**Crisis in Sri Lanka**

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Sri Lanka’s troubles seem never-ending. In the decades since its independence in 1948, the small island has seen ethnic pogroms against Tamils, leftist rebellions, a Tamil independence movement, genocide, anti-Muslim violence, coup attempts, and persistent economic problems.

The current economic crisis, a culmination of decades of economic mismanagement by successive governments, has hit all communities hard. Fuel shortages, electricity outages and price inflation on essential items have made life difficult. People across the island have to queue for hours to fill up their vehicles and buy gas for their stoves. School exams have been cancelled and some newspapers stopped printing – both due to a lack of paper. Hospitals are running low on essential medicine and have been forced to cancel surgeries.

Last week, visiting Indian foreign minister Subramaniam Jaishankar took to Twitter to ask the local Indian High Commission to support a local hospital after news of its struggles were tweeted – bypassing the government. All this has been highly embarrassing for the government, keen to show the world that it is a stable destination for tourism, a significant source of revenue that has been hit hard by the pandemic.

Under the Rajapaksa presidency, nepotism became the order of the day – the Rajapaksa clan occupies several key positions in the government. The president’s brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, was president between 2005 and 2015 and is now prime minister. In the recently dissolved cabinet, two other brothers, Basil and Chamal, and the prime minister’s son Namal were all ministers.

The family controlled 24 percent of the national budget – with nine ministerial roles and seven out of 30 available cabinet positions in their hands until this week. The Rajapaksas and their relatives live lavishly – social media posts frequently show them in fancy cars or on luxury holidays. All of this fuelled the outrage of many of their former partisans in the Sinhala-majority south, resulting in large-scale protests, attended by a cross-section of Sri Lanka’s diverse population.

But this is not the first time the Rajapaksas’ have faced pressure from their main constituency. In 2015, Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the presidency to a so-called “good governance” coalition, made up of former allies and opposition parties. He lost because many of his supporters had grown frustrated with corruption and nepotism, while Tamils continued to refuse to vote for a man they sought to have prosecuted at an international tribunal for overseeing mass atrocities during the war.

However, the short-lived ‘good-governance’ government, supported by an over-enthusiastic West and a Colombo-centric civil society, failed to deliver on their promised reforms.

The 2019 Easter Bombings, in addition to that government’s mismanagement of the economy, with corruption and disputes plaguing the coalition, laid the foundation for a return of the Rajapaksas.

In 2019, Gota, running on a hardline Sinhala nationalist platform, won with an overwhelming majority among Sinhala voters, who bought into his chauvinist messaging on the back of the bombings, which sparked anti-Muslim violence in parts of the country. In 2020, Rajapaksa strengthened his presidential powers, weakening parliament and taking the country in an ever more autocratic direction, rejecting Tamil and international demands for justice, pardoning war criminals and establishing structures that allow him to govern without the oversight of parliament.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka’s economy, already underperforming as a consequence of the war and longstanding protectionist policies, continued to deteriorate. Since his election in 2019, Rajapaksa has only accelerated the economic decline with half-baked policies, including tax cuts and a ban on chemical fertilisers, which has severely impacted agricultural yield. Sri Lanka’s economy, characterised by a high debt-to-export ratio, a bulging public sector and low FDI, was already ripe for collapse. The pandemic’s impact on tourism and global supply chains, along with the outbreak of war in eastern Europe, were more than enough to send the country’s economy into freefall.

Excerpted: ‘Sri Lanka: Gota needs to go – but so does the ethnocratic state’

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