



INTERNATIONAL  
CENTRE FOR  
ETHNIC STUDIES

# ECHOES OF THE ARAGALAYA

A Multifaceted Glimpse into the Sri  
Lankan Protest Movement

**KIMAYA BALENDRA**





**Echoes of the *Aragalaya*:  
A Multifaceted Glimpse into the Sri Lankan  
Protest Movement**

**Kimaya Balendra**

**International Centre for Ethnic Studies**

**2025**

Echoes of the *Aragalaya*: A Multifaceted Glimpse into the Sri Lankan Protest Movement

© 2025 International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES)

2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka

E-mail : [admin@ices.lk](mailto:admin@ices.lk)

URL : [www.ices.lk](http://www.ices.lk)

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-624-5502-39-4

Copyright to this publication belongs to the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES). This publication or parts of it can be used by others for free as long as they provide a proper reference to the original publication. The interpretations and conclusions expressed in the study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of ICES.



Cover photograph: Created on Canva.com

**Echoes of the *Aragalaya*:  
A Multifaceted Glimpse into the Sri Lankan  
Protest Movement**

**Kimaya Balendra\***

---

\* Kimaya Balendra was an intern at ICES from June 2023 to January 2024 and is currently reading for a degree in International and Public Affairs, and Economics at Brown University, USA.



## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Shreen Saroor, Vraie Balthazar, Yamindra Watson Perera, Anjalee Waduragala, Serena Burgess and Satya Burgess for taking time to speak to me extensively. Their varying experiences and viewpoints of the Aragalaya are invaluable.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Where We Came From: Background and Beginnings .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Supercut: Our Most Memorable Moments at the <i>Aragalaya</i> .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Empowerment and Broken Barriers: The Positive Aspects of the Movement.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>From One to Many: The Expansion of the Movement’s Agenda .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Addressing the Disappointing Truth: The Limitations of the Movement.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Rewind: A Thoughtful Look at the Past.....</b>	<b>16</b>



## Introduction

The *Aragalaya* ('public uprising' or 'struggle' in Sinhala) was a decisive time in the lives of many Sri Lankans. It was a mass protest movement that began with a single gathering in March 2022, near president Gotabaya Rajapakse's private residence in Nugegoda, Colombo. It was spurred on after the police opened fire at a public protest in Rambukkana, Kegalle on 19 April 2022, killing an individual. At the time, most people in Sri Lanka had experienced power cuts of more than six hours long. Very high inflation had eroded purchasing power. There was no fuel to travel. These problems were mainly the result of the dollar shortage, unrealistic tax reforms and irresponsible governance. Sri Lanka was facing a full-blown economic crisis. Many citizens became involved in protests- be it at Galle Face in central Colombo where the historic '*GotaGoGama*' was formed, or on their own streets while fearlessly breaking curfew.<sup>1</sup> All of us were part of a defining moment in Sri Lankan history where the power of the people was portrayed by thousands and thousands of angry citizens. The unprecedented lack of essentials spurred a protest movement that ousted the President. Through this essay, I am striving to report the views and stories of a few who were very involved in the movement. They come from different backgrounds and vary in age- bringing out a multitude of perspectives that I was fascinated to hear and learn from. I set about doing so by asking ICES as well as my own acquaintances for contacts of those whom they knew were heavily involved in the *Aragalaya*. I met my interviewees individually on Zoom, where they answered a series of questions that I had prepared.<sup>2</sup> The sessions each gave me new insight into the protest movement, and expanded my own view of it. It was an experience that I hope I can give this essay's reader at least a small taste of.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Gota' was used colloquially to refer to the president, Gotabaya Rajapakse. '*GotaGoGama*' was the protest village that was the centrepiece of the *Aragalaya*'s activities. 'Gama' means 'village' in Sinhala.

<sup>2</sup> These interviews were conducted in English between June and October 2023.



