

“A New and Rare Democratic Moment for Sri Lanka”

Social Scientists' Association

Sri Lanka is currently experiencing the worst economic crisis in its post-independence history. Foreign reserves of the country have dangerously dwindled, incapacitating the government to import essential supplies such as fuel, cooking gas, fertiliser, and medicine, among other things.

As a result, Sri Lankans are going through unprecedented suffering. Severe shortages of almost all essential items have had a crippling effect on their daily lives. For many weeks, people across the country have been standing in long queues to obtain access to essentials. They are forced to suffer long hours of power cuts. The current crisis has not only disrupted people's lives at home, but also adversely impacted the economic activities of many sectors such as agriculture, transportation, hospitality, small businesses, and manufacturing. The livelihoods of many are teetering on the edge of collapse. Children's education, already disrupted by the COVID19 pandemic, has further suffered due to lack of transportation, electricity, and even writing papers. Hospitals have almost run out of essential medicines, costing lives. The crisis has reached such a high point that any corrective measure, no matter how well thought out, will take at least months to have some positive effect on people's everyday lives.

We share the public perception that the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government is primarily responsible for aggravating the financial crisis and bringing it to a head. In the backdrop of intensifying popular protest against the difficulties people face, the President and his government are fast losing legitimacy. Although economic mismanagement was the immediate cause of the current crisis, we cannot ignore the role of political institutions and processes in producing the overall crisis. Since independence they have nurtured a corrupt, authoritarian, ethnicised, dynastical, and undemocratic political culture, paving the way for the current disaster of unprecedented magnitude. Resolving the immediate economic crisis is undoubtedly a major

priority. However, we believe that restoring democracy and reforming the country's political culture are equally important and urgent for establishing a just and fair society.

Indeed, this is the call from ordinary citizens who have been protesting over the last month night and day, in the sunshine and rain, offline and online. The protests which started as small neighbourhood candle-light vigils about the hardships faced by people due to the power cuts and gas and fuel shortages have now grown into an unprecedented nationwide uprising that has crossed the ethnic divide. A number of protests have been punctuated by Iftar celebrated by Muslim participants at the protest ground. Young people including university students, who have never been involved in any protest, are at the forefront of the agitation. This is a spontaneous citizens' protest movement with a multi-class, multi-ethnic character. It is a culmination of a wave of protests commenced by farmers, teachers, fishermen, etc. against economic hardships a few months ago.

This spontaneous uprising of people independent of political parties call for the removal of the Rajapaksa family and all 225 Members of Parliament. We see this call as a metaphor of the deep disenchantment shared by many citizens with the whole political class in this country. This wave of protests gives a clear message that citizens are deeply disappointed with the way in which the country's system of democratic institutions and practices have been abused by the political elites as well as the bureaucracy. The slogans and demands being put forward embody a thorough critique of the system, suggesting ideas and directions for far reaching reforms and reconstructions. It is also a call for a new political culture of democracy, accountability, and integrity without political corruption. Citizens and civil society organisations committed to Sri Lanka's democracy have come together to support and sustain this movement in the long term.

We unequivocally condemn the use of violence against unarmed citizens exercising their right to protest, and are deeply saddened by the death of one protestor at Rambukkana on 19 April 2022. More broadly, we recognise that there are efforts to infiltrate this movement and divide and demonise the protesters as anarchists and extremists. Counter protests are being staged to bring back ethnic divisions. Social media analysts have also warned that efforts are underway to splinter and dilute the core message coming from the people. Therefore, participants and well-wishers of this new democratic movement in Sri Lanka need to be vigilant to defeat such efforts at undermining this movement. Moreover, the Prime Minister in his address to the nation on 11 April appeared to issue a veiled threat against the protesters, while falsely asserting that the protesters are insulting the armed forces.

