



SRI LANKAN DEMOCRATIC CRISIS 2022: WOULD IT BECOME A CASE OF HUNTINGTON'S FOURTH WAVE OF DEMOCRATISATION?

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's democratic crisis exemplifies the fragility of its democratic institutions, driven by the rise of authoritarianism, social unrest, economic turmoil, widespread public dissent, and weakened governance. The situation reveals how the complexities of democratic governance, shaped by historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and economic mismanagement, converge to create a volatile political landscape. Consequently, Sri Lanka is currently experiencing a level of democratic crisis that has never been seen before. This turmoil raises concerns about the resilience of the country's democratic institutions and whether these developments indicate a democratic regression or the beginning of a new democratisation process. This study explores whether this crisis aligns with Samuel P. Huntington's fourth wave of democratisation. The crisis is comparable to several aspects of earlier waves of democracy, including its root causes, its defining characteristics, and the democratic transitions that followed. The analysis reveals that Sri Lanka's political crisis shares key features with previous waves of democratisation, such as social unrest, declining government legitimacy, and economic turmoil.

In this background, Sri Lanka becomes a case of fourth wave of democracy. Ultimately, the study examines the ongoing democratic crisis in Sri Lanka, exploring its potential as a case of Huntington's fourth wave of democratisation.

Keywords: Democratic transition's theoretical foundations, Sri Lankan democracy crisis, Sri Lankan government by the people, Sri Lanka's fourth wave of democratisation, democratisation theory

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka, the oldest democracy in Asia, is currently in jeopardy of political and socio-economic collapse. Throughout the three decades of civil unrest following independence, Sri Lanka maintained a flawed but consistent democracy. The ongoing crisis has sparked political unrest and jeopardised the socio-economic well-being of Sri Lankans, particularly the vulnerable. The democratic crisis in Sri Lanka has significantly disrupted human life and negatively impacted the economy, creating unprecedented challenges in public health, tourism, travel, and education sectors. The 2022 Sri Lankan democratic crisis, triggered by a severe economic downturn and widespread public discontent, brought the nation to a political tipping point. As the government struggled to address inflation, fuel shortages, and a collapsing currency, massive protests erupted, culminating in the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The crisis not only highlighted the fragility of Sri Lanka's democratic institutions but also raised concerns about the country's future political trajectory.

Over the past several decades, the country has experienced significant democratic backsliding, marked by increasing executive power, authoritarianism, and diminishing civil liberties. The rise of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism and recurring anti-Muslim riots further contributed to the destabilisation of the democratic government. The recent democratic crisis marked a significant turning point in the nation's political landscape, as it was fuelled by a combination of economic mismanagement, social unrest, and government inefficacy. During this period, a turning towards authoritarianism led to the consolidation of protesting groups around a shared agenda, which in turn led to a call for a change in government (Fonseka 2022).

The country is beginning the process of democratic transition, which is fraught with uncertainty and has already encountered some setbacks. These trends have raised concerns about the resilience of democratic norms and institutions in the face of mounting pressures. Thus, the current crisis presents an opportunity to reassess the prospects for democratic renewal and the conditions necessary for fostering a robust democratic environment. In this context, Huntington's theory of democratisation waves becomes a relevant lens to examine whether Sri Lanka could be on the verge of joining a new wave of democratisation. Huntington's fourth wave, characterised by democratic transitions spurred by economic and social crises, offers a framework for understanding the potential shifts in governance and political order in the aftermath of such turmoil. In light of all of this, an important question arises: Is it possible that Sri Lanka will become a test case for the fourth wave of democratisation?

In the context of this upheaval, Huntington's theory of democratisation waves provides a relevant framework for analysing the situation. However, the crisis in Sri Lanka exemplifies Huntington's wave of democracy, sharing similarities with previous democratic waves in terms of root causes, key characteristics, and the subsequent transitions to democracy. In his seminal work on the growth of democracy worldwide, Huntington explains the democratisation process in contemporary world politics is taking place in three distinct waves, beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing into the present day (Narain 2015). In a nutshell, Huntington distinguished three waves of democratic progress and two waves of democratic reversion. This

theory posits that moments of significant political and social unrest can serve as catalysts for democratisation, suggesting that Sri Lanka's crisis could either herald a new era of democratic governance or lead to a regression into authoritarianism. In this context, economic and socio-political crises, the declining legitimacy of the government, and widespread public protests led to the government's overthrow and marked the beginning of the fourth wave of democratisation. This study examines the ongoing democratic crisis in Sri Lanka, exploring its potential as a case of Huntington's fourth wave of democratisation.

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Democracy has been the standard form of government since recorded history, and its importance is growing day by day. Many scholars have interpreted the concept of democracy in various ways. Former American President Abraham Lincoln is one of the most eloquent proponents of democracy. He defines democracy as the "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Grover 2020: 190). Democracy was defined by Schumpeter (1947: 269) as a system, "for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide through a competitive struggle for the people's vote". Dahl (1989) believes that the history of democracy begins in 1776, with the American Revolution. Dahl defines democratisation as the triumph of the idea of representation, which led to the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States of America. Over centuries, several nations successfully transitioned to democracy, while others collapsed, and many more fell and remain in the category of problematic democracies. Simply, democratisation is a process of political change that shifts a society's political system toward a system of government that promotes peaceful, competitive political participation in an environment that protects political and civil liberties (Samarasinghe 1994).

