

Aragalaya: Struggle for Space and the Spaces of the Struggle

Nihal Perera

The *Aragalaya* was the largest gathering of people to protest a national government in Sri Lanka. February 2022 saw the emergence of small, spontaneous, and non-partisan candlelight vigils in and around Colombo. Coalescing the struggle, in April, the protestors occupied a part of Galle Face, demanding the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2020-22).

Struggles against governments are not new in Sri Lanka. Until 1977, no government withstood a general strike. Debilitated by workers strikes, all governments were defeated at the next election. President J. R. Jayewardene (1977-88) changed this structure by not only defeating the general strike of 1980, but also destroying the backbone of the working-class movement, following the elimination of leftists, especially the Sama Samaja and Communist parties, from parliament in the 1977 elections. Even without the lethal political weapon of the general strike, the *Aragalaya* made Prime Minister Mahinda and President Gotabaya flee.¹ Yet, the Rajapaksa regime survived only to be defeated at the next election.

There are several interpretations of the *Aragalaya*: for Wimal Weerawansa (2023), it is a conspiracy; Nalin Wickramage (2022) questions the politics of the *Aragalaya*, adopting outside-in approaches. Nirmani Liyanage's (2022a) talk on people's spaces at the People's University, and the study of memoryscapes at Galle Face by Radhika Hettiarachchi and Samal Hemachandra (2023) draw our attention to the spaces of the *Aragalaya*. Here, I refer to the physical spaces and their social roles and definitions. These raise the following questions: What spaces did the *Aragalaya* use? How did the protestors deploy and organise these spaces? What were the spatial conflicts and contradictions that emerged? What spaces did the *Aragalaya* produce in the process? What do these teach us about politics and space?

This study is built upon the literature on social space (Lefebvre 1991; Harvey 1973) and my own work that investigates the spatial production of Ceylon and how ordinary people create spaces for their daily activities and cultural practices (Perera 1998; 2016). From my observations, the *Aragalaya* which spread almost across the entire country, bringing about a revolutionary moment, failed to establish the sovereignty of people, transforming the national political sphere. Instead, it died in an unfamiliar place: the parliament. In the process, however, the protestors created an unprecedented public sphere and space that enabled the emergence of new ideas, organisations, and movements, which promises to continue, transcending old politics. In developing this understanding, I draw on my own experience at GotaGoGama, intermittently between April and September 2022, conversations with many protestors, and several in-depth interviews.

Uniting dispersed protests

On 31 March, the demonstration in front of the president's private residence in Mirihana somewhat united the dispersed protests behind the demand for Gotabaya to resign. The police attacked them, and the president declared a nationwide emergency and a 36-hour curfew. This triggered panic-buying, causing long lines of people outside supermarkets and pharmacies. Also, many commuters got trapped in Colombo. The next day, more than 300 lawyers volunteered to represent the protestors arrested by the police. Whatever the government did caused more problems for itself and citizens. The government slid into defensive mode.

Then, the unified struggle both intensified and expanded: private bus drivers in Anuradhapura, carpenters in Moratuwa, and fishermen in Galle joined the protest. Celebrities condemned the government, and the Catholic weekly *Gnanartha Pradeepaya* blamed the crisis on government corruption. The struggle was also waged on social media and the government's attempted blockage of social media platforms failed.

¹ As the story involves several Rajapaksa brothers, I use their first names for clarity.

The hashtag “GotaGoHome” trended on X (Twitter) and Facebook posts supporting the *Aragalaya* reached one million by 9 April.

As its own action began to backfire, the government went into panic mode: the cabinet of ministers resigned on 3 April, but Gotabaya reappointed the same politicians to different portfolios. This was followed by a large protest near the Parliament, demanding the resignation of the entire cabinet. The ruling party began losing some of its members and coalition partners.

