

Sri Lanka Has a Proud Tradition of Revolt Against Leaders Who Trample on Its People

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Last year, a protest movement in Sri Lanka stormed the presidential palace and forced the president to flee the country. It reminded many of the *hartal* strike action in 1953, one of the most impressive displays of working-class power in Asia's modern history.

Last year's [anti-government uprising in Sri Lanka](#) was followed with surprise and solidarity around the world. For many, its iconic moment came with scenes of common people cooling themselves in the swimming pool of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa after storming and occupying his official residence, compelling the despised head of state to flee the country before resigning.

Comparisons were sometimes made between the popular movement of 2022 and an earlier protest upsurge on this island in the Indian Ocean. Seventy years ago this month, on August 12, 1953, there was "[a demonstration of the tremendous power of the masses in action](#)," as its best historian described it. Influenced by left parties and trade unions, the mass movement of 1953 shook the country, which was then known as Ceylon.

Ceylon had secured its de jure "flag independence" from Britain five years before. But the declining imperial power still controlled the primary export of tea and other economic sectors and maintained military bases in strategic locations. It had bequeathed a political system modeled on Westminster and headed by the British monarch to the new state, transferring power to a loyal elite that was joined to it by class and culture.

The Great Hartal

The uprising of 1953, or "Great *Hartal*" as it is known in left folklore, was hailed by Colvin R. de Silva, leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), as the neocolony's first revolt against capitalist rule, and the first manifestation of the crucial but hitherto absent alliance between workers and peasants. In an agrarian society fractured by racism and casteism, religious and regional identity, where the working class was weak, the Ceylonese left exulted in the coming together of the exploited and the oppressed against a common enemy.

On the day of action, every province experienced some form of protest against the pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist United National Party (UNP) government. The UNP had been elected with a thumping majority only the year before, having been in office since before decolonization, occupying a position at the center of government since the introduction of universal franchise in 1931.

The LSSP was the most significant left-wing party in Ceylon. It was one of the few Trotskyist parties in the world at the time with a mass base and was the joint largest force in the parliamentary opposition. The UNP's critics and opponents on the Left wanted more than anything to shatter "[the myth of the invincibility of the UNP](#)."

People were most defiant of state authority in the western littoral of the island, where the population

density was highest, and where most industry was to be found. Shops and offices were forced to close, and buses, trains, and private vehicles were stopped from moving. Postal services were suspended as well.

In Colombo, the hub of countrywide transport services, railway workers struck duty upon midnight of August 11. The city trams stopped running. The harbor came to a standstill. Workers at the largest private textile mill, and other enterprises such as engineering and carpentry, also stopped work.

In semiurban and rural areas, particularly in the southwest, locals expressed their sympathy for the day of action through removing railway sleepers to prevent the passage of trains, or dynamiting small bridges used for conveyance of people and movables. Trees and boulders were laid to block roads. Signal wires were cut and telegraph poles toppled to disrupt communication between the government in the capital and its agents in the districts.

In the Moratuwa village of Egoda Uyana, a train was captured to prevent it from operating, and armed police were forced to retreat to the police station by unarmed people. Further south at Panadura railway station, two wagons were set on fire in a message to the authorities.

The main entry and exit points to and from the capital were occupied by demonstrations and barricades. The police attempted to remove protesters from the street. In the trading center of Pettah in north Colombo, demonstrators were baton charged.

An unarmed pavement hawker and LSSP youth activist by the name of Edwin refused to move and taunted the police to open fire if they dared. He was shot dead. In all, nine people are known to have been killed by state forces on that day and the next.

State of Emergency

The government panicked. Fearing for their safety, the cabinet of ministers met the same day on the British battleship HMS *Newfoundland*, moored in Colombo's port. Emergency rule was declared that afternoon, and the military was deployed to restore law and order.

A police curfew was imposed for twelve hours from 6:00 p.m. onward. Government politicians assembled a militia of their supporters "to assist the police." The printing presses of the left parties were sealed, and their newspapers ceased publication.

Under cover of the state of emergency, the Ceylonese military and police brutally assaulted peaceful protesters. UNP supporters provided lists with names of those alleged to have participated in the *hartal* in their localities. Thousands were arrested and thousands more were injured.

On the following day, despite the curfew and the presence of the military, there continued to be outbursts of outrage. In one area, a private bus company was blockaded for defying the *hartal* the previous day. In another village, the residents held a large demonstration for the release of those who had been arrested. Nearer Colombo, there were clashes with the police and military, and a gas pump was set alight.

Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake was so shaken that he took ill. Senanayake became unwilling to lead his party, and therefore the government. He partially reversed the policies that had sparked the uprising before resigning in October 1953. Finance Minister J. R. Jayewardene, who was rightly blamed for the welfare budget cuts, lost his portfolio in the new cabinet formed by Sir John Kotelawala.

