

Sri Lanka: People explode when suppressed and repressed

Tuesday 21 June 2022, by [PEIRIS Jeewantha](#) (Date first published: 20 June 2022).

The protest at Galle Face is continuing despite President Gotabaya Rajapaksa refusing to step down.

Rev. Fr. Jeewantha Peiris is a key figure in the struggle at Galle Face and he is confident that the main objective of the protest will be met.

In an interview with Daily Mirror, Rev. Fr. Jeewantha Peiris responded to criticism with regards to the protest at Galle Face, claims of a division among the demonstrators and the future of 'GotaGoGama'.

Excerpts of the interview:

It has been more than two months since this struggle started taking place here at Galle Face. What has GotaGoGama achieved?

Yes, it has been more than 65 days and we have seen first of all how this has become the central point of a citizen's protest here in Sri Lanka. It's historical. All our struggles as citizens didn't last long. But here we see a persistent, non-violent citizen's struggle that we have achieved. We have achieved people's power. We started this on April 9th and we saw how several people have flocked together, centralizing not only at Galle Face, but also in the suburbs. Therefore, I think as we discuss the freedom struggle of Sri Lanka, this is a historical moment where all the people of Sri Lanka, from different walks of life, irrespective of their religion, race, creed and party politics, as citizens they have all come together. So that's the greatest achievement according to my perspective.

Then we see how people's power has challenged the corrupted system of Sri Lanka. We know that two thirds power was given to this existing government but they were not faithful to the people and they were not going by the people's power. But with this, we have seen how people were peacefully protesting and how people were able to challenge the two third of the government power and also to change the power of the Prime Minister who had power and who always insisted he would remain in power. On May 9th, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa renounced power, and on June 9th, Basil Rajapaksa had to leave his seat. All this was achieved, because people's power had taken a real stand together to pressurize this corrupted system.

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But, father, the main demand when you started this was for Gotabaya Rajapaksa to move out. While those around him have moved out, he is still there. So do you feel that the main focus of this struggle has not yet been achieved?

Of course. But we see even when we study Guatemala and the South Korean people's struggle, always any citizen's struggle was never achieved within a short time. We see that gradually we are reaching the accomplishment and Gotabaya Rajapaksa must renounce power and that is the main objective of this people's struggle. We see how the people around him or the powers around him are going away, and we hope and we are convinced that Gotabaya Rajapaksa as the President also, in a short time, will have to renounce his powers, because today we see more and more how the power of the people is coming together. On the streets, how the women come to give their cry of the kitchen, and how students, farmers, all the trade unions are coming together. So we are convinced that very soon the president will have to leave, because all the chaos he has created in this country is because of him and because of the Rajapaksas.

So you are confident that he will leave although he has mentioned recently that he will continue for his full term, that he will not leave immediately?

Any dictator would not say that he will renounce power. That's the dictatorship. But we know that with the people's power, dictatorships will not work.

Do you think that with Basil Rajapaksa stepping down and the Cabinet changing, it's a diversional tactic, that they are trying to shift focus away from Gotabaya Rajapaksa and trying to convince the protesters that something is happening, when the main issue is not being addressed?

We understand the tactics and we are conscious that they don't want to leave power, but we know that sooner or later he will have to leave, for day by day, the people's power is increasing. First of all we have to clean the system; that process is taking place already. So we know that the president will also have to obey the people's power in no time.

Some people are of the opinion that this "Aragalaya" (struggle) is not helping the country but is adversely affecting the country which is already suffering economically, that this is also adding to the economic pressure. How would you respond?

That's an opinion. But we also see today all the fuel queues in Sri Lanka, the health crisis, the food crisis has already started. We see how single parents and parents are pushed to commit suicide. And all this economical, political, social crisis is not naturally brought to Sri Lanka - not because of Covid-19, not because of this global financial crisis. This is because of the Rajapaksa regime. They are the people who created this. Therefore, what we do is that we stand by people and we voice people's struggle together as a collective. So this is a universal collective. We are promoting people's power and we are voicing the voiceless people's power. Therefore, some interpret this as another burden to Sri Lanka, but we want to ask them, if this struggle is also not taking place, do you want Sri Lankans to suffer like this unlimitedly? And all the people in the city, in villages, to suffer with starvation? Why is that only one class of people or this Rajapaksa regime, when they want to grab power, at the cost of people, why people should suffer like this? So what we do is we are voicing and centralizing the power of the people.

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There has been this concern recently, and of course it's been mentioned by Mahinda Rajapaksa in parliament as well, that although the "Aragalaya" started off peacefully, it is

no more a peaceful struggle, that they have blood on their hands, because of certain incidents that took place including the killing of one MP. How would you respond to that?