The *Aragalaya* took a new turn on 9 April. In March and April, Colombo’s rich made the Independence Square area their space for protest. On 9 April, the protestors planned several marches towards the Agitation Site previously designated for such purpose by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government in early 2020. The authorities closed it on that day citing “land development” as the reason. Yet, tens of thousands of people belonging to diverse social groups gathered, making it one of the largest demonstrations in Sri Lanka. Some of them occupied the site.

Unprecedented public sphere/space

The Agitation Site, located adjacent to the Shangri-La Hotel, could be contained, isolated, and possibly attacked. At its opening, in February 2020, a minister warned potential agitators not to disturb others. The site had been used for many protests but the *Aragalaya* was different.

Commenting on peasant struggles in India, Ranajit Guha (1983) stresses the importance of violating hegemonic signs and symbols as a process of identification that would otherwise be subjected to the ones assigned by the authorities. Violating is precisely what the protestors in Colombo did: they occupied the site meant for agitation. Then, they transformed it from a site of control, into the home of protest.

Moreover, the protestors renamed the site ‘GotaGoGama’. Naming establishes the authority of the namer over the named (cf. Perera 1998). By renaming, the protestors appropriated Gotabaya’s Agitation Site and relocated it within the space of the *Aragalaya*. As the name stood for the immediate intent of the protest, the site turned into the rallying point, or the spatial centre, of the larger struggle.

The names the protestors used were familiar to most ordinary Sri Lankans, *vis-à-vis* the British colonial nomenclature the postcolonial Ceylonese followed (Perera 1998). In Sri Lanka, everyone is assumed and supposed to have a gama (‘home village or

neighbourhood’, in Sinhala). Hence, GotaGoGama denotes a sense of belonging, i.e., their own place. Similarly, the agitation was called the *Aragalaya* (‘struggle’ in Sinhala). Hence, the space the protestors produced was familiar to those who use Sinhalese.

Centring the protests in Colombo, and not in Kotte, highlights a postcolonial dilemma. Ceylon was a colonial product developed from Colombo; it did not evolve from Lanka, the island (Perera 1998). Although the country’s capital was moved to Kotte in 1982, with the shifting of the Presidential Secretariat back to the old (colonial) Parliament building, the move to Kotte was undermined by the president himself. Both the president and the prime minister use colonial-era official residences in Colombo and anti-government protests also take place in Colombo. As protestors targeted the president, the Agitation Site, in proximity to the Presidential Secretariat, well positioned the protest.

The invigorated protestors quickly built GotaGoGama for the long haul. With various ‘political’ groups building tents using local resources, on available land, the site became populated very fast. As a variety of ‘groups’ with different political interests and objectives joined the protests, the ‘political’ also became diversified and socialised. Beginning with portable toilets, they provided basic amenities, including food, water, technology support, and, later, emergency medical services. Physically, the small and quickly built tents of the individuals who stayed the first night were complemented by larger tents for food distribution and other community services, including a library and tech centre. Demonstrating a sense of place, responsibility, and environmental awareness, the protestors themselves cleaned up the site every night. The settlement was readable for the occupants: they knew where their tents and amenities were and how to find them (cf. Hettiarachchi and Hemachandra 2023).

The occupiers then extended GotaGoGama up to the Presidential Secretariat over the bridge across the Beira Lake. They occupied the closest gate to the Secretariat, built a stage, and called it Gate Zero. In between speeches, various groups of protestors chanted slogans, day and night. In so doing, they not only extended the protest space into state space but also made themselves heard using loudspeakers. Later, a few protest groups built their tents on the bridge.

Settling in for the long haul, the protestors incorporated entertainment, relaxation, and cultural practices into it. The rapper Shiraz RudeBwoy performed on 11 April. On the sixth day, the occupiers celebrated the Sinhala and Tamil New Year by playing *raban*, setting

off firecrackers, cooking *kiribath*, and chanting slogans. Space is also defined by visitors to it. They included famous singers, war veterans, and former cricketers.

