

Sri Lanka: The political phases and faces of the ‘aragalaya’

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Protestors note infiltration of hidden political agendas and ulterior motives affecting the people’s struggle

One of the reasons that critics consider the ongoing anti-Government and anti-President protests, dubbed the “aragalaya” (struggle), the most significant people’s movement in the recent history of Sri Lanka is because it was an example of the people’s unity. Even though this movement has come a long way since its inception in late March and early April, and has led to the historic resignations of a President, a Prime Minister, and several Ministers, during the past few weeks, there were signs and allegations that the protestors had split into several factions, sometimes even leading to disputes.

However, those at the forefront of the protests and those who hope that the protests will bring about the real change that the country needs, emphasise that regardless of differences or the interests of individuals, protestors should maintain their unity, especially due to the fact that the protests have a long way to go.

To look into how the members of this movement see these recently emerged divisions, *The Morning* spoke to several former and current protestors at the “GotaGoGama” (now dubbed “RanilGoGama”) and in other areas of Colombo.

Politics in the People’s Movement

One of the main concerns raised by several persons who commented on the matter was the hidden existence of political interests in the ongoing protests. They note that this became more apparent when current President Ranil Wickremesinghe became Prime Minister and subsequently President, following former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s resignation. “Although I do not think that political interests are the only reason for these divisions, they are a major reason,” protestor V.A. Kalpa Hemantha, said.

Adding that when the protests started at the “GotaGoGama” and in other areas, they had two objectives, i.e. ousting Rajapaksa and his Government and bringing in a system and leader that can reverse the impacts of the economic crisis, he explained: “The protests had a political aspect from the outset, and therefore, it was impossible and impractical to completely separate protests from politics. However, the main or the sole objective was ridding the country of the economic downturn it is going through, and that is what kept people together despite their individual differences.”

Hemantha added that with the resignation of Rajapaksa and the appointment of Wickremesinghe as President, however, protestors tended to focus on their political opinions more than they should have, which led to some groups that were a part of the protests, especially at the “GotaGoGama”, leaving the movement. “Some people who were a part of the protests since the beginning were there due to their opposition to the former administration. When Rajapaksa resigned, they thought that

they had achieved their purpose in the protests, and left. Also, some hard-line Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) supporters were also there, who left when Wickremesinghe was appointed as the Prime Minister, as they thought that they could not achieve what they wanted.”

Meanwhile, speaking of the recent developments following 9 July, protestor Sandaruwan (name changed on request), stated that Rajapaksa’s resignation and Wickremesinghe’s appointment as the acting President led to arguments among the protestors due to three concerns, namely, the concern as to whether Wickremesinghe was competent enough to salvage the country, whether Wickremesinghe was a proxy of Rajapaksa, and whether various Opposition political parties should step into influence the political situation.

He explained: “We saw how certain so-called activists and politicians including those of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led and supported the protests near Parliament, while similar groups supported the occupation of the Prime Minister’s office. These were denounced by the majority of those who represented the people’s movement at the ‘GotaGoGama’, and not too many people from the mainstream movement participated in these acts.”

He emphasised that the occupation of key State-owned buildings was supposed to be merely a symbol of the people’s opposition and strength, not a means of intimidating politicians, and that various groups had different opinions about this reality. “Some groups also did not like the fact that a certain group representing, or claiming to represent, the ‘aragalaya’ stormed the Rupavahini Corporation,” another protestor told *The Morning*, adding that some factions seemed to be thinking that spreading the protestors’ presence in various places was a good strategy, but that this mindset somewhat affected the movement’s priorities.

Sandaruwan added: “Wickremesinghe’s appointment was a big reason that divided the protesters, because they were concerned as to whether he is merely a representative of Rajapaksa, or whether or not he would do what Rajapaksa could not to stabilise the economy. At the same time, there were concerns about what should happen next.”

Leaderless versus leadership-less

One of the reasons for these concerns, he claimed, was the fact that the protests were a leaderless people’s movement. He explained: “Being a leaderless movement is sometimes tantamount to being a leadership-less movement. Everyone has different opinions, and everyone wants their opinions to be heard and respected. I think that that was one of the reasons that prevented the protestors from reaching a consensus on what should happen in the event Rajapaksa and his Government resigned.

“The protests continued without a concrete idea about this, despite the fact that it was pointed out throughout the past few months. The result was, once Rajapaksa resigned, the protestors were clueless as to what should happen next. Some wanted to raid Parliament, some wanted to continue the protests to depose Wickremesinghe, some wanted an all-party Government with or without Wickremesinghe, while some also thought that the protesters should receive some place in the governing system.”

He added that however, eventually, most protestors agreed with the idea that Wickremesinghe too should resign, and that the country should go for Presidential and Parliamentary Elections to choose leaders who command the public’s confidence.

Giving Wickremesinghe a chance

Meanwhile, several protestors who left the protests at the “GotaGoGama” said that Wickremesinghe and his Government should be given a chance to govern the country. One such person who did not

wish to be named told *The Morning*: “It is true that everyone has a question as to whether Wickremesinghe could do what Rajapaksa could not. He has not served as a President before, but he has decades of experience as a Prime Minister. He is also good with international relations. I think that we should stop trying to predict what could happen in the future, and give him some time.

“It is true that there are concerns about his past, but I personally think that the only matter that the people should be concerned about is whether Wickremesinghe can do the job. Some want to hold an election immediately as they do not agree with the results of the election held in Parliament. But the country is not in a position to hold an election due to the huge amount of money it requires.”

He claimed that if Wickremesinghe failed to fulfil the country’s expectations, he would join anti-Wickremesinghe protests without thinking twice. “I am one of the 6.9 million people who thought Rajapaksa was the answer. When I realised that he is not, I protested against him. The same way, if I realise that Wickremesinghe is not competent enough to save the country, I will protest against him too.”

Another protestor who expressed similar opinions about giving Wickremesinghe time said that protestors should demand that Wickremesinghe present his vision for the country.

“I think that Wickremesinghe should have a fair opportunity. However, people should not support him blindly; instead, they should demand that he publicly announces the concrete steps that he is going to take in the coming few months to stabilise the country’s economy.”

When questioned about the protestors splitting into different factions over Wickremesinghe’s presidency, he said that factions driven by political ideologies were a part of the protests since the beginning, and that it is nothing new.

“Everyone can believe in whatever they think is right, and it is completely acceptable. However, these divisions should not make people lose focus on why they started the protests. We should not care who comes to power. Instead, we should care about whether whoever comes to power can do what the country wants,” he opined.

While protestors have different opinions about what is right for the country, as those who spoke with *The Morning* noted, such individual interests should not overpower the main goals of the people’s movement. At the same time, despite the fact that the protests being leaderless or people-led ones’ has been admired, it is also crucial for it to have a clear vision as to what it expects beyond getting rid of incompetent or corrupt leaders.

If these matters are not addressed soon, protests will have to go on indefinitely, while unsuitable leaders keep being replaced by leaders who are equally unsuitable.

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