

# PEOPLE'S MANIFESTO FOR SRI LANKA



THE PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT

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By People's Parliament Team Coordinated by Law & Society Trust

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## THE PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT

The People's Parliament is a consultative, citizen-led initiative founded in response to Sri Lanka's political, economic, and social crises in 2022. The aim of this initiative was to engage and consult with citizens, across various communities in different parts of the country. The people's Struggle protests, which had emerged in response to the economic crisis this year and demanded political accountability, were most prolific at "GotaGoGama" in Galle Face Green since 9th April 2022. Other GotaGoGama protest sites subsequently set up in districts such as Badulla, Galle, Kurunegala, and Kandy.

The People's Parliament functions as an open and deliberative space for citizen engagement and public opinion. The first two sessions were held on the 12th and 13th of April 2022 at GotaGoGama in Colombo. Subsequent People's Parliament consultations were held in Galle on May 2; with conflict-affected minority communities in the Northern province including Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Kilinochchi, and Vavuniya from June 3-6; with plantation sector communities in Udupussellawa, Nuwaraeliya, Thalawakele, and Maskeliya in late-June; and with farmers' communities, war widows, women activists, and Tamil and Muslim communities in Polonnaruwa and Hingurakgoda in the North Central Province, as well as in Batticaloa and Ampara in the Eastern Province, during August 5-8. The People's Parliament also has an online presence, sharing the content of these in-person sessions on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Through means of a Google form, public opinions on the crisis and way forward were collected.



## People's Inscriptions

The objective of the People's Parliament is to identify and document the most pressing issues people are facing and what reforms are suggested to address the ongoing national crisis. A long-term, practical manifesto which ties together these Inscriptions is outlined below.

## People's Parliament Gatherings

- 12th & 13th April 2022-Gotagogama Galle face Green Occupied Protest Site
- 2nd May 2022-Gotagogama Galle District Occupied Protest Site
- 3rd June 2022-Mannar District (Tamil & Muslim community groups in Mullikulam & Silavathurei)
- 4th June 2022-Jaffna District (IDPs, Fisheries Communities, Women Groups, Representatives of Cooperatives)
- 5th June 2022-Killinochchi & Mulathive Districts (War affected & Resettled Communities)
- 22nd & 23rd June 2022 Plantation Sector (Udapussellawa, Talawakale & Maskeliya)
- 05th August 2022 Polonnaruwa District (Hingurakgoda and Lankapura Farmer Communities who suffered with Micro finance debt crisis and fertilizer issue)



## 1. A pluralist and equal society

- 1.1 A political solution should come up from the core of issues which must be reached on the ethnic issue, with genuine reconciliation among communities through power devolution, ethnic integration policies, etc.
- 1.2 Protect the basic human rights of ethno-religious, linguistic, and other marginalised communities through the rule of Law.
- 1.3 Education of citizens on history of the 'ethnic issue' and systemic racism.
- 1.4 Institutionalisation of secular politics, e.g., People's Unity Council for inter-religious co-existence
- 1.5 The law needs to apply equally to all citizens of the country, in terms of rights and access to basic social services.
- 1.6 Education of citizens of their rights and duties.
- 1.7 Protect freedom of speech and expression, and ensure the functioning of a free and unbiased media.
- 1.8 Ensure that the police and armed forces operate in a neutral manner and remain within their professional boundaries.

## 2. Justice for victims of conflict and historical injustices

- 2.1 Human rights of all citizens, including economic, social and cultural rights enshrined constitutionally
- 2.2 The rights of victims of conflict prioritised and ensure by actions.
- 2.3 Reverse state policies that institutionalise racism and militarise governance, especially in post-conflict areas.
- 2.4 Repeal Prevention of Terrorism Act used to arbitrarily arrest and intimidate minorities and political dissidents.
- 2.5 Strengthen peace building and reconciliation process up to bottom and bottom to up. Includes acknowledging responsibility for past actions and accelerating prosecution of persons who committed atrocities during the war.
- 2.6 Announce status of conflict-related missing persons and provide their families with justice and reparations.