Justice and inclusivity were central themes of the *Aragalaya*. The protestors celebrated Easter and protested the 2019 Easter Sunday bomb attack which killed 258 people in three churches. Actor Jehan Appuhami made a symbolic walk between two of those churches—St. Sebastian’s Katuwapitiya and St. Anthony’s Kochchikade—before continuing to Galle Face carrying a large wooden cross on his shoulder, symbolically connecting these sites. Further welcoming other religious and ethnic groups, on the ninth day, the protesters sang the national anthem in both Sinhala and Tamil. On 3 May, they celebrated Ramadan Eid-*Ul-Fitr* with the participation of Buddhist monks and Christian priests. Besides casual walkers from Galle Face, a substantial group of Muslims participated but there was no indication that the *Aragalaya* meant much for Tamils.

As heavy-handed attempts to regain control of GotaGoGama failed, the government tried softer tactics such as defaming the *Aragalaya*. On two mornings empty bottles of alcohol and condoms were found on site. Disinformation and rumours flew, and a television channel labelled the protest a ‘beach party’ funded by terrorist organisations and hackers. This did not shame anyone away, most evident in the participation of women in substantial numbers, many playing leading roles. By focusing its efforts on retaking GotaGoGama, the government fell into a defensive position, empowering the *Aragalaya*. The government never succeeded in reclaiming it.

Well anchored at GotaGoGama, the *Aragalaya* expanded across the country and overseas. On 24 April, members of the Inter-University Student Federation occupied the entrance to Temple Trees, demanding Mahinda’s resignation. Calling the site MynaGoGama, they undermined Mahinda’s aura as a Sinhala Buddhist leader. On 5 May, a group of protestors led by university students blocked the main access point to the Parliament. They called the site HoruGoGama, referring to stealing national wealth and assets. Police used barricades to stop them, water cannons to destroy tents, and tear gas to disperse them. Despite periodic protests staged in the area, the protestors were never able to occupy a site near the main entrance to the Parliament.

Spreading across the country, protests were held in principal towns including Kandy, Galle, and many other localities. Nationally, the protestors blocked the mobility of ruling politicians within the country they ruled. By May 2022, the territory outside of official and

private residences and offices was much under citizens’ control, and the public activities of the politicians were blocked. Mahinda visited the Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura, but citizens booed and heckled him, demanding the ‘thieves’ be banned from sacred places. They rejected the role he assumed as the ‘protector’ of Sinhala Buddhism.

The rulers were further cornered by international organisations. The Canadian High Commission and the European Union, among others, criticised the government for cracking down on dissent. Spreading the struggle overseas, protests were staged in several countries with a substantial Sinhalese population. Some tried to convince their host governments to intervene, both providing economic help and making the rulers accountable. Mahinda was booed in Italy, and several groups tried to take the Rajapaksas to international courts. As the walls moved in on it, the government was compelled to find accommodation within the national and international space the *Aragalaya* had produced.

GotaGoGama: Never reclaimed

The Rajapaksas’ last-ditch effort to retake the key *Aragalaya* spaces and reestablish their control over the country not only failed but they had to flee, giving up their last bastions and positions. After a meeting at Temple Trees, on 9 May, a group of Mahinda loyalists assaulted the protestors at MynaGoGama and GotaGoGama. It was met with resistance and the police dispersed both groups. The backlash spread out of Colombo. Some buses that carried the attackers were intercepted on their way back. Houses and offices of ruling-party politicians were torched, and one member of parliament was killed. It became evident that nowhere in the country was safe for the rulers.

Further extending the reach into Rajapaksa territory, some protestors targeted properties and monuments of the Rajapaksa family. Allegedly built with public funds, the D.A. Rajapaksa Museum was destroyed. The Rajapaksa family house at Medamulana and Mahinda’s other house in Kurunegala were also attacked. Another group of protesters attempted to storm Temple Trees. Later that day, the prime minister resigned. By dawn, security forces had evacuated Mahinda and his family to a naval base in Trincomalee.

Surprising many, Mahinda’s political rival Ranil Wickremesinghe, whose political party had only his seat in parliament, was appointed acting prime minister. In a largely two-party system, Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP) and Mahinda’s long-term party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), played political

opponents for six decades. This appointment exposed the Rajapaksa-Wickremesinghe collusion, developed more recently behind the scenes.