There are three main analytical approaches that could be used to explain democracy or democratisation in general. The first type contends that democracy's stability is dependent on certain "economic and social background conditions" (Chen 2007: 6–7), such as a high gross national product or gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, a high level of educational, and urbanisation. The second type is based on people's beliefs or psychological attitudes towards democracy. The third type examines some distinguishing features of social and political structures which further strengthened democracy (Chen 2007). Furthermore, economic development varies by stage of democratisation, declining in the early stages but increasing later, or vice versa.

Former US Secretary of State and Harvard Professor, Samuel Huntington is one of the most eloquent proponents of democracy. In 1991, he introduced the concept of "waves of democracy", which was later expanded in a book titled *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*. In this work, he provided an in-depth understanding of the transitional processes of the third wave of democracy and examined the underlying ideas, reasons, traits, issues, and possible outcomes. The wave of democratisation, according to Huntington, is simply "a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period and significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period" (Huntington 1993: 15).

Concurrently, Huntington claims that three waves of democratisation have occurred in the modern world, spanning from the Northern Hemisphere to the Global South, with each wave, affecting several countries (Saidin 2021). According to Huntington, three types of regime changes occurred during transition processes that paved the way for democratisation, which

are transformation, replacement, and trans-replacement. Transformation is a type of transition in which the incumbent authoritarians take the lead toward the transition to democracy. Replacement occurs when the balance of forces is weighted in favour of the opposition and thereby able to undermine the authoritarian regime it seeks to replace, while trans-replacement is characterised by a compromise between the opposition and the government in power, which allows both parties to share power (Akhaine 2010). Sri Lankan democracy is going through the modes of replacement.

Huntington described the global democratisation trajectory as three successive waves and two reverse waves. The first wave of democratisation was rooted in the American and French Revolutions, which lasted from 1828 to the 1920s. The number of democratic governments gradually increased during the first wave of democratisation, and nearly 30 countries established at least minimal democratic national institutions. From 1922 to 1942, the first reverse wave or democratic breakdown occurred. Countries in the first reverse wave experienced democratic backsliding, including Poland, Italy, Germany, Spain, Estonia, Greece, Portugal, Argentina, Lithuania, and Latvia. These regimes shift, according to Huntington, reflected the rise of communist, fascist, and militaristic ideologies (Huntington 1991).

The second wave of democratisation took place pre-and post-World War II, from 1943 to 1962. Huntington says that the military dictatorship was much weaker during this time and that all of these countries were practicing or just beginning to hold elections to form a legitimate, representative government (Saidin 2021). The second-wave democracies put down strong roots, and around forty countries became democratic states. They also gave rise to some newly independent countries, such as Israel, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines. From 1958 to 1975, the second wave went backwards. Twenty-two of the 30 democracies had turned back to authoritarian rule because of this wave.

According to Huntington (1991), between the years 1973 and 1990, there was a significant reduction in the total number of authoritarian regimes, which ushered in a new era of global democracy, which is referred to as the third wave of democratisation. Huntington (1991) argued that the combination of significant levels of economic development with short-term economic crisis or failure was the economic formula that was most favourable to the transition from authoritarian to democratic government during the third wave of political change. The third wave of democratisation reached parts of Southern Europe, Latin America, and Asia in the 1970s, and it reached Eastern Europe, some parts of Africa and the Middle East, and Southeast Asia in the 1990s.

Huntington's waves of democratisation have been influential in understanding global political trends. Huntington's concept remains a valuable tool for analysing the spread and challenges of democracy, though it has been subject to both conceptual and empirical criticism. Doorenspleet (2000) criticises Huntington's method of measuring democracy based on the percentage of democratic states. She points out that the number of states in the global system increased dramatically over time, making Huntington's analysis problematic. Doorenspleet further emphasises that Huntington's model overlooks many transitions and regime types by focusing on broad, dichotomous categories of democracy or autocracy. On the other hand, McFaul (2002) points out that while focusing on the post-Soviet world, Huntington's wave theory does not accurately predictor explain the incomplete democratisation processes in countries emerging from communism. McFaul argues that Huntington's waves fail to account for the rise of hybrid regimes, where countries exhibit elements of both democracy and authoritarianism, thus, challenging the clarity of Huntington's third wave.

Similarly, Przeworski and his colleagues further criticise Huntington's work for failing to account for the varied political transitions that do not fit neatly into his wave framework. They argue that Huntington's reliance on a binary distinction between democracy and non-democracy does not capture the complexity of transitions and the various stages of democratisation observed globally. Przeworski emphasises the importance of economic and institutional factors in democratisation, noting that Huntington's theory underestimates these variables (Przeworski et al. 2000). Diamond (2008) has pointed out the theory's limitations in accounting for focusing too heavily on external global movements, arguing that internal factors, such as civil society and political culture, play a more critical role in democratisation processes. Furthermore, Sen (2017) critiques Huntington's Western-centric view of democracy, arguing that the theory does not consider non-Western governance models. These scholars find Huntington's "waves" model is insufficient to explain the nuanced and uneven democratisation processes, suggesting that a more detailed and multifaceted analysis is necessary to capture global political transitions.

