

THE POST-PANDEMIC PUSHBACK: ANALYZING MASS UPRISING MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIA

ON Thalpawila¹

Abstract

Mass uprisings against authoritarian regimes have emerged in various countries worldwide. South Asia, despite being known for its tradition of parliamentary democracy—largely inherited from British colonial rule—has experienced significant political instability in recent years. Countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka initially adopted robust democratic systems, but over time, several of these states witnessed democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarian tendencies. Some leaders, though democratically elected, gradually eroded democratic institutions and practices, prompting widespread dissent. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, mass protests erupted in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, driven by both political and economic grievances. These movements, in some cases, contributed to regime change or significantly challenged incumbent authorities. This paper examines the nature and dynamics of these post-pandemic uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Using secondary data, it analyses how social discontent, economic crises, and political disillusionment converged to fuel these movements. The protests saw active participation from university students, civil society groups, and opposition parties, with social media playing a critical role in mobilisation and coordination. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary political resistance in South Asia.

Keywords: Mass Uprising, Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Era, Aragalaya, Monsoon Revolution, Pakistan

¹ Deptment of Political Science, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

Email: osantha@kln.ac.lk



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5580-7077>



[The Journal of Desk Research Review and Analysis](#) © 2025 by [The Library, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Received date: 06.06.2025

Accepted date: 18.08.2025

Print Publishing Date: 31.10.2025

Web Publishing Date: 31.10.2025

Introduction

South Asian states shape their social and political policies with the help of the experiences gained from British colonial rule. The majority of countries adopted the model of Western democracy as their political system. Although democracy became a key concept in their political agenda in South Asian states, some states faced challenges in democratic governance in the post-independence era. For instance, in a short period, Pakistan and Bangladesh endured prolonged military rule after emerging as new states on the South Asian political map. The military rule created authoritarianism by abolishing the multiparty parliamentary system in those countries. In the past 78 years, Pakistan has been ruled for 33 years by the military, and Bangladesh has experienced 25 years since the country gained independence in 1971. Although the Maldives has not experienced military coups, 32 years of authoritarian rule of President Abdul Gayoom abolished democracy in the country. Sri Lanka faced two youth revolts in the post-independence era and a 30-year separatist struggle of the Tamil militants, which had a significant impact on the country's democracy. However, Sri Lanka could protect its core values of parliamentary democracy under those threats.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point for many South Asian states, which were highly affected by the pandemic on the economy as well as later politics. The post-COVID-19 pandemic era experienced heavy economic instabilities for many South Asian nations such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Maldives. Sri Lanka, where the economy was badly hit by the COVID pandemic, reported its most precarious economic situation in Sri Lanka's post-independence period. Bangladesh and Pakistan have also experienced economic difficulties since they mainly depend on external factors. In addition, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan experienced a tremendous political crisis in the post-COVID pandemic period, as a result of some economic as well as political issues. The protest movements of the masses against the ruling regimes made significant political changes in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The mass protests ended with the overthrow of the ruling regime in those countries without a ballot. In the recent history of South Asia, on the one hand, those trends may be a question related to democracy and on the other hand, one can be argued to help further strengthen democracy with direct involvement of the masses. In 2022, the removal of the Gotabaya Rajapaksha regime in Sri Lanka, the removal of the Imran Khan regime in 2022, and the removal of the Sheikh Hasina regime in Bangladesh in 2024 by the mass protest movements show different trends in the removal of governments in recent times in South Asia.

Aim of this paper and methods

The aim of this paper is to examine the reasons and the nature of regime change in some South Asian countries. To fulfil this task, desk data from related reports, journal articles and electronic media have been used. The desk data have been descriptively analysed to reach the objectives of this study.

Changing authoritarian regimes

Many revolutions or upheavals have been reported against the authoritarian rule or regimes throughout human history. Most of those revolutions were aimed at restoring democracy. The 'Glorious Revolution' in Great Britain in 1689 was a centrepiece of the Parliamentary Democracy in the Western world. The revolution could limit the absolute power of the monarchy in Great Britain. The French Revolution in 1789 was a well-known mass upheaval against the Louis XIV dynasty. In Eastern Europe, a political wave of protests in the 1990s toppled some dictators. Thousands of people gathered in capitals such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, etc. In Asia, the "Arab Spring" in the Middle East countries toppled some dictators in 2011. The authoritarian regimes of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya collapsed due to mass uprising, and Syria experienced a prolonged civil war (Salam, 2015). In the 1980s, the people of the Philippines gathered to expel Ferdinand Marcos, who had ruled the Philippines

for over 30 years (Overhilt,1986). There were some experiences of mass uprisings that ended undemocratic rule in South Asia. Nepal, a Historical Kingdom in South Asia, thousands of masses gathered in Kathmandu in 2006 against the Monarchy and restored democracy by ending the Royal dynasty in Nepal (Subedi & Bhattarai,2017). Mohamed Ershad, the military dictator, resigned and handed over the country to a caretaker government because of mass protests in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in the 1990s (Alam,1995).