Agitated protestors demanded the resignation of the whole government. Parliament amended the Constitution to bar foreign nationals from being legislators. On 9 June, Basil Rajapaksa, the chief organiser of the Rajapaksa camp, a US citizen, resigned from parliament.

On 9 July, the president fled his official residence following the gathering of a large number of protestors outside the security ring. Hours later, the protestors overwhelmed his residence, braving police barricades, tear gas, and live ammunition. Protesters also besieged Temple Trees and the Presidential Secretariat and refused to leave until the president and the (new) prime minister resigned. Some protestors entered Wickremesinghe's heavily guarded private residence that evening and set it on fire. On 14 July, Wickremesinghe was appointed the acting president.

In sum, by mid-July, the three most powerful Rajapaksa brothers had left office, the government had collapsed, and the protestors had won their immediate battle. Spatially, it was carried out through the strategic and tactical production of ephemeral spaces such as vigils, marches, and occupation of state spaces for immediate needs. Beginning with 'liberating' small spaces, the protestors 'occupied' the whole country, especially the Sinhala areas, including significant spaces of power except the parliament. Yet, the regime survived with Wickremesinghe becoming its face. Let us approach the *Aragalaya*, especially its peak, from the vantage point of the protestors.

The tipping point

The storming of the President's House, Temple Trees, and Presidential Secretariat on 9 July brought the struggle to its peak. A few days later, a few protestors attempted to besiege the Parliament but without success. A few others entered the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation and demanded the protests be telecasted. The Presidential Secretariat was turned into a temporary library with over 8,000 books. In short, the protestors held the key spaces of the regime. Parliament, which they could not take over, was spatially displaced, isolated in Kotte. Yet, the government claimed the sovereignty of the Constitution and the parliament.

By occupying prime spaces of authority, the protestors had turned the *Aragalaya* into a potential revolution. The possibilities were immense; they included a change of regime and the existing power

structure. A friend mourned the lost opportunity of assigning separate rooms of the President's House to discuss and debate policies for each sector and the whole nation (Perera 2024). The moment produced the potential for protestors to transform the *Aragalaya* from a protest against the government into a means to create the political structure they wished for. However, a political party that could materialise this transformative moment, i.e., read the conjuncture and lead the *Aragalaya* towards people's sovereignty, displacing the parliament, was conspicuously absent.

Transformation is serious business, and familiarity is key to any transformation of space and society (Holston 1986; Perera 1998; 2016). When the Communards walked into elite areas in Paris, during the Paris Commune of 1871, the spaces were unfamiliar to them (Ross 2008). They did not know what to do with the spaces they had just taken over. Reading the environment using their familiar knowledge and signs, they continued to fight against power, destroying its identifiable symbols like the Vendome Column. At the beginning, the Bolsheviks too had little knowledge about what to transform and produce. After the October Revolution of 1917, they too struggled with the unfamiliarity of elite areas in Petrograd and Moscow. *Doctor Zhivago* is a popular representation of this struggle.

At the *Aragalaya* too, the people from remote areas who showed up in Colombo in waves were unfamiliar with the city and its elite institutions, especially the President's House and Temple Trees. They got rid of the 'enemy' but were unfamiliar with the spaces they took over and had no plan to adapt and transform them. Unlike the occupation of the Agitation Site, the protestors were unable to violate hegemonic signs and symbols assigned by the authorities (cf. Guha 1983) and make them theirs. The protestors lacked the political wisdom and leadership to transform the governance system and/or institutionalise the people's victory. The *Aragalaya* thus revealed the impotence of those who appear as the 'Left'; and left unresolved the question of what it means to be the 'Left' today.

