

Debt Crisis and Popular Social Protest in Sri Lanka

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING A FAIRER SOCIETY

A fair society is one that is just, inclusive and embracing of all without any barriers to participation based on sex, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, age, class, ability or any other social difference. One where there is access to healthcare and education, technology, justice, strong institutions, peace and security, social protection, decent work and housing. But how can research truly contribute to creating global equity and diversity without showcasing diverse voices that are underrepresented in academia or paying specific attention to the Global South?

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Debt Crisis and Popular Social Protest in Sri Lanka: Citizenship, Development and Democracy Within Global North–South Dynamics

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Dedicated to

The Aragalaya
(The struggle)

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(courtesy of Manisha Gunaratne)

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List of Acronyms

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CIABOC	Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption
CP	Communist Party
CTU	Ceylon Teachers Union
FMM	Free Media Movement
FSP	Frontline Socialist Party
FTZ	Free Trade Zone
FUTA	Federation of University Teachers Association
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GGG	Gota Go Gama (Gotabaya go village)
GPN	Global Production Networks
HRCSL	Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITJP	International Truth and Justice Project
IUSF	Inter University Students' Federation
JDS	Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka
JVP	<i>Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna</i> (National Liberation Front)
KDU	Kotelawala Defence University
LSSP	Lanka <i>Samasamaja</i> Party (Lanka Equal Society Party)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NPP	National People's Power (<i>Jathika Jana Balawegaya</i>)
OMP	Office of Missing Persons
PP	<i>Podujana Peramuna</i> (People's Front)
PPPs	Public-private partnerships
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
SAITM	South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine
SJB	United People's Power (<i>Samagijana bala wegaya</i>)
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
TNCs	Transnational Corporations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNP	United National Party
WHO	World Health Organisation
WSF	World Social Forum
WTO	World Trade Organisation
YFC	Youth for Change

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About the Author

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He has lectured at University of Western Australia and University of New South Wales. He has also worked in the NGO sector in Sri Lanka and the public sector as well as the NGO sector in Australia. He was a competitive spring board diver and represented Sri Lanka at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.

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Preface

Although I mostly engaged with activists during my short visit to Sri Lanka in June 2022, I also caught up with old friends and colleagues. I used to be a competitive springboard diver before I moved to Australia, and one day, a diving coach took me to a training session on his motorcycle and told me how he had to wait for six hours to buy petrol so that he could get to work. Meanwhile, the divers he coached, mostly teenagers, and generally middle-class, had also suffered through fuel queues to get to practice. Amidst the economic crisis and a popular mobilisation, a few children from middle-class families suffered these frustrations, but managed to keep up with their training.

The main diving pool is in the heart of low-income working-class neighbourhoods in Colombo. The concentration of Muslim and Tamil communities in the area dot the landscape with mosques and Hindu *kovils*. It is congested but vibrant, with mainly older single- and double-story houses and small businesses (motor repair workshops and the like), but these are increasingly being displaced by new commercial buildings.

The Gota Go Gama protests zone was across from the main commercial area, with its densely packed historic retail shops, the main bus depot and railway station, about three kilometres from the pool. If you were to journey with me, to get there from the pool, we would wind through these shrinking low-income neighbourhoods before entering an area of colonial-era administrative buildings interspersed with a few modern high-rises. This is Colombo's main financial hub, home to its commercial banks, but also the Central Bank and Treasury. The Treasury is located in an expansive old colonial building next to the old parliament and faces the Indian Ocean. Travelling along the Treasury building (which also serves as the Presidential Secretariat), we would arrive at the protest zone, the Galle Face Green, the scenic oceanside public park. When I arrived there one evening in June, the sea breeze and the spaciousness diminished the unease of congestion, pollution and noise. A few people were gathered, chanting slogans at the front gate of the Presidential Secretariat. Others were just chatting with friends or simply resting in different stalls and tents.

