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### Introduction

In the opening months of 2022, Sri Lanka found itself plunged into a profound economic and political crisis. Spiraling inflation and drastic shortage of foreign currency made everyday life almost unendurable for all sections of Sri Lankan society. Three-wheeler drivers waited in line for hours for ever scarcer supplies of fuel. Households suffered long daily power cuts. The poor struggled to feed their families. As the economic situation worsened, people responded with a wave of ever more imaginative and confident protests, directed at the government but especially at the president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and his family, which has dominated the last two decades of Sri Lankan politics.

The crisis can be traced to particular economic choices made by the country's leaders as well as the unequal determinants of global trade and financialization. The immediate causes of the crisis lie in the accumulation of unsustainable levels of sovereign debt — a problem soon to be felt more widely across the global South. However, the personalistic focus of the protests fell on the Rajapaksa ruling family for good reason. Mahinda Rajapaksa served as president from 2005 to 2015. He combined strategic appeals to majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, with high-visibility vanity projects. He also inserted family members into positions of authority, accompanied by accusations of graft and corruption.

His brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, defense secretary when the decades-long ethnic war was “won,” was elected president in late 2019. This followed four years of internal squabbles among the opposition coalition that had replaced the Rajapaksas in 2015. Gotabaya presented himself as a non-politician, a good administrator with a technocratic team who would “get things done” — in contrast to the self-serving and incompetent politicians he would replace. In practice, the opposite happened. The new president combined political incompetence with spectacular errors of judgment, like the sudden banning of imported fertilizer in 2021, which crippled much of the country's agricultural

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**CONTACT** Jonathan Spencer  [jonathan.spencer@ed.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.spencer@ed.ac.uk)

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sector. The regime's inability to manage the balance of payments crisis, which many had predicted, was the final indication of Rajapaksa perfidy and incompetence.

In early 2022, public displays of opposition took the form of small neighborhood protests in the suburbs. After an attack by the state security on a protest near the president's private residence in April, however, the main site of protest shifted to Colombo's pre-eminent public space — Galle Face Green on the seafront next to a number of luxury hotels and close to the offices of the president and the prime minister. Protestors brought tents to build a semi-permanent presence, and in the evenings the new settlement became the scene for chants and performances of all sorts, from street theater to traditional exorcism rites. The protests attracted thousands from across Sri Lanka's many divisions of caste, class and religion.

The overriding slogan of the protestors has been "Gota Go Home," and the site of what they refer to as the "struggle" (*aragalaya*) is known as Gotagogama (GGG or "Gota-go-village" in English). Car horns tooting the distinctive chant of *kaputu kaak kaak kaak* (explained by Kaushalya Kumarasinghe below) reverberated across the country in acts of solidarity. On May 9, just before we assembled the contributions to this piece, a group of Rajapaksa supporters attending a rally at the prime minister's office attacked the protest site, before being chased away by protestors. In the immediate aftermath, Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned as prime minister and the houses of several government politicians were burned down in arson attacks. Ranil Wickremesinghe was made prime minister. After the events of May 9 there was a lull in protest activity. The economic situation continued to deteriorate. The new prime minister's legitimacy was in question and the president remained in power, until there was a further eruption on July 9, which we describe at the end of this piece.

The events of 2022, like all good revolutionary moments, combine the shock of the new and the unprecedented with a strong sense of iteration, of the past reappearing in quotation marks in the present. Again and again at GGG, we hear faint echoes of the 1970s and 1980s, when the country was convulsed by youth insurrections and then divided by contending ethnonationalisms and a long civil war. Sinhala youth rose up against the government under the banner of the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), and Tamil youth joined a constellation of militant groups before their struggle was taken over by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the group that fought the government of India and the government of Sri Lanka before falling to defeat in 2009.