The younger protestors knew the current conditions better but lacked experience and ideology. They displayed the ability to defeat old strategies of the government, using new tactics. Yet, these were not sufficiently political. On 15 April, the Presidential Secretariat building, which was not physically accessible to them at that time, was colourfully illuminated with 'Go Home Gota.' Thereby, the protestors appropriated it, remotely, and widely circulated the image on social media. Unfamiliar with technology, the police lacked the

knowledge to block the projection. Yet, the protestors were challenged to go beyond the awe of technology and branding, including the GoHomeGota hashtag, and use technology to move the *Aragalaya* 'forward.' They neither recognised nor materialised the potential of new technology for political transformation.

Among many, a key division the protestors did not cross was the one with security forces, members of which also felt the crisis and wanted respite. Many armed men were sympathetic towards the *Aragalaya*. During the 5 April protest in front of the Parliament, six masked army personnel arrived with guns on motorcycles with no registration plates. It was the police who sent them away. On 14 April, a sergeant from Kuttigala Police Station joined the protest in uniform. He was arrested but granted bail. During the occupation of the President's House and Temple Trees, security forces maintained their distance, allowing volunteers among protestors to regulate people; some allowed protestors to take selfies with them.

Yet, the 'leaders' of the *Aragalaya* could not capitalise on this sympathy, excitement, and/or apathy of the police and military personnel. A picture of a young woman giving a flower to the military across the barricades went viral. Yet, the protestors were unable to identify the people inside the uniforms, separate from the regime. Such totalising and homogenising of the regime, packing every person and thing connected to it into a whole, made it impossible for the protestors to capitalise the transformative moment. This can be contrasted with how the Bolsheviks, leading up to the Revolution, did not simply create workers' and peasants' soviets, but also of soldiers. That enabled the Tsar's soldiers to join the revolution, weakening the military and the state.

In the absence of the politicisation of state-spaces occupied by the protestors, the President's House and Temple Trees became spaces of consumption, familiar in the neoliberal era. The protests peaked but moved off the 'political track', reaching an impasse. By 10 July, these edifices turned into tourist attractions with large numbers of citizens from distant places visiting them. Families held picnics at Gordon Gardens and took dips in the swimming pool at President's House. While the visitors observed the luxuries their rulers enjoyed, especially during the economic crisis, the government and the media mocked the 'villagers' for behaving like idiots. The political parties which benefit from rural votes were conspicuously absent.

The impasse enabled the regime to move power back to the parliament. The pivotal moment was the vote on 20 July to elect an acting president for

the rest of Gotabaya's term. Surprising most people, the ruling party nominated Wickremesinghe as its candidate. A breakaway group from the government nominated a former cabinet minister. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), popularly considered the leftist political party in the parliament, nominated its own leader. Wickremesinghe easily won; Dissanayake received three votes out of 225. The protestors had no voice in it; they had become the spectators. With this, the centre of political activity in Sri Lanka moved back to the presidency and the parliament, displacing the *Aragalaya*. Spatially, power moved back to the isolated Kotte from the rebel-held Colombo (and the rest of the country).

In sum, space was central to the *Aragalaya*. While the regime held power in Kotte, the *Aragalaya* anchored itself in Colombo, making the state fight to recover its Agitation Site. The *Aragalaya* space expanded across the country at large. The regime clung on to parliament, calling it the only legitimate place of political negotiation. At the pivotal moment of the *Aragalaya*, the JVP reverted to its comfort zone: parliament. Unlike the streets, occupation sites, and the country at large, which had become the spaces of the *Aragalaya*, parliament was the turf of the ruling regime. By being complicit with the election process, the JVP enabled the regime to revive the formal power structure, displacing the *Aragalaya*. In this way, the protests died in parliament, a space totally unfamiliar to it, with no eulogies.

Thereafter, the 'cleaning up' of protest sites was merely a formality. Despite the credit given to Wickremesinghe, it was a 'mop up' operation. The *Aragalaya* had lost its compass. The resistance to Wickremesinghe by the remaining protestors was strongly characterised by "oppositional politics" which, according to Terry Eagleton (1990: 26), move under the sign of irony, following "a terrain already mapped out by [their] antagonists". The opposition both recognised and legitimised Wickremesinghe's new position of power and the structure he presided over. The economy seemingly began to improve, fuel and gas lines disappeared, the frequency of power cuts reduced, and tourism resumed. The Rajapaksa regime survived, and the middle classes were able to resume their normal patterns of consumption.

