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Disenchanted Solidarity? Reflections on Postcolonial Solidarities in a Moment of National and Global Crisis

ABSTRACT In July 2022, Sri Lanka witnessed a spectacular people's uprising dubbed the *aragalaya* ("struggle"). People flocked in their hundreds of thousands to the capital Colombo and deposed a sitting executive president. The *aragalaya* was underwritten by extreme economic precarity and saw an unprecedented form of solidarity that cut across ethnic, class, religious, and other boundaries. However, as in other recent uprisings—such as the Arab Spring or the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong—the *aragalaya* was short-lived, and conventional politics reasserted itself in the country and unleashed further repression. This paper reflects on Sri Lanka's *aragalaya* and similar struggles elsewhere to critically probe different iterations of solidarity and to ask a series of interrelated questions about the ephemeral nature of solidarity, but at the same time to imagine possibilities for more sustained and substantial forms of collective social and political action.

KEYWORDS Aragalaya, people's uprising, solidarity, Sri Lanka, *When Memory Dies*

When this piece was initially conceived, it was under different circumstances.[1] I was in Europe, in Austria, in early April 2022, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine was gathering pace. Throughout Western Europe, solidarity with Ukraine was evident. There were also uncanny parallels between the European situation and the Sri Lankan one because, as Sri Lanka's economy crashed, India and China expressed solidarity and material assistance. However, in both contexts, many internal tensions in this discourse of solidarity were apparent. While the moral condemnation of

1 After the death of Harshana Rambukwella during the preparation of this volume for publication, Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Frank Schulze-Engler, and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell undertook the last revision of this contribution.

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Russia, particularly by Western European nations, was swift, the willingness to convert this into direct action was more hesitant. Similarly, India's generosity towards Sri Lanka was informed by the need to counteract growing Chinese influence in the country. Therefore, it was clear that in terms of global geopolitics, solidarity would only make sense if it was understood in relation to instrumental self-interests of nation states. At the time, I positioned this geopolitical solidarity against what I saw as a less instrumental and more human-scale solidarity that was visible in Sri Lanka within the *aragalaya* or "struggle"—the spectacular people's uprising that got rid of a sitting president, a prime minister, and a cabinet of ministers. These were all historic firsts in Sri Lankan political history. In addition to undermining a deeply unpopular political regime, the *aragalaya* appeared to represent a rare moment of collective action which transcended ethnic, religious, and class divisions. However, several months down the line, with the swift resurgence of the corrupt political culture, the *aragalaya* rejected, and the radical democratic promise of the *aragalaya* largely dissipated, my view of the possibilities for solidarity on a micro scale are more circumspect. There is, perhaps, an inherent danger in offering analysis of fluid sociological phenomena without the benefit of hindsight—further complicated by my own subjective and affective entanglement with the *aragalaya*. I badly wanted to believe that radical change was possible. As Arjun Appadurai (2007) reminds us, 'hope' is a powerful and necessary political currency, but one that could also potentially blunt our critical consciousness.

The rest of this chapter explores the notion of solidarity in greater detail through two broad moves. Initially, I explore the tensions of attempting to theorize solidarity on a macro scale. Thereafter, I will move to the Sri Lankan context, where I will explore the people's uprising in relation to solidarity, and I will also introduce a literary dimension to the discussion by exploring an iconic novel about Sri Lanka's long and protracted ethno-nationalist conflict and what this has meant for the possibilities and limitations of solidarity.

Theorizing Solidarity on a Macro Scale

Solidarity, in geopolitical terms, is largely overdetermined by pragmatic concerns, though one can also imagine instances where states act non-instrumentally, as in times of grave natural disasters or rare instances when moral and ideological concerns guide statist interventions. It also tends to be hierarchical, with more powerful nations 'helping' the less

fortunate. However, even geopolitical solidarity is informed by a notion of mutual interest that distinguishes it from similar ideas such as justice or general duty towards society (Laitinen and Pessi 2014). Though the motivation may be pragmatic, this reciprocity nonetheless generates some empathy towards 'others' unlike you.

