

**Forum:** Political Committee (PC)

**Issue:** The situation in Sri Lanka

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**Position:** Chair

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## Introduction

Politics is intrinsically linked to the stability of a country. When those in power make ill-fated moves, the public is forced to pay. This much has been made apparent by the 2022 Sri Lankan political crisis.

When Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power in 2019, he and his cabinet members — most of whom were relatives of the Rajapaksa family — implemented policies that were considered ill-fated by critics. This included a ban on inorganic fertilizers, which led to food shortages, as well as numerous ventures in infrastructure development, whose return did not justify the investment. As humanitarian and economic hardships began to arise, so did anti-government sentiments. Members of the Sri Lankan Parliament called for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's removal and resigned en masse. High rates of turnover within the Parliament led to political instability, with sustainable solutions yet to be developed.

When tackling this issue, delegates should view it from multiple dimensions. Long-term political stability, naturally, ought to be promoted, for the country to systemically eradicate its troubles; this may include means to reduce nepotism in the Sri Lankan cabinet. Alleviating economic stress must be considered as well, looking at both the debts that the nation incurred and the continual economic mismanagement of the government. This will, in turn, impact how humanitarian needs are met. Delegates in the Political Committee can expect to debate the dangers of Sri Lanka's sovereign debt and political turmoil in this era of geopolitical competition.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Nepotism

The practice of granting favoritism, in terms of getting good jobs or gaining other benefits, to relatives and friends through using one's power of influence. Nepotism typically plays a role in business and politics. The Rajapaksa family was accused of nepotism after President Gotabaya's brothers and nephews secured ministerial positions after his electoral win in 2019. Protestors believed that being led by the Rajapaksa family would only result in the perpetuation of the economic conflict that the nation had been mired in.

### Interim government

An emergency governmental authority is created during extraordinary circumstances, including a nation's creation, collapse, or conflict. It handles governmental affairs until a new government is officially appointed. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa proposed the establishment of an all-party interim government after all 26 cabinet members resigned on April 3. This government would have, in theory, served as a temporary solution until the next parliamentary election in 2025.

### Cabinet reshuffle

A cabinet reshuffle occurs when the head of government moves government ministers between posts. Reshuffles are typically held to uphold performance management, signal policy shifts, and refresh. However, they can also take place due to events beyond the president's control, which is precisely the case for Sri Lanka's situation. The resignations of the ministers en masse spurred President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to conduct a cabinet reshuffle to maintain a sense of stability.

### Bailout

The extension of financial support to a country on the brink of bankruptcy, to save it from collapse. Bailouts typically take the form of loans and bonds and involve governmental oversight. From mid-2022 to September 2022, Sri Lanka sought to restart bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as it needed an emergency loan. The nation had been attempting to recover from both its decades-old struggle with debt repayment, as well as the complications brought about by President Gotabaya's new policies, to no avail. On September 1, 2022, Sri Lanka reached an initial deal with the IMF for a \$2.9 billion bailout.

## Background Information

Although the struggles of Sri Lanka have long predated the current situation, the blame for the nation's economic and political collapse has been pinned on the Rajapaksa family. Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the 2019 presidential election and gained much public support after he led the government in handling the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of his campaign, Rajapaksa promised public tax cuts and sought to make Sri Lanka the world's first 100% organic-farming state. In theory, such proposals would have reaped many benefits for the state; in practice, however, the rapid changes brought about by the newly appointed President Rajapaksa led to confusion and dissent.

With the resignation of all 26 cabinet members — except for the president and prime minister — on April 3, 2022, came severe political instability. Even after reshuffling and forming an interim government, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa retained their positions, amid protests for Gotabaya to resign immediately. The ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party lost the support of its allies, which set off a power struggle between the president and the parliament.

Following Prime Minister Mahinda's resignation on May 9, 2022. Gotabaya Rajapaksa left the country on July 13, 2022, and stepped down from his position, as he stated that he was "unable to exercise, perform, and discharge the powers, duties, and functions of the Office of the President". Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed as acting president shortly after. While Gotabaya sought asylum in the Maldives and Singapore, Sri Lanka was left in a state of political turmoil.

### Subtopic 1 - Addressing the economic roots of the conflict

The year 2021 marked Sri Lanka's descent into its current crisis. The ill-fated economic ventures, dwindling foreign reserves, inflation on necessities, and the restrictions brought about by COVID-19 collectively prompted the government to declare an economic emergency. Citizens took to the streets to protest, expressing their deep disapproval of the government's actions.