This is a new and rare democratic moment for Sri Lanka. Let us not miss it. We urge all political and civil society actors to respond to the messages coming from the protesting young citizens with utmost seriousness and responsibility. In that context, we would like to state the following:

- We welcome the current democratic activism of all Sri Lankans, especially the youth, who have got onto the streets to express their deep disappointment and anger against the rulers. It is a new democratic movement of citizens that has emerged independent of political parties and politicians.
- We urge the current government to respect the demands of the citizens and pave the way for a new interim government, and take effective steps to resolve the economic crisis immediately.
- We urge the government to suspend those responsible, immediately as well as indirectly, for opening fire on unarmed civilians pending an independent investigation into the killing of one protestor in Rambukkana. We are conscious that such action by the police has been normalised through a long history of impunity.

We stress the importance of reforming the political system of the country as a part of the solution to the current economic crisis by:

- Re-establishing the primacy of parliamentary democracy, checks and balances on the Executive as well as the Legislature to prevent arbitrary and corrupt government, and institutions and mechanisms of accountable government.

- Introducing new institutional and procedural mechanisms to facilitate citizens' participation in, and supervision of, policy-making and implementation.
- Reforming and democratising political parties, their structures, and practices to be truly representative of citizens, freeing the parties from the control of families, business elites, and corrupt vested interests.
- Introducing reforms to re-establish independence of the bureaucracy, judiciary, and law enforcement institutions including the Attorney General's department and the Police, on the principle that their primary institutional duty is to serve the people and protect their rights, and not the interests of the rulers.
- Adopting economic policies that encourage economic and social development, while providing adequate social protection measures to safeguard living standards of the poor, the unemployed, and the working people.
- Putting in place an institutional framework that would ensure citizens' participation in the affairs of government.
- Introducing an institutional framework that would establish equal status of all economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender groups while protecting their rights.
- Ensuring that any programme for resolving the economic crisis would not transfer its burden to vulnerable social groups.
- Addressing the longstanding demand for greater devolution of political power from the Tamil minority; and
- Accounting for past and present atrocities committed by the State against all citizens, including minority communities.

We call for a broad coalition of all protesting groups to sustain this movement for democracy and economic justice in the long term. It is also time for any struggle for democracy in the 'South' to be linked up with the struggles for devolution and justice in the North and East, and the rejection of the systematic marginalisation and intimidation of ethnic and other minority communities as part of State policy.

April 2022

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September 2017 ISSN 1361-8682 Editor Anil Acharya Pinar Unsalbayrak Editorial Board Anand Gopalakrishnan Kunal Jayaraman Pradyumn Das W. Rudolph Social Sciences Association 36, Dharmaram Road, Chokkikulam, Sri Lanka Telephone: +94 11 561 399 Email: polity@polity.lk.org www.polity.lk.org Price Sri Lanka Rs. 200 International \$5 (US orders include postage cost) For subscription inquiries please email polity@polity.lk.org	Editorial: The Promise of January 1978 in Perspective 1 Research: Democratic Reforms: The Sri Lankan Editorial (December 1991) 5 Focus: From Good Governance to Injust Governance Jeyaraj Jayapala 10 Tamil Nationalism As the Theory of Good Governance Mahalingam Manivannan 18 Institutional Justice in Post-war Sri Lanka: Obstacles and Prospects Chakraborty Jayaraman 26 Voluntaryism's Promise of Reconciliation: Unity is a Must, Not an End Pradyumn Das 27 "A La Unknown Future?": The Neopopulist Moments of January 1978 Anil Acharya 34 How did we come to become? Jayaraman 40 Interviews: The Case for Openness: An Interview with Chulani Kallilana Pradyumn Jayaraman 47 To Quest for Civil Society: An Interview with Dr. Shivali Banaji Desai Pradyumn Das 48 Field Diary: Campaign Trail Shows from the Field Diary of Anil Acharya Anil Acharya 74 Reviews: "Social Research - Philosophical and Methodological Foundations" Jeyaraj Jayaraman 87 The Politics of Sinhala Buddhist Cosmology Kunal Jayaraman 92 Political Rhetoric of Development Pradyumn Jayaraman 102 The Legacy of Our Development: Racism and Geography in Vithu Nairath Alagathil Anil Acharya 103	