I think Mahinda Rajapaksa should first know the cause and effect process. Any simple logic is that always there's a cause and there's an effect. So this aragalaya, this citizens' protest of Sri Lanka, took place already for one long month, very non-violently, peacefully and more than that as a cultural revolution, very much expressed in a cultural way - through cinema, music, theatre, drama, libraries and university discussions, so many expressions, like what we see in Europe today. So all these creative expression took place in a very creative and peaceful way, till May 9th. On that day, the Rajapaksa regime mobs assaulted this place and we were non-violent and we were about 120 people here and we defended ourselves by just confronting them non-violently. So they started this at Temple Trees, that is Mahinda Rajapaksa's place and he and all the other ministers are responsible for this. They are the mobs that created this whole story and attacked this place, the silent and very creative protesters. And that was the cause - Mahinda Rajapaksa who conspired this whole system and we saw how people in Sri Lanka reacted to this. That is the effect. So who has blood in their hands? This is the Rajapaksa regime and all their ministers and they are still out there, whereas so many innocent peaceful protesters, nearly 2600 normal people are questioned and arrested, and some have been jailed. But those who conspired and those who invented this whole thing are still outside. So who has blood in their hands? Non-violent protesters don't have blood on their hands. Still in Galle Face and other non-violent protest grounds, peaceful protests are taking place. So that's a baseless argument they have given. I think Mahinda Rajapaksa wanted to shift his guilt complex because they know jolly well they have blood in their hands, not only because of the aragalaya but for a long time now. They have had this power in their hands with the blood, with killings and murder, so they try to shift this thinking so that our citizens in Sri Lanka will be drifted away. But Sri Lankans today have understood who has blood in their hands.

So you are saying no one who was involved in this protest was involved in any incident that took place outside this area, in the attack where the MP was killed and the violent incidents. But Now we see a lot of protests taking place outside this area, the students' protests, especially, and they clash with the police and tear gas is being fired. Do you think that is something that is required at this moment at a time when you are sitting here and dealing with the issue in a different way, do you think that those kind of protests are also required?

We have to understand the social psychology of this whole protest movement. This is a citizens' struggle where there is no one command or one leader. So Therefore, there are different expressions of it. Not one of us has the total command. So there are different ways. We have to understand today the students, the people, the farmers, the labourers, they are under pressure. And that's how they explode with the feelings and their resistance. So in no way do we justify the violence, but this way of confronting is the expression of the society, who are vulnerable, desperate and frustrated. So we see in the whole political system of the world, when people are suppressed and repressed, they explode. So this is what we have to understand.

Now this is again something that Mahinda Rajapaksa mentioned in parliament, that religious leaders kept silent when violence was taking place outside.

That's false. We have always from the beginning, not only as religious leaders, but as citizens, we have been together always to maintain this peaceful process. It is a false accusation to say that we have been silent. Because if you take the footage and we have a lot of live recordings, we - monks, priests, lawyers and many of us - we have been always with the people who are trying to defend themselves. It's something to defend themselves but we have been peacefully calming them down to make this a peaceful expression, a non-violent expression. So in the Galle Face grounds and in the

whole of Sri Lanka, when this whole thing was taking place as a reaction and people started clashing with these parliamentarians and setting fire to their houses, we were always continuously insisting and trying our best to maintain our stance as non-violent and peaceful.

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Is there a division in this place as well? You mentioned earlier that different people are taking this struggle in different forms. Is there a division in Galle face as well, separate groups with different agendas?

I said as a citizens’ struggle there are a variety of expressions. So expressions are needed because this is a pluralistic protest struggle. So when it is pluralistic, we know there are different expressions, not divisions. There is a unity in diversity. Because we see when different walks of people come together to protest, students will protest in one way, artists in another way and trade union workers express themselves in another way. So there are different ways. So there is diversity but there’s also unity, because unity is one objective to change the system.

Something else that is being spoken of these days is this struggle diminishing. Are people losing interest? Are numbers dropping? Do you see interest in the struggle slowly dying off?

Again, it’s about the psychology of the society. We have to understand that at the beginning, when we started this in April, multitudes of people came together with curiosity and they were so interested. By May 9th, when the assault took place, with curfew and fuel problems, we know so many youth and people who wanted to come. Earlier they came in a trishaw for 500 rupees. Now they have to pay 1500/- only one way. So they have to find 3000/- just within the suburbs of Colombo. Therefore, we need to understand that people today have many problems. People today are not able to only think about the citizens’ struggle, because they have to struggle for daily living. Therefore, it’s true that the number of people have reduced but that doesn’t mean the power of this struggle or the essence of the power of this struggle has gone down. And more than coming to Galle Face, in different cities, people are expressing their protest and that should happen everywhere. But we say all the citizens of Sri Lanka, in all their villages and cities and roadsides must come to the streets and say, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the president is the culprit of creating this whole story and he has to leave the power. So that is the real expression of people’s power.

Are you grooming someone or a group of people from this struggle to be people’s representatives in the future?

Right now, because of this crisis, we have come together to protest as Sri Lankans. But in the long run it might happen. We see a lot of youth involved here in several capacities with potential. So it can happen. The existing 225 people can’t always run the country. So it will take place. But we are not intentionally planning that. We understand our main task is to pressure this government to renounce power.

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