What follows is a set of brief reflections by younger Sri Lankan anthropologists, all of whom have been centrally involved in the "struggle." Kaushalya Kumarasinghe sets the scene with an account of the role of social media, and especially humor, in turning an authoritarian, and once-feared, figure into an object of near-universal ridicule. Krishantha Fedricks follows with an analysis of the government's attempt to shield itself from the sound of the protests

through the deployment of Buddhist protective chanting (*pirit*). Both Fedricks and Kumarasinghe evoke the sensory properties of the protests, especially new sonic forms used by the protestors. Chulani Kodikara, in contrast, situates these protests in the longer history of protest in Sri Lanka, especially the protests by women relatives of those who “disappeared” in the final stages of the country’s civil war. The presence of these “ghosts” calls into question the attempts to imagine a new, inclusive form of citizenship at Gotagogama. Finally, Anushka Kahandagamage directs our attention to the counter-political ethos of the protests, evinced in a determination to be all things the Rajapaksas are not. Kahandagamage traces this form of political expression to earlier feminist initiatives in the long decades of war.

What follows is not intended as a final word — the situation remains dynamic, as the economy continues to collapse — and we have steered away from extensive academic commentary, choosing instead to emphasize the rawness of our own experience. And we present these early reflections in the same spirit of implausible hope that we have found in the protests themselves.

## Humor

### *Kaushalya Kumarasinghe*

As I browsed through my Facebook page toward the end of March 2022, something disturbed my sense of familiarity with the Sri Lankan cyber *everyday*. My “friend list,” comprising about 4500 Sri Lankans, revealed something new regarding the crisis that had been unfolding over the previous three months while I was back in Delhi to write up my Ph.D. dissertation. It took me awhile to notice the sudden drop in the political humor one otherwise frequently spotted in the newsfeed in the form of memes.

After the 2015 electoral defeat of the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime, political humor in social media increased dramatically. It was as if humor became the most appropriate mode of political engagement. Even though some have criticized making serious matters humorous, the memes served as rhetorical devices and helped to hold the ground for democratic deliberation. This was especially true after Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s win in 2019, which regenerated fears of severe erosions of personal and public liberties.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a decrease in political humor on social media could indicate a shift in the collective ways of engaging with the political. This is my point of departure: how humor, though it waned for a short period, once again became a vital force that formed new modes of political resistance in the Gotagohome struggle.

At that moment in March, it became evident that anger and distress, in varying intensities, were slowly replacing humor on social media. Some posts simply cursed the political authority. Also, in particular cases, anger entangled with distress seemed to have driven people to explore the realm of political

action. Individuals started to post that they would stand at a specific place in the city, holding placards or candles to protest against power cuts, fuel queues, gas queues — and against the government in general — for making their quotidian lives miserable.

This change in political subjectivity, manifested in the digital, wasn't an illusion. It reflected the social. Hundreds turned up for those self-declared protests, originally announced on social media, and these numbers increased exponentially to thousands in no time. Protests, initially silent, later acquired slogans and soon developed into wild yelling. Protests near the president's house on March 31 went through all of these stages within a few hours, and crowds attempted to break down barricades.

Live videos, photos and protest statements mushroomed throughout the island's urban centers, converting social media into a dynamic space of resistance where people's solidarity against the ruling regime blanketed other emotions. However, political humor ceased to occupy its usual place in social media. Meanwhile, a post called for one million people to come to Galle Face Green in Colombo on April 9. This paved the way to occupy that space, including the main gate of the presidential secretariat. Protesters gradually set up makeshift facilities such as a community kitchen, toilets and washrooms, a medical center and a media center. They also constructed a citizens' assembly, library, cinema, open-air theater, art studio, open mic spaces, public university and children's activity center.

It is essential to grasp the structure of feeling of the April 9 demonstrations to see how humor returned as a collective way of engaging with the political. The tens of thousands of people who gathered were not the usual participants in political rallies or protests. The protesters included people from a wide range of class, ethnic, religious, gender, age and lifestyle categories. Even more striking, they did not represent political institutions such as parties, trade unions or organizations. Individuals expressed their idiosyncrasies with placards written in nonstandard protest language and various handwritings.