In this book, I explore the entangled set of relationships that connect and separate the diving pool (in its working-class multi-ethnic and multi-religious neighbourhood) and protest zones (which occupied territory in a centre of finance and government). These are separate but interconnected spaces of relative affluence, deprivation and civil disobedience. I investigate how the people who inhabited these spaces and relationships were constituted – and constituted themselves – through

specific political, economic and cultural dynamics. I try to unpack what their efforts tell us about struggles for justice, fairness and notions of 'good society'. While much of the analysis centres on experiences within Colombo, Tamil and Muslim communities in the North and East, as well as Tamil communities in the hill country, are also resisting in their own ways, opposing cultural misrecognition, economic maldistribution and political misrepresentation that continue to emanate from these centres of political power.

My aim is to tell a story about Sri Lanka as a microcosm of South Asia and the Global South. To tell a story about the desires and wants of a range of people to build a fairer society. Activists on the ground are often networked with a range of other activists, within and outside the diasporic Sri Lankan community, like myself, in the Global North. In this sense, it is a global story, of migrations, and of ambivalent notions of citizenship and belonging. It's about making our way through the world, recognising the unity and fluidity between the ethical and political. It also relates to rethinking the ways in which the government, along with local and global financial markets, influence the allocation of resources to the military, police and prisons, as well as state social provisioning, and how this might be done according to a different set of priorities.

The story is about a popular uprising that created hope for a better world. It resonates with a range of similar struggles across the planet to reimagine notions of living well and to create more pleasurable and care-centred ways of living with (and living for) each other. It is also a story about struggle, civil disobedience, non-violent resistance and rebellion, encouraging new forms of solidarities, reframing notions of love. It is a story drawn from the experience of a diasporic migrant, one among a range of stories about the *Aragalaya* (the struggle). It is inspired by the irreverent anger of a multitude of actors who embodied non-violent resistance to build a fairer, better world.

S. Janaka Biyanwila
Sydney, Australia (March 2023)

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S. Janaka Biyanwila
Sydney, Australia (March 2023)

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Challenges of Democracy, Development and Popular Movements

Abstract

The peoples' movement was a movement to deepen citizenship and democracy by demanding actual participation in representative politics. It was a non-violent democratic movement based on independence from political parties, collective informal leadership and multi-level horizontal networking and coordination. It was strengthened by the activists from the student movement, trade unions and working-class parties. It foregrounded issues related to debt and development, Global North–South dynamics, narrowing of representative politics and the role of democratic social movements. The peoples' movement, '*Aragalaya*', illustrated that solidarity, cultivated across multiple cultural, economic and political differences, while engaging locally with a global sense, can influence authoritarian militarised governments. In effect, the struggle for democracy and citizenship aimed at transforming representative politics also accompanied alternative notions of well-being and pleasures involving 'living well together with others' in harmony with nature.

Keywords: Debt; development; Global North–South; representative politics; social movements; popular movements; ethno-nationalism; public-driven economy

The 9 July 2022 mass mobilisation that led to the resignation of the President was a historic day. On that day, protesters, led by young activists of the *Aragalaya* or 'the struggle', occupied the President's official resident, the Presidential Secretariat and the Prime Minister's official residence. The sheer size of the mobilisation

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made the security forces protecting the ruling regime retreat. When the protesters entered the Prime Minister's official residence, some of them engaged in looting and destruction of property, breaking windows and chairs, while others were trying to deter them. Known as the 'Temple Trees' for the frangipani trees in the garden, it was an official place reserved for the political elite and foreign dignitaries. But the protesters painted a sign that read 'open to the public'. The place was occupied on a Saturday evening, and early Sunday morning some activist musicians went to participate in the occupation.

Among the property at the PM's official residence was a grand piano. A young man was guarding this piano, preventing others, mostly young men, from damaging it. The group of activist musicians, who had been part of the *Aragalaya*, joined with the young man to protect this piano. While brainstorming how to demonstrate the value of this piano, a phone rang with Dr. Zhivago's 'Somewhere My Love' ringtone. This triggered an idea to use the piano in a concert that evening, but the sound equipment required for a concert setting was beyond their means. After making a few inquiries, they managed to get the sound equipment through their networks.

