

Political Failure, Military Success: Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis of 2022

Ms Radhika Daga®

Abstract

The institution of law and order, along with the financial system, collapsed in Sri Lanka in the summer of 2022. This took place in two stages, with the elected government losing its legitimacy, followed by the failure of the law enforcement agencies to curb the escalating situation. In developing countries, military forces are often called upon to establish normalcy whenever law enforcement authorities fail or require assistance to maintain the law and order. However, once they are called for action, the operations need to be orchestrated meticulously as it could lead to more violence during turbulent times. In the Sri Lankan context, the nation recently saw a wave of unprecedented protests from its citizenry. People belonging to various communities, groups, societies, and professions took to the streets demanding essential commodities such as fuel, gas and electricity. The situation became extremely tense once the protesters blocked the entrance of the presidential secretariat and occupied area around the premises.

The Sri Lankan Army was called upon to restore security amid the increasingly deteriorating security situation. While the army brokered security between the angry citizens and the political leaders gone wrong in their decisions, they faced a double dilemma.

®Ms Radhika Daga is an independent thinker and scholar of International Relations and Strategic Affairs. She has gained a rich experience in policy research, security and conflict analysis, strategy evaluation and data analytics during her tenure with leading think-tanks in India and abroad. Her areas of interest span a wide range of subjects from Geo-politics and Geo-sociology to System Analysis and militarisation of Space. She has published extensively on these subjects over a period of time. She holds an MA in Defence and Strategic Studies from Panjab University.

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At a strategic level, how can the army serve the government without alienating its own people and at the operational level, how can the military aid in a non-violent manner without actually using firepower on its own people? That is, using non-violent means to deter a largely non-violent movement, a 'bloodless revolution'.¹ From security point of view, a study and analysis of these military operations in a modern-day revolutionary movement will have great relevance for other militaries, especially in the developing countries.

Guardians of the Island

Since the beginning of public outrage against the incumbent Rajapaksa Government, the Sri Lankan Army worked closely with civil security agencies like the police and Special Task Force (STF) to maintain law and order in the country. Apart from upholding the societal order, their efforts were concentrated towards the security of the key strategic installations, the functioning of local administration and public distribution while preventing any opportunity to the unlawful elements. However, public discontent was rising steadily, and a full-scale unrest finally broke out in the month of April 2022. On 01 April, protestors attempted to storm the President's Pavilion occupied at the time by the then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

With increased hardships and declining patience amongst people, the situation continued to grow tense and the military's role gradually shifted from security assistance to leadership. Once again, the armed forces assumed the role of the ultimate guarantor of law and order as it did just a few years ago in the aftermath of the April bombings of 2019. The government imposed a nationwide emergency for the first time on 02 April 2022, against what was a failed attempt at calming the rising anguish of the population. The political security of the nation, encompassing issues related to law, democracy, history, culture, civil liberties and security of its citizens was at stake.

The nature of the protests remained largely non-violent and non-ideological, that is, they were driven by economics rather than political ideology of the authorities. Various communities,

groups, societies, and professions participated in these protests and re-asserted its apolitical nature. Their demand was clear- the resignations of the then President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa. Notwithstanding the objective set by the protesters, this presented an opportunity for certain people to use this volatile situation to their own advantage.

Some senior military officers noted that notwithstanding the genuine frustration of the people, the show was run by the few invisible and unlawful elements, leaders and coordinating bodies, who became the agents of disharmony. To this end, they used the most modern and advanced tools available at their disposal. Internet activism was effectively used to stir up the masses. Active and consistent use of social and mass media ensured the engagement of popular and professional personalities. Simultaneously, the engagement of religious and community leaders was also seen. The vulnerability of the general public was exploited and widely capitalised upon. Despite the scarcity of fuel, more than 100,000 protesters descended in the capital, Colombo, to demand the President's resignation.

Concurrent use of physical information and communication technologies (ICTs) was fully integrated into the strategy for island-wide mobilisation and synchronisation of activities. Targeting VVIPs and their supporters, and inciting violence and unrest, reiterated the ban on internet and control of information by the state. On 09 May, supporters of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa emerged from the premier's residence and attacked anti-government demonstrators. This set off an outpouring of rage across the country. There was rioting on the streets, vehicles were set alight, and the homes of members of the ruling party were burned to the ground. Within no time, people gathered on the streets and created roadblocks. Vehicle numbers were shared and stopped at locations spanning across the country. The political leadership had not correctly estimated the magnitude of the protest until this point.

