

# “Galle Face was Important, but Not the Whole Thing”

*Dileepa Witharana*

**C**olombo's Galle Face Green became a symbol of democratic activism in Sri Lanka, for more than 100 days from April to July 2022 with young people in particular from across the country converging there to protest against a President, his family, and their government, whose corruption and short sighted policies were chiefly blamed for the country's current economic catastrophe. Speaking to **Hasini Lecamwasam** from Polity, **Dileepa Witharana**, academic and activist, voices his view on the occupation of Galle Face Green, its composition and contradictions, the Aragalaya more generally, and the current democratic moment in Sri Lanka.

**HL:** *Shall we start with a general description of yourself, your work, and your politics?*

**DW:** Since university days I was involved in student politics. I studied engineering at the University of Moratuwa. It was during the 1980s. We had to spend around six years on our undergraduate studies because of the '88 and '89 unrest. I was a political animal since then, and even before that. We used to read translations of Soviet stories. During my university days I was also an environmentalist. There was this famous NGO called OSLEN (Organisation to Safeguard Life and Environment)<sup>1</sup>. That was the place where a lot of prominent environmentalists in our country gathered at that time. There were three generations of activists there and I belong to, I think, the second generation.

I joined the Department of Mathematics and Philosophy of Engineering at the Open University of Sri Lanka in 1991 as a lecturer. I left the University in 1998 and re-joined in 2008. I am a member of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) and was part of the famous FUTA struggle of 2012.

I remain an environmentalist and a leftist. We have formed a group with the aim of establishing a green socialist movement in the country. At the moment, environmentalism is going its own way and the Left movement is taking its own journey; we feel they have to be merged. When it comes to the Left, they are not

that sensitive to this whole environment issue, and when it comes to the environmental lobby, there aren't really leftists involved. My politics can be positioned as Green Left.

**HL:** *I thought of asking you about your politics because that in a way informs how you approach the Aragalaya (the struggle) and the Galle Face protests. Before we get to Galle Face, what is your take on the Aragalaya more generally?*

**DW:** I think a superimposition of several factors triggered this *Aragalaya*. The main factor is the severe hardships caused by the economic/dollar crisis. However, an overlap of two more factors with the above triggered this mass scale uprising in my opinion. The first is the discourse constructed especially by the Left movement in the country on the corrupt political culture that has existed since independence. It helped people link the dollar crisis with corruption that is embedded in our society, and led to the identification of the Rajapaksas as the main culprit. From the struggle to protect our forest cover led by environmentalists, to the teachers' and farmers' struggles, we have witnessed that the recent times have provided the initial material ground for the above discourse to take root. The second is the popular social media call to occupy Galle Face that became the symbol and the central ground of the *Aragalaya* for around 100 days.

**HL:** *What is your analysis of those participating in the Aragalya? What would you identify as their social base? I have read in multiple places that Galle Face, and even the protests before that, perhaps excluding the farmers' protests, are largely driven by the middle-class. What do you think?*

**DW:** I think I will have to primarily take Galle Face into consideration when I talk about this. It's not just the middle-class who came to Gotagagama. There were many different groups that came from different backgrounds. Galle Face in a way represented a nice spectrum of the Sri Lankan society from politically motivated groups to groups who considered themselves non-political/non-political party affiliated (*nirpaakshika*), and from the elite class to middle and working class. However, representation was skewed towards the town-based population in general. Communities outside towns, as I witnessed, were relatively unaffected.

**HL:** *Can you say something about the different groups that were present in Galle Face?*

**DW:** If you think about the groups that were present there, there were organised groups with political party links such as the *Anthare* (Inter University Students' Federation or IUSF) and the Socialist Youth Union (SYU). I think there are some groups attached to the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) as well. So that is one category.

The group called 'Gate Zero' that occupied the entrance of the Presidential Secretariat was another interesting group with a non-elite background who came from the margins of the urban society. Though they were not directly attached to a party, they were political and they expected a change. In addition, there were also groups attached to religious organisations. Buddhist monks and priests of Christian churches were among the famous figures that were present in Galle Face. Interestingly, disabled soldiers too occupied a hut there.