Once the sound equipment was set up and they were preparing for the concert, a young woman among the crowd who had come to see Temple Trees sat at the piano and began to play. Soon she was invited to join with other musicians in an impromptu concert. The evening's concert began with a female pianist playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata and Ode to Joy and a male violinist playing Hungarian Dance by Brahms. This introduction was followed by the song 'We are the Champions' by Queen. After the piano-based music, several bands played in a lively music concert for a large crowd gathered in the garden at the Prime Minister's official residence on that tropical Sunday evening.

There are many hidden stories of the *Aragalaya*. This was a historic moment with multiple stories. Stories to regain our identities as citizens, workers, students, parents, consumers and civil society actors. Stories to recognise our compromises with the status quo that have undermined the possibilities of an alternative, a more democratic and just society that can nurture alternative pleasures of collective flourishing.

This is a story about a popular uprising in Sri Lanka, an island with an abundance of natural beauty along with an abundance of subterranean stories of inequality and violence. It is a local story with a global sense, in terms of residues of British colonialism, the evolving negotiations with the US empire, as well as regional super powers such as India and China. It is a story about assertions of a national identity in the aftermath of a gruesome civil war of nearly 30 years. And, how this imagined national community based on Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has meant a corrosion of democracy, citizenship as well as human dignity. It's a story about how ordinary people transcended their differences for a collective struggle and occupied the streets with a subversive playfulness to make the world a better place, even for a moment. A moment that captured the struggles of the past and the hope for a better future, in the present.

1.1 The Uprising

Since the beginning of March 2022, a range of protests erupted across Sri Lanka demanding the resignation of the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Gotabaya was elected as the President in November 2019 with a large majority. He was considered a ‘national hero’ for his role in ending the civil war in 2009, as the Secretary for the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, while his older brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, was the president. Triggered by a foreign debt crisis, the street protests against shortages of essential goods (electricity, kerosene, diesel, natural gas, milk powder, medicine, etc.) and the increase in cost of living soon expanded into a mass movement by July.

In early April, the government declared the suspension of debt payments or a ‘sovereign debt default’. Amidst escalating protests, the Central Bank governor, the Cabinet as well as the Treasury Secretary, resigned. Around the same time, the protesters established an occupied zone, near the Presidential secretariat, and called it the ‘Got Go Gama’ (GGG – Gotabaya go home village). What began as few stalls, soon evolved into a festive space of protests and solidarity, with a people’s art studio, cinema, campus, library and a community kitchen. People engaged in chanting slogans and a range of performing arts, with a politico-aesthetic that also expressed a sense of commons. The protest was called the ‘struggle of love’, *aadaraye aragalaya*, expressing solidarity amongst diverse communities and against an uncaring authoritarian state that caused an economic crisis.

The protests continued through April and GGG extended despite multiple forms of state repression. Faced with growing popular discontent, on 9 May, the ruling Rajapaksa regime deployed its party members, loyalists and thugs to attack the non-violent protesters at GGG in broad daylight. However, this act of state-sponsored violence led to an unexpected outrage by the public who were sympathising with the protesters. Soon, the local people surrounded the party members and their supporters and counter-attacked them. Within hours the Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who commanded popularity as ‘the president who saved the nation’ resigned. The counter-attack continued into the night and spread to other regional areas, and following the enforcement of emergency regulations, the violence subsided by early next morning.

The protesters at GGG regrouped and continued through June, amidst state repression and a defiant president. Nevertheless, 9 July mass mobilisation organised by the protesters overwhelmed the security forces. This non-violent mass gathering forced the President to flee the country and submit his resignation three days later from exile in Singapore. This was a major achievement; however, the Rajapaksa-led party was still holding a parliamentary majority. Before long, the Rajapaksa regime reassembled with a new president, who intensified state repression. The physical attacks and arrests of activists coincided with mainstream media strategies discrediting and delegitimising the protests. While a few activists were coopted, some segments also withdrew from the protests. In early August, the protesters vacated the GGG or the occupied struggle zone in Colombo and shifted to more diffused modes of activism.