When Gotabaya came into power in late 2019, Sri Lanka's foreign reserves stood at \$7.6 billion. By the time December 2021 came around, however, this number plummeted to a low \$1.9 billion. The Sri Lankan economy was built on already shaky foundations, with decades of economic mismanagement and growing debt leading up to the 2022 crisis. Since the 1990s, the country granted tax exemptions to "wealthier people, multinational corporations, local businesses, incomes and assets"; in other words, the political preferences of those in power translated to low revenue collection. This poor policy decision forced Sri Lanka to increase its borrowings from other nations.

Currently, Sri Lanka has approximately \$7 billion of debt against \$2 billion in foreign exchange, \$1.5 billion of which comes from China in the form of swap agreements. Thus, Sri Lanka is earmarked for sovereign default. The crux of this economic situation stems from the fact that the government chose to tap into “cheap debt markets”, which may have been beneficial in the short-term, but trapped the country in a “vicious cycle of ever-increasing borrowings to repay past debts and finance ongoing deficits”.

In June 2022, acting Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe officially announced that the economy had collapsed. As the pressure from the economy’s downfall spurred cabinet members to resign, the government could not set aside time to finalize and restructure loans from China, Japan, and India. However, on September 1, 2022, Sri Lanka reached an initial deal with the IMF for a bailout. This deal, which still needs to be approved by the IMF’s executive board, would include a \$2.9 billion emergency loan to reduce the nation’s fiscal deficits. This would help Sri Lanka regain credibility and secure further financing while ensuring that its existing debt is properly addressed.

### *Tax cuts and unwise policy decisions*

Gotabaya Rajapaksa established sweeping tax cuts after he was elected president, in keeping with the pledges made during his campaign. The value-added tax (VAT) dropped from 15% to 8%, with the cabinet abolishing seven other taxes as well. Finance Minister Ali Sabry reasoned, “The 2019 end tax cuts were brought for all tax-paying citizens in the country to stimulate economic activity and thereby make use of that reinvigoration as a launchpad for the development of the country. As a result of the pandemic, it failed to deliver the desired results.” Even though the country was already experiencing numerous financial difficulties, struggled to pay off its debt, and its foreign reserves were running dangerously low, the cabinet still decided to follow through with these tax cuts. This ultimately launched the nation into a deeper crisis.

### **Subtopic 2 - Alleviating humanitarian needs with governmental policies**

When Sri Lanka defaulted on its loans, the country struggled to pay for essential goods. An economic and political crisis soon tipped into a humanitarian one. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) holds “particularly grave concerns” for the “millions of [Sri Lankan] families” that are “facing shortages of food, fuel, cooking gas, essential supplies, and medicines as the humanitarian impacts of the economic crisis continue to multiply”.

Ever since Sri Lanka enacted the Green Revolution in the 1960s, the nation has subsidized and encouraged farmers to utilize synthetic fertilizers. The agricultural sector has, therefore, relied heavily on

these materials — the use of chemicals in the country's 'cash crops' typically lay within the 90% range. One of the ill-conceived policies President Gotabaya's government implemented was to ban chemical fertilizers overnight.

It is speculated that this decision was taken after Gotabaya consulted with Indian ecologist and anti-GMO scholar Vandana Shiva, despite warnings from Sri Lankan scientists and agriculture experts. Gotabaya aimed to make Sri Lanka the world's first country to use 100% organic farming, and reverse the developments brought about by the Green Revolution. Another reason behind this volte-face was that Sri Lanka's farmers themselves had already been raising health-related concerns over pesticides. Unfortunately, the government did not fully plan out this transition; the steps and processes involved in Gotabaya's new agricultural policy were not taken pragmatically.

Upon the government's decision to ban chemical fertilizers on April 27, 2021, rice production plunged by nearly 50%, forcing Sri Lanka to import grain for the first time in decades. The chemical fertilizer ban and the resulting imbalance in supply and demand led to surging prices for daily commodities. With sharp decreases in nationwide yields, food shortages were also triggered across the nation. Citizens would queue in lengthy lines to buy food items and other essential goods, including cooking gas and petroleum; multiple individuals have died as a result of these queues. According to estimates from the IFRC, 6.7 million residents in Sri Lanka are currently in urgent need of assistance. Policies will need to be revised to bring the nation back from the brink of a humanitarian crisis.

### Subtopic 3 - Promoting long-term political stability

Discontent with the 2019-2022 Sri Lankan government is thought to have originated from the Rajapaksa family's rise to power following President Gotabaya's electoral win in 2019. Positions such as the Minister of Agriculture, the Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, and the Minister of Finance was secured by the president's brothers and nephews, inciting rumors of corruption and nepotism. During this time, concerns were raised over the Rajapaksa ministers' aptitude for their respective roles. The public questioned whether nepotism was to blame for the officials' climb up the social hierarchy, despite claims from the nation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the elections were legitimate. Furthermore, Sri Lankans desired political change, which often comes in the form of an entirely new government, rather than being led time and time again by politicians with the same ideals.