Solidarity on a smaller scale can also be informed by such instrumental interests. For instance, it can be seen in social contracts that benefit society as a whole but are not necessarily based on a moral principle. Even in philosophical terms, this reciprocal dimension of solidarity is important, because if one takes an exclusively communitarian approach and argues that solidarity is primarily about responsibility to the collective, this can result in conflicting solidarities—essentially creating 'in-' and 'out-'group structures (DuFord 2022, 10).

Therefore, solidarity on a micro scale seems to make more sense, because it is easier to nurture a sense of solidarity within a relatively homogenous social setting. However, both in a conceptual and political sense, the key challenge is in trying to understand how solidarity might work with diversity (Leinius 2022, 3–20). Even in sociological literature, there is a privileging of solidarity when it is informed by a compulsion to engage with people unlike you. For instance, Émil Durkheim distinguishes between "mechanical" solidarity associated with traditional societies and a communal sense of obligation with what he calls "organic solidarity," which he associates with more diverse, "modern" societies (Britannica 2022). Durkheim uses the analogy of the body, where each part carries out its functions independently but in relation to some overarching principle, to describe organic solidarity.

A basic problem confronting the theorization of solidarity is under what conditions a sense of obligation towards others unlike oneself can emerge (Leinius 2022, 4). Therefore, from a normative philosophical sense, solidarity that has some element of duty or care towards the other may be considered less impoverished than a form of solidarity that is largely informed by instrumental motives. As I shall discuss in relation to Sri Lanka, these tensions in conceptualizing solidarity have a direct relevance to understanding the *aragalaya*—in terms of who participated, what forms that participation took, and equally, who left when the circumstances changed.

Solidarity can also lead to misrecognition. Such misrecognition has been historically visible when 'progressive' agents have identified themselves with struggles they perceive as worthy. In Sri Lanka, this was visible when early international commentators valorized militant Tamil nationalism at the outset, hardly realizing the authoritarian tendencies of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Many who took this position

drew on what Judith Butler calls "frames of recognition" (Butler 2009). It was progressive to identify with the militant struggle of an ethnic minority oppressed by a majority. But as those embedded within the Tamil community recognized—for instance, the authors of the iconic *Broken Palmyrah* (Hoole et al. 1990), one of whom was assassinated by the LTTE—the LTTE represented an authoritarian nationalist ideology that offered little moral counterpoint to Sinhala majoritarianism. Yet global geopolitics continued to construe the LTTE as 'authentic' representatives of the Tamil community.

This dilemma is also poignantly captured in James Fenton's poetry. Fenton, like many other first-world anti-imperialists inspired by the victory of North Vietnamese forces over 'American imperialism,' initially applauded the rise of the Khmer Rouge in neighboring Cambodia. In his deeply reflective and self-critical poem "In a Notebook," Fenton reflects on his own complicity in espousing solidarity with the Khmer regime (Fenton 1994). The poem begins with an idyllic pastoral scene of youth setting out to war:

> And night still lingered underneath the eaves.
> In the dark houseboats families were stirring
> And Chinese soup was cooked on charcoal stoves.
> Then one by one there came into the clearing
> Mothers and daughters bowed beneath their sheaves.
> The silent children gathered round me staring
> And the shy soldiers setting out for battle
> Asked for a cigarette and laughed a little…
> I sat drinking bitter coffee wishing
> The tide would turn to bring me to my senses
> After the pleasant war and the evasive answers
> (Fenton 1994, 15)

A few stanzas later, the same scene is repeated in reflective hindsight:

> And the tide turned and brought me to my senses.
> The pleasant war brought the unpleasant answers.
> The villages were burnt, the cities void;
> The morning light has left the river view;
> The distant followers have been dismayed;
> And I'm afraid, reading this passage now,
> That everything I knew has been destroyed
> By those whom I admired but never knew;
> The laughing soldiers fought to their defeat
> And I'm afraid most of my friends are dead.
> (Fenton 1994, 15)