### 3. An economy of and for the people

- 3.1 Public finance management should be more transparent, participatory, accountable, efficient, and equitable.
  - 3.1.1 Major national development decisions should be made with greater publicity and public engagement, e.g., whether it is essential and meets citizen needs, how it impacts local communities. At present, only essential development initiatives, suited to the various needs of each region in the country, must be pursued; all other capital expenditures must be halted and redirected towards immediate poverty alleviation and relief measures
  - 3.1.2 Pursue avenues to recover stolen public funds and prosecute those found guilty, including retrospectively and whether in Sri Lanka or in an overseas jurisdiction.
  - 3.1.3 Implement progressive and transparent tax regimes which give indicative feedback to public with responsibility that lessen socio-economic inequalities.
  - 3.1.4 Maintain good foreign relations with countries towards foreign investment and development projects that are strategically able to balance and secure the national interest.
  - 3.1.5 Implement more stringent, frequent, and effective auditing, policy review, and anti-corruption measures regarding public finance, e.g., establish a permanent monitoring commission to oversee state institutions; pass laws that ensure key national decision-makers meet qualification standards.
  - 3.1.6 Pass laws which enable national debt to be procured only after official, non-partisan risk and ROI assessments and public opinion surveys have been carried out, along with limits to amount of national debt incurred.





## 3.2. Local development policies should be people-centric

- 3.2.1 Ensure universal social safety mechanisms which prioritize most vulnerable sections of the population as well as should balance the needs of all the sections of the society. State subsidies must prioritise health, education and agriculture sectors.
- 3.2.2 Economic crisis recovery strategy should target and centre the working class and economically marginalised sectors of society, as well as the environment.
- 3.2.3 Government policies should prioritise a more sustainable, production based local economy by supporting a people centric production economy over a consumption economy.
- 3.2.4 Revive or establish collective mechanisms such as cooperatives, to better meet local interests.
- 3.2.5 Policies and systems must ensure local are not vulnerable to high degrees of exploitation by middlemen businessmen.
- 3.2.6 Economic policies should make more opportunities available to youth, including leveraging youth technological literacy to access global digital services and platforms, e.g., improving economic productivity of export sector.
- 3.2.7 Ensure the right to livelihood and promote livelihood generation avenues in any national common minimum programme.

## 4. Right to land and equitable access to natural resources.

- 4.1 Develop a proper mechanism for land redistribution.
- 4.1 Ensure right to land and places of origin, e.g., locals in former conflict areas reported of private land access obstructed by military occupying these lands and conducting farming activities.
- 4.1 Ensure equitable access to natural resources, which are inextricably tied to sources of local livelihoods.
- 4.1 Ensure land and housing rights of Malayaga community





## 5. A people's democracy

Implement political reforms, such as:

- 5.1 Limits to entitlements of public office and number of cabinet members
- 5.1 Professional standards for political representatives, e.g., vetted educational qualifications, an age limit, a maximum term limit to serve in parliament, anti-nepotism measures, transparency on any past misconduct by political representatives wanting to enter public office.
- 5.1 Make elected representatives accountable and legally bound mechanism to election mandates
- 5.1 Reinstate and improve the 19th Amendment to the Constitution (of 2015). Abolish the executive presidential system and return to a full parliamentary system.
- 5.1 Empower parliamentary opposition to hold the government accountable to public interests through force groups and other people centric council initiatives.
- 5.1 Prevent political party member crossovers during an ongoing parliamentary term.
- 5.1 Prohibit patron-client relations between elected representatives and voters.
- 5.1 Audit political parties and pass electoral reforms over issues such as campaign financing.
- 5.1 Mandate by law all political representatives to declare assets and liabilities when they campaign or are appointed to public office.
- 5.1 Political parties should have checks and balances on the process of nominating MPs (including those entering through the national list) such that arbitrary, unqualified, and patronage-driven political appointments are prevented.
- 5.1 Establish effective channels through which citizens could make complaints or provide other feedback with no fear of reprisals or discrimination afterwards and with the guarantee that such feedback is acted upon efficiently and independently.





