Sri Lanka's Organic only Agriculture

What is the issue?

The rash policy shift to 'organic only' agriculture by the Sri Lankan government could severely impact the country's food security with considerable political cost for the ruling Rajapaksas.

What was the government's move regarding organic farming?

- On May 6, President Gotabaya issued a gazette banning the import of chemical fertilizers in order to become the world's first completely organic farming nation**.**
- This came at a time when all sectors were reeling under the persisting economic impact of the pandemic.
- The announcement came with no consultation, forethought, or convincing transition plan.
- Later, in December, the Ministry of Agriculture said that it was setting up a task force to study and report on the adverse effects of the use of chemical fertilizers and chemical pesticides on the human body.

What were the reasons cited for the shift to organic farming?

- The government said that the move was to propel a new agricultural revolution that is not against nature.
- Government spokespersons sought to justify the move that it is a necessary step to prevent a chronic kidney condition loosely attributed by non-scientists to chemicals in the soil.
- They also said that banning the import of chemical fertilizers will save forex spent on fertilizer import [about 300 million dollar annually].

What concerns were attributed to this transition?

- **No source of fertilizers**- The sudden move to ban chemical fertilisers and pesticides triggered hoarding by traders and companies, leading to black-marketing.
- The farmers came under enormous pressure as they had no source of chemical fertilizer when sowing season began in September.
- **Poor domestic production of organic fertilizers-** The domestic

production of organic fertilisers and biofertilisers is very weak and farmers are caught in uncertainty over the availability, quality and potential effect of organic fertilizers.

- **Reduction in yield**- Farmers fear that the yield of next paddy harvest in January and February would drop by 50% and those growing vegetables and fruits are also already noticing worrisome change.
- The ban will also adversely impact Sri Lanka's 1.3 billion dollar worth tea industry, a vital foreign exchange earner for the country.
- **Food security**- The government's ban puts Sri Lanka's top staple crop in danger affecting the country's food security achieved through decades.
- **Inflation**- The chemical fertiliser ban, combined with bad weather, led to falling crop yields and contributed to inflation hitting a 47-month high of 8.3% in October with food inflation at 11.7%.

What was the Government's response?

- All these concerns propagated the farmers' resentment over the government's policy.
- President Gotabaya said that there was no change in the government's green agriculture policy, and that subsidies would be provided only for organic farming.
- A gazette on November 30 repealed the May 6 gazette, along with another issued on July 31 on the subject.
- The government then decided to permit the private sector alone to import chemical fertilizers.
- But none of the officials clarified the part-reversal of policy and their messages were found to be conflicting and confusing.

What will be the likely consequence of the policy reversal?

- Currently, there is a small stock of imported chemical fertilizers and it would take months to import a large consignment of chemical fertilizers.
- Even if the chemical fertilizers were immediately available, few farmers would be able to afford it as there would be no subsidies anymore.
- With 75% of the current crop's life cycle already over, chemical fertilizers will not be of much help to paddy growers, who add it at different stages after the sowing season.

Sri Lanka liberalised its economy in 1977. Before 1977, agriculture contributed 74% of the country's GDP while, it has reduced to about

7%, despite employing 28% of the labour force, after opening up.

What will be the other effects of the Government's policy on agriculture?

- What began as a farmers' problem is already manifesting as a problem of all consumers as the cost of rice and vegetables are soaring with the fear of an imminent food shortage.
- Regardless of how the government changes its fertilizer policy, the farmers' protest through the last 7 months is bound to have a political cost.

References

1. https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/sowing-the-seeds-of-a-disaster/article37982205.ece

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