

THE CONTOURS OF CHANGE

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The president is scheduled to resign today. Was this Sri Lanka's Arab Spring then, and if so, has it ended? How would Sri Lanka's history be written recording the last few days which have been decisive, but which hasn't seen a resolution yet to the country's long winded crisis?

Did the events on the 9th of July culminating in the occupation of the President's House and the Prime Minister's official and private residences, constitute a putsch for power?

No it did not, because the protesters were not organised in a coup attempt to seize power. But it was a People Power protest.

Was it then close to an 'Arab Spring' type of operation aimed at regime change? But regime change in that way i.e. *a la* Arab Spring has acquired some negative connotations. Are armed factions involved and if so would Sri Lanka implode? Very probably not. In fact there are no armed factions. None of the protesters bear arms.

There have been some acts of violence but the protests have been by and large peaceful. But the protesters say they respect democratic process. There are some who privately state that politics should be taken out of the 'precincts of the Diyawanna,' meaning that Parliamentary democracy has failed and there should be an alternative.

But yet, it is not a putsch for power by any party. To a great extent it is the people that marched and they marched of their own volition. It is true that a student organisation had called for a final push to derail the Presidency of Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

But even they did not seem to expect the spontaneous efforts by the people who marched and joined them and held similar protests all around the country.

CONSTITUTIONAL

But the occupation of the President's House had symbolic value. The President had not been removed. He remained president but pledged to go, saying that he would relinquish office on the 13th.

Though the people did not hear from the beleaguered president directly, it seemed that he had indeed spoken to the Speaker who is the next in line constitutionally to assume office as president when the incumbent has decided to resign, and the prime minister has resigned along with him.

Normally, the prime minister assumes the office of the presidency for thirty days after a president either dies in office or resigns. But the prime minister is scheduled to resign as well, and in the unusual circumstances that the Speaker becomes president there is much that can be called totally uncharted territory.

Meanwhile the 'putschists' are not insistent on making any bid for power — far from it. It is true that many players are involved in the 'People's protest' and that's only natural.

But it's neither an Arab Spring or a Colour Revolution or an insurrection or a coup, when those who are responsible for getting the president to resign wait for the constitutional



There have been some acts of violence on Saturday but the protests have been by and large peaceful.

Picture by Sulochana Gamage

IT IS UNPRECEDENTED, AND THE SYMBOLIC VALUE OF THAT, EVEN WHILE THIS IS BEING WRITTEN IS ENORMOUS. NO REGIME THAT HAS AUTHORITY AND FULL COMMAND OVER THE ARMED FORCES WOULD HAVE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES LIGHTLY CONDONED ANY SUCH SITUATION. THEY WOULD HAVE PREVENTED IT UNDER ALL COSTS, BUT THIS TIME THEY COULDN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT BECAUSE THE PEOPLE POWER THEY WERE UP AGAINST WAS UNASSAILABLE.

process to unfold. It is a very unusual situation.

The people of this country must be enormously disciplined. However of course there were incidents that marred the protests badly, and the torching of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's private residence was one of them.

The Whodunit regarding that is a poser. It is extremely unlikely that the people's protest that ended with the President's House being taken over with barely a single incident of looting, would deteriorate into an attack on a private residence.

It seems there were some elements that were not among the core group of citizens' protesters that carried out the arson attack on Wickremesinghe's house. Of course the investigations are ongoing and it could very well be revealed that the mob got out of hand. Or it could be revealed that there were elements that wanted to give the protests a bad name.

The questions that swirl around the public space also seem to dwell on whether this local 'Arab Spring' for want of a better name, could end in anarchy. To reiterate, 'Arab Spring' is used for want of a better description here. Of course this is not any such uprising. It is a revolt no doubt but it is correct to say that it is one of a kind.

On the question of whether all this could end in chaos and grief for everyone, one of the answers could be that things are not all that far from a state of anarchy for people in any event, either way.

They queue up for days on end for petrol and the economy which is in dire need of recovery is not functioning properly as a result of all this chaos.

But of course absolute anarchy could be a totally different state of affairs.

The current state of play is that people are not aware of how this would all end — in fact they do not have a clue.

UNPRECEDENTED

But they have had their say in that they seem to have now a chance for a morally tenable regime, whereas they didn't have one earlier. The Rajapaksa-Wickremesinghe regime was past its sell by date even before the uneasy cohabitation began. Wickremesinghe's excuse seemed to be that he was the man that was necessary as the occasion demanded.

Nothing proved to be further from the truth. He seemed to be in no way equipped to deal with the events that were overtaking the country, to put things mildly.

Now that the people seem to be getting a regime that's at least marginally morally tenable, it is imperative that the next moves of the main actors are impeccable. By now it should be clear to the powers that be — all politicians that is — that the order of business that they were used to is not tenable any more.

CONDONED

They cannot make promises they cannot keep, because it would catch up with them sooner or later. It is also worth mentioning that the fact that both the prime minister's official residence and the president's official residence are occupied by the people is not something that is trifling.

It is unprecedented, and the symbolic value of that, even while this is being written is enormous. No regime that has authority and full command over the Armed Forces would have under any circumstances

lightly condoned any such situation. They would have prevented it under all costs, but this time they couldn't do anything about it because the People Power they were up against was unassailable.

What happened on the 9th was a People Power protest and any need to call it any other name — a Spring, or a Colour Revolt of some sort, is highly unnecessary.

But what can be said, barring of course the incident of Ranil Wickremesinghe's house being burnt, was that it was a very dignified protest. One reason was that the Armed Forces were not just outnumbered but were able to grasp the people's pulse.

They seemed to know that the voice of the masses needed to be heard authentically if the country is to survive and move forward. There is no way that a genuine people's uprising can be put down.

It can be quelled for some time but in the current climate everyone knows that the people reached the end of their tether. Everything had started to collapse and fall apart around them and the worst situation is that the politicians — both in Parliament and otherwise — were not at all connected with this reality.

This was an uprising as a last resort and it had been brewing for some time now — this final putsch. But it may not be the end game because a lot would depend on how things would happen from here onward. The politicians or at least some of them seem to think that they can still do things to preserve their positions of relative privilege.

But it's too far gone for that, and if that realization is not reached, it will not end well for them. The people are saying loud and clear that enough is enough.