**Cracks in Colombo**

BY M A H I R A L I 2022-04-06

RAMPANT inflation, food and energy shortages, foreign debt dilemmas, street protests. That`s not an unfamiliar scenario in this country, but a similarly hydra-headed crisis in Sri Lanka appears to have reached breaking point.

After months of indications that the islandstate was facing its biggest economic challenge since independence in 1948, riots over recent days led to the resignation on Sunday of the entire cabinet, leaving in place just the president and the prime minister, Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Political family firms are hardly a novelty in South Asia. It`s a familiar phenomenon in Pakistan, where the viability of the incumbent regime`s main opponents, the PPP and PML-N, is closely linked with the BhuttoZardari and Sharif clans, respectively. Even in India, the once formidable Congress party, now depleted as an electoral force, cannot come to terms with the idea of delinking itself from the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.

The equivalent trend in Sri Lanka was represented by the Bandaranaikes as stakeholders-in-chief in the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, but they were trumped early this century by the Rajapaksas.

The presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa extended for 10 years from 2005, which covered the period when the war against the separatist LT TE came to a brutal conclusion, ending the long-running insurgency with its own record of atrocities but not the state`s human rights abuses, directed mainly, but not exclusively, at Tamils and their sympathisers.

The defence minister then was none other than the current president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa. A third brother, Basil, served as the minister for economic development in that phase, and was elevated to finance minister when the Rajapaksas returned to power in 2019.

The clan`s resurrection, notwithstanding multiple accusations of abuse of power, was facilitated by that year`s horrific Easter Sunday bombing by Islamist militants ostensibly alliedwith IS terrorists,whichinevitably elevated national security to a key electoral issue.

That profound tragedy also normalised the persecution of Sri Lanka`s Muslim minority, the irony being that the elements of the Sinhala Buddhist majority who tend to decry the Muslim presence are of ten equally antipathetic towards Christians.

Ethnicity and religious identity might not have much to do with the current society-wide crisis, but the ongoing tensions cannot be disregarded as a backdrop. The terrorist outrage three years ago dampened Sri Lanka`s appeal as a tourist destination, but a far bigger blow to its tourism sector, a leading source of for-eign currency earnings, arrived with Covid-19.

Combined with instances of avoidable economicmismanagement-fromunnecessarily extensive tax cuts to last year`s sudden ban on fertilisers that shocked the agricultural sector, and mounting overseas loans that cannot be paid back on time because of depleted foreign currency reserves the outcome is a crisis the Rajapaksa-led state is struggling to cope with.

The affordability and availability of basic necessities has been an issue that has been building up for months. The government`s inability to of fer substantial relief led to demonstrations, and then riots. There have been reports of families struggling to subsist on one-tenth of what they could previously afford. Baby formula and milk powder have become rare commodities. Milk tea has turned from a staple into a relative luxury.

Daily blackouts of 13 hours are expected to lengthen as are the queues at petrol stations, where soldiers have been posted to deter violence amid scarcity.Limited economic lifelines from India andBangladeshhave failed to make much of a difference. Iran has apparently been willing to barter oil for tea, but that won`t go far. Sri Lanka somewhat like Pak-istan represents more than a microcosm of the broader supply-chain and food security issues unleashed by the pandemic and exacerbated by Russia`s aggression against Ukraine.

The island`s indebtedness cannot be separated from overambitious deals with China, butextendswellbeyondthat-andwilllikely be exacerbated if efforts to obtain an IMF handout pay off. Globalised neoliberalism, which invariably undermines nations` capacity for self-sufficiency in certain spheres, has evidently served Sri Lanka exceptionally poorly. And authoritarianism combined with corruption invariably adds up to a toxic mix.

What the future holds is dif ficult to foresee, although it will hopefully include the realisation that whatever the solution, it cannot include the Rajapaksas.

That lesson ought to resonate way beyond Sri Lanka. In the face of all-powerful global behemoths and invariably self-serving politicians, we could do worse than heed Banquo`s warning to Macbeth in Shakespeare`s play: `But `tis strange and of tentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray`s in deepest consequence.` m mahir.dawn @gmail.com