1.2 Debt and Development

The debt crisis in Sri Lanka was not an exceptional event, given that the economy experienced similarly high levels of debt during the 1987–1994 period. What was exceptional was the draining of foreign exchange needed to maintain everyday international trading activities. The Sri Lankan debt crisis illustrated both internal as well as external contradictions of integration with the global financial system. Internally, the Rajapaksa regime, since coming into power in 2005, encouraged speculation and borrowing money for large-scale infrastructure projects with limited employment generation. Externally, aside from Chinese government credit lines, most of this borrowing was in commercial loans with higher interest rates, shorter maturities, which deepened the debt burden.

The ‘national economy’ project of the Rajapaksa regime was a continuation of the market-driven economy since 1977, which equates economic growth with ‘development’. The promotion of export-oriented growth strategies involved the privatisation and commercialisation of the public sector and the deregulation of markets. The efforts to attract foreign investors through tax incentives and a low-wage docile labour force has meant watering down worker rights and attacks against trade unions. After four decades of deregulated labour markets, over two thirds of the labour force are in the informal sector, misrecognised, unprotected and socially excluded.

Since 2007, the Central Bank became a player in financial markets by transforming state debt into sovereign debt bonds or tradeable commodities. This reliance on financial markets not only nurtured speculation and rent-seeking but also corruption. While draining public finances needed for social protection, the framing of speculation and rent-seeking or unearned income, as ‘investment’ activities also undermined real investment in creating decent jobs, social infrastructure and adapting to the climate crisis. Most of the national debt went into projects with limited public benefit, including sports stadiums, that displaced communities and disrupted local ecologies.

In terms of socio-economic development, the benefits of the market-driven economy for the past 40 years are mostly concentrated in the main city of Colombo and the Western province. Nearly 27 per cent or 5.8 million, out of Sri Lanka’s total population of around 22 million, live in the Western Province. This amounts to nearly 30 per cent of the total population occupying 6 per cent of the country’s landmass. The Colombo Metropolitan Region accounts for nearly 45 per cent of total GDP.

The richest 20 per cent of the population, mostly living in Colombo, received 51 per cent of share of income in 2019, while the poorest 20 per cent received 5 per cent.¹ In 2019, prior to the pandemic, approximately one out of every six (16 per cent) or 3.5 million people in Sri Lanka were considered multidimensionally poor (deprived of health facilities, cooking fuel, drinking water and basic facilities).² In the tea plantation areas, the home of Hill Country Tamil

¹Sri Lanka Central Bank (2020). Annual Report.

²Department of Census and Statistics (2019a).

communities, more than half the population are living in poverty. The pandemic and the debt crisis exacerbated multiple forms of deprivation, increasing incidences of poverty and food insecurity.

The Sri Lankan debt crisis illustrated a broader context of debt dependence in the Global South. In 2017, total debt of developing countries reached about 190 per cent of GDP, the highest level recorded.³ Debt-service burdens, amidst rising interest rates, is an on-going mechanism of debt dependence across the Global South. The debt contracted by Southern governments mainly benefitted the ruling elite, illustrating forms of ‘illegitimate’ debt. This dependence of the Global South on financial markets in the Global North reveals the contradictions of Global North–South dynamics.

1.3 Global North–South Dynamics

The Global North–South distinction highlights the uneven development of a global capitalist economy, shaped by specific histories of colonialism and imperialism. While a majority of populations impacted by colonialism resides in the Southern hemisphere, the Global North–South categories are not strictly geographic markers, but stratified and differentiated categories of geo-political power relations. Global North signifies regulation and emancipation, while the Global South represents reappropriation and violence.⁴ The Global North is also in the South, where a minority of privileged (leisure) class culturally flourish in regulated safe urban spaces, while a majority are suffering, dispossessed of economic, cultural and ecological commons. The Global South also exists in the North, within a range of misrecognised and politically marginalised communities. Rather than static categories, these are evolving concepts to better understand geo-political power relations reproducing cultural misrecognition, political misrepresentation and economic maldistribution in global, regional and national scales.