The line "distant followers have been dismayed" pithily captures the dilemma of enchanted solidarity. For Fenton and others who espoused solidarity with 'distant' causes from what they saw as shared ideological concerns, the reality of their enchantment was often disturbing. However, distance is also relative. While Fenton was a 'Western' anti-imperialist espousing solidarity with an anti-imperial cause in the Global South, such misrecognition can happen even when there is much greater cultural, ideological, and political proximity. As I suggested at the outset, when I first conceived of this piece, I was caught up in the euphoria of events unfolding in Sri Lanka and what I saw as their radical democratic promise. Earlier this year, as I joined my friends, colleagues, students, and former political and ideological adversaries in uniting against a corrupt political regime, I saw an opportunity to effect substantive political change in the country and possibly the beginning of a form of pan-Sri Lankan solidarity that I had not witnessed in my lifetime. However, following a spectacular uprising, the spirit of solidarity that united this diverse group appears to have dissipated. The academic and political question that is central at this moment, therefore, is whether the solidarity that was witnessed within the *aragalaya* was transient or something more substantive.

The Historical Context Leading to the *Aragalaya*

To provide some context to my argument, a brief sketch of the current situation in Sri Lanka and the historical context that informs it is necessary. Sri Lanka concluded a three-decade civil war in 2009. Fought between a Sinhala majoritarian state and segments of the Tamil minority that engaged in an armed secessionist struggle, the conflict was shaped by the post-independence Sinhala nationalist project of building what has been described as an "ethnocracy" (De Votta 2021), where an impoverished understanding of representative democracy rationalized majority domination. Within this overarching political dynamic, mutually conflictual and exclusionary solidarities, built on ethnic, cultural, and religious exclusion, developed. Sri Lanka's post-independence history—its politics, social configuration, and economy—were overwhelmingly impacted by this conflict. It has also left deep and abiding genealogies of suffering, victimhood, and enmity, and little has been done in post-war times to achieve positive social change. Instead, exploiting and further nurturing triumphalist sentiments within the Sinhala majority community, the extended Rajapaksa political family—which was in power at the time—positioned itself as the savior of the Sinhala majority. This, in turn, enabled Mahinda Rajapaksa, the executive

president at the time, to achieve cult status as the man who triumphed in an 'unwinnable' war. From 2009 onwards, Rajapaksa's government, emboldened by the war victory, borrowed heavily from international financial markets and embarked on a rash of economically dubious vanity projects. At the same time, this Rajapaksa-centric Sinhala nationalism demonized the Muslim community as the new ethnic Other and created a toxic glue of racism, religious enmity, and corny capitalism. This period also saw the further entrenchment of a highly militarized state in which a large standing military, which had no productive role in a peacetime society, was strategically channeled into many areas of civilian governance and administration.

However, in 2015, Rajapaksa's dream of an unprecedented third term ended when he was ousted by a rainbow coalition of political forces. This was also read as a moment of solidarity, because the common goal of getting rid of the Rajapaksas united otherwise adversarial forces (Ali 2015). But it was precisely because it was read from a perspective of enchanted solidarity that this progressive political moment became a transient event. Those who united to oust the Rajapaksas—particularly politicians representing the minority communities—did so with deep reservations about the Sinhala political leadership they were aligning with. The brief solidarity that emerged in the conjuncture was one shaped almost entirely by the expeditious goal of displacing the Rajapaksas from power, and there was no 'shared value horizon' (Ter Meulen 2016) informing this shaky political alliance. However, had 2015 been understood through a more contingent notion of solidarity—where solidarity is seen as an ongoing process rather than a point of arrival—perhaps a different outcome had been possible. Some scholars have called this "disenchanted solidarity" or a recognition that solidarity needs to be understood as a contingent and situated practice (Schulze-Engler 2015). The solidarity that emerged in 2015 was shaped by unity against a common enemy, but once the enemy was gone, it could no longer be sustained.