*Protest on 9 July 2022*

Source: Serena Burgess's Photo Archives

## Where We Came From: Background and Beginnings

When asked if she had been involved in civil society work before the *Aragalaya*, Satya Burgess, age 16 and a student from Colombo, spoke of her environmental activism as the founder of Earth Guardians. Through previous protests for causes such as the protection of habitats, climate change awareness, and eco-friendly products she had made various connections, many of whom were part of the early *Aragalaya* protests. Her mother, Serena, 50 and a yoga teacher, was the “most passionate” and inspired both herself and her younger brother Jai to make the protest village their home. I spoke to Serena, who asserted that even though she was not involved in politics at all, their family always made an effort to stand up for what was right. Anjalee Waduragala, of age 22 and a university student currently studying in the United States said that her mother worked at an NGO. This was her background in civil society work. Yamindra Watson Perera, age 53 and from Colombo, had not been any sort of activist before the *Aragalaya*. Yamindra spoke to me from Canada and said that she travels often. She recalled that the frustration of the people was too evident to ignore, even while being away from the country. Yamindra began her activism while remembering her grandmother who had protested at Galle Face Green years previously, after the enactment of the Sinhala Only Act.<sup>3</sup> Both Yamindra and Satya said that they felt they had to become part of the collective voice, especially given the influence of their family figures.

Unlike Yamindra, Satya, Serena, and Anjalee, Shreen Saroor, 54, has been involved in feminist work since 1990. “For many of us feminists, our personal life is political,” she said. Shreen founded the Mannar Women’s Development Federation (she is originally from Mannar) and has continuously worked for women’s empowerment with various development agencies. She also launched WAN (Women’s Action Network) which addresses traditional challenges for women such as domestic violence, and post-Civil War issues such as abductions and resettlement. WAN also pays special attention to rebuilding interethnic relationships. This is a passion of Shreen’s, and in my conversation with her,

---

<sup>3</sup> The Sinhala Only Act was an act passed in the Sri Lankan parliament in 1956 that made Sinhala the sole official language of the country, subsequently excluding the Tamil language. This was protested against as it signified the blatant exclusion of the Tamil minority by the majority Sinhalese.

she often mentioned the Northern Tamil people's part in the *Aragalaya* and its message. Shreen has been involved with civil society work for most of her life, and she felt as though joining the movement was only right to unseat the corrupt government, and also to hold them accountable for civil war crimes.<sup>4</sup> I also spoke to Vraie Balthazar, 38, who is a politician and was previously a mayoral candidate of Colombo. She is also a feminist researcher, looking at issues such as labour rights, access to services and violence against women. Unlike all others I have interviewed, she became part of the *Aragalaya* through politics as a part of the National People's Power (NPP). She went into the protest site with the Socialist Youth Union (SYU), an organized group affiliated with the NPP, to talk and share ideas of change.

I found it interesting that, according to Shreen, "*Aragalaya*", is technically not a new concept to Sri Lankans. In the North, many "*Aragalayas*" had occurred previously in relation to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and accountability for war crimes. Shreen detailed that when traveling from Mannar to Colombo, every town had seen a protest. There were many signs of the "struggle", all leading to Colombo's Galle Face. Those from the North were inspired by the uproar, and participated in *GotaGoGama*. They called for the repealing of the PTA, accountability for the families of the disappeared and abolishing the executive presidency, which were issues commonly brought up by people from the North. "These messages started with them," Shreen told me.

Yamindra spoke of seeing smaller protests by farmers who were affected by the regulation of fertilizer.<sup>5</sup> The incompetence of the government angered her, and she became more interested in politics due to this frustration. After seeing the middle classes start to rise up, she wanted to lend her voice to the collective effort. Similarly, Serena remembers a day in April that further fuelled her family's decision to get involved. Before curfew was enacted, they saw many local protests in action, with a large one occurring at *Nelum*

---

<sup>4</sup> A resolution passed by the UN Human Rights Council accused the Sri Lankan government of "obstructing accountability" for war crimes committed during the country's 25-year civil war. These include forced disappearances and artillery use in "no-fire" zones.

<sup>5</sup> Gotabaya Rajapakse's government banned the import and use of conventional agricultural chemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers in April 2021. This led to a reduction in yield and an increase in food prices throughout the country, contributing to its economic crisis. In November 2021, the ban was partially revoked in the case of critical export crops, but food prices remained high.