Within the Global South, the emergence of BRICS bloc – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – in 2010, highlight the consolidation of emerging capitalist economies. Among these, the rise of China as a global hegemon is often depicted as a geo-political transition from the West to the East.⁵ However, the domination of the US empire, in terms of military industrial complex, global financial institutions along with media, communication and cultural production networks, suggests a more complex capitalist world system in terms of emerging hegemons, nation-states and geo-political alliances.

Although the BRICS group was intended to generate South–South solidarity particularly aimed at contesting the global financial architecture dominated by the North, these tendencies have largely dissipated for now.⁶ The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia under Putin reinforced the unipolar project of US

³United Nations (2020).

⁴Santos (2007).

⁵Tricontinental (2022).

⁶Bond (2022).

imperialism, along with notions of ‘growth and development’ strategies of global governance institutions (IMF-World Bank, WTO). In the South Asian subcontinent, India’s engagement in the Quad, a military alliance among Australia, Japan and the United States, has also escalated tensions with China in the Indian Ocean region.

The challenges of South–South cooperation highlights the realm of representative politics at the nation-state levels. The rise of authoritarian state forms in the Global South remains entrenched in patriarchal cultures promoting market-economies legitimised through ethno-nationalist politics. The repression and attacks against democratic social movements from below is embedded in militarist discourses that prioritise ‘national security’ over ‘human security’. Nevertheless, there are multiple activist networks engaged in South–South as well as South–North solidarity reinforcing the movement for global justice and solidarity. The changes in the realm of representative politics, reproducing authoritarian state forms, shaped by local histories and cultures, is central to understanding the predicament of democracy and citizenship in the Global South.

1.4 Representative Politics, Ethno-Nationalism and Violence

The popular movement in Sri Lanka foregrounded the disillusionment with representative politics in a context of growing inequality and violence. Over the past four decades, the realm of representative politics, involving political parties and the electoral system, has expanded the wealth of the elites and a thin layer of middle-classes, while most of the working-class are struggling to make a living. The state violence directed at unions and working-class parties, as well as the rise of anti-Tamil civil war (1983–2009), and the JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* – People’s Liberation Front) insurrection (1988–1990), displaced working-class politics of redistribution by assertions of Sinhala-Buddhist politics of recognition.

The Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalist project based on promoting markets maintains the militarisation of the state, even after the ending of the civil war in 2009. The lack of efforts towards a genuine ethnic reconciliation has meant continued military occupation of the North and East, with a population of around 3 million people.⁷ This accounts for nearly one soldier for every six (adult) civilians.⁸ There are on-going demands for information regarding enforced disappearances, over 20,000 people, during and after the war, as well as the release of political prisoners, around 200 people, detained for over a decade based on dubious charges.

The militarised state was reinforced following the April 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bombing attack by a local Muslim fundamentalist group, killing nearly 300 people and injuring more than 500 others. Among those killed were 45 foreign

⁷Hensman (2015).

⁸Oakland Institute (2021).

nationals from 14 countries, illustrating global consequences of local violence. It was a coordinated suicide bombing attack on churches and luxury hotels mostly in Colombo.⁹ The April 2019 attack not only renewed anti-Muslim discrimination and violence fostered under the Rajapaksa regime, but also the ‘law and order’ and ‘national security’ narratives normalising the militarisation of state.

The Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism of representative politics takes place within a multi-ethnic and multi-religious cultural context.¹⁰ While the main political parties are multi-ethnic in character, smaller Tamil and Muslim parties often enter into coalitions with the main parties. According to the 2012 census data, out of a population of around 22 million people, around 70 per cent were considered Buddhist, 13 per cent Hindu, 10 per cent Muslim and 7 per cent Christian.¹¹ In terms of ethnic identity, around 75 per cent were Sinhala (15.2 million), 10 per cent Sri Lankan Tamils (2.2 million); 9 per cent Moors (Muslims) (1.9 million) and 4 per cent Hill country Tamils (0.8 million).¹² Within the Sinhala and Tamil communities in particular, caste hierarchies interact in diverse ways, but mainly in terms of marriage.¹³ There are also small, scattered indigenous (*Vedda*) communities struggling to retain their cultural identities as well as material survival. Geographically, the North and East provinces encompass higher concentrations of Tamil and Muslim communities, while the Central province comprise of the hill country Tamil communities, working in the tea plantations. There are differences within each of these religious and linguistic categories as well as overlap, illustrating an evolving entangled multi-ethnic and multi-religious context, grounded in heteropatriarchal cultures. Meanwhile, the articulation of the national community or nationhood is integral to the realm of representative politics.