## 6. Inclusive governance.

- 6.1 Have more youth, women, persons with disabilities, minorities, peasantry, working class, and other economically-disadvantaged communities represented in National & local level governance with active coordination.
- 6.1 Formulate national policy through consensus and consultation with people than in closed and small groups.
- 6.1 Develop a national policy which all governments adhere to irrespective of political party composition, and establish an institution such as the Senate in India or a National State Council to this end.
- 6.1 Increase the role of Civil Society) and other groups in governance. Create a collaborative mechanism to absorb and make an action outcome.



## STORIES OF PEOPLE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

At a People's Parliament session in Pottuvil and Akkaraipattu in Ampara district, villagers shared how large-scale commercial agriculture, archaeology, and forest conservation have led to widespread occupation of local people's lands. They also shared challenges in carrying out home cultivation and small-scale production, which would help them through the current crisis. Farmers in Hingurakgoda spoke of the problem of a rice mafia and middlemen, who profited from selling paddy at exorbitant prices while buying from farmers at cheap rates. It was the responsibility of the state to ensure equitable access to resources and to maintain fixed prices for essentials. It was suggested that small-scale village rice mills were supported so that the power of large external rice mill businesses could be undercut.

Some communities in the North expressed the need to petition for the basic state cash transfers (currently at Rs. 5,000) to be increased and to reflect the real cost of living. Others in Uda Pussellawa complained that the current rural poverty alleviation programme, Samurdhi, and other cash transfers during the pandemic and crisis were not equitably distributed to all who needed it within their communities.

Farming communities in Hingurakgoda, Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa spoke of how traditional seeds could be cultivated using compost (such as from local rice mills) and did not require a lot of irrigation. This was a more self-sufficient and symbiotic system and some spoke of preparing to make these seeds at their homes. In contrast, the hybrid seeds given by the government were said to be much harder to cultivate and required more water supply and chemical fertiliser. It was suggested that fuel distribution and fertilizer/seed subsidies be prioritised to those in farming and fisheries, as the local food systems depended heavily on them, and the nature of these economic activities were seasonal.

Communities in the north strongly believed that any system change short of constitutional reforms and repeal of long unjust and draconian laws, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), were superficial and temporary. In Kattankudy, Batticaloa, a local women's group spoke of how the community had faced backlash in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Attacks. The state had used the PTA to detain members of their community for a number of years. The locals suggested that community-based correction could be an alternative to the PTA, where the persons under suspicion could be given work in their communities and the wages they earned sent to their families.

In Uda Pussellawa, which has a large plantation worker sector, demands for a minimum wage of Rs. 1,000 a day have still not been met. Locals spoke of how avenues of work outside the plantations sector, such as the construction, three-wheeler hires, and garment sectors, are increasingly closed off. Even those with university degrees found it increasingly difficult to find employment. Women's groups in Batticaloa shared how many people, including public servants who had permanent jobs had to resort to second jobs (such as fishing) to survive. Some bartered surplus fishing catches for other goods, indicating how inflation reduces the value of money as a medium of exchange. The social fallouts of such situations were said to show up in mental health disorders and substance abuse.

Communities shared how the crisis has affected students' access to education, especially among lower-income communities and regional schools. As a result, there are increasing numbers of school dropouts, as former students look for work avenues to support their struggling families. The state needs to provide support, such as food subsidies and access to technology for online education.