*Pokuna* roundabout. The sheer amount of people was incredibly moving, highlighting the collective voice- the pull of the people’s suffering and anger that was almost impossible to ignore. Serena also shares a sentiment with Anjalee- they both said that during this time, they were very aware of their privilege. If they and their families were finding it hard, they could not imagine the lives of those who were disadvantaged, who were facing much more difficulty. They felt that they absolutely had to contribute. “This is where I should be. This is what I have to do. That’s how I thought back then,” Serena reflects. Her daughter Satya commends her consciousness. This determination, which was shared by everyone participating in the protests, was monumental.



*Residential tent at GotaGoGama*

Source: Serena Burgess’s Photo Archives

## **Supercut: Our Most Memorable Moments at the *Aragalaya***

Each person who lent their voice and heart to the movement remembers moments that they felt were incredible- so I asked my interviewees about their own. Significantly, a date that was mentioned often when I posed this question was 9 May, which we all remember as the day government supporters violently cracked down on the protest site. Tents were burning, people were being attacked with clubs and other weapons- over 150 were injured.<sup>6</sup> Satya said that even though she doesn't particularly remember the *Aragalaya* by certain days, she can recall this one. She felt inundated with fear- for her mother, for everyone who had become like a family to her in that last month. The protest site on Galle Face Green was a whirring, thriving village of a community that shared a goal- system change. There was a logistical side to it- such as the provision of basic needs - Anjalee worked on this. Similarly, Satya and Serena's family worked at People's Power, an organization that would hand out food, water and other essentials to protestors. Satya recalls a medical tent, a cinema, a kitchen, a library and even a law tent where people could learn about their rights. Seeing some of these community symbols burn shattered everyone's hearts, but only made them angrier. The *Aragalaya* would not be broken so easily. The people were resilient and continued to speak out, to protest and to demand change.

In the early days of the *Aragalaya*, the people participating were from the upper-lower middle classes that lived in Colombo and its suburbs.<sup>7</sup> However, as the movement grew, more people from different classes and ethnicities joined the ranks. Shreen spoke of a beautiful moment when bishops and priests mobilised and washed the feet of protesters; regardless of race, religion and social class, everyone was a part of the people's movement. She and Satya also recall the Muslim community celebrating Ramadan at the *Gama* by breaking fast. People of different faiths came forward to help and show their support on this day. There were many instances such as this where barriers of faith and ethnicity were

---

<sup>6</sup> Source: Human Rights Watch, *Sri Lanka: Government Backers Attack Peaceful Protestors*, 10 May 2022

<sup>7</sup> Source: Law and Society Trust, *LST Review, Vol 31, Issue 349: Aragalaya*, pg. 53, June 2023



broken. Vraie remembers 14 April -the Sinhala and Tamil New Year or “*Avurudu*”- she spoke of the love, support and unity felt on the streets. There was traditional New Year food being served, and everyone would celebrate together. Anjalee said, “As a young person, seeing this religious coexistence for a common cause was uplifting and unlike anything I have seen before.” These were true positive parts of the movement- everyone was respected and acknowledged. Satya and Serena spoke of the Pride March in June- “Our family dressed up in the different colours of the pride flag,” said Serena. There had not been a Pride event of such a large scale in Sri Lanka before the *Aragalaya*. Even the LGBTQ+ community- who were for so long forced to be in the shadows- were able to walk without fear through the *Gama*. Serena also mentioned the participation of those with disabilities in the protests- others who are unfairly hidden in society.

There were also other citizens who had important messages to make heard. Various trade and student unions were monumental in gathering support for the movement. The IUSF (Inter University Student Federation) played a major role in increasing the number of student protestors by using its organizational power to get people on the streets. In June 2022, they organized a protest march against the shortage of food, medicine, electricity and fuel. Students ended up on the front lines- they were tear-gassed multiple times by the police. Students were perceived as leaders among those who protested.



