

Sri Lanka: Revolution by Committee and Other Ways to Kill a Protest

Wednesday 20 April 2022, by [SATKUNANATHAN Ambika](#) (Date first published: 16 April 2022).

“It is a youth protest.”

Youth “should do xxxx” and “should xxxxxx. They need direction.”

“No one has control of the protests. Even the political parties have no control over the protests.”

“I went down there last night and it was like a party. They have lost focus. They need guidance.”

Infantilizing youth: a familiar trope

The ongoing protests are being labelled youth protests. Yes, youth have taken the lead in the Occupy Galle Face protest, which is being sustained by their creatively subversive and constructive strategies. Yet to focus only on Galle Face and label the protests youth protests is not only inaccurate but also dangerous.

As at April 14, there have been 240 protests of different sizes around the country by different social groups according to [Watchdog’s protest tracker](#). These include protests by fisherfolk in Galle and Ambalantota, carpenters in Moratuwa, private bus drivers in Anuradhapura, health workers of the Kandy, Kegalle and Mullaitivu hospitals, Free Trade Zone workers in Katunayake, and public protests in Akkaraipattu, Balangoda, Bandarawela, Batticaloa, Dambulla, Gampola, Habarana, Hambantota, Jaffna, Kandy, Kelaniya, Kurunegala, Mannar, Matara, Minneriya, Mullaitivu, Nuwara Eliya, Panadura, Ragama, Thihariya, Vavuniya, Walasmulla and Yakkala.

Labelling a broad show of citizen discontent as youth protests creates room to discredit protests through claims the youth do not know what they are doing and hence should not be taken seriously. [Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa in his speech on April 11](#) alluded to this by referring to protestors as “youth” and “young people” and stating their “elders” and “parents” would be able to tell them of the devastating repercussions of youth protests, thereby following a familiar patronizing trope of infantilizing young persons who are portrayed as misguided. Civil society too unwittingly seems to be falling into the trap of enabling this narrative. To portray the youth, who seem to have a clear understanding of the duty they have as citizens to hold those in power accountable, as apolitical or politically apathetic does them great disservice and is counter-productive to a collective political struggle.

Politics vs political parties

Disdain is being heaped on young persons by some sections of civil society, political actors and trade unionists for what is termed their “rejection of politics” because they are preventing political parties from joining the protests at Galle Face. Yet their demands, such as repealing the 20th amendment to

the constitution and the abolition of the executive presidency, are inherently political. There are also calls for political parties to lead the protests because, if not, the protestors will supposedly lack [“legitimate representatives for conflict-deescalating negotiations”](#). Further, fears are being expressed about their “lack of policy coherence”.

People generally, not only youth, reject political parties because of their consistent failure to deliver and their failure to be consistent (in anything except failing, making deals and protecting each other). In this context, it is disappointing that it is youth protestors that are being chided for preventing political parties from joining the protest, and demands are not being made of political parties to show their bona fides. The performance of all political parties (and yes it was more performance than using parliamentary process to hold the government accountable) the last time the Parliament convened did nothing to diminish people’s mistrust of political parties.

Expecting young people who courageously stepped up to call for the resignation of the President to trust political parties when they have done nothing to deserve it illustrates a sense of entitlement. A sense of entitlement that lies at the rotten core of Sri Lankan political culture. It is this that youth are rejecting. They are not rejecting politics. They are rejecting party politics as it exists in Sri Lanka and the patronage driven and nepotistic political culture that drives it; a culture that has been normalized and has remained unchallenged for decades.

Labelling citizens’ demands for accountability as youth protest also ignores the decades long rights struggles of communities, such as Tamils, that have challenged the state and particularly the Rajapaksas. [The families of the disappeared for instance have been protesting non-stop for 1,881 days](#) demanding answers from specifically Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Mahinda Rajapaksa. The protests of these groups have been subject to surveillance, intimidation, harassment and threats by security agencies. Key persons in these struggles, mainly women, regularly receive visits to their homes and phone calls inquiring about their whereabouts and activities and have even been summoned to the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) for inquiry. The ability to protest freely is hence a privilege and is shaped by factors such as ethnicity, region and class, particularly when people do not have the safety of numbers.

Eternally seeking a savior: it’s the Sri Lankan way

Another growing assertion is that the protests need to have leaders and should be ideologically driven because when people are called to the street, they need to know who is calling them. But is anyone calling people to the streets in an organized manner? Many protests around Colombo seem to have been initiated by a small group of people who decided to protest and tried to encourage their family, friends and colleagues or passers-by to join and posted it on social media. This resulted in others joining the following day.

While there is speculation about who is coordinating the protests, the reality is that there are various social groups that are not affiliated to any political party supporting those who are occupying Galle Face. There does not appear to be a single entity either coordinating or gathering people together. This is evidenced by two facts – the homogeneity of people gathered at protests outside Colombo, which reflects its spontaneity because it is by people of the area and the heterogeneity of those gathering at Galle Face, which also illustrates spontaneity because of the impossibility of a single entity gathering such a large group of diverse people together.

One wonders if the laments about the lack of leadership are indicative of the yearning Sri Lankans have for power to be centralized and the eternal search for a “strong leader” to save Sri Lanka. [This yearning](#) enables the creation of a paternalistic, non-rational core of the nation and the cult of personality whereby the relationship is not one of accountability between the voter and the elected

but a relationship between a superior and a subordinate.