The heteroglossia was unmistakable here, and it stood in stark contrast to the monotony of placards in past protests organized by political organizations. There were groups of people with painted faces and bodies singing "Go Gota Home" with drums, guitars and saxophones. The soundscape of the protest did not echo that of past demonstrations. A center or leadership to dictate the crowd was noticeably absent. Even so, waste was appropriately collected in bins, and water was distributed when needed. In the evening, hundreds of Muslims ended fasting collectively with prayers, and Christian priests marched next to them. The national flag, visible everywhere, seemed to lose its Sinhala Buddhist nationalist connotations. Because this multitude celebrated heterogeneity, people weren't hesitant to find new ways of expression and modes of resistance.



**Image 1.** Muslims end fasting and praying at Galle Face. Photo by Amila Udagedara.



**Image 2.** April 9 demonstrations. Photo by Don Maya.

Humor gradually seeped back into the language of resistance. Collective laughter became a spontaneous gesture of groups who followed slogans. And, of course, this laughter was subversive because it framed the Rajapaksas, and the political elite, as the ridiculous other. Simultaneously, sound patterns of slogans turned into simple melodic, rhythmic forms, which enhanced the sense of humor. And these melodic rhythmic slogans created an impulsive force that moved the protesters' bodies in a dance-like manner. Hence, the humor became the underlying force that made laughing, singing and dancing the central practice of political resistance in this particular context, as never before.

A television interview in which the former finance minister Basil Rajapaksa's fluency in English was challenged led to a simple slogan constituted by mimicking the sound of a crow and repeating his name. The chant "*Kaputu kaak kaak kaak* - Basil Basil Basil Basil" was used to ridicule Basil Rajapaksa for using *kaputa*, the Sinhala word, instead of "crow" in that English-language interview. That sound pattern was imitated through honking as passing vehicles blew horns in the traffic, mainly as an exchange between random cars. When it occurred near demonstrations, the protesters shouted back the rejoinder. A video was shared on social media that captured a train honking the first part when approaching the station, and hundreds of people on the platform threw back the latter.

Political humor not only became one of the prime components of the practices of resistance but also turned out to be a vital force that even formed temporal solidarities beyond spatial limitations or hierarchical differences. When the language and the practices of resistance had been controlled by political organizations or a centralized leadership, humor had played only a limited role in the history of protest in Sri Lanka. In other words, it had never been taken as a serious political category by political actors. However, in social media, humor remained the ordinary citizen's way of engaging with the political, at least since 2015. Therefore, humor has become a collective way of resistance in the heterogenous "carnavalesque space" of the struggle where ordinary citizen perspectives were incorporated and empowered.<sup>2</sup>

## **Weaponizing Pirit**

### **Krishantha Fedricks**

I joined the protest against the Rajapaksa regime at Maina Go Gama (known as No Deal Gama as of early August 2022) near Temple Trees, the residence of Sri Lanka's prime minister, on April 25, 2022. Amal, one of my closest friends, was protesting silently with a hunger strike at the gate, asking Mahinda Rajapaksa to step down. On the other side of Galle Road, a group of young people were protesting in a temporary hut facing the prime minister's residence. They were holding placards of different kinds and voicing



slogans of resistance with the support of handheld mics, megaphones, and stereo sound setups. However, their voices were disrupted by the loudspeakers of Temple Trees that broadcast recorded tapes of pirit (paritta in Pāli), Buddhist protective chants.