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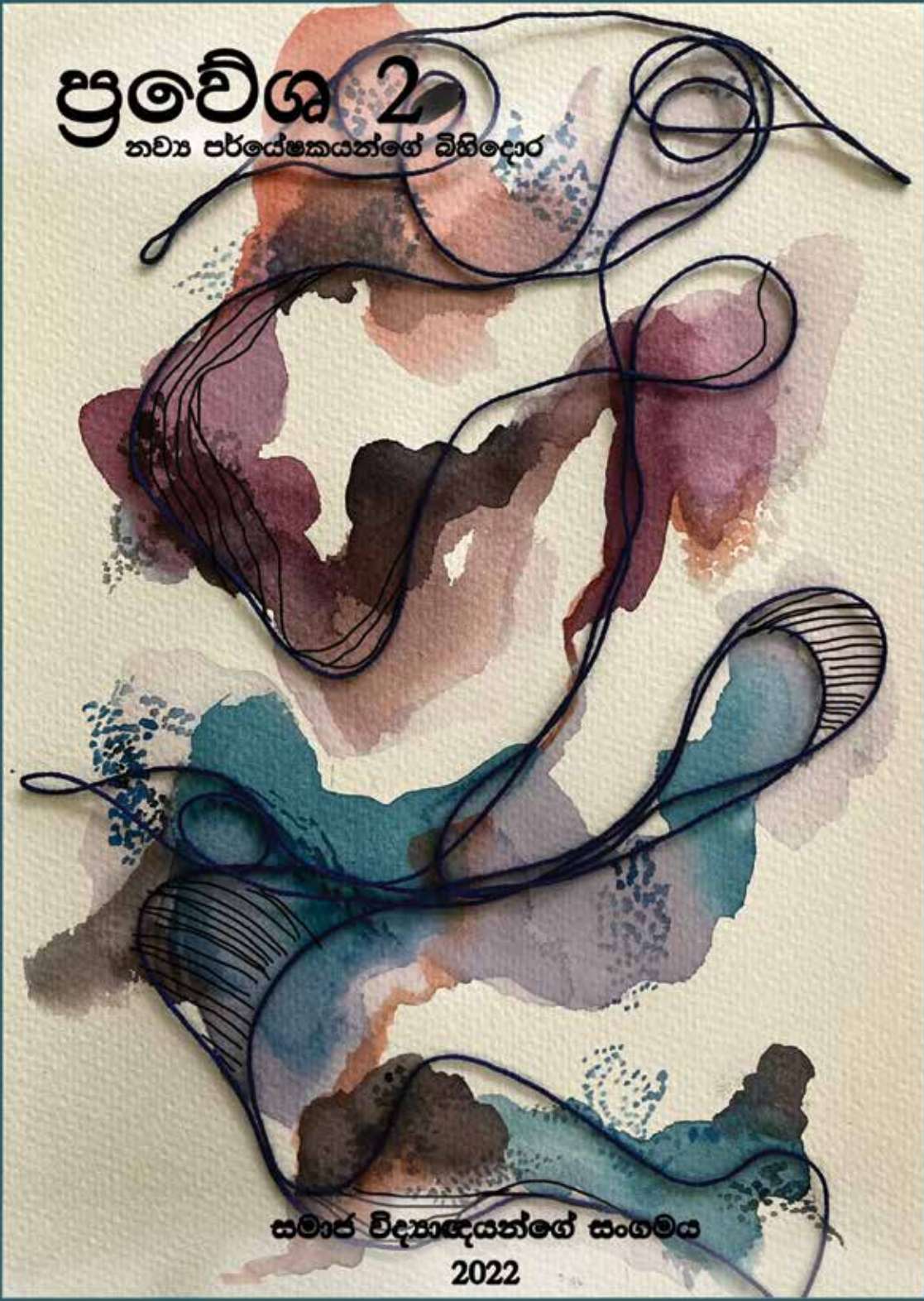
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2022

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