#### *Destabilization of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government*

As stated previously, the pressure resulting from Sri Lanka's economic and humanitarian crisis led to the resignation of all 26 cabinet ministers on April 3, 2022. As President Gotabaya

Rajapaksa attempted to stabilize his government, a plan to form an interim government was put forward. However, the largest oppositions — the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) — declined Gotabaya's proposal, and instead demanded that the president and prime minister resign immediately.

Following Prime Minister Mahinda's resignation, Gotabaya Rajapaksa requested the leader of the opposition, Sajith Premadasa, to fill the vacated role; however, Premadasa was only willing to take up the mantle if the president himself stepped down, as it was believed that tangible change could not be brought about with Gotabaya in power. The president ultimately appointed Basil Wickremesinghe, who unsuccessfully attempted to pass an amendment that would impose a limit on the powers vested in the executive presidency.

### *Curbing protests*

During the first half of 2022, thousands of citizens took to the streets to protest against Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the government he led. With the issues running rampant in Sri Lanka, anti-government sentiments were spreading at an unprecedented rate among the public. Power cuts had reached over 12 hours a day, families were starving, and people were losing faith in the competence of their leaders. Protests were carried out in front of the President's office, before Gotabaya's residence, and on pedestrian roads, demanding the president to quit.

The government quelled these protests through authoritarian measures; they imposed curfews, restricted citizen access to social media, and allowed the military to arrest civilians who did not comply. However, this sparked further protests regarding the suppression of human rights in Sri Lanka. A stable government — and, by extension, a steady political climate — should have public support. Thus, civilian assent is yet another aspect to consider when dissecting this politically-rooted topic.

### *Recent developments*

On July 9, protestors stormed Gotabaya Rajapaksa's official residence. Rajapaksa left the nation four days later, with his wife and bodyguard, and officially resigned on July 14. While he stayed in the Maldives and Singapore, Sri Lanka was left in a state of political turmoil. Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as the Acting President of Sri Lanka on July 15; he appointed Dinesh Gunawardena, the leader of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (People's United Front), as Prime Minister.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### International Monetary Fund (IMF)

The IMF is an international organization that works toward fostering global monetary cooperation, in addition to achieving sustainable growth and prosperity for its 190 member countries, through implementing and reinforcing economic policies. Its financial resources are derived from the money that countries pay when they join as members; each country is assigned a quota based on its relative wealth and economic position in the world. Collecting these quotas allows the IMF to provide loans to member countries — including Sri Lanka — experiencing financial difficulties or balance of payments issues. Subsequently, the IMF aids such countries in rebuilding their foreign reserves and reinstating conditions for positive economic growth.

In June 2022, Sri Lanka reached out to the IMF in a bid to receive an emergency loan. As it sunk deeper into its financial crisis, the nation had been forced to default on its foreign debt. Funds were running low, and the country could no longer afford to pay for essential imports. On September 1, Sri Lanka's efforts paid off, as the nation reached an initial, staff-level agreement with the IMF for a bailout valued at \$2.9 billion. The IMF team leading the Sri Lanka mission issued the following statement: "The new Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement will support Sri Lanka's program to restore macroeconomic stability and debt sustainability, while safeguarding financial stability, reducing corruption vulnerabilities, and unlocking Sri Lanka's growth potential."

### China

As Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender, China plays a significant role in the nation's economic crisis — specifically, in its debt restructuring efforts. China currently holds approximately 6% of Sri Lanka's \$81 billion debt, \$790 million of which is indeed central government debt, but \$7 billion of which comes from financing various ventures and projects through state-owned banks. For instance, loans were made from the Exim Bank of China and the China Development Bank to build the Hambantota International Port, Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, telecom towers, and parts of the Southern and Central Expressways. The aforementioned port and airport were highly unprofitable, with the costs being disproportionate to their usefulness.

China was said to be engaging in "debt-trap diplomacy" by giving Sri Lanka loans for these projects. Sri Lanka sold an 80% stake through a 99-year lease in the Hambantota International Port to China's Merchants Port Holdings, due to the project's economic failure.

On the other hand, some researchers also hold the stance Sri Lanka is not a victim of a Chinese debt trap since international capital markets constitute nearly half of Sri Lanka's external debt, followed by 22% from banks, and 10% from Japan. This is an important aspect to note since China can help Sri Lanka recover by helping it restructure its debts, or place it in a worsened position by withholding aid.