The people used the ballot box to complete the task left unfinished on the streets: the UNP was trounced in the 1956 general election by a Sinhala nationalist coalition led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). It was this bloc, rather than the Left, that proved to be the principal beneficiary of the uprising's political fallout.

It would take decades more for Jayewardene to realize his political ambitions. As prime minister and later president of Sri Lanka, he settled scores with those who had humiliated him by unleashing violence against labor militants, before [crushing the trade unions in the July 1980 general strike](#).

He also abolished the rice ration scheme, substituting it with food stamps for some households, and incrementally ended subsidies on food. Any electoral blowback was neutered through public investment in rice farming.

Attack on the Poor

The trigger for the uprising was a combination of austerity measures: the almost threefold increase in the price of rice from twenty-five cents to seventy cents a measure (following abolition of the rice subsidy); the increase in rail fares and postal rates; and the withdrawal of the free midday meal (a bun in many cases) for schoolchildren. All three were announced in the Budget Speech of 1953.

This attack on living standards for the poor was only the latest in a series that began after the general election of 1952. Within months of the UNP's triumph, it began cutting back spending on state subsidies and public welfare to shrink the yawning budget deficit.

The ration of rice for each household was abruptly reduced by a quarter measure. The price of a pound of sugar increased by fifteen cents. Milk-feeding centers where a free glass of milk was provided to undernourished children were closed. Tariffs were raised on textiles and tobacco.

The system of rationing and price controls on essential foods such as rice, flour, and sugar — all imported and therefore financed from foreign exchange — was progressively dismantled, as advocated by laissez-faire enthusiasts within the Central Bank of Ceylon and the World Bank.

This system had been introduced during World War II to manage the challenge of limited supplies from abroad, combined with growing demand at home. Although it was imperfect, it had succeeded in expanding access to basic goods while keeping price increases in check, thereby limiting an inflationary spiral in a low-wage economy.

An Underdeveloped Economy

The roots of Ceylon's fiscal ills lay in the underdevelopment of its economy by colonialism. At the time of independence in 1948, three agricultural commodities — tea, rubber, and coconut — accounted for almost all foreign earnings. Britain, the former occupier, was the main market for exports.

The Korean War stimulated a boom in demand for natural rubber from the US military-industrial complex. This benefited the island's balance of payments but soon petered out. Meanwhile, almost everything had to be imported, including rice, flour, sugar, clothing, and kerosene oil.

The country's fledgling central bank was headed by a US national, John Exter, who had been seconded from the Federal Reserve. It pronounced in its annual reports that Ceylon was living beyond its means. In its view, the government was sacrificing investment in development projects for subsidies on food and creating distortions and inefficiencies in food prices and wage behavior.

The central bank [deemed it](#) “regrettable from the economic point of view that such a large share of the budget deficit is the result of increasing food subsidies.” The subsidies accounted for Rs. 133 million of the Rs. 153.6 million shortfall. Over 20 percent of government revenue was utilized to subsidize the world market price for rice (purchased mostly from the United States and partly from Burma) and distributed through the ration system to domestic consumers.

The World Bank’s report on its first Mission to Ceylon in late 1951 [took up this refrain](#): “Food subsidies impose an unending drain on the country’s financial resources.” Its recommendations to reverse the budget deficit included income tax increases, higher electricity rates and railway charges, and cuts to food subsidies.

As one critic [observed](#): “The [World Bank] Mission’s recommendations were intended to promote private capitalism within the broad economic and social structure which then existed — the same type of dependent capitalism previously cultivated by British colonialism.” The UNP government, the Central Bank of Ceylon, and indeed the Ceylonese merchant-capitalist class were of the same point of view.

The World Bank proposed the gradual elimination of food subsidies over the next few years, with “the necessary adjustments being made in wage rates, including government salaries, and in the tax burden of the export industries.” It suggested that the removal of the subsidy system “if carefully planned and spread over a period of two or three years, can be carried out without any major disturbances.”

Had the government heeded this counsel, conditions may not have been as favorable for the success of the *hartal*. Instead, the escalation in the price of rice was imposed overnight, while there were no wage increases in the public sector to expand purchasing power, and government financing was not expanded through higher corporate taxes. The soaring cost of rice, a staple food item, was particularly infuriating to people, as the UNP election campaign had promised that its price would be unchanged so long as it was in government.

Blockades

The day after the abolition of the rice subsidy, there was a spontaneous protest on July 21 in Randombe, along the southwestern coast. The people of the village blockaded the main road by lying across it, preventing the traffic of people and goods between Colombo and the southern seaport of Galle.

Women are said to have been angrier and more rebellious than men. The responsibility of food preparation and managing the household budget was mostly theirs. This sudden and sharp increase in food prices hit them hard.