*Avurudu Celebrations during the Aragalaya*

Source: NewsWire



*Pride March during the Aragalaya*

Source: Serena Burgess's Photo Archives

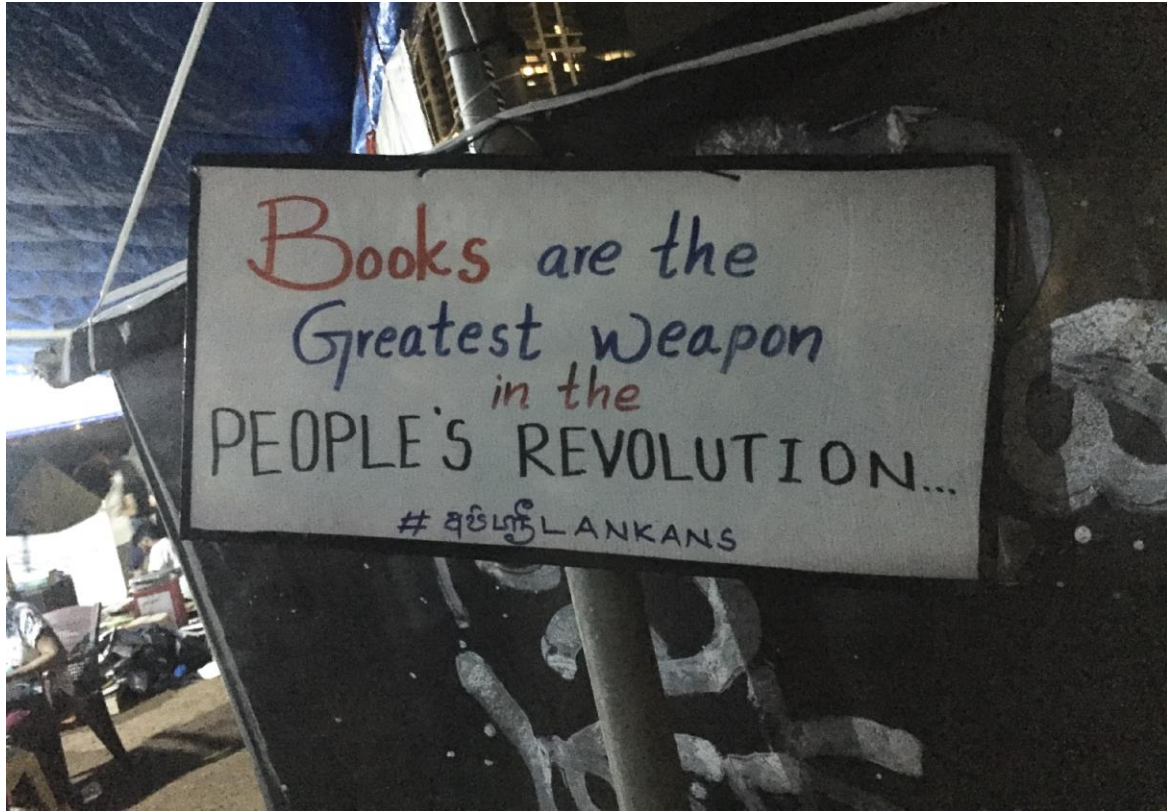
## **Empowerment and Broken Barriers: The Positive Aspects of the Movement**

When asked about her views on the positive aspects of the *Aragalaya*, Anjalee mentioned the people's resilience and their will to assist in any way they could. Everyone had something to contribute: whether it was donating food to the *Gama*, helping with setting up tents, or taking to the streets. Each role was important. "The collective support that *GotaGoGama* received from different strata of society was an important positive," noted Shreen. Yamindra said that the strength of the protestors increased each time there was a political victory- namely the resignations of the President and Prime Minister. She calls the *Aragalaya* an "exercise of democracy", referring to our agency as Sri Lankan citizens. "Even 'the most voted in President' as scared," Vraie said.<sup>8</sup> The resignations showed that the movement was somewhat able to achieve its goal of ousting the corrupt and irresponsible dynasty that was in power- although it did not mean that the government was cleansed completely. However, the courage of the people was not in vain: the *Aragalaya* increased the political consciousness of those who had previously been apathetic or unbothered. "We woke up!" exclaimed Serena. Shreen asserts that the protests showed a vast contrast to the past, when it was only activists who spoke on the streets for change. Every part of Sri Lanka had felt the pain of the crisis. A whole generation of teenagers and children, such as Satya and myself, were affected by the movement and learned from it.