Many Scholars have considered mass upheaval movements against the authoritarian rulers in the world. According to Skocpol (1979), revolutions are caused by constellations of structural factors such as regime capacity, international pressure, grievances and the economy. Durac (2013) explored the causes of the 'Arab Spring', which ended the rule of autocratic rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. The article argues that the success of revolts in each of those states is due to the complex interplay of socio-economic and political factors (Durac,2013). According to Durac, "the combination of the closure of political system and socio-economic distress led to the emergence of a new set of political movements which were, in large part, leaderless, relied on non traditional forms of organization and communication, and were focused on broad demands of regime change and political reforms" (Durac,2013). Kadivar (2018) focused on mass mobilisation in new democracies in recent times. It points out in history that democracy was achieved through 'bourgeois' revolutions. In addition, Kadivar (2018) examines that Rueschemeyer and colleagues (1992), in contrast, demonstrate that democratisation has been achieved through working-class mobilisation. Kurzman (2008) documents the role of intellectuals in democratic uprisings of the early twentieth century. Luwis (2008) points out the factors in the 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Luwis (2008) identified that the Kyrgyz revolution was a complex political process that combined both external and internal factors. He argued that the external factors were relatively insignificant in the way the revolt developed. Luwis explored that the claim that democracy promotion programming or western-backed NGOs played a substantive role in the overthrow of President Akaev in March 2005 seems to have little evidential basis (Luwis, 2008).

Mass protest movements for regime change in South Asia in the post-COVID pandemic period.

Some South Asian countries experienced mass uprisings to regime change in the post-COVID pandemic period. Since some South Asian countries were highly affected by the COVID pandemic, their economies also faced bitter experiences. The economic crisis further extended towards political calamities in some South Asian countries.

The mass uprising of 2022 (*Aragalaya*) in Sri Lanka.

The deep economic crisis contributed to creating a political crisis in those countries. Sri Lanka was the best example, where the Gotabaya Rajapaksha regime was changed by the mass uprising (*Aragalaya*) in June 2022. Sri Lanka experienced many shortages of foreign revenue in its economy since 2021 because of the declining incomes from tourism and remittances from migrants, mainly working in the Middle East. This, in turn, forced the authorities to go so far as to declare a food, fuel and cooking gas emergency, and to ration all basic goods and fuel (Abenante,2021). This economic crisis created the context of the protests among the people in Sri Lanka. The early signs of unrest began in March 2021, when the government introduced a policy to ban the use of chemical fertiliser and promote organic fertiliser in Agriculture. Several agricultural organisations protested the government policy since March 2022, because it was not practical to switch to organic cultivation at short notice (Gamage,2023). The agricultural crisis in fertiliser was further developed by the prevailing economic crisis in the post-pandemic period in Sri Lanka. Gradually, that tension developed into a mass protest against President Gotabaya Rajapaksha's government. Many Social groups, headed by the younger groups, non-partisan protesters, university students, some religious groups, and political parties, began openly demanding

that President Gotabaya should resign under the slogan 'Go Gota Go'. The popular protest movements centred on the Galle Face green area in the Capital of Colombo, close to the Presidential Secretariat. According to Imtiyaz (2023), the protest movement did not officially declare any single charismatic or supremely articulate leader. However, some analysts pointed out that 'the front-line Socialist party', along with its undergraduate front, played a crucial role in the movement (Imtiyaz, 2023)

Many protest demonstrations operated from March 2022 to demand the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksha and his family from official functions. Those demonstrations were mostly peaceful, but occasionally, they used force by the police and security forces. However, from the 09th of April, the protest groups were based in Galle Face Green, Colombo.

“This base turned into a tent city with free food, medicines, portable toilets, psychological support and even a book exchange service. The area was mainly frequented by young men and women, from different social classes, students, social activists, teachers, lawyers and farmers. This sort of ideal community, with its joyful and peaceful atmosphere, was pitted by protesters against the corruption and violence of the state agencies” (Asia Maior,2022).