The loudspeakers were too loud to allow the voices of protesters to carry through to the ears of the authorities in Temple Trees, which was guarded by a thick white wall, greenish military bunkers and saffron-colored barricades. There were also police trucks parked blocking the sidewalk. Recordings of



**Image 3.** Protestors' Voice against Pirit at MainaGoGama. Photograph by Krishantha Fedricks.



**Image 4.** Celebrating Vesak at Gotagogama. Photograph by Krishantha Fedricks.

Buddhist monks in saffron robes chanting *pirit* added a metaphoric layer to the yellow barriers, changing secular protection to “saffron.” With the performance of opposing streams of sound from the protesters and the *pirit*, there arose a sonic atmosphere in which secular political voices of resistance and religious sounds of protection struggled for power. In this brief contribution, I focus on how *pirit* has been weaponized as a tool of dominance against the protestors by a regime with ideological foundations in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

*Pirit* are a set of Buddhist discourses or suttas selected from *Sutta Pitaka* (or the Collection of Discourses), one of the three canonical texts of the Buddhist sacred scriptures or *Tripitaka*. These suttas are melodically chanted in Pāli, mainly by monks, to assure protection from nonhuman and supernatural harm.<sup>3</sup> *Pirit*-performing rituals and broadcasts are a common practice in Sri Lanka, especially during natural disasters, war, or famine. Buddhist followers believe that disasters, including political violence of many kinds, are caused by evil nonhuman powers that can be contained by the sounds of *pirit*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Buddhist monks chant the Pāli prose melodically, stressing the accurate pronunciation of sounds such as aspirated phonemes. Buddhists believe that accurate pronunciation of the sounds and words of the suttas adds magical powers to chants, and they treat sounds of the *pirit* as having efficacious power to contain the evil spirits and bring about blessings.<sup>5</sup>

The Rajapaksa regime came to power with massive electoral support, especially from Sinhalese Buddhists. When the island-wide protests erupted, they seemed to challenge the religio-political aura the Rajapaksas had so carefully constructed over the years. While the president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, reacted to the “protesting villagers” of Gotagogama by mostly using legal powers, Mahinda Rajapaksa, his elder brother, tried to use other means to mitigate the power of the citizens at Maina Go Gama. The elder Rajapaksa is a devout follower of all forms of noncanonical supernaturalism, in addition to publicly performing the figure of *baudda upasaka* (pious male Buddhist). He is a loyal patron of the new-rich-Buddhist monastic groups as well as all sects of the traditional Sangha.

By playing recordings of *pirit* during the protest, he symbolically transformed the familiar Buddhist ritual voice of *pirit* into a political voice intended to contain the “evil powers” of the protestors who were yelling at him outside his residence. The blurring of the religious and the political has always been foundational to the Rajapaksa brand as the protectors of the mother land and Buddhist religion. This is the context within which *pirit* works to dehumanize the protestors. In doing so, he tried to transform the human voices of the political actors into the evil powers of nonhuman beings by using *pirit* to expel their power. Significantly, the misuse of the sacred sounds of *pirit* to disrupt and suppress the legitimate demands of the protestors was not criticized by

any of the leading Buddhist monks in the country. However, it was swiftly criticized on social media by some sections of the laity who were either against the regime or against their use of sacred rituals for political gain.

Mahinda Rajapaksa visited the sacred city of Anuradhapura on May 8, one day before the infamous political meeting at his residence in Colombo, and paid homage to the sacred Bo tree that symbolizes the introduction of Buddhist sacred objects from India to Sri Lanka. On the following day, he invited his political allies and party supporters to his residence for a meeting. Charged by the meeting, these mobs unleashed brutal violence and an inhumane attack on the unarmed, supposedly “nonhuman” protestors. *Pirit* chants were still playing in the background while the attack took place. I argue that this dehumanization of the protestors helped unleash the violence against them. After all, despite the presence of the police and military, the protestors did not receive any initial protection from the attack.

The sounds of the political violence superseded the sacred sounds of *pirit*, but in the immediate aftermath Mahinda Rajapaksa stepped down as prime minister. With his resignation, as expected, the loudspeakers of the *pirit* went silent. Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed as the Premier. Subsequently, the name of the protest village changed from Maina Go Gama to No Deal Gama and the sounds of resistance of the protestors were heard more clearly than before.