Beyond, below, and besides

Although the protests died, the *Aragalaya* changed politics for good, created history, and impacted the future of politics. Since the formation of political parties in Ceylon, a people's uprising had not surpassed the capacity of its leadership. The *Aragalaya* did. It won

its battles against the government and was impactful. However, it did not last long enough for the inventions and interventions it spawned to mature. While the defeat of the former regime at the 2024 presidential election is a clear product of the *Aragalaya*, the deeper social and political sensibilities it produced promise to continue below the radar of election and parliamentary politics.

The *Aragalaya* produced, possibly, the most egalitarian space yet in Sri Lanka with a strong sense of place and belonging. GotaGoGama and its satellites were largely non-partisan, non-violent grounds where diverse populations and ideas could meet, challenge each other, and produce new ideas and organisations that could develop alternatives to extant society and space. Demonstrating new times, it was younger people who brought in different ideas and values, highlighting the need to change prevalent views and the old vocabulary.

A key novelty of this struggle was the conspicuous absence of formal political parties. There were various arms of political parties, trade unions, and student organisations, but it was not a struggle waged in the arena of formal politics. Instead, it rejected and displaced formal politics. Political parties did not claim leadership; they avoided the risk of rejection at the protest. The protests were marginal to formal politics and the *Aragalaya* marginalised formal politics.

Another dimension was the re-adoption of non-violence into politics. Sama Samaja leaders who brought Marxism in the early 1930s did not readily adopt armed uprising as the means of social change. They thought the Sinhala Buddhist society would not support a bloody revolution. The landmark struggle it led, the 1953 *hartal*, was non-violent but made the biggest impact on the government. Further encouraged, the Sama Samaja party was attracted to finding ‘democratic’ means of social change acceptable within the local culture.

Violence was not totally absent from Ceylonese politics, but the first organised attack on a government in 1971 brought violence to the centre of it. Here I refer to the use of arms instead of votes to negotiate issues. Violence became part of the electoral process in 1977 when the victors beat their opponents. Political parties and groups too became hierarchical with no room within them for debate, especially to question the leaders. In a decade, Sri Lankan politics descended into military conflict. The Rajapaksas glorified state violence during the civil war, planting insecurity in the minds of people, and placing the military on a high pedestal.

The *Aragalaya* broke this era of violence in Sri Lankan politics. Non-violence was a defining aspect of the *Aragalaya*. The protesters’ intentions were evident in phrases like *adaraye aragalaya* or the ‘struggle of love’ (see Bandara and Manuratne 2022). There was counter-violence by the ‘public’ against those identified as Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) thugs who were involved in the attacks of 9 May, but the protestors appealed to them to stop. The government did not know how to and failed to respond to this non-violence.

The future and direction of the struggle were of concern to the young. The danger of being oppositional to the state and the need to think of a viable future/change came up early on in the protest. Anti-colonial struggles largely defined national independence as freedom *from* European subjugation but were unclear about freedom *to* what (Spivak 1999). For the most part, independence reintroduced former class and caste discrimination and apartheid within the newly ‘independent’ society. Socialist revolutions were not too different; they got out of the existing system but were confused about what they were getting *into*.

Somewhat addressing these boundaries of thought, the younger generation at the *Aragalaya* paid attention to what they were fighting *for*. Early on, Nirmani Liyanage, who led the establishment of a *Purawesi Sabhawa* (Citizens’ Council) (and others that I do not know), designed future-oriented slogans such as “we want justice,” “we want a people’s constitution,” and “we want people’s councils,” complementing and going beyond those critical of the government (Gunathilaka 2023). In many parts of the country, setting a new trend, people opted not to invite politicians for ceremonies. They invited school children, alumni, and community members as chief guests (*ibid*). There were many bottom-up efforts like these across the country.