As word of their action spread, villages elsewhere along the same stretch of sea and to their interior were inspired to protest in a similar manner over the next three days. On July 24 in Ahungalla, the police used batons and tear gas to remove protesters who had blocked the road. In the combat that ensued, some policemen were knifed.

On July 20, the Communist Party-affiliated Ceylon Trade Union Federation (CTUF) held a conference with other working-class bodies, including the LSSP-affiliated Ceylon Federation of Labour (CFL), the Ceylon Workers’ Congress (CWC), and the LSSP-aligned Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU). It ended with a joint declaration calling upon all trade unions and unorganized workers to “prepare for a one-day general strike and to form united action committees in all places of work for carrying this into effect.”

The Harbour and Dock Workers' Union (HDWU) and the Ceylon Labour Union (CLU) later also endorsed a joint appeal for "all sections of the people" to participate in a protest on August 12 by "closing their establishments, keeping away from schools and workplaces, holding protest meetings and hoisting black flags."

The militancy of the working class compelled the left unions that were bitter rivals, as well as the anti-communist CLU and CWC, to cooperate with each other. It also drove strikes in advance of the day of action: on July 21, the twelve thousand-strong workforce at Colombo Port struck for three hours, and on July 23, there was a half-day strike at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills. The momentum for large-scale action was accelerating among the urban working class.

The government, of course, was not sitting back as preparations unfolded for the day of action. It threatened workers in the public sector and in local government with dismissal from employment if they went on strike. Shop and cooperative storekeepers were threatened with removal of their business licenses if they did not open on the day. There was greater public presence of the police and military on the streets and in public places in the weeks leading to August 12.

On August 11, the eve of the announced day of action, university students led by the LSSP demonstrated on the streets of the hill country capital of Kandy. While peaceably marching back to their campus in Peradeniya, they were baton charged by the police, loaded onto police buses, and assaulted in their hostels. In anger, all university students boycotted classes. Shopkeepers in Kandy shuttered their stores in solidarity the following day.

While the Ceylonese masses were in advance of the country's left in the timing and tactic of their protests, left-wing organization in trade unions, party branches, and youth leagues enabled the Left to quickly provide support to those in action and to politically influence their direction. The LSSP's publications in Sinhalese, Tamil, and English were printed twice a week, as the public sought alternative news to the bias of the pro-capitalist media. The party also printed handbills daily to pass information from one workplace to another about the militancy among workers, encouraging confidence in strike action.

Opposition Rally

Well before these events, the parties of the parliamentary opposition, principally those of the Left, began organizing a public protest on Galle Face Green. This was located almost opposite the Parliament, which had recently passed the cuts in public assistance programs, and where the Budget Speech was still being debated.

Unity among the divided left was achieved based on a two-point agreement proposed by the LSSP:

- (a) to support the masses in just struggle against the capitalist UNP Government and (b) to assist the masses to achieve their objective of replacing the capitalist UNP Government with an Anti-Capitalist Government.

In addition to the left parties, there was participation from the SLFP, representing the Sinhalese Buddhist petty bourgeoisie and rural classes; the CWC, which commanded the support of the Tamil proletariat in the plantations along the central massif; and the Federal Party (FP), which championed autonomy and rights for the Tamil-speaking people of the northern and eastern regions. None of these three parties were friends of the Left, but each had its own reasons to be hostile to the UNP and agreeable to its embarrassment.

The opposition leaders who addressed the rally on July 23 were surprised by the mammoth turnout and caught off guard by the crowd's strength of feeling. There was apprehension among the police

that some in the assembly were prepared to storm the parliament building and disrupt the proceedings. The police began assaulting the crowd with batons and tear gas. Instead of dispersing, those under attack fought back with stones and anything else that came to hand.

A Mass Weapon

It was the LSSP's creativity that prepared the day of action as a *hartal*, rather than the more traditional working-class strike. This word, which originates in the Western Indian language of Gujarati and refers to a shutdown of commerce and community alike for political ends, was then not known in Ceylon. It was imported by the LSSP into the national languages of Sinhalese and Tamil, where it is now embedded, from its direct experience of the anti-colonial struggle in India.

During World War II, the underground LSSP had sent its central leadership to the Indian subcontinent for refuge from imprisonment by the British for opposing the war, and also to make connections with other Marxists for the purpose of socialist organization and social revolution on a subcontinental scale. While there, they participated in the "Quit India" campaign of August 1942, where the independence leader M. K. Gandhi (himself of Gujarati origin) used the *hartal* as a means of mobilizing people across social classes and the urban-rural divide, and beyond traditionally organized sectors, for nonviolent political struggle for India's independence.

