

Epilogue

I wrote the initial drafts of this book over the period November 2018 to April 2020. Every time I had finished a draft chapter, Sri Lanka's appetite for power-sharing seemed to have crumbled further. The scene at the Galadari Hotel and the dim prospects of devolution in the concluding chapter are reflective of this. With Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election to president in late 2019 a new era appeared to start, and I decided to draw a line under my analysis. Academic books cannot continue to keep up with events, and it would be foolhardy to try.

Or so I told myself. Until an economic maelstrom of debt and shortages precipitated a popular uprising that ousted the Rajapaksa government, leaving Sri Lanka's entire political landscape in disarray. With the resulting whirlwind of ideas, hopes, puzzles and disillusionments – as present in many readers' minds as in mine, I presume – an epilogue is warranted to grapple with the afterthoughts to this book. As my manuscript wormed its way through the academic machinery of reviews and revisions, radio stations called me to comment on a country that appeared to have changed beyond recognition. Everything that had seemed unchangeable – the very genetic coding of Sri Lanka's political system and culture – got in flux. Through the *aragalaya* (struggle), as the uprising came to be known, the edifice of the state and its foundation of a sovereign people made a volte-face in the first half of 2022 – only to land roughly where they had always been, though maybe not quite, in the second half of that year. Many of the characteristics of this revolt connect to the central concerns of this book.

In late 2021 and early 2022, Sri Lanka spiralled into a foreign debt trap. The seeds for this had been sown in the immediate aftermath of the civil war, when the Rajapaksa government initiated a lending spree to bankroll a trajectory of postwar development that combined sensible infrastructural upgrades with misguided megalomaniac prestige projects, as well as soaring corruption (Ruwanpura 2016). The impressive growth figures of the immediate postwar years and visions of

becoming a new Malaysia or Singapore muted concerns over the debt burden from multilateral, Chinese and other loans. When growth flattened off in the mid-2010s, these concerns became more acute (Klem 2020). Due to the combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Peiris 2021) and government mismanagement, the economy took a nosedive. When the island's primary sources of foreign currency (tourism, remittances, along with the export of apparel, tea and other commodities) dried up, Sri Lanka became unable to service its debts and pay for essential import (De Mel, de Mel and Kapilan 2021; DeVotta 2022). Endless queues at the fuel station and enduring power cuts became the norm. Vital commodities like medicine became scarce. Soaring inflation pushed large parts of the population into poverty. Unlike war-time destitution, which had disproportionately affected the northeast, this crisis affected everyone, including the urban middle class, which had long considered itself safe from such shocks. University lectures were scrambling for cooking gas canisters, senior bureaucrats struggled to feed their families and established businessmen went bust.

The general state of anger and anxiety was aggravated by haphazard government policies and the continued repression of dissent. Even in 2021, before the economic crisis hit with full vigour, the farmer's movement was on the streets to protest the government's sudden ban on important agrochemicals (prompted by the need to save dollars but legitimised as a strategy to mitigate the kidney disease that plagued rural areas). Supporters of the Catholic Church protested to demand investigations into government maleficence around the 2019 Easter bombings. The teacher's union was on strike over salary arrears. University teachers fulminated against the militarisation of higher education (Gamage 2022; Klem and Samararatne 2022). These diverse nodes of protest gradually converged around their opposition to Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government, and in early 2022 they eventually fused into one focal point of popular uproar: the Galle Face Green. Hitherto disparate voices joined the protest chorus of the *aragalaya* movement: rural and urban, men and women, cis-gender and queer, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist and liberal cosmopolitan, leftist and conservative, the peasant movement and the bar association, office clerks and youth activists. And the Galle Face Green – Colombo's premier parading ground, a waterfront surrounded by government buildings, prestigious hotels and the most visible of flopped megalomaniacs (the interrupted Port City project) – became the stage where the nation demanded Gotabaya Rajapaksa's eviction from the presidential palace across the road. The protest assumed a permanent character when an improvised settlement emerged on the green. What started as rudimentary lodging for the protesters grew into a theme park of political imagination with a people's library, a people's university, an art gallery, arenas for debate and consultations, and venues for press statements. The central slogan of the protesters – 'Gota go' – earned the settlement its name: Gota go

gama (the Gota go village in Sinhala). Hash-tagged slogans, pamphlets, videos, artwork, caricatures and gaffes went viral on social media. Far from a rowdy street protest butting heads with the police, Gota go *gama* became an attraction for the general public, both online and on-site. Families started making outings to show their children the spectacle.