Communities in the North, East, and up-country shared details of being unable to afford the rapidly-increasingly cost of food and other essentials, as there was hardly a commensurate increase in their wages. This has impacted the diet of many people, who can no longer afford three meals a day. Even the food that is consumed is often nutrition deficient, as food items high in protein, vitamins, minerals, etc., such as fish, poultry, and vegetables are scarce and/or too expensive. This affects most severely new mothers and infants. Some of them suggested that a food security hotline should be established.

Many communities spoke of difficulty in paying back loans taken to finance basic livelihood infrastructure. With many of the males of the household losing their livelihoods, the women, who were largely engaged in daily labour, such as care work in other people's houses, cutting grass and other manual tasks, became the sole breadwinners.

Many interviewees mentioned that in response to scarcity and increased livelihood pressures, there was an element of communities coming together, such as co-living with extended families; communal cooking and sharing food with the less-able. In the up-country region, people shared stories of collective, small-scale businesses enterprises, such as greenhouse farming and home gardening. Success stories were shared by plantation workers in Maskeliya of going on strike to demand for better wages and forcing the estate management to come to some compromise. In Hingurakgoda, one story was shared of how a local woman won a case against her by a microfinance company.

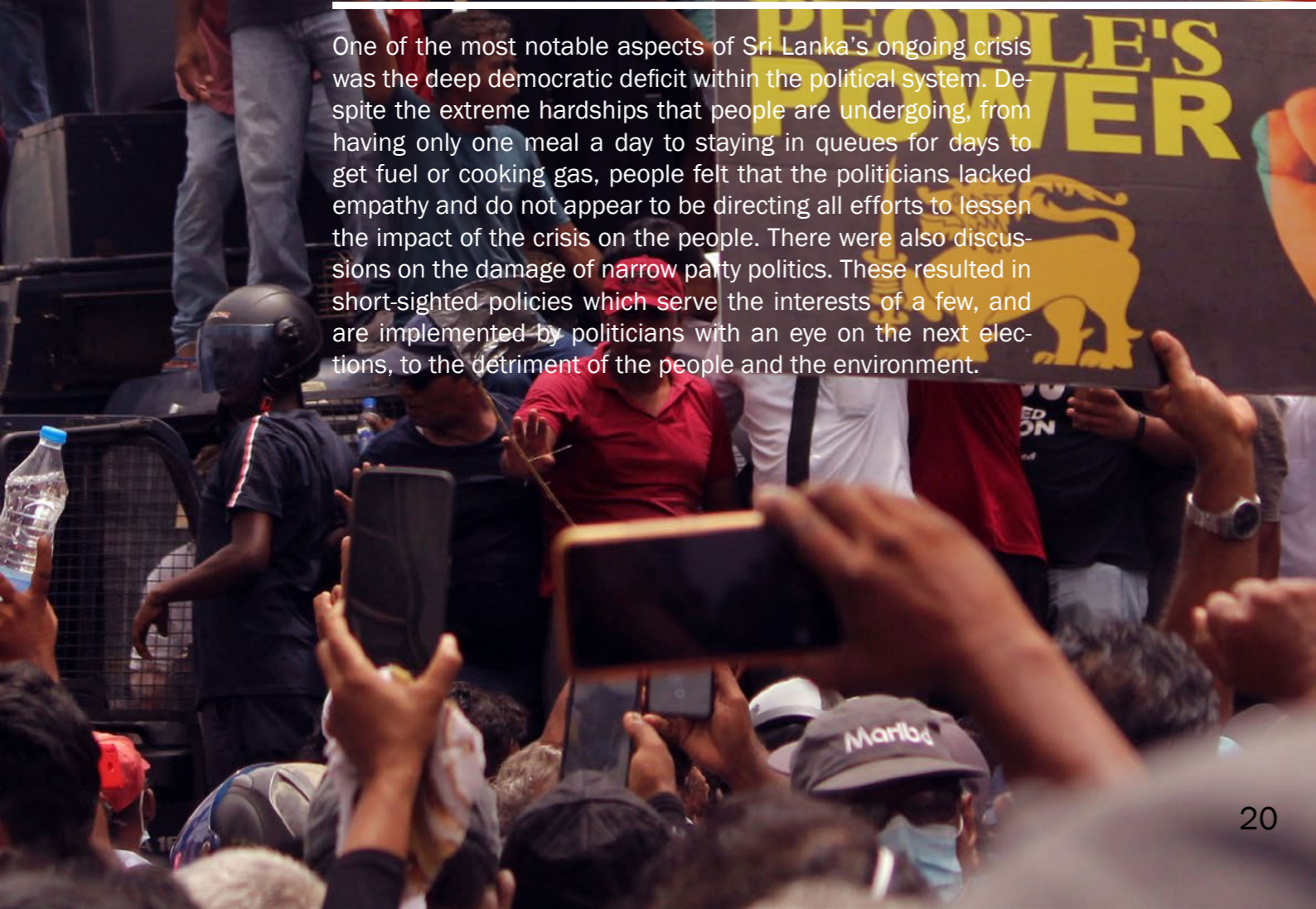
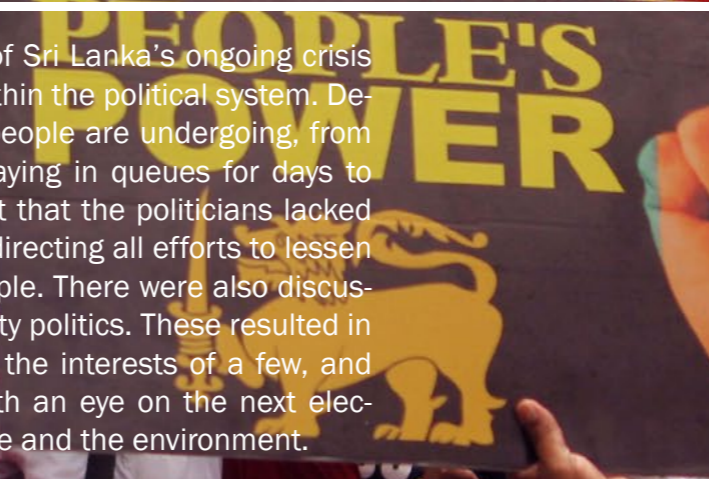
Fishing communities among Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) at Point Pedro and communities in Mullaitivu said their livelihoods were disrupted by the economic crisis. Farming communities in the Northern Province and up-country revealed how most of them are restricted to raising livestock due to the lack of diesel and fertiliser for farming activities. Farmers from Hingurakgoda, Polonnaruwa spoke of how the high cost of fuel meant that many farming activities were carried out by manual labour, which is difficult and not compensated for in produce prices. Some other farmers spoke of how they faced difficulty in registering their farming tractors in the QR code fuel allocation