## Ghosts

### *Chulani Kodikara*

Social and political movements in search of powerful forms of assembling and protesting have long relied on the encampment and/or the tent as a method of protest. Consider the Aboriginal tent embassy set up in 1972 in the lawns of the Australian parliament, the women’s protest against nuclear weapons in Greenham Common in the early 1980s, the tents of the Occupy Movement in the wake of the global financial crisis and the tent protest at Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi, led by women in response to the Citizenship Amendment Act passed in India in 2019.

Irrespective of the kind of protest and the demands that these protesters make, what they have in common is the physical occupation of prominent and symbolic public spaces to make their demands audible and visible over a long period of time. Encampments also have facilitated mutual support, solidarity and ethics of care. By simply being physically present, such protesters have made demands with their bodies as much as with their words, songs, theater, dance and art. In doing so, they have remade and reclaimed public spaces in radical new ways, often enacting what they demand through practicing participatory models of democracy or anarchic forms of self-governance.



**Image 5.** Gotagagama, Galle Face. Photograph by Chulani Kodikara.

The Gotagagama protest sites that have mushroomed across Sri Lanka are encampments in this sense. Gotagagama at Galle Face, located right next to the presidential secretariat, the seat of executive power, began with a few small tents. By the summer 2022, it had expanded into a tent village (*gama*) with its own library, legal aid center, medical center, water and food tents, a cinema (Teargas Cinema), a college, a people's university, a media center, a mental health center, a women's and children's center, a plastic collection center and a solar power unit. Though protesters started camping on the site on April 9, the following months saw hundreds and then thousands of other protesters visiting the site on a daily basis. This swelled the numbers and enlivened the protests, especially in the evenings.

As Kaushalya Kumarasinghe points out, between April 9 and May 9, the predominant atmosphere was carnivalesque. Yet it was impossible to ignore the ghosts of many struggles from the past. Consider, for example, the ghost from the satyagraha led by the Federal Party in 1956 against the Sinhala Only law held at this very site or the more recent struggles waged across the country, from farmers to teachers to women victims of microfinance institutions.<sup>6</sup>

But perhaps none were more prominent than the ghosts of the struggle that continue across the north and east of Sri Lanka even as I write this. I am referring to the struggle for truth and justice waged by Tamil women family members of those who disappeared during the war. They have been waging

this struggle, first individually and then collectively, for more than 13 years. It is the longest struggle for justice the country has seen. After more than 5 years of struggle, between February and March 2017, groups of these women located in Vavuniya, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Marathankerny and Trincomalee set up small makeshift tents, vowing not to move until the government told them what had happened to their family members, particularly those who had surrendered and disappeared during the last days of the war.

For a brief moment in time, the tent protesters of the north and east garnered some political attention from the highest level of the United Front government that had come into power in 2015 promising to implement a transitional justice process. Ultimately the government failed to deliver either truth or justice. In July 2018, after more than 500 days of continuous protest, the women discontinued the protests one by one (excepting the tent protest in Vavuniya), because of the physical, mental and financial toll it was taking on them. They vowed to continue their struggle through other means. They are still protesting and now count more than 2,000 days since their tent protests began.

I contend that these earlier tent protests in the north and east not only preceded but prefigured the Gotagogama protests. They now haunt the latter as an “absent presence,” there but not there. I invoke the ghost here not merely as a representation of the disappeared but as a rhetorical figure. In this sense,



**Image 6.** The tent in Maruthankerny set by family members of the disappeared taken on the day marking 343 days of protest. “Continuous struggle of the family members of the disappeared in search of loved ones.” Photograph by Chulani Kodikara.

ghosts envision the violence of the war and the structures of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist power that prohibit mourning and grieving of those who were killed and disappeared during the war. Ghosts thus challenge the denial of truth and justice that the next of kin have experienced in postwar Sri Lanka. To attend to the ghosts is to attend to what is “usually invisible, neglected or thought by most to be dead and gone ... it is to comprehend the living effects, seething and lingering, of what seems over and done with, the endings that are not over.”<sup>7</sup>