## Australia

In May 2022, an Australian journalism program speculated that Aspen Medical, an Australian-based healthcare company, had been embroiled in a money laundering case involving the Rajapaksas. Aspen Medical contributed to the construction of the Hambantota General Hospital in 2012, using an AUD 18.8 million insurance guarantee from the Australian government. The company had been hired to provide supplies and design the infrastructure for the hospital. However, it was later discovered that Aspen Medical's transactions were made to a company in the British Virgin Islands called Sabre Vision Holdings, which was owned by Nimal Perera, a Sri Lankan businessman known for his strong ties to the Rajapaksa family. Perera stated that he collected these funds for Namal Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's Sports Minister at the time. Through being connected to Sri Lanka's political controversies, Australia has a stake in issues concerning the Rajapaksas — especially when the Aspen Medical scandal is brought up.

## Uganda

In February 2021, Sri Lanka's flag carrier, SriLankan Airlines, posted a tweet on the social media platform Twitter, saying "SriLankan Cargo made history today by operating three consecutive cargo charter flights to Entebbe International Airport in Uganda by uplifting over 102 metric tonnes of printed matter." The printed material in question was thought to be currency notes. Upon being asked about such, however, the company deleted the post and cited "commercial confidence".

This lack of transparency sparked rumors that the Sri Lankan government was engaging in illicit activity, predominantly due to the circumstances at the time — the nation's foreign reserves were exceedingly low, and the three flights would have brought in much-needed foreign revenue to the nation. As a result, speculations that the Sri Lankan government had transferred ill-gotten wealth to Uganda began arising. These rumors tainted the reputation of Sri Lankan politicians and contributed to the public's loss of faith in the government. Uganda is, therefore, a key player to consider when discussing Sri Lanka's political state.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
November 16, 2019	Gotabaya Rajapaksa wins the 2019 presidential election and is inaugurated two days later.
April 27, 2021	The government bans chemical fertilizers in an attempt to switch to 100% organic farming.
April 1, 2022	Gotabaya Rajapaksa announces that Sri Lanka is in a temporary state of emergency, and grants the military permission to arrest protestors.
April 3, 2022	All 26 members of the cabinet resign, leaving the president and prime minister to grapple with the situation.
April 4, 2022	The country's two main opposition parties, the SJB and JVP, refuse to join the all-party interim government proposed by President Rajapaksa.
May 9, 2022	Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa resigns after protestors storm his residence
July 9, 2022	Protestors storm President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's residence. They also set fire to the private residence of the acting Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe. The president is taken to an undisclosed location.
July 13, 2022	President Gotabaya leaves for the Maldives with his wife and bodyguard and officially resigns.
July 20, 2022	Ranil Wickremesinghe is elected President of Sri Lanka.
September 1, 2022	Sri Lanka reaches an initial deal with the IMF for a bailout valued at \$2.9 billion.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Situation of Human Rights in Sri Lanka, 6 September 2022 (**A/HRC/51/5**)

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

### Establishing an all-party interim government

The stirrings of political instability became palpable in April 2022, following the resignation of all 26 cabinet ministers. This heralded the rise of a new government and a new era. Protestors had, at the time, been highly upset with the governing style of the Rajapaksa-led government. Among their other demands was the creation of a temporary government with members from other political parties as well. Thus, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa responded to the sudden vacancies in the cabinet as well as the civilian protests by proposing the formation of an all-party interim government. The views of all political parties would have been properly represented; in other words, it was an attempt to bring about political stability through cooperation, in an era of extreme disorder.

In April 2022, Gotabaya asked members of the opposition to join this interim unity government, which would collaboratively work towards ameliorating the dire state of the nation — that is, until the next presidential election in 2025. Rajapaksa invited all parties in Sri Lanka to accept ministerial portfolios. Unlike what the protestors had in mind, however, this government would still encompass the current president and prime minister; the only change would be having the members of the cabinet come from various political parties.

However, the country's two main opposition parties, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), readily declined the president's offer, claiming that they would only join the cabinet if Rajapaksa himself stepped down. The parties' refusal has been met with varying degrees of criticism from the public, as it implied that the SJB and JVP would not put aside their political beliefs, even when it comes to the citizens' safety. President Gotabaya's proposal for an interim government was a fitting solution, in theory; unfortunately, it ultimately fell through due to the lack of support from the opposition.

## Possible Solutions

### Implementing independent monetary policies

For Sri Lanka to overcome its economic crisis, several feasible steps must be taken. The nation has already reached out to countries such as India and Japan for financial support, which has come in the form of credit lines, loans, and grants. Additionally, if the \$2.9 billion IMF bailout is approved, Sri Lanka could use these funds to address the immediate humanitarian needs of the people, and buy time to consider their next steps.

