cleavages. Considering all these challenges the viability of this approach remains problematic.

Partly in response to these challenges, the second approach has gained ground and the plans to establish people's councils have become popular among JVP actors in particular. The advantages of the council system would be the opportunity it provides for people to get

involved in decision making at various levels, monitoring local level affairs and the possibility it provides for preventing corrupt or abusive practices at various levels. This, however, must happen through some constitutional mechanism and that requires state recognition and support. This may be seen as a useful way to retain the democratic ethos and the enthusiasm and concern demonstrated by the public during Aragalaya and thinking beyond public protest in securing people's participation in public affairs.

The third approach is more of a wait and see approach to see how far and in what ways the new regime goes about things and whether it addresses the serious issues raised by Aragalaya in respect of accountability, transparency and the like. If it does not, it may be necessary to reactivate Aragalaya also utilizing the lessons learnt during and after Aragalaya. On the other hand, if the new regime makes some positive moves, the Aragalaya actors can fall back to option two and work towards formally establishing People's Councils to strengthen the democratic aspirations of Aragalaya.

The decision by the new regime to postpone local government elections scheduled for March 2023 and to introduce a new anti-terrorism act that will include most social protests and even legitimate criticisms of the government within the definition of terrorism can be seen as anti-democratic moves in the direction of authoritarianism. This in turn may justify the reactivation of Aragalaya along the lines of position one. On the other hand, such reactivation of public protests can be used by the ruling elite to justify its authoritarian bent just as much as the IMF bail out package itself has been used to muster international support for the problematic activities of the new regime. This indicates the necessity of a cautious approach to resort to people's power in Sri Lanka and the balance act it must follow in order to ensure that it does not work into the hands of anti-democratic mobilizations and at the same time strategically take advantage of its position to push for democratic reforms. This is where a blend of positions 2 and 3 may offer more prospects compared to position 1 in terms of adapting people's agitations to the changing socio-political scenario in Sri Lanka.

Chapter five

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

The Aragalaya marked an extremely important milestone of a process geared towards reviving and strengthening democratic politics in Sri Lanka. Against a backdrop of the quality of Sri Lanka's representative democracy in steady decline, the direct entry of citizens into active politics is an important intervention. It marks the inauguration of a new politics of critique, resistance, and democratic rebuilding in Sri Lanka. This is all the more significant at a time when traditional institutions of democracy such as Parliament, mass media and the judiciary have been mere onlookers of a steady decline of one of the oldest democratic systems in Asia. It is therefore essential to assess the importance of this mass movement in order to appreciate its political potential and strengthen its constructive outcomes while minimizing its risks.

The present wave of protests by the citizens embodies a mixture of political reactions to this state of affairs—disillusionment, despair, loss of trust, anger, and of course political hope for a fresh beginning. That is why Sri Lanka's citizens have now decided to take democracy into their own hands through direct political action. They call for re-inventing Sri Lanka's parliamentary democracy in such a way that the Parliament, the electoral process, and cabinet government are freed from the debilitating control exercised by the corrupt political class and its state capture deploying their bureaucratic, business, and nepotistic cronies. They are also demanding political parties to begin to represent the interests of the Sri Lankan people, and not their financiers, political brokers, corporate allies, or family members. They seek a Parliament and a new generation of parliamentarians who will honour the people's expectations for a genuinely democratic political order in which politicians are accountable to the people and directly answerable to their electors. The Aragalaya was a movement of the people, by the people, and for the people to restore the role of the demos in a badly shattered democracy.

Three critical aspects arise when deconstructing the conceptual foundations Aragalaya's primary demands and slogans. First, a rejection of existing parliamentary / representative democracy and its corrupt forms and practices, as well as the illiberal democracy that has been constitutionalized since 1978. Second, the Aragalaya political ideals are not restricted to liberal, representative democracy. Rather, a paradigm for addressing Sri Lanka's representative democracy dilemma by incorporating components of participatory, direct, and republican democratic principles, institutions, and practices. Third, the Aragalaya reflects fresh ideas for tackling Sri Lanka's democratic problem, which is based on both neoliberal democracy and home-grown authoritarianism. Overall, ordinary citizens have constructed a resurgence of the powerful democratic metaphor in a counter-hegemonic political discourse

over several months, not to obtain political power, but to communicate shared democratic goals against unjust authority.

According to Harvard scholar Stephen Jones, Professor of modern history, there is no democracy without people's protest. As witnessed in Sri Lanka, protest is not just about resistance, as in the longer term, it promotes a sense of solidarity, diversity and harmony by exercising citizens' power through alliances between diverse social groups. It is also an educational process that combats passivity through organised collective actions. It could be concluded that the *Aragalaya* enabled Sri Lankans to liberate themselves from an authoritarian regime that clamped down on the legitimate expression of citizens' views and their democratic voices. If Sri Lanka wants to be a meaningful democracy, then citizens' protests must be accepted as part of its democratic practice.