Since the protests at Gotagogama commenced, a number of human rights activists, journalists, academics and artists have been materializing some of the ghosts that haunt postwar Sri Lanka, including the disappeared, through chants, rallies, posters, images, films and even theater. A good example was the work of two activists from Families of the Disappeared, an organization pursuing truth and justice on behalf of victim survivors of disappearances. They set up their own tent at Gotagogama in a sustained effort to address the erasure of disappearances in the south of Sri Lanka. They have argued that if the Gotagogama protesters are serious about their demand for a “system change,” it is necessary to attend to these ghosts in a spirit of honesty and hospitality and also of “love” (*ādaraya*) and “unity” (*samagiya*).

These are precisely qualities that the Gotagogama protesters claim characterize and underpin their struggle (*aragalaya*) and that distinguish it from other struggles and insurrections from Sri Lanka’s past. But if those involved with the Gotagogama movement do not connect their efforts with those of other movements, the protests



**Image 7.** Disappearance tent at Gotagogama, Galle Face. Photograph by Chulani Kodikara.

of 2022 will remain meaningless to the women who have waged one of the longest struggles in Sri Lanka's history. And the same goes for the broader Tamil community, which demands accountability for war-related atrocities. The ghost represents loss but also paths that we could have taken but did not — paths that we can still take. Whether we will remains to be seen.

## The Language of Protest

### *Anushka Kahandagamage*

Commemorating the Easter bombing on April 21, actor Jehan Appuhami walked the 38 km from Negombo to Colombo barefoot, and bare-chested, while carrying a cross on his shoulder.<sup>8</sup> The people followed him with much sympathy, and some splashed water on the road to comfort his feet. Thousands of people were moved by the act, and the state had no idea how to respond. This is but one example of the divergent features of expression by the state compared to society.

In Sri Lanka, the state's language of response has long been based primarily on violence and other oppressive mechanisms. This is true regarding their reaction to the movement of the spring and summer of 2022. Conversely, the Gotagogama protestors' primary language is one of nonviolence. I am not arguing that the protest is entirely nonviolent or that it is homogeneous. However, nonviolence is one of the driving forces of the protest, which the state fails to comprehend and respond to. In this short piece, I analyze how



**Image 8.** Jehan Appuhami carrying the cross in remembering the Easter bombing victims. Photo by Amila Udagedara.

protestors have dismantled the totalitarian state ideology and its responses by introducing new nonviolent protest frames, primarily derived from the history of feminist protest.

One of the most important political consequences of the 1980s and 1990s in Sri Lanka was the collective mobilization of maternalism as a counter-violence movement, in the context of both the civil war in the north and east and of the JVP revolt in the south.<sup>9</sup> The Mothers' Front was established in Jaffna in 1984 to voice opposition to the Sri Lankan government's widespread detention of Tamil youth. These mothers "mobilised mass rallies, and picketed public officials demanding the removal of military occupation."<sup>10</sup> This movement was led by and comprised Tamil women from all socioeconomic classes. A Mothers' Front of Sinhala women was founded in the south in July 1990 to protest the abduction of their male kin during the JVP insurrection from 1987 to 1990. During the two years when the movement was particularly active, their large demonstrations and *deva kannalawwas* (God-beseeking) had a huge impact on Sinhala society.<sup>11</sup>

In 2022, the protestors have largely incorporated feminist forms of nonviolent protesting, introducing *reframing* instead of *reacting*. Instead of using violence and destruction as a resistance mechanism in responding to the state's acts, the movement used a different framing of resistance: nonviolence. This has meant countering state violence with love and compassion. It has also included attempts to complicate how people think by introducing multiple narratives, as opposed to a uniform and divisive narrative that opposes an "us" and a "them," as has previously been the practice by the state.

For example, on May 18, for the first time in public in the south, Gotagogama commemorated the war's end and mourned the primarily Tamil victims of



**Image 9.** Different ethnic and religious group participating in commemorating the victims of war. Photo by Amila Udagedara.