DEMOCRATIC CRISIS OF SRI LANKA

The democratic crisis of Sri Lanka is rooted in ethnic tensions, governance issues, constitutional challenges, and authoritarianism. To grasp Sri Lanka's current democratic condition, it is essential to understand the democratic structure, the legacy of the country's civil strife and its lasting impacts. After gaining independence from Britain in 1948, Sri Lanka adopted a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, which later transitioned into a republic with a hybrid presidential-parliamentary framework in 1978. The shift towards authoritarianism was a notable aspect of Sri Lankan politics during the 1980s and 1990s.

A first major shift occurred in 1977 and 1978; J. R. Jayawardene of the United National Party came to power with a two-thirds majority that he used to push through the 1978 Constitution and make himself Executive President with almost unlimited power. This shift concentrated power in the hands of the President, creating a semi-presidential system that granted the President wide-ranging executive powers, including sweeping powers over the judiciary and the legislature, and appoint key officials, leading to an imbalance in the separation of powers. He orchestrated anti-Tamil pogroms, enacted legislation enabling the government to detain, torture, and kill Tamil youth at will, and carried out a rigged referendum in which Sri Lankans supposedly voted to cancel elections (Hensman 2019). The imposition of limits on trade unions, oppositionist politics and the rule by repressive legislation were other manifestations of this constitutional drift toward authoritarianism (Uyangoda 2009). In addition, Jayewardene embraced an open economy, moving away from the socialist-oriented policies of the past. This led to the rise of a new capitalist class, with economic liberalisation fostering rapid urbanisation, foreign investments, and the growth of a private sector-driven economy. This economic transformation had significant implications for the country's political culture, as it strengthened elite business groups and shifted political patronage towards market-oriented policies.

The second trajectory was the militarisation of the ethnic conflict. It meant that the government resorted to war and violence as the preferred strategy for managing the ethnic conflict and majority-minority relations (Uyangoda 2009). Ethnic and religious factors heavily influenced Sri Lanka's democratic transition. The majority Sinhalese population, mainly Buddhist, and the Tamil minority, mostly Hindu, have long experienced tensions. Under the British, the Hindu Tamil minority was mainly represented in the bureaucracy and military. The British legacy of favouring the Tamil minority for administrative roles added to these tensions, contributing to a sense of marginalisation among the Sinhalese. Gradually, the situation changed; in 1956, Tamils

constituted two-fifths of the armed forces; by 1970, their representation had dropped to 1% (DeVotta 2021). The Sinhala Only Act of 1956, disenfranchised Tamils and further exacerbated ethnic tensions. This period saw the rise of ethno-religious nationalism.

In response to this, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a Tamil militant organisation that emerged in 1976 in opposition to the Sri Lankan Constitution of 1972, which designated Buddhism as the country's main religion and Sinhala as its national language. This marginalisation led to a growing sentiment for self-determination among Tamils, further exacerbated by violent anti-Tamil riots, particularly the Black July riots in 1983, which galvanised support for armed resistance. The war, primarily between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, lasted until 2009. Mahinda Rajapaksa, who served as Sri Lanka's president from 2005 to 2015, played a pivotal role in the defeat of the LTTE. His government launched a decisive military campaign from 2006 to 2009, ultimately leading to the LTTE's defeat in May 2009. The civil war that followed (1983–2009) deeply undermined democracy, as it led to an increased militarisation of governance, human rights abuses, and the erosion of civil liberties. The war's aftermath has left lingering ethnic divisions and has affected the inclusivity of its democracy.

Subsequently, after LTTE was defeated, Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother, Gotabaya, the defence minister who orchestrated the final assault on the LTTE, were hailed as war heroes. President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government thereafter pursued policies that continued to promote Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy and expanded authoritarian governance with the goal of creating a political dynasty (DeVotta 2021). As a result, large-scale militarisation took place in the name of development across the north and northeast areas of the country where Tamils reside. The military even attempted to change the demographic composition of these Tamil regions by encouraging Sinhala settlements in Tamil areas. Yet, even after the LTTE defeat, the Rajapaksas did little to address allegations of serious atrocities committed by government forces or to redress the plight of ordinary Tamils whose lives had been shattered by years of conflict (Ali 2022).