A truly moving aspect of the *Aragalaya* was the way it used the arts as a tool of protest and voicing opinions. There was a performance of a Sinhala artist that referred to Black July '83, condemning the terrible injustices towards the Tamil people. The public also took part in this, increasing its impact. According to Shreen, art such as this created the space for talks about civil war accountability and those who disappeared during the war, which had long been awaited. *GotaGoGama* was undoubtedly a place for education, difficult conversations and the much-needed support of a community.

---

<sup>8</sup> Gotabhaya Rajapakse won by a large majority at the 2019 presidential election. 52.25% of votes were in favor of him.



*Sign at the protest village*

Source: Satya Burgess's Photo Archives

## **From One to Many: The Expansion of the Movement's Agenda**

While considering the questions for my interviews, I was interested in understanding the different calls for change that became a part of the *Aragalaya*'s agenda as time passed. When asked about it, both Satya and Serena said that they felt as though “*Gota Go Home*” was never the true agenda of the movement, but a slogan. “It was catchy, and it got people excited,” Satya said. In reality, the movement stood for many visions- transparency, system change and good governance. Yamindra said that one way to observe the expansion of different motives was by paying attention to the posters held by protestors, which reflected what they were fighting for. Vraie notes that the movement went beyond the “*Gota Go Home*” slogan soon after it began to pick up speed - it started to include calls for inclusivity, equity, equality and even environmental protection. Serena also remembers a beach cleanup that was a part of the *Aragalaya*.

Shreen mentioned another important focus- countering racism. The movement as a whole was multiethnic and multireligious. It also brought the plight of the ethnic minorities of our country, the Muslims and Tamils, to the forefront. Sinhala activists were making a renewed effort to fight for change and bridge the gaps between the ethnicities. On the religious front, the Catholic community demanded justice for the victims of the Easter Attack of 2019.<sup>9</sup> The President had failed to keep his electoral promise of holding those who were responsible accountable. In addition, Anjalee said that the demands for system change included free and fair elections, which are the key to a democracy- Sri Lanka's political sphere needed a change, one that has not yet occurred in 2023.

---

<sup>9</sup> The Easter Sunday attacks were a series of suicide bombings carried out by an Islamic terrorist group in April 2019. They mainly targeted Sri Lanka's Christian community, with attacks on churches and hotels that were holding Easter Sunday events.

### **Addressing the Disappointing Truth: The Limitations of the Movement**

Although the *Aragalaya* had an overwhelmingly positive impact, there were negatives associated with it, my interviewees told me with sadness that was tinged with resignation. Yamindra and Satya both acknowledge the negative connotation that the *Aragalaya* began to take on. “The burning of the Prime Minister’s home gave it a bad name,” Yamindra said. Satya focused more on the media coverage- the narrative was spun so that the protests seemed violent and destructive. The burning of the Prime Minister’s home as portrayed by some sections of the media had a negative impact on the general perception of the *Aragalaya*. The students of Sri Lankan state universities, who were a large part of the protests were subject to varied online discourse on if they were helping or hindering the movement. The reality of their roles was not presented accurately. Another negative that was taken up by Vraie and Anjalee was the fact that the movement lacked political leadership. “The system is political, therefore the solution had to be political,” Vraie told me. Unfortunately, new leaders could not breach the government in a way that could make an immediate impact. Similarly, the effectiveness of a leaderless movement that is so large can be called into question. “The movement became easy for people to criticize,” said Anjalee. “We were called disorganized, not knowledgeable enough.” “It was not sustainable,” Serena said, in a similar opinion. “There was not enough of a strategy.”