Mullivaikal, the site of the government's sustained and final bombardment in 2009. People representing different ethnic and religious communities participated in the event. It is clear that the struggle of 2022 has introduced a space where multiple ethnic and religious groups co-exist and interact, commemorate and mourn together. A year earlier, this commemoration would have been impossible in Colombo.

From time to time, different groups, including fishers, farmers, professionals and indigenous communities, have joined the protest. And so have the hearing- and visually impaired. Artists were also actively involved: dancing, performances, paintings and installations were prominent at the site. The participation of these different groups expanded the scope of inclusion and, as a result, the democratic space. The protest movement at Gotagogama has introduced a new language to the history of protest in Sri Lanka. Countering the state language of militarized patriarchal structures, the protestors introduced the language of nonviolence, which is largely derived from Sri Lankan women's struggles.

This new language refuses to communicate in the state-proposed, militarized, patriarchal tone. The state's militarized, patriarchal interventions align with oppression, violence and disciplining the body. The new language of nonviolence aligns with love and freedom. This language proposes reframing instead of reacting and conversation instead of debate.

Again, this is not to say that the 2022 protests have been entirely nonviolent. The state-incited violence of May 9 and that of July 9, when the prime minister's private home was set on fire, transformed certain moments of the protest into a form that the state could better understand and respond to. The state has used all of its powers to capitalize on just those moments and to use it to suppress protestors. On the one hand, this response from the state was not surprising. On the other hand, it emphasizes the importance of the movement's broader nonviolent approach.

The feminist nonviolent approach to the struggle problematizes the state's idea of the "political." Deconstructing Judith Butler's idea of *gender trouble*, Chambers and Carver argue how "troubling" transforms our given understanding of the "political." If elaborated further, "troubling politics" would disturb, challenge and question consistently.<sup>12</sup> In identifying the issues of 1980s' and 1990s' women's struggles in Sri Lanka, in which hundreds of mothers participated, the late Malathi de Alwis proposed alternative ways of problematizing the state's take on the "political" through grief, injury and suffering.<sup>12</sup> I argue that the nonviolent trends in the struggle question and confuse the state's normal political parameters.

The struggle has come to a point where protestors commemorate the end of the war and its Tamil victims, by floating jasmine flowers on the ocean at Gotagogama; Jehan Appuhami carries the cross and walks for miles; protestors light candles remembering the victims of the Easter attack; a Muslim girl shades

a monk from the rain; a mother protests with her child in one hand and a candle in the other; and a young man protests alone in the rain while police were poised to strike the protesting university students; Catholic nuns also guarded the students. These are some of my most vivid recollections of the struggle. Because the language of protest differs so radically from the language of the state, the state has been incapable, so far, of suppressing the protest. It can only control it by resorting to the language that it understands — that of violence.

## The Struggle Continues

In early July 2022, a few months after the unleashing of regime-sanctioned violence on Gotagogama, the protests had become subdued at the site. The *kaputu kaak kaak kaak* chant was no longer heard. But the tents remained, and the site continued to be an important gathering place, with ongoing teach-ins and negotiations regarding the meaning of the space, even though the thronging crowds of April and early May were absent. After the violence on May 9, a new prime minister — Ranil Wickremesinghe — was appointed.

Wickremesinghe is the UNP (United National Party) politician well known for being at the helm at pivotal political moments in the country's recent past and for failing spectacularly to realize their promise, not least after the Rajapaksa's defeat in 2015. He was again in charge of Sri Lanka's future. On July 9 another mass demonstration was called for in Colombo, and crowds gathered from all over the island in unprecedented numbers despite the growing difficulties of obtaining transport. Protestors took control of the presidential palace and the presidential secretariat. Wickremesinghe's private residence was torched. A few days later, Gotabaya Rajapaksa left the country and then at last resigned as president. Wickremesinghe became president and seemingly decided it was time to put an end to the protests. The Gotagogama encampment was attacked by state security, and leading figures from the protests have been targeted by the police.