The 'Aragalaya' was attacked by the government-sponsored thugs on 09 May 2022, but that incident developed into a huge mass protest that gathered in front of the President's House to force the President's resignation from the post. The protesters occupied the President's House in Colombo on July 13 and compelled him to resign. President Gotabaya Rajapaksha departed the country and announced his resignation on 14th July. The huge mass protest compelled President Gotabaya to flee the country, and the Gotabaya regime fell. A new interim President was selected by the Parliament according to the constitution of the country. The mass protest movement called “Aragalaya” continued for over 90 days (Right to Life, 2022).

The Monsoon Revolution in Bangladesh in 2024.

Bangladesh also experienced a mass uprising for the anti-democratic regime in the country in 2024. A student-led mass uprising in Bangladesh was formed in July 2024 against the quotas in government jobs. Students' demand was to end the reservation of government jobs for the descendants of veterans of the 1971 liberation war in Bangladesh. Later, the movement was developed into the removal of the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, and the ruling Awami League. Students led the peaceful demonstration against the quota system in government jobs in Bangladesh, which was attacked by the authorities, resulting in hundreds of people being killed, and another thousand people being injured. "The Hasina government deployed security forces who used tear gas, stun grenades and rubber and live bullets, shooting indiscriminately into crowds and directly at students" (Human Rights Watch,2025). Later, the mass uprising of Bangladesh developed into a movement against the authoritarian rule of the Awami League and the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who came to power in a disputed election in January 2024 for the third time, winning three consecutive national elections. The mass uprising in July-August, called the 'Monsoon Revolution', looked for a rebuilding of democracy in Bangladesh. The undemocratic role of the Awami League regime was highly unpopular since it repeatedly caused corruption, suppression of freedom of speech and brutality of the regime. However, the military suppressed the peaceful demonstration of the students, which led to a mass uprising to topple Hasina's regime.

Although Bangladesh had a booming economy in the last decade, many economic issues such as high cost of living, rising unemployment and a slowing economy were experienced in the post-COVID pandemic period (Munir, S, 2025). “Since Covid, we have seen a stagnant economy, a depreciating

currency, a foreign exchange crisis and high inflation (Whitehouse & Amaral,2024). According to Siddiquee & Faruk (2020), the Economy of Bangladesh heavily relies on the global supply chain.

“As the economy of Bangladesh heavily relies on the global supply chains, particularly ready-made garments and foreign remittance, the country has faced a severe impact of the global economic meltdown (Amit, 2020).”

“As the banks in Bangladesh heavily depend on the business brought by the ready-made garments, COVID-19 has also seriously affected the banking sector. Similarly, remittance sent by the Bangladeshi diaspora, around 10 million workers, is another important pillar of the country’s economy. This sector has already been hit by COVID-19....”(Siddiquee & Faruk, 2020). The COVID pandemic seriously hit the economy of Bangladesh, and it has affected the day-to-day life of the local population.

Those economic issues of Bangladesh further encouraged the student movements against Hasina’s regime, and the tension was further strengthened since the government openly used violence to control the protest movements. Thousands of people gathered in the capital city of Dhaka against the government and marched towards the Prime Minister’s residence, demanding that the Prime Minister resign. Since the mass protest developed, Prime Minister Hasina fled the country, marking the end of the regime of the Awami League. According to Human Rights Watch, the 36-day monsoon revolution reported at least 858 deaths, including those who were involved in the protest. In addition, nearly 250 people, including policemen, were killed in the period of post-monsoon revolution (Human Rights Watch, 2025). In addition, more than 20,000 people were injured during the riots. Following the resignation of Sheikh Hasina, an interim government was formed in Bangladesh. The student-led movement intervened to form the interim government. Since there were no provisions on an interim government or any other form of government in the existing constitution of Bangladesh, the student-led movement announced that it would hold a constitution assembly election to draft a new constitution. The students used social media to communicate in the protest movement countrywide. Although the government cut down the internet service in the country, the protesters used other social media strategies. The ‘Monsoon Revolution’ in Bangladesh marked 36 days of people's uprising to change Hasina’s regime.

Regime changes in Pakistan in 2022.