Then there was this group called *nirpaakshika* (non-partisan). This was kind of an upper middle-class group. There were some other groups also that again didn't belong to the category of middle-class. I think from the beginning they were there but became powerful after this incident that happened on May 9. They were kind of culturally alternative people who also found a comfortable space in Galle Face. They were political but to a lesser extent than the ones attached directly to political parties. These cultural groups were people who have dreams of changing society.

For some others Galle Face became kind of a laboratory. They established spaces such as the *Mahajana Sarasaviya* (public university), *Mahajana Pasala* (public school), peoples' library, a cinema, and an art gallery. They conducted regular lectures, discussions, screened film shows, and hosted art theatre classes. While the community kitchen provided food for activists camping at Galle Face, facilities like legal advice, first aid, and salons were also there. Galle Face was a space for all of them.

Visitors were also important. At the peak of the Galle Face protest you found a lot of people coming there, especially in the evenings. There were different groups. In the morning politically sensitive people would be present, those from trade unions, students, and others as well. There were also those who lived in the vicinity, especially the Muslim community. It was fasting time and even to break their fast they came to Galle Face. A lot of people living in Slave Island and the surrounding area started visiting. So Galle Face became very crowded from evening to midnight and early hours in the morning.

It was a very colourful space. Maybe people highlight middle class participation, because with the appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister, there was kind of an effect and some people left the space. It's not that the middle-class left and the other classes remained. That's not the case. The entire political situation changed. So I don't think the middle-class dominated Galle Face. It became political because of the political groups there.

**HL:** *Looking at how people have analysed the Galle Face space, particularly before 9 May, you see sort of a chasm between those who idealise it, who romanticise it, and those who are really cynical of it. I didn't see much of a middle ground between these two types of analysis. Where would you position yourself?*

**DW:** I think I would put myself in the middle. I think Galle Face became the symbol, the centre of the struggle.

But Galle Face was a mistake as well, in my opinion. There was this protest area that was declared by the government some time back. That was exactly the place where GotaGoGama was set up. So in a way, what happened was that we, ourselves, actually expanded the protest territory to the entire Galle Face. We confined ourselves to this expanded protest site. Earlier, there were protests happening all over the island. In every town and at every junction. There were all these protests. The government was very worried. It had

spread to that extent; every town and every junction. Take High Level Road as an example: along the High Level road at Gamsabha *handiya* (junction), Delkanda *handiya*, Wijerama, Maharagama, at every junction and even during daytime, there were at least a few people holding placards.

Then there was this social media discussion that we can't have this struggle on social media, we have to come to the streets. There were discussions and people were suggesting things and I saw one person suggesting that on 9 April, let's go to Galle Face. So somehow that idea emerged. That's what I saw. There was no central body to call for that; one person just suggested it. I think originally, they were saying bring one million to Galle Face. So, April 9 became the day and people arrived. When I checked with the *Anthare* on the morning of the ninth as to what will happen, they said "Let's see. If people are going to come, we will stay [on at the site]." During the initial weeks and months organised groups linked to political parties played a key role in providing direction and maintaining the fighting spirit. They organised events and marches to strengthen the Galle Face cause. People came in numbers. So, that's how this thing somehow evolved. In my opinion the government was happy about us being confined to Galle Face because the headache they had throughout the country was no more. Post-April 9, they could travel along the High Level road without seeing this nuisance!

But the thing is Galle Face became kind of a symbol of the struggle. People started coming there and it became a protest space. But later I felt that it was becoming more of a cultural space. The umbrella slogan was "Gota Go Home." But if that is the slogan, you have to work towards it. But the kind of activities that happened there later on were not that connected to sending Gota home. It's good, I mean I don't reject them. I wrote a small piece on Facebook saying, "We have to maintain Galle Face but the struggle we have to take out."

So to your question, my answer is that Galle Face was important but Galle Face was not the whole thing.

I proposed at this point that we have to explore different options available to us. I even proposed this to FUTA. I said that at some point we have to finish this business. We can't drag this on. We have to think of new actions. There was this idea of having a space [tent] for FUTA and maintaining it. I mean it's an innocent activity, and there's no issue of having a hut and a roster [of people] to occupy it. But it was a major struggle. We had to send the government away.

One choice we had was a continuous general strike. The trade unions declared a general strike but before that I

suggested it to FUTA because, with the experience of 2012, FUTA had the credibility to convene all the trade unions.

