

# Sri Lanka: The Sound of Protest Amidst Crisis

Monday 11 July 2022, by [MAJEED Imaad](#) (Date first published: 9 July 2022).

**I am here to ask you to place an empathetic ear to the ground to listen to the sound of collapse.**

It seems that whenever we look out into the world through our smartphones, there is only doom to scroll through. Every day, we are inundated with another crisis, with the constant din of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the background, and it feels like there is little that we can do to help. So we mute the news, we look out the window, put on our favourite music and tune out the chaos.

Yet, I am here to ask you to place an empathetic ear to the ground to listen to the sound of collapse. It is the sound of a country where, according to UN estimates, 5.7 million people require humanitarian assistance, including 2.3 million children. It is the sound of Sri Lanka's political and economic crisis.

In 2019, 6.9 million Sri Lankans voted in alleged war criminal and former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa as President. Promising "vistas of prosperity and splendour", the Rajapaksa dynasty instead took hold of the political apparatus, placing their yesmen and henchmen into positions of power, making decisions that would place the economy at peril. As of May 20, 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted on its debt obligations for the first time in its history. The inflation rate is currently Asia's fastest, set to reach 60% very soon. The Sri Lankan Rupee has rapidly depreciated, and the country is now in the midst of talks with the IMF to save its economy.

In March, 2022, protests began to erupt across the island, as citizens struggled to get by their day to day activities as a fuel shortage led to daily power cuts up to 13 hours long. Queues for petrol and diesel are often 5 kilometres long, with citizens waiting days to fill up their vehicles, many of whom depend on it for their daily wage. These sporadic protests culminated in the forming of a protest village at the government appointed "Agitation Site", in Colombo, right by the Presidential Secretariat building. To this day, citizens camp out and demand that the President step down. "Go Home Gota!" is their rallying cry.

On May 9, 2022, a pro-Rajapaksa mob attacked the GotaGoGama protest village, which led to violent outbursts across the island, and saw the homes of Rajapaksa-affiliated politicians razed to the ground. They even torched the Rajapaksa ancestral home. The President's brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, resigned from Parliament in response, and a famously unpopular politician took his place by the President's appointment: Ranil Wickremesinghe. Confidence among citizens is very low, yet the spirit of protest remains. The people want system change.

**Update July 10, 2022:** After a massive and momentous protest on July 9, 2022, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister have agreed to resign. Thousands gathered despite unconstitutional "police curfew" and a potential internet shutdown, storming the Presidential Secretariat and the President's official residence. Upon orders of SSP Romesh Liyanage, Special Task Forces officers

assaulted four members of a news team, kicking a 23 year old woman reporter in the head. At least 60 people were injured. Footage shows police assisting arsonists into the Prime Minister's residence which was set ablaze, though it has been reported as a violent retaliation by protesters.

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### **Musicians have stepped up to give us the soundtrack to this revolution.**

In the midst of all of this, as a curator, I was working with two underground musicians on a music video to be launched on a new platform for music from the fringes of Sri Lanka. They are OJ Da Tamil Rapper and Bo Sedkid. In November, 2021, OJ had written the lyrics for the song "Wake Up" that addressed the country's rapidly deteriorating condition and the looming crisis. It wasn't until June 22, 2022, that we were able to release it, once the music video was fully animated. The visuals capture the energy of the protest movement, while the words express the plight of the people, urging them to wake up. And surely enough, they did indeed wake up. You can watch the [music video here](#).

Well before this release, protest music came to the fore with urgency.

MC Ra, a Tamil rapper, released the music video "[Enna Da Nadakuthu Naattula?](#)" (What Is Happening In This Country?" on January 23, 2022, and subsequently re-released it on March 27, 2022 with an updated music video (watch below). While the original visuals were carefully art directed with artistic cinematography and choreographed scenes, the re-edit chose to focus on real life footage, with clever inserts of citizens talking about how they were affected by the crisis.

GTV, a social media content creator, released "Podda Podda", a parody song with slapstick comedy visuals on April 16, 2022. It was by far the most popular protest anthem with 1.9 million views on YouTube to date, though its real reach was to be witnessed on TikTok, where the catchy hook became a viral trend across middle and lower classes across the Sinhala speaking South of the country.

What sets it apart is its clever use of Mahinda Rajapakse's political gaffe at a public meeting in the North addressing Tamil people in the aftermath of the war, where he said "Naam ellam ondrakha vaazha vendham" (We all must not live together) instead of "vendhum" (We all must live together). He then corrected himself by joking "Podda podda varathi venava. Dham venava, dhum venava". (Little little mistakes happen. Dham happens, dhum happens). Much like how his younger brother President Gotabaya Rajapaksa confessed to "making mistakes" that led to the current economic collapse.

Zany Inzane, one of Sri Lanka's rising Sinhala rappers, collaborated with Bo Sedkid to release "Eka Gamanak" (One Journey) on April 16, 2022. He pleads, "End this suffering. I can't bear to witness this." He called for the end of the racism that had been used by the Rajapaksas to divide citizens.

The song was performed at the GotaGoGama protest village, with a music video by Riyal Riffai and Muvindu Binoy capturing vibrant moments from the site. We see Pride flags waving among the Sri Lankan flag, and Muslims bowing down to prayer: images of a unity and equality that the most marginalised desperately yearn for.

RIIS, a Sri Lankan Tamil rapper based in Dubai, released "Voice of Our Nation" on April 17, 2022, at the height of the protests. He switched between English, Tamil and Sinhala, to reach every Sri Lankan. "We broke the big time illusion," he said, proud of the awakening that was taking place, and taking the opportunity to demand that Tamil genocide is finally acknowledged.

Even from afar, RIIS recognized that this unique political moment allowed for all demands to be voiced, though, ultimately, only a few were really heard and repeated by the protest at large.

There have been many criticisms of this revolution, and many of them justified. The Tamil people of the North and East have not participated under the same banner, as their needs extend beyond fuel, electricity and food. Their demands include the right to self determination, as well as acknowledgement of Tamil genocide and war crimes committed by the Rajapaksa government and the Sri Lankan Army. They don't want Gota to simply "go home". They want him tried at the International Criminal Court.

The Muslims of the East have also been quiet, which I witnessed myself when I visited my hometown during Ramadan. They feel that they already registered their protest at the ballot box. They see this revolution as buyer's remorse and are wary of the Sinhalese majority that could very easily be turned against minorities once more, as the country has seen so many times in its history.

Nevertheless, the entire country is suffering together. Many are surviving on a single meal a day, as they cannot afford the ever increasing cost of living. And there is very little hope on the horizon and no trust in the government to see us through it.

**If you have read this far, and the sounds of this struggle have moved you, I only ask that you consider donating towards causes that are trying to keep people alive.**

Through the following link you can access information on carefully vetted, trusted fundraisers that are helping the most marginalised communities of the island: [tinyurl.com/econcrisisreliefLKA](https://tinyurl.com/econcrisisreliefLKA)

With the Sri Lankan Rupee now among the worst performing currencies in the world, your foreign currency will go a long way — and its people will be very grateful for your assistance.

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