This book grappled with a set of fundamental normative and conceptual problems around sovereignty, including the self-referential character of key sovereign notions, like the legitimacy of the state, the foundation of law and the demarcation of the people or *demos*. All of these were out on display in Gota go *gama*, but in ways that differ from the Tamil nationalist tribulations with sovereignty that I have described in the preceding chapters. With its persistent emphasis on ‘the people’, it was easy to read the *aragalaya* as an invocation of popular sovereignty, a movement by the people, for the people that set out to redress the unwarranted appropriation of Sri Lankan sovereignty by a corrupt political family and the dynastic political cartel more widely. Though the Rajapaksas had been democratically elected several times, their democratic legitimacy was voided – so the protestors argued – when they crippled the rule of law and sacrificed the welfare of the entire nation for their personal spoils. This warranted ‘re-activation of the sovereign people’s extra-legal constituent power’ (Wijayalath 2022) – words that seem to echo the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi’s (ITAK) rejection of the 1972 constitution, or the 1976 Vaddukodai resolution, or the 2003 Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s interim self-government proposal.

Gota go *gama* created a well-televised stage to give performative shape to a notion that often remains vague, if not vacuous: the people. It remained deliberately leaderless (though there were some charismatic spokespersons), and it successfully projected unity in diversity – no small feat considering Sri Lanka’s history of political splintering. Most significant of all, it maintained its peaceful character, even in the face of violent provocation by government thugs and security forces (DeVotta 2022), until 9 July 2022 – the moment of dramatic climax – when the crowd crossed the road, broke through the barricades and poured into the halls of the presidential office. The performative stage of the street absorbed the stage of the palace, leaving spectators – in Colombo, around the island and across the globe – in amazement and shock. President Rajapaksa fled in haste and left the country. When he conceded his resignation, the revolution of the people appeared to have triumphed.

OK, a people’s revolution, a re-assertion of democracy, a performance of popular sovereignty. But what *kind* of ‘people’? What kind of *demos*, defined and demarcated how? The community enacting ‘the people’ on the Galle Face Green notably included Tamil, Muslim and Christian leaders and supporters, as well as many other minorities (Gamage 2022; Imtiyaz 2023), and Sinhala activists made a deliberate effort to highlight minority grievances and amplify

minority voices, but the *aragalaya* emerged from a groundswell disgruntlement from the majority community. It advocated a broad and encompassing agenda of system change and re-democratisation, but its unifying demands concerned economic hardship, outrage over the Rajapaksa political family and objection to the extreme concentration of power in the executive presidency – not ethnic power-sharing, justice for wartime violence, postwar land-grabbing or ethnic minority rights (Samararatne 2022; Uyangoda 2022). When Tamil and Muslim protesters were out on the streets in the years prior to the 2022 uprising, demanding justice for war crimes and disappearances, demilitarisation and self-determination, their demands were routinely cold-shouldered. The *aragalaya* uprising derived the power to occupy Colombo's public space and overrun the president's office from being a movement representing virtually every layer of *Sinhala* society. Everyone could see that these were not the sinister elements that Gotabaya had promised to protect his voters from; these *were* his voters. Had Tamil or Muslim activists initiated a Gota go *kiramam*, they would have been driven away at the very least. Had they tried to storm the presidential office, they would have been shot or incarcerated. In fact, long before this uprising, one of the first major Tamil nationalist protests had started on the exact same Galle Face Green. In 1956, ITAK leaders opposed the 'Sinhala only' language bill with a *satyagraha*, a peaceful sit-in protest in the scorching heat of the green, then the square across from parliament. They were attacked and evicted by thugs with government officers standing by. A wave of anti-Tamil violence followed.