Rajapaksa's second presidential term, which began on 26 January 2010, further eroded democratic principles. Rather than pursue consensus, his second term combined nepotism, Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism, and militarisation with authoritarianism. During Rajapaksa's second term, several Buddhist extremist groups appeared, the most prominent being the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), led by Buddhist monks Gnanasara Thero and Ravana Balaya (Hensman 2019). These groups pushed a hardline Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist agenda, reinforcing the idea that Sri Lanka should prioritise Sinhalese-Buddhist interests above others, which fostered an environment of intolerance and ethnic division, particularly targeting the Muslim and Christian communities. His ultranationalist rhetoric projected Sri Lanka as a Sinhala-Buddhist country invaded by aliens, above all Muslims; he threatened them with annihilation and incited mob violence against them in a series of attacks in which arson and murders were used to drive Muslims from their homes and businesses (Hensman 2019). Under their influence, Sri Lanka witnessed multiple anti-Muslim racial riots, notably in places like Aluthgama (2014) and Digana (2018). Both incidents reflect the deep-rooted tensions between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and the minority Muslim community in Sri Lanka and led to multiple deaths and widespread destruction of Muslim properties. These riots were often orchestrated or encouraged by extremist Buddhist elements, leading to widespread violence and the marginalisation of the Muslim minority. During its tenure, the Rajapaksa regime was seen by many as offering tacit approval or, at the very least, turning a blind eye to these activities. Appearances of Gotabaya Rajapaksa with Gnanasara and the failure of law enforcement agencies to take action against him led to the widespread belief that the BBS was a state-sponsored group, a belief confirmed more recently (Hensman 2019). The expectation of state patronage for these groups under the Rajapaksas further contributed to derailing democratic governance in Sri Lanka.

Another significant incident was the impeachment of Chief Justice Bandaranayake, who had issued rulings unfavourable to the government. The impeachment was widely condemned as an assault on judicial independence. It was considered part of a broader effort to undermine the judiciary and eliminate legal challenges to Rajapaksa's power. During Rajapaksa's presidency, press freedom sharply declined. Journalists who criticised the government were harassed, attacked or even killed. Notable cases, such as the assassination of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge in 2009, highlighted the climate of fear under his rule. Rajapaksa's government heavily militarised governance, especially after the civil war. Led by his brother Gotabaya, the military extended its influence beyond security into civilian governance, infrastructure projects, and local administration, particularly in Tamil-majority areas in the north and east. This blurred the lines between civilian and military rule and was seen as detrimental to democratic governance.

Additionally, Rajapaksa replaced the 17th Amendment of the 1978 Constitution with the 18th Amendment, which stripped the Constitutional Council of its authority to oversee elections, the judiciary, the police, the civil service, state finances, and bodies responsible for combating bribery, corruption, and human rights violations. The notable feature of the 18th Amendment was that it abolished the two-term limit on the presidency. He did this to allow a third term and grant president-wide powers, including control over key appointments to independent bodies, such as the judiciary and the police. It is visible from appointing numerous family members to key government positions, further consolidating power within his inner circle. His brothers, Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Defence Secretary) and Basil Rajapaksa (Minister of Economic Development) held significant portfolios, and many other relatives were placed in top government roles. He attempted this in January 2015, but his plan backfired when he lost to Maithripala Sirisena, the former health minister and general secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

Mahinda Rajapaksa returned to power again in 2018 as prime minister but was forced to step down a few months into his term after the Supreme Court deemed his appointment unconstitutional (Human Rights Watch 2018). The deadly Easter bombings by Islamic State terrorists in 2019 led to a renewed demand for ensuring security, which provided the Rajapaksas an opportunity for a political comeback. This time, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna Party won a 2/3 majority in the legislature after the general election (2019). Mahinda Rajapaksa and Gotabaya Rajapaksa were elected as the country's Prime Minister and President, respectively (India Today 2022). Other members of the Rajapaksa family, many of whom had been implicated in corruption cases, also returned to power and were given prestigious ministerial positions (Al Jazeera 2021). This concentration of power within a single family contributed to a lack of accountability and democratic governance, as family loyalty often superseded national interests.

Shortly after coming into power, Gotabaya Rajapaksa passed the 20th Amendment to the Constitution, which significantly expanded the powers of the executive presidency, reversing reforms introduced under the 19th Amendment (which had aimed to limit executive authority). This amendment marked a sharp shift toward authoritarianism, with Gotabaya gaining total control over all branches of government. Gotabaya's presidency witnessed increased suppression of dissent and curbs on freedom of expression. Journalists, activists, and critics who spoke against the government faced intimidation, harassment, and, in some cases, arbitrary arrests. The government introduced new anti-terrorism laws and used existing draconian laws, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), to arrest activists and journalists critical of the regime. There were concerns about the shrinking space for civil society and political opposition under his rule. Social media monitoring and restrictions were imposed during periods of unrest, curbing the free flow of information and public discourse. Instead, Gotabaya's presidency was

characterised by the militarisation of governance. He appointed many retired military officers to top government positions, including ministries and administrative posts, even in areas unrelated to defence or security, such as agriculture, education, and healthcare. The militarisation of civilian governance undermined democratic civilian oversight and marginalised professional bureaucrats. These factors contributed to the democratic deficit in Sri Lanka, which refers to a perceived shortfall in democratic accountability, transparency, and public engagement in governance.