The weakened governance, administration, and economic system in the country aided this intent of disturbance and retaliation. Officers on the ground observed that the use of social media was not only limited to provoking public sentiments but also for defaming the military and military leaders. Mainly called on to police public unrest, they found themselves pitted against their own people, the

targets of anger, frustration and despair, reaction, and repercussions. The whole movement was further catalysed by funding from diaspora- demonstrations against suppression of human rights and anti-government organisations followed abroad. Hashtags such as #GoHomeGota and #GoGotaGo trended on Twitter in countries such as the United States, Singapore, and Germany.

With Great Power comes Great Responsibility

As per the Constitution of Sri Lanka, in case of emergency, the military is allowed to take action against those who threaten the law and order of the country. Thereby, the very nature of military actions was limited not only by ways of morale but by the very constitution.²

Even though the non-lethal ways of the law enforcement agencies failed, the army still could not apply the lethal ways for controlling the situation. In fact, the army refrained from use of any violence against the people for it would have not only been counterproductive but explosive in the existing setting, which posed a grave dilemma for a voluntary professional force whose members are deeply embedded in society and government alike. Even as the military defines and designs a set of austerity measures to reinforce security under the state directives, both political and military leadership must be aware of the potential spoilers on the way. The civil use of military force implies non-combat principles of unity of effort, legitimacy, perseverance, restraint, and security or what constitutes the principles of Military Operations other than War (MOOTW).³

By nature, civil security agencies are limited and restricted both in scale and capacity. Being a larger force, the military is, therefore, entrusted with the task of deterring the enraged mobs through snipers and marksman as opposed to shooting in the air or confrontation with water cannons and tear gas. However, the legitimacy and dignity of this force is upheld solely through careful planning and specific deployments. Here, it must also be noted that MOOTW demands a significant chunk of army's resources, putting a strain on the military exigencies. Usually different units are earmarked for different operations. Therefore, the army's role remains need driven and a little more than ad-hoc.

For instance, the military's role cannot be to disperse crowds but to protect the key installations vulnerable against a possible outrage. In case of a confrontation, a single slip-up or, worse, a casualty can defame not only the military but also the national leadership and aggravate the already agitated mob, simultaneously attracting negative international attention. Moreover, use of lethal means by the military can call for an uncalled state of confusion where everyone gets down in the battlefield without any rules of fighting.

The mission statement which guides the army is 'Do Not Disturb', i.e., as long as the protesters do not threaten public and private property, they should not be disturbed. The strategy is not to win the war but to prevent war or a warlike situation. This mostly entails deterrence through intimidation. For instance, the protesters formed massive human waves to force their way past the barricading around high-security areas. However, once the barricades were overrun, the army and police stood by and watched. The only situation in which deployment of lethal means can be justified is when there is a threat to life. This required to be aided through with improvised technologies. For example, during the on-ground operations, the military used GoPro and other supportive technology to collect evidence and justify any action which might go against them. Legal institutions allow digital evidence to be produced in the court. This also helps to prevent any act of provocation for justification of violence or incitement.

Messing with the Wrong Generation

The Aragalaya ('Peoples Struggle') was largely led by the youth who descended to the capital from all across the country. Determined to make a change, crowds assembled in the heart of Colombo city at the Galle Face Green, the magnitude was unprecedented, and the authorities were blatantly challenged- "You have messed with the wrong generation". The present-day civil society leveraged ICTs to create awareness, transparency, and accountability on every incident; to recruit, mobilise, organise, coordinate, monitor, educate, and empower the public; and to expose wrong doing through 'sousveillance' (watching from below).⁴ They successfully demanded political accountability and unseated the President and the Prime Minister in a bloodless revolution.

What happened on 09 May was illustrious of how integrated and vigilante the public was in this fight. A single incident in one place led to the outbreak of violence all across the country. Within no time, people gathered on several key roads and blocked the vehicles of the government supporters, who allegedly attacked protesters. Things moved much more swiftly than expected as the crowds leveraged crowd sourced open source intelligence to coordinate their actions. As soon as the Prime Minister resigned, legal practitioners timely imposed a travel ban against parliamentarians and the Prime Minister to stop them from leaving the country.

Apart from communications technology, it was discovered that people made use of drones for surveillance against the movement of political leaders in the government. The wave of protests was not restricted to holding placards or shouting slogans. The protesters were intellectual, technophiles, funded, analytical, prepared, and evolved. The capabilities of this generation couldn't be underestimated to say the least.