In the South Asian region, many political power crises have been reported from Pakistan, where the country was controlled under a military authoritarian regime for over 33 years since its independence. In the post-COVID pandemic era, a political and constitutional crisis emerged in Pakistan in April 2022, resulting in the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan. Imran Khan came to power in 2018 with the help of two other political parties in the Parliament by forming a coalition government. Imran Khan's government intervened to control all types of corruption and to rebuild the country's economy. Imran's government cut down all types of unnecessary expenses in the economy and looked for Chinese and Middle Eastern financial assistance to rebuild the Pakistani economy. However, Pakistan experienced an economic crisis in the post-COVID pandemic period. According to Zaidi (2021), after COVID-19 took Pakistan in its grasp, forcing major disruptions in the country's economic activities, after 1951-1952, it experienced a negative GDP growth rate, -0.4 per cent for the fiscal year 2020. Some Western analyses pointed out that the cause of the Pakistani economic crisis was that the government had over-dependent on Chinese financial assistance (Shaikh & Kai Chen,2021). In addition, the 'Pakistan Democratic Movement' (PDM) anti-Imran alliance was developed by the main opposition parties against the corruption of Imran Khan's government. The PDM undertook some protest movements against the government. In 2022, the main opposition alliance of Pakistan laid blame on the Imran Khan government for being responsible for the economic crisis in the country and tabled a no-confidence

motion against the Imran Khan government on 22 April 2022. By rejecting the no-confidence motion, Prime Minister Khan addressed the parliament and stressed that a foreign conspiracy had been hatched to bring about regime change in Pakistan. Further, Prime Minister Khan dissolved the parliament without the no-confidence motion taking place. The Pakistan Supreme Court decided the Prime Minister's decision on parliament dissolution was unconstitutional and made its verdict to summon the Parliament to proceed with the no-confidence motion since the Prime Minister had violated the constitution. Therefore, the vote of no-confidence in Parliament led to Khan's ouster from office. A new Prime Minister was elected by the National Assembly for an interim period. Anyway, thousands of people marched in cities across Pakistan to protest Imran Khan's removal.

The characteristics of the mass uprising in the post-pandemic era in South Asia.

Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan faced significant challenges to their democracy in the post-pandemic era. Mass uprising movement directly involved in changing the regimes of existing leaders in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In the case of Pakistan, although mass protests broadly developed against Imran's regime, the Supreme Court decision directly influenced the removal of the Prime Minister from office. The characteristics of Sri Lanka's '*Aragalaya*' were that it was the first time that a popularly elected President vacated his post since the growing protests of the masses. In 1953, Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake resigned his office due to the unfortunate death of some protesters shot dead by the Police during the anti-government movement (Harthal Movement) in Sri Lanka. But the *Aragalaya* in 2022 in Sri Lanka reported an organised movement to regime change of President Gotabhaya Rajapaksha. Finally, *Aragalaya* could overthrow President Gotabaya Rajapaksha from his office. The following table (Table 01) shows the characteristics of the *Aragalaya* under identified themes.

Table 01: Significances of *Aragalaya* in 2022 in Sri Lanka

Reasons for mass protesting	Participated groups	Leadership	Communication among the protesters
1. Beginning of the protest for the organic fertiliser policy of the government. 2. Economic crisis in the post-COVID pandemic period. 3. Corruption and injustice of the government. 4. Inefficiency of the government	1. Social activists 2. Students 3. Opposition political parties 4. younger Groups 5. Religious groups	No identified a significant leadership	1. Social media

In Bangladesh, there were some military coups to topple the regimes in the post-independence period. The high involvement of the military in the politics of Bangladesh has significantly influenced the regime change since 1971. In addition, people of Bangladesh initiated a protest movement to force President General Mohmed Ershad to resign from his office. The 'Monsoon Revolution' in 2024 was a vast mass upheaval to overthrow Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from her office. The following characteristics can be identified in the 'Monsoon Revolution' in Table 02.

Table 02: Significance of the ‘Monsoon Revolution’ in 2024 in Bangladesh

Reasons for mass protesting	Participated Groups	Leadership	Communication among the protesters
1. Initiated a protest against the government's policy on quotas for government jobs 2. Economic crisis after the COVID pandemic. 3. Corruption and authoritarianism of the Hasina regime 4. Suppression of opposition political parties	1. University students 2. Alliance of the opposition parties 3. General public	1. Student-led organisations	2. Social media

In Pakistan, many military coups have been undertaken to dismiss and create a regime in the political history of Pakistan. Since the military has a more powerful status in Pakistani politics, the civil government is also controlled by the military. Therefore, martial law had been imposed for a long time in the history of Pakistan, causing heavy damage to the country's democracy (Jalal, 1995). Although the military had no direct intervention in Imran Khan's case, Imran Khan was ousted as Prime Minister because of political turmoil in the country. Growing a huge protest movement against his regime, he had to be ousted after losing a no-confidence vote in Parliament. Further, the Pakistan Supreme Court had dismissed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from his position in 2017 (Chappell, 2017). In addition, Benazir Bhutto stepped down as the President of Pakistan before the end of the term of the government (Los Angeles Times, 1996, November). “The regime change in 2022”, the post-COVID pandemic period, can be identified in the following Table 03.