Gotabaya's presidency saw significant economic mismanagement, particularly in the handling of fiscal policies and external debt, which contributed to the country's economic collapse in 2022. The current power struggle and the crisis between President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the Parliament of Sri Lanka caused the 2022 Sri Lankan democratic crisis (DeVotta 2022). Public discontent over the government's handling of the country's economic crisis is fuelling the unrest (Mehta 2022). The Sri Lankan government's sudden ban on chemical fertilisers angered farmers, who criticised the government's lack of planning. The chemical fertiliser bans hurt harvests, causing nationwide food shortages. Sri Lankans faced the inaccessibility of sugar, milk powder, kerosene oil, and cooking gas after a sudden chemical fertiliser ban (Nordhaus and Shah 2022). The government declared an economic emergency in September 2021 due to the falling national currency exchange rate, massive inflation, rising food prices and fuel shortages, and pandemic restrictions on tourism, which further reduced the country's income (BBC 2021).

The economic crisis triggered mass protests across the country, with demonstrators calling for Gotabaya's resignation, blaming him for the mismanagement that brought the country to the brink of bankruptcy. Against such background, the Sri Lankans protested to oust the President and the Government. Many people, including youth, university students, and other sections of society, peacefully protested for a major system overhaul and urged lawmakers to let youth lead the country (Vaidyanathan 2022). Protesters also wanted the Executive Presidency and the 20th amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution abolished. A few protestors also urged all 225 MPs to go home to elect new parliamentarians. Sri Lanka's Parliament approved the national emergency on 6 September 2021 after it was declared on 30 August 2021 (Subramanian 2021).

In response to the mass protests in 2022, known as the Aragalaya movement, these protests were not associated with any particular political party or one single organised group. People from diverse groups (ethnic, religious, age, and gender) joined the protests (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2023). Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government attempted to suppress dissent by declaring a state of emergency and granting the military and police broad powers to crack down on protests. Security forces used tear gas, water cannons, and arrests to disperse protesters. Despite the peaceful nature of most protests, the government's heavy-handed tactics were seen as an attempt to silence democratic expressions of public anger and frustration. Political instability taking place in Sri Lanka, and consequently, a daunting challenge emerged before the Sri Lankan democracy. Due to massive protests and calls for resignations, 26 cabinet ministers resigned on 3 April 2022, resulting into escalating political instability (Yeung 2022).

The public outrage and consistent pressure forced Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country in July 2022, leading to his resignation. Meanwhile, as a result of the resignation of Rajapaksa, no political leaders came forward to form the government, Ranil Wickremesinghe took on the responsibility to lead the country at a time of political and economic crisis (Sultana 2023). Since parliamentary elections have not been held in the aftermath of the political crisis the current government is the same as the one headed by Goatabaya; the only difference is that Wickremesinghe is the president (Samaranayake 2023).

Meanwhile, in the 2024 Sri Lankan general election, Anura Kumara Dissanayake's victory was a result of widespread frustration over economic mismanagement, Rajapaksa family's dominance, corruption and the political system's failure to respond to the people's needs (Behera 2024). Dissanayake's win can be viewed as part of a broader trend in the democratic evolution of Sri Lanka. Dissanayake's promise to abolish the executive presidency, a symbol of authoritarian power along with his focus on decentralising governance and prioritising social welfare, reflects a commitment to reviving democratic values in the country. The new president focuses on people-centric governance model, where the interests of the lower and middle classes are prioritised over the political elite. In this regard, Dissanayake's win signifies a revival of democratic ideals.

IS THE SRI LANKAN GOVERNMENT BY THE PEOPLE?

As mentioned earlier, Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as “a government by the people, for the people, and of the people”. It merely reaffirms the people's authority and how that authority should be used to improve the lives and respect of all people. This definition exemplifies the Sri Lankan government's efforts to undermine the lawful and democratically elected government. Sri Lanka's democracy is in peril, and the country's values are eroding as a result of the protests and calls for the government to resign.

Chen (2007: 6) has supported his argument by quoting some scholars (Rustow, Seymour Lipset, Philips Cutright, and others), that the stability of democracy is dependent on certain “economic and social background conditions.” High levels of per capita income, comprehensive literacy, psychological attitudes, and defining features of social and political structures were all necessary. The extreme balance of payments crisis and uncontrollable debt, which are affecting growth and poverty, had posed a threat to the success of democracy in Sri Lanka. The forecast of the real GDP of Sri Lanka is to decrease from 9.2% in 2022 to 4.2% in 2023, as reported in the most recent South Asia Economic Focus and Sri Lanka Development updates (The World Bank Group 2022). Democracy, according to Lipset (1959), has a bearing on a country's level of economic progress. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sri Lankan economy had already shown signs of weakness.

Dahl clearly asserts that no nation on earth fully satisfies the criteria for a perfect democracy (Pye 1990). But Dahl believes that a democratic process of any kind, no matter how flawed it may be, is impossible to achieve without the dedication of the populace to a diverse range of substantive rights. Consequentially, a staunch dedication to democratic principles is the most effective method there is for the protection of these rights (Pye 1990).

Sajith Premadasa, the opposition leader, along with many other opposition party leaders, has openly stated that they are willing to take on leadership roles within an interim all-party regime. This may be the first step toward re-democratising the country (Abeyagoonasekera 2022). Despite all of the upheavals, the Sri Lankan people have shown that they are steadfast in their support for democracy, as is evident from the commitment of the opposition parties and protesting people.