The *Aragalaya* and Its 'Form'

A similar situation reemerged in 2022 in Sri Lanka with the *aragalaya*. Once again, a broad movement of solidarity formed. The immediate focal point, again, was the Rajapaksa dynasty; but, unlike in 2015, there was also a larger overarching consensus about changing the country's political culture. In addition, unlike in 2015, the solidarity that emerged with the *aragalaya* was not necessarily underwritten by instrumental political

interests. Instead, this iteration of solidarity had more 'organic' sources and was informed by the common perception of precarity that Sri Lanka's economic crisis has generated. This precarity was also something new in Sri Lankan society. While various forms of precarity had been widespread in Sri Lanka's post-independence history, these experiences of vulnerability were almost always ethnically and culturally overdetermined—for instance, the precarity of the civil war was experienced very differently in the 'Sinhala South' of the country and the 'Tamil and Muslim North and East.' Throughout the war years, the 'Sinhala South' of the country saw the Sri Lankan state as an entity that served Sinhala interests, and therefore, protecting the state was in its self-interest. But with the extreme economic meltdown, this social contract between the state and the Sinhala people broke to some extent.

The beginnings of the *aragalaya* lie in a series of governance blunders by the government of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Elected in the aftermath of the shrill Islamophobia generated by the tragic Easter Sunday attacks of 2019, Gotabhaya was seen as the 'apolitical' Rajapaksa who would lead the country to a new era of prosperity. Shortly after his election, Sinhala youth painted murals on roadside walls full of hope for a new future. But this sense of optimism was short-lived, as Rajapaksa made a series of blunders, beginning with drastic tax reductions leaving the state in deep financial deficit; early missteps in COVID-19 vaccination; and a disastrous attempt to switch to organic farming, virtually overnight, resulting in massive crop failures.

These governance failures were followed by countrywide protests, first by government schoolteachers and later by farmers across the country as agriculture went into crisis. A full-on national crisis emerged when people experienced ten-hour power cuts. It was the power cuts and fuel and medicine shortages that drew the urban middle class onto the streets. It is with their involvement that the *aragalaya* took distinct shape. The event that catalyzed the *aragalaya* was when thousands thronged Gotabhaya's private residence on 31 March 2022, demanding solutions. This uprising was met with a violent police crackdown.

On the next day, a 'Gota go Gama' or 'Gota go Home' village was established by a group of youth activists, with support from a cross-section of political parties, civil activists, professional groups, trade unions, and artists. While the focal point of the *aragalaya* was this Colombo-based occupy movement, the establishment of the Colombo-based protest site also marked an emergent national solidarity that was underwritten by the unprecedented economic precarity facing the entire country.

This early iteration of the *aragalaya* can be read as disenchanted solidarity in action. Present at the protest site were oppositional ideological and political forces: the Inter-University Students Federation (a university students' union with national reach, but with a controversial history of ideological indoctrination and systematic use of violence and coercion within universities); representatives of leftist political parties such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), which stylizes itself as the 'radical' left; representatives of the Socialist Youth Union affiliated to the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), from which the FSP splintered; representatives of *ranaviruvo* or war veterans, who are idealized within the Sinhala community and instrumentally used by Sinhala politicians to drum up patriotic fervor; and members of the political party of the controversial ex-army commander Sarath Fonseka, a one-time Rajapaksa ally accused of war crimes. In addition, hardline Sinhala nationalist Buddhist monks, alongside Catholic, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu clergy were present. There were also LGBTQ activists and avant-garde artists. Professional groups such as doctors and particularly lawyers also provided support. One could argue that this was a form of vertical alignment in which these groups fought side by side but had little 'lateral' connection with each other. However, what distinguishes the *aragalaya* from what has gone before is that, despite the significant ideological and political differences between these groups, there was a hazy 'shared value horizon' that informed their participation. There was a broad consensus that the political culture in the country needed to change and some form of democratic accountability was vital, though this in turn was shaped by a somewhat naive and generalizing anger towards the entire 'political class.'

Two events at Gota go Gama symbolized the solidarity that emerged. One was the Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day on 18 May marking the death of Tamil civilians during the end of the war in 2009. In a context where such commemoration was banned by the state and the Sinhala majority population at large refused to acknowledge even the possibility of civilian deaths or war casualties, the symbolic value of this commemoration was significant. What made the event even more remarkable was that the Buddhist clergy—a significant moral and ideological force which has been historically seen as guardian of Sinhala nationalism—participated. The other event was a Pride march on 25 June—something inconceivable under normal circumstances. However, despite these progressive events, one could also argue that the *aragalaya* was a distinctly 'Southern' phenomenon in the political geography of the country. The north and east of the country, where minority communities predominate, did not join the *aragalaya* with such enthusiasm, partly because of the long history of state repression

in these regions and because many in the minority communities felt the Rajapaksa regime was, in essence, a creation of the Sinhala South.