## PERCEPTIONS ON THE CURRENT CRISIS AND ARAGALAYA

One of the most notable aspects of Sri Lanka's ongoing crisis was the deep democratic deficit within the political system. Despite the extreme hardships that people are undergoing, from having only one meal a day to staying in queues for days to get fuel or cooking gas, people felt that the politicians lacked empathy and do not appear to be directing all efforts to lessen the impact of the crisis on the people. There were also discussions on the damage of narrow party politics. These resulted in short-sighted policies which serve the interests of a few, and are implemented by politicians with an eye on the next elections, to the detriment of the people and the environment.



Among the opinions gathered from People's Parliament sessions across the country, the message was clear. In a crisis, survival is a struggle and this can limit discussions on the need for long-term reforms and development of the country. A legitimate government has to first ensure the basic needs of the people are met, especially by the more vulnerable sections of society. The main focus should therefore be on resolving the immediate crisis, and for various groups to put aside power interests and think together as a nation on planning the way forward. A considerate and humble attitude among national leaders and public servants were required to solve the roots of the current crisis.

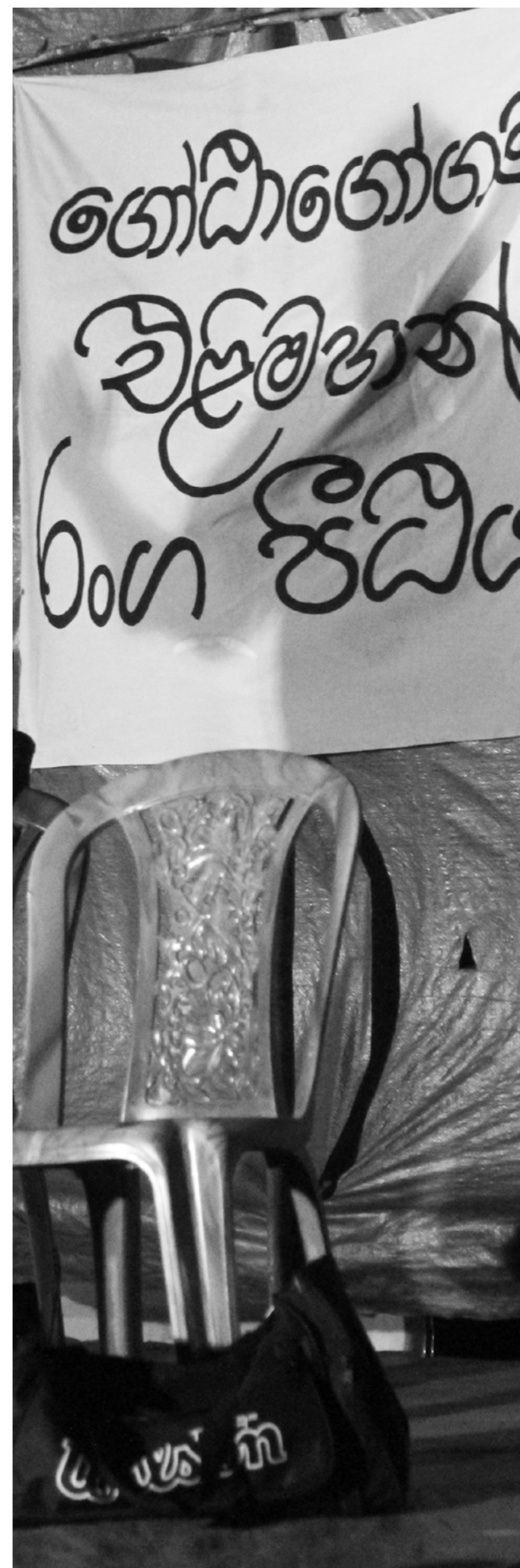
Several people recognised that part of the fault lies with the voters, who have a responsibility to make an informed choice at the polls. Many voters are brought over by political patronage and this political culture has prevented the most suitable candidate from being elected, in many ways leading to the current crisis. Some saw the goal of the current people's protests as expelling the current 225 MPs from parliament; others viewed this system change in the form of abolishing the political party system. The need to go for general and Presidential elections soon was also raised. Whatever the means by which system change was to be secured, there was consensus about the urgency with which the present system had to be changed, as solutions to the present crisis could not be found within it. However, it was unlikely that such change would come about naturally and the people had to be mobilised to pressure for system change. Social media was viewed as a useful tool for this means, as it empowers and gives ordinary citizens a voice and platform for agency and everyone can contribute their small part, which collectively drives large-scale change and transformation.



When communities in the Northern Province were asked for their thoughts and impressions of the mass protests in the South, there was a sentiment that the majority Sinhalese had not fought on behalf of Tamil rights during the civil war or afterwards. They said that while it was unfortunate that the majority of the Sinhalese now suffered many of the hardships that Tamils, especially in the North and East, had endured for several decades, it was at least a moment of shared experience and common understanding. Having endured these harsh conditions during the war, such as cooking gas and electricity shortages, the present hardships were not new to them. They argued that it was the responsibility of the state to provide additional support for communities, especially youth, in these conflict-affected areas.

