

To Solve Its Economic Crisis, Sri Lanka Must Demilitarize

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Sri Lanka's economic crisis has produced an explosion of violence on the island. That violence won't end until the country ends its war on Tamils and Muslims and drastically scales back its military budget.

Sri Lanka is in crisis. [This week](#), the houses of government-aligned MPs have been set on fire and vehicles across the island left overturned. Several people have been killed, hundreds injured. Anti-government protesters are continuing to clash with supporters of the Rajapaksa clan, and the military has been deployed to impose a state curfew.

This explosion of violence, which came after a month of relatively peaceful demonstrations in response to the country's economic crisis, is not uncommon on the island even in the cosmopolitan Southern capital of Colombo, home to the country's political and financial elite. But it has been several years since this level of widespread unrest has occurred, driven by a dire economic crisis that has affected all levels of Sri Lankan society, including the affluent middle class.

Cash-strapped citizens have had to deal with frequent power shortages, record levels of inflation, and shortages of essential goods such as food and medicine. Sri Lanka's government has been forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for aid after [months](#) of denial.

Many are increasingly alarmed by the authoritarian nature of their government and blame President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, taking to the streets and demanding that "Gota Go Home." But the crisis in Sri Lanka cannot be placed solely on one family. Nor will the IMF rescue the island from the root cause of the crisis: the country's militarized and ethnocratic state.

Over generations, a racist ideology has entrenched Sri Lanka's military into several aspects of civil society at the expense of the economy and the liberty and democratic aspirations of its citizens. This has been particularly hard-felt by non-Sinhala peoples, namely Tamils and Muslims in the northeast of the island.

The Promise of Rajapaksa

On November 17, 2019, few commentators would have predicted mass protests against the newly appointed president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The former defense secretary had played to his military credentials during his campaign and trumped the cause of extreme Sinhala nationalism.

"It is no secret that the majority who voted for me then were Sinhalese," Rajapaksa told Sri Lanka's parliament on [November 19, 2020](#). "They rallied because they had legitimate fears that the Sinhala race, our religion, national resources, and the heritage would be threatened with destruction in the face of various local and foreign forces and ideologies that support separatism, extremism, and terrorism."

Throughout his campaign, he would repeatedly attack the previous administration for being too conciliatory toward Muslims and Tamils, criticizing its adoption of the 2015 United Nations Human Rights Council resolution and the establishment of the [Office of Missing Persons](#). The Rajapaksas would claim that such gestures toward accountability jeopardized national security. For his supporters, this was vindicated by the failure of the government to stop the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, an attack by an Islamist extremist group that claimed the lives of close to 269 people.

In August 2020, Gotabaya Rajapaksa would secure a two-thirds majority in the parliamentary election, solidifying his control over the state.

Having secured his majority on a platform of Sinhala nationalism and technocratic military governance, he swiftly solidified his rule. Key cabinet positions were given to former [military commanders](#), and Rajapaksa moved to implement the [Twentieth Amendment](#) to Sri Lanka's constitution, which strengthened the executive presidency and weakened what remaining democratic safeguards existed. This helped him push through a series of [economic reforms](#), including a ban on chemical fertilizers, which caused crop production to plummet; slash taxes, which led tax revenue to fall by a quarter; and continue to inflate the military budget.

Along with a series of external shocks, these missteps proved a tipping point for Sri Lanka's economy. Crisis soon ensued as inflation and the prices of basic goods began to soar, while external debts piled up. On [April 12](#), while protesters were on the streets, the governor of Sri Lanka's Central Bank declared that the country could no longer service its international debt obligations, effectively defaulting on \$51 billion of foreign debt.

Yet despite the Rajapaksas' authoritarian governance style and bloated military being central to the current crisis, it also has a deep history that stretches far beyond this regime.

Normalizing Military Rule

In understanding the role of the military in Sri Lanka, a key figure is the country's first executive president, J.R. Jayewardene, leader of the pro-market United National Party (UNP), which won in a landslide victory in 1977. Akin to Rajapaksa, he consolidated control of the state through a new constitution that granted him sweeping powers as the executive president.

Through his command over the state, Jayewardene embraced neoliberal market reforms. [This program](#) saw a widening gulf between the middle class and poor as the government removed import controls, eliminated subsidies on food and petrol, and significantly reduced civilian state employment.

To pass these reforms, he offset their impacts by expanding the military. By the 1990s, the army had become the single largest employer in the country. For many Sinhalese, this mitigated the growing class divide and served as an important poverty-alleviation mechanism in a weak rural economy. This was notably not the case for Tamils, with the military remaining almost entirely monoethnic.

Jayewardene passed the draconian [Prevention of Terrorism Act](#) of 1979, which primarily targeted Tamil youth and granted security officials sweeping powers, including allowing for arbitrary arrests and detention for up to eighteen months without producing the suspect before a court. Despite being passed as a temporary measure, the act is still used today and has been linked to disappearances and reports of torture and sexual violence.

Thus, Sri Lanka's economy was fortified by the presence of a bloated military, which Sri Lankan leaders justified by pointing to the dangers of Tamil militants. This military was further ramped up under the presidencies of Chandrika Kumaratunga and then Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Sri Lanka's Genocide

In 2005, Mahinda Rajapaksa, the older brother of current president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, swept to power in Sri Lanka's presidential elections on yet another Sinhala nationalist platform. Though the state was still ostensibly in a ceasefire with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at the time, Sri Lanka [rapidly expanded](#) its military. In 2005 troop numbers stood at 120,000, but by 2009 this number had shot up to 300,000.