These deep genealogies of enmity and division that have shaped Sri Lankan society for decades became more visible as the *aragalaya* confronted its adversaries more directly. The Gota go Gama site was attacked on 9 May by a politically instigated mob. Within minutes of this attack, people from all walks of life mobilized. Health workers and office staff abandoned their workstations and rushed to the site; others took a more violent route and attacked the mob. People set up vigilante squads, set fire to the buses that had transported the mob, beat up mob members, stripped them, and by that night, a number of houses belonging to local politicians were set ablaze. One member of parliament was also murdered by a mob. But how do we read this violence? Was it an act of solidarity or something else?

We can read the reaction of those who rushed to the site to protect the youth as a distinct expression of solidarity, because this action happened within the 'shared value horizon' of peaceful people's political action. But the subsequent violence damaged the social contract of peaceful dissent that animated the youth-led protest. The events of 9 May marked a decisive turning point. These events facilitated the emergence of a narrative about peaceful dissent turning violent that undermined the *aragalaya*. This became most evident immediately after the *aragalaya* achieved its most spectacular victory, when Gotabhaya Rajapaksa was forced to flee the country. This moment of victory was short-lived because Ranil Wickremasinghe, who succeeded Gotabhaya as the interim president, legally but with little legitimacy, moved swiftly to crack down on the *aragalaya*. In doing so, Wickramasinghe exploited the narrative of violence that emerged post-9-May and characterized the *aragalaya* as a form of anarchy invoking deep-seated fears about populism. This resulted in an almost immediate fracturing of the solidarity that sustained the *aragalaya*, as many middle-class and professional groups withdrew. They rationalized their withdrawal through two strategies—for one, they argued that the *aragalaya* had turned anarchic, and the other argument was about the need to restore political and economic stability. Systematic repression was subsequently unleashed by the state: the police were instructed to prevent any form of dissent, and even the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act—which allows law enforcement agencies to act with impunity—has been used.

So, what insights can we glean from the swift rise and fall of the *aragalaya* in Sri Lanka? The most obvious way to read the trajectory of the *aragalaya* will be to suggest that it was economic precarity that provided the basis for solidarity and that there was no 'shared value horizon' beyond instrumental

self-interest. However, even if we take this view, one could argue that the common precarity that pushed people from their isolated social, cultural, and class bubbles facilitated a form of reciprocal recognition we have rarely witnessed in Sri Lankan society. At the same time, while the *aragalaya* was animated by an existential struggle to secure the basics for a decent life, the slogans and the discourse surrounding the *aragalaya* rose above economic precarity. Those coalescing around the *aragalaya*, ranging from farmers to teachers, youth, artists, and other professional groups, shared a vision about the need for political change. The ability of the *aragalaya* to transcend longstanding ethnic and religious differences also marks an important moment in the history of the country. While many of these divisions have long genealogies, the broad solidarity that the *aragalaya* facilitated provides a momentary glimpse into a different political imaginary.

One way of viewing the inability of the *aragalaya* to translate into a more substantive and lasting political movement could be understood through the lens of disenchanted solidarity. Disenchanted solidarity, as it is understood by Schulze-Engler (2015, 19–26), requires a critically introspective praxis where solidarity is not idealized. It requires a kind of postcolonial ethics where complex, and at times contradictory, positions and subjectivities can be held in balance. With the *aragalaya*'s failure, what we can arguably see is the failure of such a postcolonial ethics. When the imminent precarity that held diverse groups of people with antagonistic histories together lessened, people's sense of solidarity shifted from a position which could accommodate difference to a more conventional sense of solidarity that was delimited by what they were familiar with. This, in turn, meant that the radical politics that underwrote the *aragalaya* could no longer be sustained.