Some explained that they did not want to participate in the Galle Face Green protests as they felt that issues pertinent to their areas and communities, such as land issues, militarisation, housing, encroachment of fishing areas by Indian bottom trawlers, etc., were not adequately centred to these protests. They said that protestors in the South were fighting for access to food, electricity, and other essentials which the people in the North had long had only limited access to. So, they felt that the struggles of the people in the North and South were fundamentally different.

Others shared that the mass protests are in response to a problem that the people in the South created for themselves by voting the Rajapaksa government into power. There were also some who shared that the historical experience of state violence in the North meant that not everyone here believed that liberation and justice could be achieved through peaceful protests. In the past, even Southern progressive movements had been defeated or co-opted by the state and they saw no reason for there to be a different outcome now.



Many spoke of the fatigue and futility that came from their long struggle for freedom. Having borne the brunt of protesting, historically and even in the present, many people of the North felt that they would face much stronger state repression than the South was currently experiencing if they joined the protests. They also had little faith that anyone who came into power on the back of the mass protests would treat them (the people in the North) any differently or improve their lot.

Nevertheless, several people in these areas said that they saw in the (former) President Gotabaya Rajapaksa a common enemy and prayed for the success of the GotaGoGama protests, with the hope that their issues too would be raised in these movements eventually. Some expressed sadness upon hearing news that the protest site had been attacked on May 9. Others remarked on how they had heard of activists raising past state injustices on their communities, such as the burning of the Jaffna library and enforced disappearances. They suggested that the youth at the forefront of the Janatha Aragalaya (People's Struggle) come to the North and gain a deeper understanding of their problems, so that when they come into positions of power, they could bring about real change. Some communities in Hingurakgoda, Polonnaruwa spoke of the pride they felt upon seeing protestors agitating for their rights as a people.

In the up-country too, people questioned why their sustained protests over economic and social issues, such as inadequate wages of plantation workers, had not received as much media coverage as the protests in the South. Opposition to the government's chemical fertiliser ban in 2021 has been first raised in these areas, they said, due to the heavy reliance of the plantation sector on fertiliser. However, such protests received little media coverage.

Some among them (from the up-country) had gone to Colombo (Galle Face) to voice their protests, such as with regard to land issues.

Economically-precarious communities who were already dependent on extractive livelihoods, such as plantation work in Uda Pussellawa, spoke of how they feared losing a day's income or their full employment if they participated in the protests. For example, plantation workers in Mattakelle told how some of them were punished for speaking up against certain issues related to worker's rights and that this was determined by the caste of the person/s protesting or the party and/or union links of the estate management.

People living in these areas pointed out that there was no accountability or redressal mechanisms to compensate for the enormous harm the fertiliser ban had brought upon these communities' food security and livelihoods. They called for a mainstream awareness of treating politicians as public servants paid for by people's taxes, and were not being above the law or superior to the people that elected them to power. They thought that the people needed to take back their power. It was suggested that the "Gota Go Home" slogan should have been "Impeach Gota" instead because there needed to be accountability and justice served, not just resignations. The prevailing political culture and poor reputation of formal politics dissuades people with capabilities and integrity from entering into public service.



Many communities shared how the current crisis impacted their social and cultural lives. For example, as a result of their hand-to-mouth existence, many said they did not have the time or freedom of mind to engage in socio-cultural and religious practices necessary to a fulfilling and rounded life. It also weakened community bonds. People shared how it was the norm to help one another in times of need, but the current crisis affected everyone so badly that hardly anyone was in a position to help the other in need. It was said that if there is no economy relief in the near future, people are forced to search for alternative means of survival, such as leaving overseas for migrant labour or at the least, leaving their villages, where the avenues of survival are increasingly restricted. The social costs of such disruptions are immense.



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