By this time, Sri Lankan leaders had long agreed that the armed conflict would come to an end only with a military victory. This would culminate in what Tamil rights groups decry as a [genocide](#). Sri Lankan forces repeatedly bombed civilian no-fire zones; surrendering combatants were summarily executed; hundreds reported accounts of sexual violence and rape; and hundreds were taken into military custody, never to be seen by their loved ones again.

According to UN statistics, an estimated 40,000 people were killed during the final year of the conflict. Tamil sources say the number unaccounted for reaches as high as [146,679](#).

Just months after the massacres took place, Sri Lanka was in yet another financial crisis. Exorbitant military spending, a global financial crash, and rising inflation had driven the Rajapaksas to the IMF once more. The government was swiftly granted an IMF bailout of more than [\\$1.6 billion](#). But the crisis was not solved. Instead, the culture of impunity and militarism continued and expanded.

Today Sri Lanka's military remains more than twice the size of Britain's in pure numbers alone, despite the end of the armed conflict. Sri Lanka's state budget for 2022 has allocated [12.3 percent](#) for the military.

In the aftermath of the conflict, the military has taken on a new role. It expanded its occupation of the traditional Tamil homeland of the North East as well as its remit to oversee commercial industries such as tourism and agriculture. Under the Gotabaya Rajapaksa regime, this has inflated further with generals put [in charge](#) of customs, the port authority, development, poverty eradication, and even the pandemic response.

Notably, this military expansion has happened regardless of the administration. In 2015 Mahinda Rajapaksa was ousted due to growing dissatisfaction over his administration's corruption. Maithripala Sirisena secured the presidency with the support of Tamils and Muslims, vowing for an era of "good governance." Despite the rhetoric, his government refused to stem military expansion or pursue meaningful accountability. Speaking at an event in [Horowpathana](#), he vowed he "would not allow any foreign forces to lay hands on war heroes" and ruled out the potential for an international investigation into war crimes.

By 2018, Sri Lanka's military ran a score of [luxury hotels](#) and resorts as well numerous golf courses, airlines, and a nature reserve. Its presence in the Tamil homeland also expanded, with fourteen of the twenty-one divisions being stationed in the North.

Thirteen years since the end of the armed conflict, the Sri Lankan military continues to have an overbearing presence on the island.

A Sinhala Buddhist State

In addition to its extortion of Tamils, the military operates an intensive surveillance system and routinely intimidates and harasses dissidents. Its broader goal is not only to repress the democratic aspiration of Tamils but to fundamentally reshape the island in line with the vision of a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist polity.

Across the North East, Tamils have rallied against ongoing land grabs and attempts at reshaping their landscape through the imposition of Buddhist monuments and Sinhala settlements. A 2018 US State Department report detailed concerns that this was a form of “religious intimidation,” with the construction of shrines where there were “few, if any, Buddhist residents.” The report notes that Sri Lanka’s security officials would often be engaged in these monuments’ construction. This imbued to Sinhala nationalists a quasi-sacred character to the military, given its close association with Buddhist monasteries.

While welcomed by Sinhalese settlers, the intrusion of Sri Lanka’s military is a stark reminder of their occupation. Not only have Tamil [war memorials](#) been destroyed, but attempts at commemorating their war dead are routinely [cracked down on](#). In advance of memorials commemorating the war dead, Sri Lankan police threatened a Tamil politician, claiming that they would [shoot her](#) if she dared to light a commemorative lamp.

UN Special Rapporteur [Pablo de Greiff](#) has decried this surveillance. In a statement, he details how “grieving families have expressed the need to bury or destroy photographs of their deceased loved ones in uniform for fear of harassment by the security forces.”

The military apparatus is intended not only to erase the experience of Tamil victims but stifle legitimate democratic demands. In February of last year, Tamils and Muslims joined in unprecedented solidarity as they marched from [Pottuvil to Polikandy](#), the two points delineating the furthest ends of the traditional Tamil homeland. Among their demands were demilitarization and international accountability for Sri Lankan war crimes. They were not only met with harassment from Sri Lankan officers, but those who participated would be photographed and later called in for interrogations. Sri Lanka’s minister for public security openly called for the [tear-gassing and arrest](#) of prominent Tamil politicians who participated.

Demilitarize Sri Lanka

For many on the island, there is a hope that external pressure on the IMF can break this militarized mode of governance by forcing structural reform to the Sri Lankan state. But this is not the first time Sri Lanka has gone to the IMF since the end of the armed conflict. Repeatedly the IMF has turned a blind eye to military abuses and pushed for austerity programs that only further immiserate the poor.

Today Colombo lies in ruins after the carnage unleashed by Sinhala nationalist forces. For its citizens to break free from this cycle of violence, it must break from the ethnonationalist ideology that promoted figures such as the Rajapaksas to the forefront of Sri Lankan politics. Even to alleviate much of the economic crisis, government expenditure on a bloated and overwhelming military must cease. Sri Lanka needs to rebuke the infiltration of the military into every remit of society and demilitarize.

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