

Sri Lanka: Pride in Colombo: Past, present and future

Tuesday 5 July 2022, by [WANDURAMBA Ruby](#), [WEERASINGHE C.D.](#), [WIJESIRIWARDENA Subha](#) (Date first published: 3 July 2022).

A conversation between Subha Wijesiriwardena, Ruby Wanduramba, and C.D. Weerasinghe

Subha: What have your experiences of Pride been in Colombo? Give us a little bit of history?

Ruby: In November 2013, Sri Lanka hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM). The President at the time was Mahinda Rajapaksa. Even at that time there were measures to repress the freedom of expression and the freedom of peaceful assembly. There was a concerted effort to stifle dissenting voices. Demonstrations which were in favour of the Government were allowed to proceed unhindered, even though the Police had obtained a court order preventing protests in the city of Colombo for two days while the meeting happened. But some of the control measures adopted were as follows. They will sound familiar.

The restrictions on civic space manifested in the form of Police shutting down events. They controlled the freedom of movement of people from the north who wished to participate in events in Colombo. Foreign journalists travelling to the north were turned back, the intimidation and interrogation of journalists were documented. Protesters were threatened, embargoes on seminars and conferences were put in place, death threats were made against human rights activists through State-owned media, workshops were raided - many of the incidents we are now all too familiar with were prevalent. The playbook was in place. But most importantly people speaking on LGBTIQ issues were stifled. CHOGM would have been an appropriate place to raise them, given that similar laws criminalising same-sex sexual conduct are prevalent in many 'Commonwealth' nations.

But despite this restrictive atmosphere, LGBTIQ activists adorned with rainbow flags joined a march of civil society organisations, voicing their demands for decriminalisation of same-sex relations and equality. Though not termed as a 'Pride March,' this was an early attempt by LGBTIQ people to hold a procession, voicing their demands. Consequent to this there have been demonstrations, protests and collective activity that LGBTIQ persons have participated in, some even focused on LGBTIQ rights. However, the first recorded 'Pride March' was in June 2022, in Jaffna, followed by the Pride March in Colombo a week later, which enjoyed the participation of about 400 persons.

Subha: I think there have been some moments of LGBTIQ 'visibility' over the years, but perhaps it has not been emphasised in the public space in quite this way. In previous years, LGBTIQ-led organisations and some other informal groups were doing Pride events, but these were always behind closed doors. They had to be promoted more quietly, or had to be effectively invitation-only. There were film screenings, parties, and some gatherings.

The informal feminist collective that I co-founded with some friends - A Collective for Feminist Conversations, or FemCon as it came to be known - we actually did Pride events for about four years consecutively, in-person, up until the beginning of the pandemic. And when we started doing them, a lot of people told us that they were so happy to have something new in the Pride space. Our events,

and the spaces we created tried to really centre lesbian and bisexual women and transpeople, so I think people found that refreshing.

I think we couldn't really carve out a protest space, claiming public space, which is what a 'march' does, that's what was missing for a long time. But for that it really takes a lot of solidarity, as well, from allies. It takes a lot of people showing up together - but having private events didn't really help us on that issue either, because those who may have wanted to be an ally or to be visibly in solidarity with LGBTIQ people may have been excluded.

C.D.: It has been hard to make mainstream society recognise that the issues faced by LGBTIQ persons are, at a fundamental level, issues of democracy, justice, non-discrimination, and equality. This is due, in no small part, to the fact that, for many sections of society, these were blindspots in general.

In the early 2000s, the Women's Support Group, a Colombo-based lesbian, bisexual, and trans collective faced a very different reality than we see today. The ongoing war and militarisation had restricted the space for dissent and difference to an extent that visible advocacy for such issues was a tricky prospect.

Subha: But what are some of the changes you see? What has compelled those changes?

C.D.: The past few years have brought growing awareness about the underlying basis of issues faced by LGBTIQ people, particularly as each turn of events in the political landscape has made such issues so obvious. A significant part of this is due to the persistent advocacy of LGBTIQ organisations and activists over the past 20 years.

For instance, consider the public protests held by LGBTIQ persons, allies, and a range of civil society actors, against former President Maithripala Sirisena's remarks about his Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe's 'butterfly life' ('butterfly' was seen as a homophobic slur, but this charge was denied) in 2018, in the middle of what many saw as a major democratic crisis.

What we witnessed there, was not only a public challenge to the country's long-running culture of political homophobia, but an intervention that allied itself with the broader ongoing politics and ethos of challenging political authority and calling for a more just, equitable, and progressive society, and for democracy. The defiant language that was used in the protest and the demonstrated spirit, invited ordinary people to make those connections between what LGBTIQ people were fighting for and what they themselves wanted in terms of change in the country.

Subha: The pro-democracy protests in 2018 were definitely an early expression of the Pride spirit. It was very public. People stood side-by-side. The LGBTIQ community and its representatives also had to learn to stand side-by-side with each other, since those protests were also quite class-diverse, and had different parts of the community, like trans people, and those who are sex workers, coming to the fore, to be visible together.

Ruby: Since then, the previous Rajapaksa administration's hyped-up patriarchal messaging on winning the war, celebrating the military as war heroes, though it worked for many years, has in more recent times failed to inspire confidence, especially during the current political and economic crisis.

Subha: And so now we have the 'Aragalaya'?

Ruby: Many dissatisfied voters, and victims of human rights abuses have found solidarity. Though previously calls for transitional justice, human rights and democracy were heard in the north among

Tamil and Muslim groups, they are now echoed by those in the majority, who are unable to access basic goods and services such as food, fuel, medication, and healthcare. Allegations of corruption, demands for rule of law, due process and responsible governance are being made. In this space, the LGBTIQ struggle has also found acceptance, solidarity and strength.

Subha: Yes, LGBTIQ issues have not been the only surprising set of issues to find a space in the 'Aragalaya'. We've had explicit calls for justice for war crimes, which I don't think could ever have been previously expressed in the south in that way, before...

C.D.: The 'Aragalaya' has seen a similar nexus to what we saw in 2018. Many LGBTIQ persons (including those who self-identify as activists) have been, and still are, involved in broad struggles against oppression based on a range of issues, and were a part of the protests from the start. LGBTIQ organisations have not always been welcomed in mainstream social movements, but the point of the 'Aragalaya' was (and still is) to deliberately incorporate a range of participants and differences, and to shun a political culture of making capital out of creating antagonism on the basis of difference - of ethnicity, religion, class, and so on.

Subha: It's messy, but it's democracy.

C.D.: Of course. A quick scan of social media, particularly during the recent Pride March, will reveal many voices stating that LGBTIQ persons are 'hijacking' the 'Aragalaya' protests to make visible their own 'agendas'. It is deeply ironic that people who would agree on principle that the point of the 'Aragalaya' is to ensure progressive change in governance and society are wilfully oblivious to the relevance of LGBTIQ people's participation in the common struggle. If the point of the 'Aragalaya' is to change the political culture of politicians making poorly informed, self-serving, and politically expedient decisions on issues that have a real impact on all our lives; if it is to root out ethno-religious chauvinism in politics; if it is to question power inequalities that are based on difference - then there should be little argument that LGBTIQ people are legitimate participants in the struggle.

Subha: Yes, we still have a long way to go, but I hope this moment has been a transformational moment for many. I think many people have learned a lot, very quickly, and I hope that can continue. I think this moment also shows us that we won't go back, we can't go back. We will not be forced out of civic space, or bow down to the culture from some years ago of fear and censorship. Things have changed. And while the future is uncertain, I think it can also be a place where more voices will be heard.

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