The assertion of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism within representative politics was shaped by anti-colonial struggles and post-colonial state formations. The Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist tendencies that shaped state formation and representative politics include: the 1948 disenfranchisement of Tamil plantation workers; the 1956 constitutional privilege granted to Sinhala language and the 1972 privileged status given to Buddhism.¹⁴ Not only these changes reinforced discrimination against other ethnic groups but also amplified patriarchal cultures while reproducing an authoritarian state.

The 1978 introduction of the presidential system marks a historical shift towards an authoritarian state. Under the new system, the president and the cabinet concentrated power, in terms of decision-making as well as resources, while restricting the role of the parliament. Although the electoral system involves multi-level governance institutions, the centralised power within a presidential

⁹Human Rights Watch (2019).

¹⁰Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988); Gunawardana (1990, 2006).

¹¹Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics (2021a).

¹²Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics (2021).

¹³Silva et al. (2009).

¹⁴Spencer (1990).

system limits the democratic potential of these regional and local electoral institutions. The demands for more regional autonomy (devolution and decentralisation), within a federalist model, as a remedy for the ethnic reconciliation, remains resisted by the unitarist ethno-nationalist strategies strengthening the militarisation of the state.¹⁵

The authoritarian state also introduced a Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1978, which institutionalised a culture of secrecy and impunity, legitimising state violence. The ‘law and order’ and ‘national security’ narratives extended the military into policing work (such as anti-narcotic crusades and prison surveillance) in proximity to criminal networks. The overcrowded and dysfunctional prison system adds to criminal activity, integrated with the police and the military as well as party politics. The mainstream parties, with opaque finances, continue to nurture this culture of violence within representative politics, discouraging the participation of women. In effect, the militarised Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalist state sustained by representative politics that marginalise women also foster cultures of misogyny. It is within this context of weakened democratic institutions, deepening multiple forms of cultural discrimination and resource maldistribution, that the discontent among the masses manifest itself as a popular uprising.

1.5 Popular Movements

The popular uprising was an expression of accumulated grievances of a range of protests that were repressed under the Rajapaksa regime. This convergence of a protest movement parallels a range of other movements in the Global South against autocratic regimes promoting market-driven globalisation. The origin of these movements can be located with the debt crisis of Latin and South America in the early 1980s. Following the demise of the state socialist experiments in the early 1990s, and the introduction of the World Trade Organisation in 1995, coincided with a new wave of protests, such as the 1995 uprising in Chiapas Mexico, and the 1999 protests in Seattle against the WTO. Over a decade later, anti-austerity protests emerged in USA and Europe in 2011 and 2012 as well as Arab Spring protests in the early 2010s throughout Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. The popular movement in Chile, that began in 2019, also illustrate a convergence of social movements more compatible with the protests in Sri Lanka, where the maldistribution of resources instigated demands for political reforms.

The popular movements are composed of diverse interest groups, networks as well as social movements. The popular movements also encompass conservative, reactionary and authoritarian (fascist) tendencies, which undermine democratic non-violent assertions. The ways in which popular movements frame resentment and indignation varies according to strategic political orientation. The authoritarian tendencies infect a range of struggles. The late 1970s Tamil separatist group, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), eliminated a range of other Tamil nationalist groups to become an authoritarian militant movement. The 1988 JVP insurrection was an authoritarian movement that combined Sinhala-Buddhist

¹⁵Edirisinghe and Welikala (2008).