Colvin R. de Silva [explained](#) the novelty and the value of the *hartal* over the strike:

It provided a framework for the worker-peasant alliance in action. It provided a channel of struggle for the rural masses whose entry into the arena could give to the movement as a whole a sweep and power which a strike could never have by itself even if it was quite general to the working class. It could also bring in the city poor who were so badly hit by the rice price raise and who normally were not drawn into political action.

According to de Silva, the government leaders "had prepared to fight a strike, but were met with a *hartal*. They did not understand it and they did not know how to tackle it."

Betrayal or Realism?

Ever since the Great *Hartal* (so-called to distinguish it from the many lesser *hartals* that have followed), there has been controversy as to whether it was an insurrectionary flame that the Left ought to have fanned into revolution, instead of snuffing it out after twenty-four hours. The available evidence, and the remarkable consensus between the revolutionary and reformist wings of the LSSP and CCP on this matter, suggest that the prospects of sustaining the action beyond August 12 and growing it further were poor.

Not coincidentally, the districts where the action was of highest intensity were also those where the Left drew its electoral support, and the LSSP Youth Leagues were present. This was at best across a third of the island, albeit its most populous regions and the ones most closely integrated into the capitalist economy. Elsewhere, actions were more moderate, and there were no clashes with state authority of comparable scale.

There was not sufficient support across all trade unions, particularly in the public sector where government intimidation of workers and threat of victimization weighed heavily. The left-controlled and usually militant Government Clerical Services Union (GCSU) membership voted against strike action. A similar ballot in the CMU that organized white-collar staff in the private sector also fell short.

The CWC refused to join the day of action, offering token protests after working hours on the

economically strategic tea and rubber estates. The SLFP did not call out its followers, including its significant rural base. While the FP did participate, it lacked the organizational coherence and working-class base of the left parties. Even in its northern heartland, the most militant actions during the hartal were in villages where the CCP and LSSP drew support.

Nonetheless, the parliamentarism of the Left — including that of the LSSP, which had begun to develop well before it embraced [coalition politics with the SLFP in the early 1960s](#) — no doubt colored its attitude toward working-class and mass action. It saw such tactics principally as a lever to strengthen its electoral fortunes and eventually legislate for socialism through accretion of seats and influence within a governmental alliance with the SLFP.

The Aragalaya

The *hartal* of 1953 was the highpoint of mass action in Sri Lanka until last year's people's uprising, dubbed the *Aragalaya* ("struggle" in Sinhalese). Although the Sinhala insurrections of 1971 and 1987-89 and the Tamil secessionist movement between 1983 and 2009 were supported by substantial sections of their co-ethnics, direct participation was the domain of those wielding arms.

2022's social and political upheaval was sparked by a [balance of payments crisis](#), with import expenditure outpacing export revenue two to one. In the twenty-first century, the island relies on low-value exports of apparel and tea as well as tourism and receipts from migrant workers' remittances for its foreign exchange. It also continues to depend on the world market for the import of essential foods and medicines along with intermediate and consumer goods.

Sri Lanka's integration into the world market deepened after 1977, and its import-substituting industries and state interventions in domestic production were dismantled by neoliberalism. It has become more vulnerable to external shocks and crises, rising commodity prices, and fluctuating consumer demand, and more hooked on debt to finance its spending plans.

In some respects, the *Aragalaya* could be said to have surpassed the Great *Hartal*. It sustained its momentum and even grew in number between March and July 2022. It forced the incumbent president — who had been elected twenty months earlier with more than 52 percent of the popular vote (and the support of the LSSP and the Communist Party) — to twice flee from his home, and later the country, before resigning.

The former ruling family had to hide from the wrath of the people. The *Aragalaya* was contemptuous not only of the executive but also of a parliament constituted two years before with a crushing majority for the president's party. It made politicians fear the masses, instead of the other way about. Its radical wing posed the demand of "system change."

There are parallels as well as discontinuities with the Great *Hartal*. While the *Aragalaya* enjoyed support across the country, it was at its most militant in the urbanized western province. Although people of all ethnicities and faiths participated in it, Tamil-speaking minorities in the north and east, and in the hill country, were lukewarm. Middle-class discourse could be said to have dominated 2022's multiclass uprising, in contrast with the plebeian character of July and August 1953.

While there was trade union contribution, including a general strike on April 28 and *hartal* on May 6, 2022, the working class was largely passive in workplaces and missing as "a class for itself" in the people's movement. The *Aragalaya* was a glorious rebellion of the discontented, but [balked at rejecting in toto the existing edifice of the economy and the state](#). Its outcome illuminated the weakness of the contemporary Sri Lankan left and the timidity of its politics.

B. Skanthakumar is a member of the Social Scientists' Association in Colombo and coeditor of *Pathways of the Left in Sri Lanka* (Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, Colombo, 2014).

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