Table 03: Significance of the ‘Regime Change in 2022’ in Pakistan.

Reasons for mass protesting	Participated groups	Leadership	Communication among the protesters
1. Economic crisis followed by the COVID pandemic. 2. Crisis with opposition parties	1. Opposition party alliance 2. General public	1. Pakistan Democratic Movement	

Conclusion

In South Asia, the economies of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan were affected by COVID-19. The life of the masses went through many disturbances without their necessities. In addition, those economic factors led to the emergence of political crises in many countries. With the above facts, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India faced a political crisis followed by economic issues. The protest movements in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh were fueled by economic factors, which led to the removal of regimes. The protest movements were organised by the various social groups, especially university students, who played a key role in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and other groups, such as professional groups, religious

groups, political parties and non-partisan groups, were actively supported in the *Aragalaya* and *Monsoon revolution*. The significant observation of the protest movements in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh was that there was no supreme articulated leader in ‘Aragalaya’, but the university student movement led the *Monsoon revolution* in Bangladesh. Pakistan's protest movement was led by the opposition political alliance, which integrated other non-partisan protesters. However, the vote of no confidence motion was brought to parliament by the main opposition. Social media platforms played a significant role in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in maintaining their communication. In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, a peaceful protest movement was noticed, but the government used force to suppress the protests. Finally, both economic and political factors have been determined to develop regime movements in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

References

- Abenante, D. (2022). *Sri Lanka 2022: The Aragalaya protest movement and the Rajapakshas’ fall from power*. Asia Maior, Vol. XXXIII/2022. [online] <https://www.asiamaior.org/the-journal/17-asia-maior-vol-xxxiii-2022>
- Alam, S. M. S. (1995). Democratic politics and the fall of the military regime in Bangladesh. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 27(3), 28–42. [online] <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1995.10413048>
- Chappell, B. (2017). Pakistan’s high court ousts Prime Minister Sharif in Panama Papers fallout. *The Two-Way*. [Online] <https://www.ctpublic.org/2017-07-28/pakistans-high-court-ousts-prime-minister-sharif-in-panama-papers-fallout>
- Durac, V. (2013). Protest movements and political change: An analysis of the ‘Arab uprisings of 2011’. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 31(2), 175–193. [online] <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2013.783754>
- Elfatih, A. A. S. (2015). The Arab Spring: Its origins, evolution and consequences... four years on. *Intellectual Discourse*, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.31436/id.v23i1.660>
- Gamage, G. (2023). *Aragalaya: A new page of people’s resistance in Sri Lanka*. Brill. [online] <https://brill.com/view/journals/prot/aop/article-10.1163-25898420-12340045/article-10.1163-25898420-12340045.xml>
- Holger, A. (2020). Revolutionary mass uprisings in authoritarian regimes. *International Area Studies Review*, 23(2). [online] <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ias>
- Imtiyaz, A. R. M. (2023). Janatha Aragalaya: The people’s struggle in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Governance, Security & Development*, 3(2), 1–21. [online] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369808015_Janatha_Aragalaya_The_People's_Struggle_in_Sri_Lanka
- Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: A comparative and historical perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kadivar, M. A. (2018). Mass mobilisation and the durability of new democracies. *American Sociological Review*, 83(2), 390–417. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48589220>
- Lewis, D. (2008). The dynamics of regime change: Domestic and international factors in the ‘Tulip Revolution’. *Central Asian Survey*, 27(3–4), 265–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930802536514>
- Overholt, H. W. (1985). The rise and fall of Ferdinand Marcos. *Asian Survey*, 26(11), 1137–1163.
- Pakistan's President sacks Bhutto and the government. *Los Angeles Times*. [online] <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-11-05-mn-61442-story.html>
- Right to Life. (2022). *Gotagama Attack*. Right to Life: Human Rights Centre. [online] <https://www.right2lifelanka.org/>
- Sareen S. (2020). *COVID-19 and Pakistan: The economic fallout*. Observer Research Foundation [online] <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230718231026.pdf>
- Shaikh, R., & Kaichen, C. (2021). China’s debt trap in Pakistan? A case study of the CPEC project. *South Asia Research*, 41(3).
- Skocpol, T. (1979). *States and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of France, Russia, and*

China. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Subedi, D. B., & Bhattarai, P. (2017). The April uprising: How a nonviolent struggle explains the transformation of armed conflict in Nepal. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 12(3), 85–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2017.1372795>

Zaidi, S.A. (2021). A forgettable year for Pakistan's economy. *East Asia Forum*, 1 January. [online] <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/01/01/a-forgettable-year-for-pakistans-economy>