The key lessons learnt in Aragalaya can be summarized as follows:

First, it reflected the mass dissatisfaction with the prevailing state of affairs that produced a major economic crisis affecting all sections of the population.

Second, it demonstrated the capacity of Sri Lanka society to come together despite many divisive tendencies in society generated by the political system at a time of economic and social crisis and demand not just delivery of services but also democratic reforms, accountability and transparency of governance. The same people who overwhelmingly supported the Rajapaksa regime in 2019 and 2020 came forward to overthrow it, using non-violent protest.

Third, interfaith activism and a deliberate effort to include socially excluded communities such as women, youth, urban poor, LGBTQ community were positive features of Aragalaya indicating a new form of social and political mobilization.

Fourth, Aragalaya also involved close collaborations among students, trade unions, professional organizations such as lawyers collective and the Federation of University Teachers Association and selected religious actors within a mass movement which tried to be outside the control of existing political parties and which deliberately tried to be leaderless and open to all sections of the population.

Fifth, occupy Galle Face and occupy other urban spaces serve to attract and engage the public from all walks of life to participate in the protests either as visitors to the selected locations also in street protests and social media campaigns.

Sixth, Aragalaya mobilized art inclusive of digital art, music, theatre, traditional art forms like beating of raban, virindu as well as popular culture to attract the public and disseminate anti-establishment messages widely. The visit of lead artists, scholars and You Tubers to GGG and other sites added to their attraction and provided legitimacy to public protests against a corrupt regime relying on a combination of majoritarian nationalism and patronage politics to stay in power. Art and digital media were used in an effective manner to delegitimize the

hegemonic system and create a public opinion for democratic reforms, rule of law, accountability and strengthening the power of people.

Seventh, key achievements of Aragalaya includes its persistence for over 100 days, removal of Rajapaksas from ruling positions, delegitimation of fake ethnonationalism, voice cut Buddhist monks and the control of information flows by the pro-government media channels. Many of these outcomes may be seen as irreversible even though it does not completely rule out the possibility of their revival in time to come.

Eighth, the replacement of Rajapaksas by Wickremasinghe has restored the possibility of one corrupt regime replacing the other keeping their ties with each other intact. The increased reliance on state repression on the part of new regime clearly indicates that anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies is likely to be enhanced under the new regime contrary to the expectations of the Aragalaya mass movement. These emerging processes can further add to the democratic backsliding in Sri Lanka and any fresh wave of public agitations along with ongoing measures to postpone local government elections and introduce new anti-terrorism legislation can further advance the processes of de-democratization in Sri Lanka.

Ninth, Sri Lanka's democracy continues to be fragile and flawed and it has been revitalized, preserved and fostered through people's struggles, civil society and citizens activism, thus Aragalaya is not an exception.

Against this background, it is necessary to carefully reassess the situation and make the next moves cautiously. We give below some possibilities for promotion of democratization processes in Sri Lanka.

1. A broader alliance and collective actions among pro-democratic political groups, civil society formations, human rights groups, trade unions and student organizations is necessary at this juncture in order to promote democratic reforms and defeat ongoing anti-democratic initiatives such as new anti-terrorism legislation and manipulating the election process.
2. Perhaps there is an opportunity to establish a social movement for democratic reform and progressive social change at the present juncture. Unlike Aragalaya, this can be a more lasting social mobilization seeking to advance the achievements of Aragalaya and minimize the emerging challenges such as potential passing of an anti-terrorism act to eliminate social protest and public agitations against authoritarian tendencies of the ruling regime.
3. Any effort to immediately resort to mass agitations at the present juncture can be problematic in terms of its possible impact on economic recovery and pushing the ongoing anti-democratic moves. While such mass agitations may still have a role to play but it must await strategically until the best opportunity to stage such a mass mobilization.
4. Even though minority participation was strong in Aragalaya, effort must be made to incorporate greater support from like-minded groups in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, plantation community as well as other socially excluded groups such as depressed castes in Tamil and Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka.

5. The proposed social movement must seek to internationalize its campaign in order to make it more efficient and impactful. It must reach out to the Sri Lankan diaspora in various countries abroad in order to secure their support for the agenda of the social movement and bring international pressure on the Sri Lankan state to prevent its anti-democratic tendencies.
6. Instead of resorting to occupied spaces and street protests to influence the public and state policies, digital mode and social media can be mobilized more effectively to enable the social movement to carry out its programmes uninhibited by repressive action. This may also serve to prevent the public inconvenience caused by daily mass protests in urban centres.

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