As a result of constitutional amendments that concentrated power in the hands of President Rajapaksa and members of his family, the government of Sri Lanka became less democratic, which brought the people of Sri Lanka together in their opposition to the government. In response to this predicament, the Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka has become more critical authoritarian due to the 19th Amendment in the country's Constitution. The chaotic policies that Rajapaksa enacted only made an already difficult situation even worse. Steven Kotkin, a Professor of Political Science at Yale, outlined the five characteristics of authoritarian rule that are consistent

with Rajapaksa's contemporary authoritarian rule (Abeyagoonasekera 2022). First, there is the use of a coercive mechanism with heavy militarisation in more than fifteen sectors of the nation, as well as the covert operation of force and brutality that makes use of the PTA, also known as the anti-terror act, for multiple arrests. Second, the social contract between the government and the people was disrupted due to the whimsical policies that Gotabaya enacted, such as the sudden shift to organic farming. Even though the dictatorship was aware that it had breached the social contract, it did not admit that it had made policy errors until it was overthrown. Third, the state exercised control over other aspects of people's lives by taking land that belonged to minorities against their will, imposing excessive restrictions on people's right to freedom of speech, mandating cremation, making arrests outside their jurisdiction, and interfering with law and order. Fourth, the government of Rajapaksa has been using nationalism to achieve the regime's political goals by portraying it as the target of internal and external intrusions and accusing it of these intrusions. Fifth, the regime justified its tilt toward China by orchestrating a narrative that demonised the West for its continued questioning of the human rights violations by the Sri Lankan state. This continued questioning of the human rights violations in Sri Lanka was seen as a justification for the regime's tilt (Abeyagoonasekera 2022).

Rajapaksa's presidency is widely seen as a period during which democratic values in Sri Lanka were severely undermined. Sri Lanka experienced concentration of power through the 18th and 20th Amendments, undermining of democratic institutions, the militarisation of civilian governance and suppression of dissent. In addition, rather than pursuing policies of reconciliation and inclusivity, successive governments failed to address the underlying causes of communal tension. This has led to further polarisation, making it harder for democratic governance to function effectively. Rajapaksa regime's efforts to weaken checks and balances, politicise the judiciary and restrict media freedom, large-scale corruption, and financial mismanagement led to the erosion of democratic governance in Sri Lanka. These actions contributed to concerns about authoritarianism and long-lasting damage to the country's democratic framework. It is argued that Sri Lanka is only a nominally democratic country under the Rajapaksa regime, and as a consequence, the government of Sri Lanka is not the government of the people of Sri Lanka. This is because of the background information presented above.

IS THE FOURTH WAVE OF DEMOCRATISATION IN THE OFFING?

The democratic crisis in Sri Lanka stems from a mix of factors, including authoritarian tendencies, social unrest, ethnic and religious tensions, economic mismanagement, weak governance, the lingering effect of the civil war, and militarisation. These elements collectively created a fragile political landscape, which led to the democratic crisis of 2022. This has led to a string of protests by the political opposition parties and citizens in Sri Lanka, which are currently taking place (Srinivasan 2022). Despite this, day-to-day life for the people of Sri Lanka is becoming increasingly difficult as a direct result of the country's collapsing economy and unstable political climate. Given all of these dynamics, the most important question that needs to be answered is whether Sri Lanka will be a case for the fourth wave of democratisation?

Huntington expressed a bit of pessimism about the future of democracy, saying that, "the third wave, the global democratic revolution" of the late twentieth century, will not persist forever (Huntington 1991: 15). Nonetheless, there is still a chance that the fourth wave of democratisation will occur in the twenty-first century. Roland Axtmann (1996) citing Fukuyama's theory, tries to make a case for the existence of a fourth wave. In this view, the long period of democratisation and liberalisation in the Western world had reached the highest level of democratisation except

in a few countries of Eastern Europe. Something novel, akin to democratisation, may happen in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia (Axtmann 1996). Whether reverse waves occurred or not, however, there are indicators that the fourth waves are already taking place in many regions. According to McFaul (2002), the existence of a group of countries is large enough to form a wave. Secondly, there are some features that are specific to the group and distinct from other possible groups (combinations of super-centralised economies, the absence of democracy and fundamental freedoms, excessive ideology). Thirdly, the existence of some common causes that led to the overthrow of the old regimes. Finally, there is a need to acquire some common ideals that led to the transition (democracy, integration, and freedom) (Popescu 2013).

The Arab Spring, or the fourth wave of regime change in the region, began suddenly in late 2010, and one of the leading causes was the third wave of liberalisation in the Arab world (Abushouk 2016). The Arab Spring was driven by a combination of political repression, economic hardship, and social injustice across many Arab countries. Decades of authoritarian rule left citizens with limited political freedom, subsequently leading to political repression and, the denial of democratic rights, and corruption created widespread frustration among citizens. Coupled with this was the growing economic hardship, including high unemployment, rising living costs, growing inequality, and unjust distribution of wealth and opportunities, which left many, particularly the youth, disillusioned with their prospects. This convergence of factors led to mass uprisings throughout the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and North Africa.