The 2022 *aragalaya* was a genuine and broad-based movement for civic democracy (Uyangoda 2022, 2023), but it stood apart from the protracted opposition by Tamil (and Muslim) rights advocates that long preceded it (Satkunanathan 2022). The protest movement afforded unprecedented space for minority concerns, but to be a part of the struggle, Tamil concerns would need to fit in with this civic democracy agenda. And as such, *aragalaya* as an arena of people's democracy confronted Tamil nationalist leaders with the same conundrums as Sri Lanka's formal democratic institutions. To participate in a democratic arena, one must shed fundamental political convictions that clash with the foundations of that arena. The agenda of re-democratisation afforded no space for a different *demos*, for a Tamil claim to self-determination (Samararatna 2022; Uyangoda 2023). Moreover, it required alignment with a broad range of parties and constituencies, many of which had been instrumental in bringing the Rajapaksa government to power (and in solidifying the violent, anti-minority character of the state in the preceding decades). Where were 'the people' before milk and fuel became so expensive, critical minority voices wondered: when Muslims were attacked in Aluthgama, when Tamils were detained and tortured under draconian anti-terrorism law or (long before the Rajapaksas came to

power) when Tamil houses were burned in Black July, when the 1956 satyagraha on Galle Face Green was violently dispersed?

Notwithstanding these uneasy questions, the *aragalaya* offered an unusually permissive scope to proclaim grievances and aspirations. Rather than performing strained anti-political repertoires, as Tamil nationalists had done after the war (see Chapter 6), Gota go *gama* offered a comprehensively anti-political arena, a permanent stage elevated above small-fry politics, wholly dedicated to the castigation and mockery of the island's political elite. The agenda of re-democratisation (Uyangoda 2023) – aimed at a constitutional reset with a fundamental re-conception of electoral democracy and the institutional design of the state – afforded potentially fruitful space to rearticulate Tamil aspirations in civic terms. Power-sharing, greater transparency, stronger anchoring of fundamental rights and more robust measures against political manipulation would be welcome, even if these measures were taken in the name of good governance rather than the redress of Tamil grievances. Joining the bandwagon would require silence on Tamil nationalist articles of faith, but it would arguably increase the chances of success.

Soon after the apparent triumph of Rajapaksa's resignation, however, it became clear that the fruits of the *aragalaya* revolt were no less bitter for its Sinhalese proponents than they were for minority rights activists. Both the prime minister and the president had been driven away, but parliament – with its majority of Rajapaksa backbenchers – remained intact (DeVotta 2022). Ranil Wickremesinghe, a veteran politician representing the quintessence of the arrogant established elite of dynastic families, rose from the ashes when a parliamentary vote mandated him as the new president. After he assumed office, President Wickremesinghe cracked down on the protestors, clearing the Galle Face Green (Keenan 2022). Austerity reforms – the seal of Wickremesinghe's politics throughout his long career – were initiated to court the International Monetary Fund. A first instalment of emergency credit was finally agreed in early 2023 (after China conceded to restructure some of its loans, a condition from multilateral donors). Long before that, the Rajapaksas returned to Sri Lanka and patched up with Wickremesinghe. The majority of ministers in the post-*aragalaya* cabinet belong to the Rajapaksa party (SLPP).

After the dramatic staging of Sri Lanka's 'Bastille Day' (Wijayalath 2022), the curtain was drawn. The political stage has been reset, and it looks remarkably like what it used to. But there is no doubt that the events of 2022 have enriched Sri Lanka's political imaginary. The *aragalaya* showed that a powerful but peaceful campaign for civic democracy is possible. It demonstrated that no government, even the despotic apparatus of the Rajapaksas, is impervious to opposition. It left a trail of images, ideas, hashtags, jokes – a new idiom of popular democracy – that remains inscribed

in Sri Lanka's collective political consciousness. And it harnessed the realisation that many across Sri Lanka's fractured society share a commitment to democratic values and constitutional rights, even if they disagree on the sovereign constellation that underpins them.