New organisations such as the People’s University, People-Centred Constitution, People’s Councils, and the *Purawesi Sabhawa* emerged. The People’s University was an impromptu institution that saw the need for a university companion at the struggle, but one with access to ordinary people and protestors. It was not a school for the dissemination of extant knowledge but a place for knowledge production through interaction, discussion, and debate of significant issues.

The beginning of the *Purawesi Sabhawa* conveys the kind of egalitarian space the protestors were building at GotaGoGama. On a rainy evening, under a tree, a small group discussed the next steps of the *Aragalaya*. The leading figures wondered what message to take to the people. Liyanage (2022b) asked: “Why should we take a

message to people or give them direction? Isn't this their struggle? Shouldn't we ask them for their ideas, wishes, and the kind of governance they want?" That led to the creation of the *Purawesi Sabhawa* (Jayawardena 2022).

The object of the *Purawesi Sabhawa* was to help communities empower themselves, displacing centralised power, moving its base to the people, i.e. communities (Liyanage 2022b). Beginning with the visitors to GotaGoGama, *Purawesi Sabhawa* collected information on how citizens would like to see each sector of the government function. In parallel, it opted to inform people of major government decisions in simple language. It held expert-led discussions on issues such as government regulations, laws, taxes, the economy, technology, and social media, mainly explaining the government's language to people so the people could effectively engage. It also informed the public of the state of the *Aragalaya* via the internet. The next step was to visit communities across the country and support their processes of expressing and empowering themselves.

The *Aragalaya* was more inclusive than most contemporary political organisations and events. Female activists like Melani Gunathilaka, Nirmani Liyanage, Prabha Manuratne, Nilashini Mareen, Achala Seneviratne, and others who led various initiatives speak highly of the women's involvement at the *Aragalaya*. Along with women, various LGBTQ and other groups developed the *Aragalaya*. Although it was unable to speak to the Tamil population, many discussions at the *Aragalaya* were translated into Tamil; the *Purawesi Sabhawa* used sign language as well.

The *Aragalaya* is most like the 1968 world revolution which ought to be understood along with the end of liberal political system (Wallerstein 1992). Giving rise to a liberal political system, the French Revolution gave the idea that society could be improved through social change, following utopian ideas. Unlike the French, Soviet, or Chinese revolutions, the 1968 uprising was hardly oppositional (dualistic); it displaced both the opposite utopias proposed by the USA and the USSR, without providing a substitute of the same kind. The rebels not only moved away from such social structures but also from such thinking.

Similarly, the *Aragalaya* was unprecedented and transitional. It occurred amid a much larger transformation, possibly of the hegemon, the mode of production, and Western dominance: First, the global order established under the US hegemony ended around 1968-72, making the world descend into rivalry. It is unclear whether a new hegemon will provide a new order or whether some other (non)system will emerge.

Second, there are signs that the world is moving beyond capitalism but there is no way to recognise it using old concepts. Even if China or India lead the world, there is no guarantee the system will be the capitalist mode of production developed in Europe. Third, we may also be witnessing the end of European (Euro-US) epistemic domination. Hence, what we witness is how the new emerges as the old dies, old including social structures and how they are understood (intellectual/epistemic).

Pertinent to their time, the younger rebels developed locally grounded initiatives and created space for them at GotaGoGama and within the larger sphere of national and international space it was producing. The initiatives were mostly developed by trial and error, through the production of ephemeral spaces. Ideas such as non-violence and rethinking of means, ends, and the direction of struggle, especially new organisations and conceptualisations, opened new social, political, and intellectual possibilities. These initiatives have provided paths to futures along which the thinking that the *Aragalaya* generated continues below the radar, even after the establishment of a new government.