I was heavily involved in the FUTA struggle of 2012. We had three demands: there was a demand for a salary hike, university autonomy, and for at least 6% of the GDP to be spent on education. Some of us were heavily involved with the 6% campaign. At the beginning it was given the least priority. Salary hike and autonomy received a lot of attention. But we worked hard and built up the campaign and it became the major point in FUTA's struggle during 2012. It was a 100-day struggle where we succeeded in establishing that slogan; 6% of GDP for education was a slogan that played a role in the regime change of 2015 as well. We started with mobilising the FUTA membership because at the beginning they were not that sure since they were influenced by government propaganda. Then, I remember we convened trade union gatherings. Trade unions don't work together; there are different groups. We used to attend three trade union groups in parallel so that we had all of them on board. Then we addressed the artists, artists' conventions, trade union conventions, and religious leadership.

So this time around, a continuous general strike on FUTA's initiative was one option. The other option would have been to kind of occupy or surround or besiege Gota's home and maybe the Prime Minister's home, so that we focus our struggle and achieve the objective.

**HL:** *This next one is possibly a thorny question because people are ready to kill on this, but what of institutions? How far should we engage with existing institutions including political parties? Because what we do on the ground has to then be translated into some sort of policy change. What do you envision as the role of institutions and how far should we engage with them, even to alter them?*

**DW:** Actually, I have a serious issue with that. Now this is a political struggle. Sending a regime home is very political. It can't be done by *nirpaakshika* groups, alone. If it is a political struggle, then political parties have to play a role. I have my own analysis about the emergence of anti-political-party thinking, and as to why it emerged like that. There are different groups who promoted anti-political-party thinking.

I think one group that promoted that is the *Pohottuwa* (Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna) constituency itself, in the sense that *Pohottuwa* people lost faith in their own

party. And they are not ready to accept any other party as well. That is why this slogan “We reject all 225” emerged. That is one group.

There is another group, a very a-political group, who are not comfortable with politics. They have come to the streets because of the shortages – electricity issues, oil issues. There is a reasonable reason behind that, because they are fed up with politics. They aren’t sensitive to the details of politics and not in a position to differentiate progressive politics from corrupt politics.

A third group that promotes this anti-political party stand indirectly is a collection of Left-wing individuals, groups, and small parties not represented in Parliament. They are not comfortable with the Left-wing Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the JVP-based broader alliance NPP (National People’s Power). Attacking the membership of the existing Parliament as a whole with three NPP MPs among them would hurt the forward march of the NPP that seems to be receiving increasing popularity among voters in the recent times. They are not ready to accept that the NPP is different, even though they played a significant role in constructing the discourse that this regime is made up of rogues. So these are the three groups who promoted the discourse of anti-politics and anti-parties.

Your question was how to engage with institutions. In my opinion, as I wrote on my Facebook page, we didn’t need a visible political party presence at Galle Face. But political parties had, and have, to play a major role because this is a political struggle. You can’t ask political parties not to get involved. I mean that’s a joke.

Now that Gota has gone home, I think the scenario should be this: there is a kind of understanding that we don’t need the Executive Presidency, so we have to abolish it. Then what is left is Parliament. But the current composition of Parliament doesn’t match the ground reality at all. So we can’t function with this Parliament. We saw that with the Electricity Amendment Bill<sup>2</sup>. That will happen to the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment<sup>3</sup> as well. There is no point working with this Parliament. I think we need to convene an election as soon as possible.

But there are also other theories. They come from the third group I mentioned, the group that has an issue with the NPP. They say that Parliament is not going to work. Parliament has failed. It’s a general statement. Then the critique is not against the current composition of Parliament, but Parliament itself. Then, in my opinion, what they’re questioning is the idea of representative politics and representative democracy. Now, Parliament can be in Kotte, or it can be in Siyambalanduwa. It doesn’t matter. But still it’s a group

of political representatives. The number may be 225, 250 or 300, it doesn’t matter. It means that, since we can’t have all 22 million sit and take decisions, we need some representatives to represent us. In my opinion, the broader meaning of ‘Parliament’ is that.