On 17 December 2010, a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia protested the treatment he had received at the hands of a government official by setting himself on fire. This act is widely regarded as the spark that set off the Arab Spring (Abushouk 2016). His act triggered nationwide protests that ultimately led to the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled for 23 years. Tunisia is considered the most successful case of democratisation, with the establishment of a new constitution and democratic elections. Inspired by Tunisia, Egyptians launched mass protests in January 2011. The 18-day protest movement led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled for 30 years. Similar protests in Yemen led to the resignation of long-time president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012. Similarly, in Libya, protest outbreaks led to civil war in 2011, leading to the ousting and death of Muammar Gaddafi after North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) intervention. In Syria, protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in 2011 were met with a brutal crackdown, leading to a devastating civil war. The Arab Spring also affected other countries like Bahrain, Jordan, Algeria, and Morocco, where protests led to minor reforms but no major regime changes.

Arab Spring marked a wave of political and social upheaval aimed at addressing long-standing grievances, such as authoritarianism, corruption, economic stagnation, and the lack of political freedom. Arab Spring raised hopes for democracy, but the outcomes were mixed, ranging from successful democratisation in Tunisia to brutal civil wars and a resurgence of authoritarianism in other countries. The Arab Spring was a transformative event that reshaped the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa region. However, the legacy of the Arab Spring influenced and inspired other parts of the world.

Concurrently, the fourth wave of democratisation has started taking place in South Asia. As a result of a popular uprising in 2006, the Maoist insurgency in Nepal was put to rest, the monarchy was overthrown, and a republic was established (Narain 2015). On 20 September 2015, the constitution was officially implemented, and Nepal resumed its democratic course which is running successfully till date. The military has repeatedly taken over Pakistan, but in 2013, the country made a successful transition from military to democratic rule. The "Awami March" and

protests against government corruption and economic issues drew inspiration from the Arab Spring. Electing a legislature and a representative government in 2008 marked the conclusion of Bhutan's shift from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, which had begun in 2004 (Muni 2009). In 2008, the Maldives finally established a stable democracy after being ruled by an autocratic regime for the last 30 years.

In the context of Sri Lanka, democratic movements like the Aragalaya protests and the Arab Spring were driven by widespread dissatisfaction stemming from authoritarianism, institutional shortcomings, restricted democratic freedoms, and political instability. Consequently, widespread corruption and economic mismanagement of resources were central to both crises. Both crises faced significant economic challenges like inflation, rising food prices, shortage of food, high unemployment rates, and shortages of essential things, which led to public outrage. Both Sri Lanka and Arab Spring countries have faced issues such as entrenched elites, authoritarianism, weak civil institutions, and social divisions, all of which have complicated their paths toward stable democracy. Furthermore, both regions demanded democratic reform, the end of authoritarian rule, political change, and accountability. This shared context underscores the commonalities in the struggles for democracy in both regions, positioning Sri Lanka as part of a broader wave of democratisation.

However, many scholars contend that Sri Lanka does not signify a new phase of democratisation for several reasons. Economically, Abeyagoonasekera (2023) points out that the autocratic rule of the Rajapaksa family's centralised power led to high-level corruption and a breakdown of democratic accountability. This economic dysfunction undermined governance and weakened democratic institutions, moving the country toward authoritarianism, not democratisation. Culturally, some scholars claim that ethnic conflicts and ethnocentrism have weakened democratic foundations, contributing to the marginalisation of minority groups like the Tamils and promoting long-term authoritarianism instead of democratic progress. Fonseka et al. (2021) and his colleagues argue that the concentration of power within the executive branch further leads to democratic backsliding rather than a wave of democratisation. On the geopolitical front, scholars like Abeyagoonasekera (2023) argue that Sri Lanka's dependence on foreign powers, particularly China, destabilised democratic institutions. Chinese investments and loans have contributed to Sri Lanka's economic crisis, allowing for elite capture and reinforcing authoritarian tendencies. Scholars suggest that this foreign dependency has complicated domestic politics and hindered meaningful democratic reform.

Despite the opposing views, the Sri Lankan crisis can indeed be viewed as part of a broader global trend affecting many nations. While each country faces unique internal challenges, however, certain shared factors such as political, economic, and social instability contribute to these crises. A growing dissatisfaction with governance, corruption, and a lack of political accountability have led to protests and regime changes in Sri Lanka. The political mismanagement has fuelled public outrage, mirroring situations in places like Lebanon and Venezuela. In addition, the rise of populism and political unrest in Sri Lanka reflects a common theme observed in many nations. This trend can be seen in various regions, including Latin America and parts of Africa and Asia. Like Sri Lanka, many South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan, and Afghanistan are dealing with similar debt challenges, often exacerbated by external borrowing and economic mismanagement. Sri Lanka's crisis reflects a growing concern about debt sustainability. The increasing inequality and absence of essential services have caused social instability in Sri Lanka. Countries like Lebanon, Iran, Egypt, Venezuela, and Myanmar have encountered similar issues. These countries share themes of economic distress, political dissatisfaction, and social unrest that are evident in the Sri Lankan crisis.