Military's Counter-strategy of Minimum Force against the Mob-doctrine

The actions, deemed essential to counter the modern revolutionary activities, were guided by a more humane approach. The following paragraphs explain these measures in the words of the officers who served and led their men into the field:

- Understanding the context and the bigger picture: The Sri Lankan Army had to transition away from the traditional means of controlling a mob that was hardening by the day. This developed into a range of measures to counter modern day conflicts taking roots in the society. Through means of surveillance and intelligence gathering, the army pre-empted any hostile situation even before it directly dealt with the public anger. Readiness, as an imperative, is to look for smoke which can possibly flare up into a fire.
- Non violent and non-lethal counter actions: Not a single person had been killed in army gunfire. However, the security personnel faced a challenging and deciding situations. Even after the President stepped down on 14 July and Ranil Wickremesinghe took over the reins of government as the

acting President, the crowds torched his house later on the same night. Wickremesinghe's appointment, although constitutionally validated, was greeted with howls of anger across the country. And once again, the new government called on the military to maintain law and order and protect the Constitution. The protestors, in turn, vowed to continue their struggle.

- Use of (social) technology: In one of the fables from Greek Mythology, Prometheus steals fire from Zeus to emancipate humans from their materially impoverished lives, wholly dependent on the gods for sustenance. As punishment, Zeus condemns Prometheus to an eternity of suffering—an eagle pecking out his liver every day only for it to be restored every night. Drawing on this analogy, and sceptical of the promised positive benefits of technological advances, a German-Austrian author cum philosopher argues that society is unable to imagine the scale and scope of the negative consequences of contemporary (physical) technologies. The inclination to turn to further physical technological advances (e.g. artificial intelligence or deep learning algorithms to police social media content) to address the societal problems created by prior technological developments results in a continuing feedback loop of negative social impacts.⁵
- These negative impacts are identified by the security authorities and countered best by the means of social technology. These are technologies aimed at enabling social interactions, through the social software, which allow shaping the attitudes and processes. For example: A sound social media strategy played a crucial role in winning the confidence of the people, who might have misunderstood the army as a threat to their demands. This strategy meandered between control and over-control. Prolonged social media blackouts were inimical to the cause, but further restrictions had to be saved for critical times. Social media was used to gain access and confidence of the public by disseminating information. Information feeding was used to assure the people about the military's objectives and stand for its citizens. The same platform which is used by some to spread hate was used by the military to avert hate.

- Deterrence: A patient pushback strategy dictates that human barriers be used against large mobs, which are pushed back slowly and gradually. In such a situation, the troops need to be prepared for any provocation or retaliation against the military ethos. A highly integrated and technologically sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance play a central role in such operations. The correct estimation of the magnitude and moods will decide the course of action in any given situation. When the ball is in the military's court, it must be carried to the aforementioned goal, for there is no room for penalty for pushing the ball outside.
- Proactive intelligence: One of the primary goals remained engaging and neutralising the unlawful elements of the society, who were likely to continue exploiting the growing tensions between people and government. The violence is fuelled by these very people who mostly operate behind the scenes through social media, illegally organised underground networks etc. Therefore, the army personnel on the ground only dealt with the body and not the mind of this whole movement. Cracking this network and ensuring the citizens that they stand by their security and rights helped channelize the pent up.
- The control over the non-traditional security threats needed to be regulated. The modus operandi of the protesters was closely monitored and analysed as while assuming such a big responsibility, no step could have been taken without a purpose. A clearly defined and attentive objective had to be pursued.
- Integrated mechanism between law enforcement authorities and military: Beyond, and above all, the management and procurement of the already scarce resources also fell into the hands of the army leadership now. Notably, the country, which was at best a society on the edge, could not afford to disrupt its local distribution system at those times. The safety of local administration also remained a priority of the security forces and was deployed accordingly.

Conclusion

Although the number of casualties remained limited, clashes broke out between police, the army, and those waiting in the queues, for

example, at gas stations. One may debate that the security agencies failed on their part to protect the government institutions with the eventual resignation of the President. After the President fled the country, the public trespassed his residence and ensured that the internet was used as a medium to announce their right on the President's residence.

However, to answer whether the security agencies failed or not, one must look only in the direction of the Constitution because ultimately the security forces in any democratic country serve the Constitution and not its government or the public. Its roles and responsibilities are prescribed by the Constitution and not by any one of the institutions. This means that the forces are answerable to the Constitution alone and according to that very Constitution they stood by their duties and orders to prevent violence, control hostilities and return to peacetime conditions. The Constitution remained untouched by both internal and external disruptions.

Endnotes

¹ Sinharaja Tammita Delgoda, "SRI LANKA: A Bloodless Revolution?," India International Centre Quarterly Volume 49, Number 2 (August 2022): 125

² In Sri Lanka, much different from other post-colonial armies, there has never had a separate military culture. There are no separate residential areas like cantonments, or separate schools for army kids.

³ "Military Operations Other Than War," shorturl.at/mxBS7

⁴ Jarrod Hayes, Katja Weber, Globalization, deglobalization and human security: the case of Myanmar, *International Affairs*, Volume 97, Issue 5, September 2021, Pages 1469–1488, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab110>

⁵ *ibid*