However, *Aragalaya* has kind of brought this idea of people’s involvement to the centre of discussion; we will have to think of ways of engaging people in governance. There are other structures. Provincial councils, local councils, they have to be there. Power that lies with Parliament has to be taken out and Provincial Councils and local councils should be strengthened further. And maybe some village councils also can be established. In addition to that, maybe we can think of ways to get people involved with representative democracy from the national to village level, from Parliament to local and village councils. Parliament or other levels of representation should have spaces for people and pressure groups to observe and contribute.

**HL:** *What do you have to say about the various inclusions and exclusions that were there in the Galle Face space? For instance, think about the May 18 ‘celebration’ for some and mourning for others, and how much recognition was given, how much space was allocated for those things. Then there were proposals for ‘one country - one law’, and a backlash against that as well.*

**DW:** I think the *Aragalaya* has given us a golden opportunity. We went to Jaffna towards the end of April. They were not rejecting the *Aragalaya*, but they were watching. “We were going through this all this time, you were not involved. But okay, you play the game and see.” That kind of approach. But I think by the end of April, when the *hartal* was declared, even though they were a bit cynical, they joined in. The entire North was deserted on the day of the *hartal*.

I don’t know if you have seen these videos of the Muslim community breaking fast at Galle Face, other people helping, and even Muslim women giving speeches. I almost cried. The regime represented the Sinhala nationalist extreme. So the collapse of the regime means the collapse of Sinhala nationalist extremism as well. So there is this opportunity.

For example, on May 18, there was this Mullivaikkal remembrance in the morning, then the *Ranaviru* (war heroes) people had their thing in the evening at five. It was next to the Socialist Youth Union hut. So they had that remembrance, keeping a gun on top, a typical thing. But what I heard was that they were very careful

when they were doing it, because within the Galle Face space there were all these questions. So everyone is careful. Then they had some celebration at Gate Zero, the entrance to the Presidential Secretariat. That is the main stage. While they were having their function, another group from the North came marching from the Galle Face Hotel end. It was around 630pm. We also went there. Our friends knew they were coming, and we were worried there would be an issue.

They came right to GotaGoGama. They had a banner and I think some of our friends went and said, “stop there!” But they decided they wanted to go to Gate Zero as well. By that time the *Ranaviru* thing was over. Then they went there. Gate Zero was occupied by another group; they were Sinhala guys. But when they arrived with a banner, they were welcomed. They came and they explained who they are and that they were from the North and Mullivaikkal. Then they were invited onto the stage.

The guy from that group then gave a very smart speech. He balanced politics and addressed many ideas. He said that a year ago they would have been scared to even come to Colombo like this. But now the situation has changed. There is an opening for us, we are now brothers, and the people were cheering. Then a person from Gate Zero asked for a lion’s flag. So while this Mullivaikkal banner was there, the lion flag was also there. So it was kind of a mix of contradictions, but it was beautiful as well. We were so thrilled. It was symbolic. So there was this great opportunity.

In a way, Ranil Wickramasinghe stepping in messed the whole thing up. We could have gone a long way.

**HL:** *What do you think will happen to the ‘political moment’ of the country, now that Gota has gone home?*

**DW:** The political moment will not die down. Sending Gota home does not solve the issues. Parliament’s current composition is a joke. It doesn’t at all reflect the opinion of the people at the moment. It’s overloaded with *Pohottuwa*.

**HL:** *Even the new Cabinet is a slap in the face of the people.*

**DW:** Yeah, so politically of course, sending Gota home has not settled anything. We have to campaign for bigger change.

### Notes

1 Editor’s Note: See Harini Amarasuriya. (2018). “The Politics of Environmental Movements in Sri Lanka”. *Polity*, 8(1&2): 21-28. Available at <http://ssalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Politics-of-Environmental-Movements-in-Sri-Lanka.pdf>

2 Editor’s Note: The Electricity Act Amendment Bill deregulates and fast-tracks private supply of renewable energy to the national grid through removal of competitive bidding restrictions [see *The Morning*. (2022). “Electricity Act Amendment passed despite objections” (10 June). Available at <https://www.themorning.lk/electricity-act-amendment-passed-despite-objections/>].

3 Editor’s Note: The 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment Bill(s) were an attempt to reduce the Executive powers of the President within the ambit of the existing Constitution [see Kamanthi Wickramasinghe. (2022). “Is the 21A another farce?”. *Daily Mirror* (01 June). Available at <https://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/Is-the-21st-A-another--political-farce-/131-238137>].