Staying in your lane

The demands of the protestors in Colombo began with calls for electricity, gas and fuel and moved to calling for the resignation of the President and thereafter the entire Rajapaksa family. Although the slogans at the protests at Galle Face are broader, they have not included and amplified the demands of many protestors outside Colombo such as the demands of the farmers and fisherfolk or the people in Vali North in Jaffna to return their lands still occupied by the military.

Two common themes/demands are emerging from the protests; one explicit and one implicit. The explicit theme/demand is harsh criticism of the government usually accompanied by demands for the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his family. The implied demand is the re-imagining of the dysfunctional Sri Lankan state and the power to hold those we elect and appoint to public positions accountable.

Keep in mind that those protesting are not seeking to be negotiators during a constitutional reform process or to be involved in political negotiations. They are expressing discontent and have specific clear demands, which they see as imperative to begin the recovery process. It is the role of the opposition parties, not only the main opposition but all opposition parties, civil society and experts to put forward specific proposals and the media to disseminate them. It is their role to create awareness and public consensus on red lines, proposed changes to institutions and laws.

Civil society in the meantime is engaged in discussions and suggestions are being made about establishing committees to draft documents/statements to present to the government. Even at the meeting of opposition political parties with former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, reportedly it was only [“decided to form a committee to identify what is be done”](#).

Instead of attempting to lead, control or co-opt the protests – and there appear to be many such ongoing efforts – with individuals and entities claiming to “represent” youth, each entity should focus on what they do best while reaching out to the others to collaborate where possible.

The blind spots in the big tent approach

It appears many see value in adopting the big tent approach, at Galle Face in particular, to increase the pressure on the President to resign. While this is strategic, we should not be under any illusion that this moment of common purpose will magically erase historical, systemic and structural problems that are the cause of inter-community conflict. Or that it will miraculously effect systemic change. For the Tamil community, examples of such historical and systemic issues include the absence of a political solution to the ethnic conflict nearly 13 years after the end of the war, the lack of progress on accountability for violations committed during the war, especially during the last stages, continuing violations such as the failure to uphold language rights, militarization of the North and East and takeover of land.

The big tent has accepted Buddhist priests who have espoused racism and those who supported, enabled and benefitted from the Rajapaksa regime. While the right to protest of these persons is not disputed, their change of heart must not be accepted unquestioningly. They should be held accountable for their past actions and should at least acknowledge and accept their errors, particularly the factors that drove their support, such as racism, and make amends.

At the same time, those who have been historically discriminated and marginalized may not feel they are part of the big tent because issues of concern to them, such as fair wages for plantation sector workers or military acquisition of land in the North and East are not part of the broader slogans.

This could be due to three factors; the devolved nature of the protests that do not have agreed upon slogans, the lack of awareness amongst the Southern public in particular about these issues, and the failure of many to view these issues as intrinsically linked to the discriminatory nature of an ethnocratic Sri Lankan state, crisis of governance and the policies of the Rajapaksas. Fewer protests in the North and East with fewer people than elsewhere is due to this and a combination of exhaustion and feeling they have fought long enough, and this is a battle others have to take on board now.

Moreover, the apathy shown by the people in the North and East could be due to the South largely ignoring the struggles of the communities in the North and East with negligible media coverage provided in the South. Even Southern social activists have done little to engage and encourage Southern media to report and amplify these struggles. Yet some social activists are now reportedly calling upon the media in the North and East to cover the protests in the South, while not urging Southern media to report on the historical and long-term struggles as part of the current struggle, since the root causes of both are the same.

The value of Occupy Galle Face and capturing the elusive moment

Criticism of Occupy Galle Face has also centered on its methods. That protestors are not taking it seriously, that there is song and music. That it is like a party. These comments demonstrate a failure to understand the multi-faceted nature of protests and the fact that protests will always have those who come along for their own purposes. Galle Face turning into “a carnival” has perhaps broken the taboo on protesting, especially the middle class aversion to and disdain for protesting on the streets. GoGotaGama, while demonstrating certain positive practices around community care and action, fulfilling civic duties and devolution of power at work, could also be the site where inequalities, based on class, sex etc., are reproduced. After all, it is a microcosm of Sri Lankan society. There will also be disrupters, those who will try to use this as a platform for their activities and spies to gather intel for the government.

It is undeniable Occupy Galle Face serves a critical purpose. The Presidential Secretariat is the seat of power. It is a place previously thought impenetrable and yet, now, the most powerful man and one time most feared man in the country is unable to access it. It is a place whose gates no one dreamt would be draped with photos of slain and assaulted journalists; the current President is alleged to have ordered many of the attacks.

The protests serve a purpose as do other processes, such as parliament. The role of parliamentarians is in Parliament, a role which they have repeatedly failed to fulfill. Parliamentarians should use the power that they possess within the forum instead of feeling entitled to lead the protestors.

This is more [“than the culmination of past and present, dead and alive Sri Lankans from all over the world who have spoken against the Rajapaksa regime since 2006”](#). To ensure it is more than that, we need to address the elephants in the room; our dysfunctional political structures, the culture of patronage and nepotism, the Sinhala Buddhist nature of the state, the discrimination of minorities and such. If we fail to do that, like many other points in our history, this moment will only be a moment and yet another lost opportunity.

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