SRI LANKA CRISIS: A FOURTH WAVE OF DEMOCRATISATION?

Huntington (1991) argued that the rise in democracy was caused by a combination of several factors and dynamics, including improved social conditions and economic prosperity. Lipset argues that economic development is crucial to establishing a democratic government and furthering the democratisation process (Saidin et al. 2014). Sri Lanka has economic issues such as high inflation, a forex shortage, tax cuts, rising commodity prices, corruption, poverty, and more because of poor public management. From a political point of view, Mahinda Rajapaksa exercised authoritarian rule, as evidenced by the widespread human rights violations, arbitrary arrests carried out by the security apparatus and the police, and restrictions on freedom of speech and expression under state emergency regulations. A combination of advanced economic development and a short-term economic crisis or failure is often the most conducive environment for a transition from autocracy to democracy, as even Huntington recognised.

Protests by the Sri Lankans against the authoritarian rule of Rajapaksa and calls for the government's resignation were immediately followed by the change from an autocratic government to a democratic one. The people of Sri Lanka desperately needed democracy to be reinstated. As a result of the government's failure to govern by the will of the people, the people have banded together in opposition to the government and have demonstrated immediate and comprehensive political and economic system reforms.

The current uprising of the people known as the Aragalaya (the struggle) can be recognised as a democratic uprising for several different reasons. It put an end to the corrupt relationship between politicians and their clients (Rambukwella 2022). The primary goal of this movement is to restore democratic norms and ideals throughout the country. However, Aragalaya established one powerful idea: that the people can prevail even though the odds appear insurmountable. In this way, democracy is put into practice on the most fundamental level (Rambukwella 2022).

The recent 2024 Sri Lankan general election serves as an example of the revival of the country's democratic processes. As aforementioned, Sri Lanka elections follow a similar pattern; they were driven by the people's demand for systematic reform after an economic collapse and a grassroots protest movement (Aragalaya). This is why Dissanayake's victory is within the context of a fourth wave of democracy, where citizens are increasingly rejecting authoritarian governance and seeking to restore democratic values. Thus, Dissanayake's victory can be seen as part of this global fourth wave of democratisation.

The current scenario in Sri Lanka is what Antonio Gramsci (2020: 141–142) might call an “interregnum where the old is dying and the new is yet to be born”. It is a volatile and fluid situation, and the future of Sri Lanka's politics and society is not guaranteed (Rambukwella 2022). A litmus test for the presence of stale democracy is the two-turnover rule, involving a second free and fair election in a state after a transition from an authoritarian regime (Huntington 1991). A transition or a democratic form of government is part of a bigger set of possible regime transitions (Narain 2015). It is only because of people's protests and their will that democracy is restored in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's democracy was revived rather than eroded. Given the political pressure, protests and public unity often driven by dissatisfaction with governance have historically played significant roles in pushing for democratic transitions. The Sri Lankan Crisis of 2022 symbolises an ongoing democratic struggle within the context of a broader fourth wave of democratisation.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion, it is crystal clear that Sri Lanka, the oldest democracy in Asia, is currently facing socio-economic and political challenges. A combination of ethnic conflict, authoritarianism, militarisation, and the rise of ethno-religious nationalism drove the derailment of Sri Lanka's democracy. The concentration of power in the hand of the executive, particularly under the Rajapaksa regime, undermined democratic institutions, while extremist Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism marginalised minority communities and further eroded democratic governance. The 2022 democratic crisis, triggered by the unprecedented economic downturn, brought these underlying issues to the forefront, leading to mass protests and the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. This turmoil demonstrates the vulnerabilities in Sri Lanka's governance, where political inefficacy, corruption, weakening of civil liberties, and economic instability eroded public trust and disrupted the democratic process. The application of Huntington's theory of democratisation waves provides a valuable lens through which to understand Sri Lanka's current situation, spurred by widespread public discontent and calls for governmental reform. As Huntington posits, periods of severe political, economic, and social crises can act as catalysts for either democratic transitions or authoritarian regression. The crisis in Sri Lanka is a prime example of this, where a combination of these challenges, i.e., political instability, economic collapse, and social unrest, has reached a tipping point. This turmoil is the culmination of years of systematic issues, including the concentration of power, the weakening of institutions, and ethnic tensions that led to the derailment of the democratic system in Sri Lanka. In this background, Sri Lanka becomes a case of the fourth wave of democracy. Ultimately, Sri Lanka's experience could offer valuable lessons for other nations grappling with similar challenges, making it a significant case in the study of democratic transitions. It highlights the Sri Lanka crisis underscores how socio-economic issues can catalyse political unrest and demand for democratic government. Moreover, the Sri Lanka crisis provides valuable insight into the role of civil society in mobilising public sentiment against authoritarian practices. This highlights the importance of grassroots movements in democratic transitions, offering valuable insights into how civil society can effectively advocate for democratic change and hold governments accountable. Sri Lanka's experience, therefore, serves as both a cautionary tale and a potential model for fostering sustainable democratic governance in the aftermath of crisis.

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NOTES

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