Spaces of *Aragalaya*

The *Aragalaya* confirms the significance of space for social change (cf. Lefebvre 1991). It began somewhat spontaneously with small group protests, but progressed, creating strategic and tactical spaces such as vigils, protests, and marches. The occupation of the Agitation Site united the dispersed protests into the *Aragalaya*. The government's efforts to reclaim GotaGoGama not only validated the *Aragalaya* but also changed power relations, sliding the government into a defensive position. The space of the *Aragalaya* expanded across the country, limiting the mobility of the rulers, and overseas, defining GotaGoGama as its centre. People occupying the Rajapaksa's official residences and the Presidential Secretariat brought the *Aragalaya* to its peak, marginalising the parliament, and choking the government.

At its revolutionary moment, the *Aragalaya* lacked organisation and/or leadership capable of establishing the sovereignty of people over the regime; the Left or an alternative that was capable of materialising the potential transformation was conspicuously absent. Unlike in previous struggles, the rural protestors who arrived in Colombo overwhelmed the urbanites. No leader who benefits from rural votes was there to lead or direct them. Simultaneously, the rebels surpassed the leaders. In the absence of leadership capable of identifying the revolutionary moment and causing a transformation, the *Aragalaya* reached an impasse;

the rebels turned tourists consumed the spaces they occupied and the political space the rebels created became spaces of consumption.

Yet the moment was well used by the regime. With a new face, and with the support of the JVP, it moved the site of political negotiation back to the parliament, the domain of formal power. It displaced the protests, nullifying the spatial structure the rebels had established and dominated.

Nonetheless, the enormously successful *Aragalaya* created an unprecedented public sphere and space in which the participants from diverse backgrounds felt a sense of place and belonging. It was the most egalitarian public political space/sphere yet in Sri Lanka. A great incubator for new ideas turned the *Aragalaya* from a political moment into a largely non-violent, transitional, and transformative political process. The struggle itself did not last long enough for these social and political organisations to mature, but ideas, once unleashed, are difficult to contain. They continue beyond the current electoral change largely caused by the *Aragalaya*.

Nihal Perera, professor emeritus of urban planning at Ball State University (USA), is a long-term activist for social justice, and leading scholar of Colombo and of how ordinary people produce (social) space for daily activities and cultural practices.

References

Bandara, Buddhika and Prabha Manuratne. (2022). *Sindu Kiyana Aragala: Nirprachanda Aragala saha Bhavithawa* (in Sinhala). Kotugoda: Saharakshi Publishers.

Eagleton, Terry. (1990). "Nationalism: Irony and commitment." In Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said (Eds.). *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (23–42). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Guha, Ranajit. (1983). *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gunathilaka, Melani. (2023). Personal communication, December 2023.

Hettiarachchi, Radhika, and Samal Hemachandra. (2023). "Memoryscapes: The Evolution of Sri Lanka's Aragala Bhoomiya as a People's Space of Protest." *International Public History*, 6 (2): 75-90. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2023-2012>

Jayawardena, Nalinda. (2022). Personal communication, December 2022.

Lefebvre, Henri. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Liyanaage, Nirmani. (2022a). "Does a People's Revolution Require its Own Spaces: Let's Read GGG as a Socially Produced Space" [lecture]. The People's University, GotaGoGama, Colombo (3 May).

Liyanaage, Nirmani. (2022b). Personal communication, October 2022.

Perera, Nihal. (1998). *Society and Space: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Space in Sri Lanka*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Perera, Nihal. (2016). *People's Spaces: Coping, Familiarizing, Creating*. New York: Routledge.

Perera, Nirrosian. (2022). Personal communication, July 2022.

Ross, Kristin. (2008). *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. New York: Verso.

Spivak, Gayatri. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. (1992). "The Collapse of Liberalism". *Socialist Register 1992: New World Order?*, 28: 96-110.

Weerawansa, Wimal. (2023). *Navaya; Sangawunu Kathawa* (in Sinhala). Pitakotte: Nidahase Niyamuwo.

Wickramage, Nalin. (2022). *Apriel Negiteem gena Apriel Satahan* (in Sinhala). Kalubowila: Vidarshana Publishers.