When Memory Dies as a Literary Exploration of Disenchanted Solidarity

By way of conclusion, I would like to turn to one of the most iconic novels of solidarity in Sri Lanka. *When Memory Dies*, published in 1997 by Ambalavaner Sivanandan, the Marxist scholar-activist and founder of the Institute for Race Studies and founding editor of the journal *Race and Class*, is a quasi-epic novel of the precarity of working-class solidarities overdetermined by ethno-nationalism. Spanning three generations, the novel charts how a group of working-class activists attempts to chart a path of leftist solidarity that transcends ethnic, linguistic, and geographical divisions in a society that becomes increasingly polarized along ethnic lines.

The text, from its outset, is cautious about enchanted and vertical solidarities. In Book 1 (the novel is in three sections), a Tamil youth called Saha forms a close alliance with Tissa, a Sinhala labor activist, who in turn introduces Saha to S. W., a charismatic man with little formal education and an organic intellectual-activist in the Gramscian sense. Set in 1930s Sri Lanka, this segment of the novel explores working-class solidarities that fashion themselves in opposition to the collusion between colonial capital and local elites. The friendship is multi-ethnic and is also suspicious of the instrumental solidarities sought by organized labor politics. For instance, the novel depicts the early twentieth-century elite politician A. E. Goonsinghe as an opportunist. He professes a vertical solidarity with the workers but stands aloof. He also exploits racial prejudice against migrant Tamil labor for political advantage. Goonsinghe also betrays the 1923 general strike by striking a deal with the British. This section of the book ends with the death of a young Muslim boy shot by the police during the general strike—marking a symbolic loss of idealism.

The next segment of the novel traces the lives of the second generation. Saha's son Rajan marries a Sinhala woman, Lali. Lali and Rajan meet as radical youth activists at university. They raise a boy who is 'biologically' Sinhala, born to Lali from a previous marriage, but the child, Vijay, is both Sinhala and Tamil through socialization. This section ends with the rape of Lali at the hands of a Sinhala mob. Lali's rape marks another moment in the novel where the deep solidarity of Sinhala and Tamil unity forged within working class activism is disrupted by ethno-nationalism. But the novel continues to hold out the possibility of such solidarity into the third segment of the book, where Vijay, the biologically Sinhala but culturally and socially hybrid product of Lali's and Rajan's union, stands as a symbolic bridge between the two conflicting communities. This part of the novel unfolds in the 1980s with the emergence of Tamil militancy. Despite the breakdown of pan-ethnic working-class solidarities, Vijay refuses to give up hope. Towards the end of the novel, he undertakes a literal and symbolic journey from the 'Sinhala South' of the country to the 'Tamil North.' But this journey of reconciliation fails, and he is executed by his own cousin and childhood friend. The three segments of the novel, therefore, can be read as being marked by three symbolic deaths—each signifying a gradual loss of the possibility for a collective Sri Lankan identity. But the novel is also performing the function of memorialization. As its title, *When Memory Dies*—reechoed by one of its transgenerational protagonists proclaiming that "when memory dies, a people die"—signifies, deep solidarities were once a possibility and are, perhaps, a future possibility as well. Therefore, *When Memory Dies* invites us to see both the potential and the tenuous nature of disenchanted solidarity.

If we turn from the novel to the current Sri Lankan situation, there are distinct resonances. The youth-led occupy movement demanding a radical change in the political culture of the country has animated a sense of disenchanted solidarity that has transcended many deeply entrenched social and cultural divisions. It is also a solidarity that demands active participation and a horizontal commitment. But as the swift reversal of the gains of the *aragalaya* suggests, any sustainable political change in Sri Lanka will require substantive political change and consistent political engagement from various progressive groups within the country. In the last decade, we have witnessed the rise and demise of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Arab Spring, and the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong—all of which share some similarities in their political imaginary, the profiles of the activists, and their methods of mobilization. However, all of them also largely failed to establish lasting political change and, in some cases, resulted in greater repression and erosion of democratic freedoms. Therefore, the key challenge for Sri Lanka remains how the energy and political hope of the *aragalaya* and its inclusive solidarity can be nurtured and protected for a more enlightened and emancipated future.

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