One aspect to note, however, is that while these various forms of aid have indeed mitigated the effects of the crisis, they can only sustain the country for so long. Stable monetary policies are key to restoring confidence in national banks and helping the government develop a growth-based economy. Such policies could incentivize different sectors by including a steady interest rate and exchange rate, for instance. Formulating a fixed framework to ensure macroeconomic and financial stability ought to be considered as well; policies that raise direct taxes are to be expected, as they can counteract the financial damage sustained after the tax cuts made by President Gotabaya's cabinet.

Once the nation sees progress in its economic sustainability, the government can allocate a portion of its financial reserves to the export industries, since it needs to attract foreign investments for

its external debt payments. Furthermore, Sri Lanka's economic sector should also increase its transparency and decrease its susceptibility to being influenced by political powers, which would fall under the government's immediate policy changes.

The ongoing trend is that national plans are halted and disposed of once a new government comes into power. Needless to say, this hinders the nation's growth. Thus, it is crucial that the continuity of all economic policies are as independent of electoral and political changes as possible.

### **Liaising with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to develop sustainable solutions**

A humanitarian crisis has indisputably emerged from this political conflict, with President Rajapaksa's ban on chemical fertilizers arguably being the largest contributing factor. Food shortages and malnutrition continue to be areas of concern in Sri Lanka. The World Food Programme (WFP) expects the food security situation to deteriorate further during the lean season of October 2022 to February 2023. Thus, a holistic solution must be formulated to properly address this problem.

Non-governmental organizations such as the IFRC can, aside from providing emergency aid packages, focus on long-term goals. Sri Lanka cannot grow overly dependent on external powers. Too much aid can be a curse, not a blessing. To elaborate, a country wishing to change for the better — and, more importantly, maintain these positive changes — must learn to stand on its own two feet. While foreign aid can give it a head-start, external influences will never support a country indefinitely. Effective and sustainable solutions must start at the grassroots.

NGOs can create development projects whereby Sri Lankans are trained by skilled volunteers. For instance, farmers who have been negatively impacted by the chemical fertilizer ban can be taught how to improve crop production and collect higher yields through regular sessions with an agricultural expert. The farmers could then apply their newfound knowledge to their work, thereby benefitting the community as a whole. Such projects have been undertaken in the past when other nations experienced humanitarian troubles resulting from political conflicts or natural disasters. Therefore, this solution would not be farfetched or unheard of; instead, it can be interpreted as a reasonable step in the right direction. In short, significant long-term sustainability can be achieved with NGOs delivering training to Sri Lankan citizens at the grassroots level.

### **Establishing laws that balance the people's values with the government's powers**

At the end of the day, the situation in Sri Lanka boils down to one issue — political stability. The Rajapaksas inherited a government that was built on shaky foundations, not to mention the poor

economic decisions that forced the nation into debt cycles before Gotabaya came into power. For years, the Sri Lankan public did not have faith in their leaders, leading to a clear rift between the people and those in power. This divide was exacerbated by the unwise policy decisions made during Gotabaya's rule, in which the citizens were forced to pay for the government's errors. The political conflicts that subsequently arose in April 2022 destabilized the nation and led to general disorder. Sri Lanka was unable to progress forward.

The current cabinet, led by President Ranil Wickremesinghe, ought to learn from the mistakes of its predecessors and establish laws that balance the values of the people with the sovereignty of the government. Transparency, for one, is a critical aspect that previous authorities have failed to emphasize. When the citizens publicly express their disapproval of a minister's actions, the Sri Lankan cabinet should have an obligation to respond to such concerns. Background checks on the minister in question can be conducted, and the information will, if needed, be partially disclosed to the public. These back-and-forth interactions guarantee that the people will always have a say in their governance, which decreases the likelihood of civilian protests surfacing. Moreover, a new social protection system can be enacted, to both protect the citizens' rights from the consequences of Sri Lanka's economic crisis and prevent dishonesty in the government itself. To ensure that economic mismanagement and political corruption are truly being minimized, any final bailout deals with the IMF could hypothetically be contingent on the cabinet's progress and current standing with the public.

All in all, the most pressing priorities for the new Sri Lankan government will be devising a way to peacefully curb protests, counteracting the decades of civilian mistrust towards the government, and altering the nation's constitution to limit the powers of the executive presidency.

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## Appendix or Appendices

- I. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/five-things-know-about-sri-lankas-crisis>
- II. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/sri-lankas-economic-meltdown-sparks-political-crisis/>
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