As we write, Wickremesinghe — known best for his failures — is again in charge and is engaged in a final attempt to build a legacy. As pointed out by Chulani Kodikara, the ghosts of the past continue to be with us as Wickremesinghe unleashes a repressive push to halt the protests in a manner eerily similar to wartime. An emergency has been declared and repressive measures gazetted. A media campaign has been unleashed to discredit the known faces at GGG; the violent events of May 9 and the burning of Wickremesinghe's house on July 9 are being highlighted. As Anushka Kahandagamage has suggested, the government is resignifying the protest in terms that it can best respond to. The government's crackdown on protestors is being legitimized as the restoration of law and order. The mood in Sri Lanka as we complete this piece is dismal.

The number of people out on the street in April and then again on July 9 was unprecedented. It is unlikely that the countrywide political awakening that the people's presence indicated can be subdued by the actions of the current leadership. The actions of the leadership indicate only that they continue to be out of touch with the people's awakening and it is unlikely that the repression that has been unleashed can be sustained. Already there are indications of further protests being organized and of the spirit of the *aragalaya* (struggle) continuing. There have been no improvements in the economic hardship that people are facing, and the situation remains dire. Though the promise of the *aragalaya* is somewhat subdued, hope remains.

## Notes

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2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
3. Anne Blackburn, "Magic in the Monastery," *History of Religions* 38, no. 4 (1999): 354–372.
4. Jeffrey Samuels, "Texts Memorized, Texts Performed: A Reconsideration of the Role of Paritta in Sri Lankan Monastic Education," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2005): 339–367.
5. Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Piyadassi Thera, *The Book of Protection* (Sri Lanka: Mrs. H.M. Gunasekara Trust); Anne Sheeran, "Review of *Buddhist Chant I: Mah Pirit: The Great Chant* (compact disc, 1990, recording and notes by Wolfgang Laade, Jecklin Disco JD 651-2)," *Asian Music* 25, nos. 1–2 (1993–1994): 298–301.
6. In what was to become a gloomy milestone on the long road to civil war, Tamil protestors attempting a nonviolent vigil (*satyagraha*) at Galle Face in 1956 were attacked and beaten up by a Sinhala mob.
7. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2008).
8. In April 2019, a group of Islamists claiming allegiance to ISIS set off bombs in churches and tourist hotels across Sri Lanka, killing over 200 people. The government's failure to prevent the bombings, despite strong intelligence warnings, contributed to Gotabaya Rajapaksa's successful presidential campaign later that year, in which he was able to promise strength and security.
9. Malathi de Alwis, "Interrogating the 'Political': Feminist Peace Activism in Sri Lanka," *Feminist Review* 91, (2009): 81–93.
10. Hoole, et al, in De Alwis (2009: 83).
11. Malathi de Alwis, *Maternalist Politics in Sri Lanka: A Historical Anthropology of Its Conditions of Possibility* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Chicago, 1998).
12. S. Chambers and Terrell Carver, *Judith Butler and Political Theory: Troubling Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).
13. de Alwis, "Interrogating the 'Political.'"

## Notes on Contributors

**Krishantha Fedricks** is a Ph.D. candidate in linguistic anthropology in the Department of Anthropology, University of Texas at Austin. He is also a senior lecturer attached to the Department of Sinhala, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

**Farzana Haniffa** is professor and head of the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo. Haniffa has published on ethno-religious violence, women in Islamic reform movements and Muslims as a minority ethno-religious community in Sri Lanka.

**Anushka Kahandagamage** is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Sciences, University of Otago. Anushka's research interests lie in Buddhism, gender, colonialism, and visual anthropology.

**Chulani Kodikara** is currently a visiting lecturer in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo. She will take up a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Edinburgh in October 2022.

**Kaushalya Kumarasinghe** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi. He is a Sinhala novelist and a social activist.

**Jonathan Spencer** teaches anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. He has been researching Sri Lankan politics and society since the early 1980s.

## ORCID

Jonathan Spencer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6737-6489>