The Protest in Sri Lanka

What is the issue?

There have been violent scenes in Sri Lanka, with mobs targeting the homes of prominent political figures including the ruling Rajapaksa family.

Why have people taken to the streets?

- Protests over rising prices and shortages flared up in early April in the capital and have grown in size and spread across the country.
- People are furious because the cost of living has become unaffordable.
- People are now paying up to 30% more for food than a year ago which has forced many people to skip meals.
- There are also fuel shortages and power cuts.
- The lack of medicines has brought the health system to the verge of collapse.
- The daily demonstrations and attacks have forced at least some, including Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, to resign.
- Sri Lankan citizens have also been protesting and asking the current President to step down.

Why is there an economic crisis in Sri Lanka?

- **Neglection of foreign market**- At the end of its civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka chose to focus more on its domestic markets instead of selling to foreign ones.
- So income from exports remained low, while the bill for imports kept growing.
- **Debt crisis**- The government racked up huge debts with countries including China, to fund what critics have called unnecessary infrastructure projects.
- Sri Lanka's government has racked up $51bn in foreign debt and the government failed to make repayments totalling $78m.
- **Reduced forex reserves**- Sri Lanka's problems come down to the fact that its foreign currency reserves have virtually run dry.
- **Affects tourism**- The government blames the Covid pandemic, which killed off Sri Lanka's tourist trade - one of its biggest foreign currency earners.
- **Tax cuts**- President Rajapaksa decided to offer big tax cuts because of which the government now has less money to buy foreign currency.
- **Banning chemical fertilisers**- Banning all imports of chemical fertiliser and promoting the use organic fertilisers instead led to widespread crop failures.
- An IMF report said the fertiliser ban (reversed in November 2021) had also hurt tea and rubber production, leading to substantial export losses.

What is the current movement about?

- Young social activists had been organising things over the last year for a new political culture.
- Inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, Black Lives Matter, the Arab Spring, the Indian farmers' movement and Shaheen Bagh, they created an enclave for an alternative vision of Sri

Lanka.
- The emphasis was on non-violence, democracy, ethnic harmony and creative expression.
- Trade unions, the environmental movement, professional associations, all-island student, academic unions, civil society groups and religious leaders of all faiths also made their way.
- Lawyers also mingled with the protesters and intervened if there was any tension or difficulty.

What about the participation of people from north and the east?

- The protests have celebrated the Tamil culture and language as never before in a Sri Lankan gathering but there is no discussion of devolution or a Tamil nation.
- There is also deference to the rank and file of the army .
- Many from the Jaffna University Students Union and women from the north and the east have been quite active in their participation.
- Tamils have participated at the local level and were a part of the hartals that have taken place throughout the island but it is not the fullest active participation.

What lies ahead?

- There will be no stability until the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.
- Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as Prime Minister and he should command not only the confidence of Parliament but also the confidence of the protesters as well.
- Bar Association in Sri Lanka has proposed to return to the 19th Amendment, especially its provisions on
    - the independent judiciary and independent commissions
    - abolishing of the executive presidency through a 21st Amendment
    - setting up of the economic framework for International Monetary Fund (IMF) negotiations
- The IMF has signalled that it will go ahead with its negotiations since there seems to be an all-party consensus for that to happen.

References

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