The natural flow of the conversation after that was to the topic of an ending, or a halt to the large, collective protests. When asked if they think the movement truly ended, I was fascinated to hear varying answers. Vraie asserted that it never ended as the people’s struggle was not over. “It is still much harder to survive than it was before the economy collapsed- people are now taking loans to eat,” she said. The struggle is still alive, as citizens are not as subservient and are more open about showing dissent. Shreen said that some are still on the streets- “The larger *Aragalaya* died down,” she noted, “But they split into different spaces.” As a result of the movement, people’s councils, youth awareness groups and new forums have sprung up that openly air the issues of the people. Satya also asserted that it didn’t truly end, but a large protest movement like it may not happen for some time. “It also gets tiring,” she told me. “The privileged got to think about system



change. Others thought simpler.” Here she is referring to how there is a lack of a catalyst at present, since fuel, food and electricity have been restored- which is what many people fought for. It is interesting to note that another event like the *Aragalaya* has not made itself known despite the continued governance issues within the country. The main driver of the movement may well have been as basic as the unprecedented shortage of essentials such as electricity and fuel.

The looming obstacle to a large protest movement such as the *Aragalaya* emerging again, according to many of my interviewees, are the oppressive policies of the government. Due to the enforcement of the PTA, the police and armed forces have more leeway. “People are afraid of getting arrested, or worse,” Satya told me solemnly. She is referring to the tear gas and water cannon violence that was unleashed on the protestors when the movement was in its prime, as well as the gun violence that happened near to its end. “How far will the government go to cling to power?” Serena mused. Vraie told me of several new proposed bills such as the Anti-Terrorism Act and the Online Safety Bill.<sup>10</sup> “They are methods of repression that increase government control,” she asserted. The postponement of elections also does not allow the democratic processes the country is meant to follow. Citizens have the right to choose their leadership. We may finally get that chance only this year, in 2024.

Shreen brought out an interesting point of the “brain drain” from this country- many educated people who were a part of the *Aragalaya* have migrated in search of new opportunities elsewhere. This is an obstacle to the organisation and sustainability of collective protest. She also considers the current government’s aims to appease the middle class. The middle class were huge donors to the *Aragalaya*- they funded food, water and other essentials that were integral to the survival of the movement. Shreen is of the opinion that the current President’s economic policies make it difficult for the corporate sector to support dissidence against him, ensuring that the middle class would not rise up as they did last year. Yamindra pointed out the ignorance present in the country. “Since

---

<sup>10</sup> This bill is now an Act, and is in effect as of late October 2023. These interviews were conducted between June and October 2023.

the economy is improving, they think everything will be hunky dory. This is the culture of Sri Lankan politics,” she told me. Anjalee responded a little more positively, although with reservations. She called Sri Lankans resilient in the way they forget and move on, but she recognized that in this case, it is negative. “We must remember our struggle in the face of distractions and oppression,” she stated.



*Sunset at the protest site*

Source: Satya Burgess' Photo Archives

## **Rewind: A Thoughtful Look at the Past**

When I had conversations with Shreen, Satya, Serena, Vraie, Yamindra and Anjalee, it had been more than a year since the *Aragalaya* first started. I asked my interviewees to explain how they felt when they looked back to that time in all of our lives. Yamindra said she feels a sense of “history”. She can’t believe how people came together and made an impact, just a year before. Still, she can’t help thinking “Have we really learned anything?” Anjalee thought of the lessons learned from the movement, and of how young people are more fearless and ready to learn and grow. Torn, Satya had mixed feelings. On one hand, she felt how empowering the movement and its community was, and on the other hand she couldn't help but be disappointed. “We weren’t heard enough for the government to do anything different,” she said, a sense of frustration in her tone. Vraie said she is able to look at it in a different context than before. At the time of the protests, there was no time to really think about the impact it had on Sri Lankan society. Everything was changing, and there was a sense of urgency that prompted action instead of true reflection. More than a year later, she is thankful for the political and personal awakening both she and many others had because of it.

Serena reflected on what she was feeling when the movement was just starting out. She remembers hearing the choir singing “Do you hear the people sing?” from *Les Misérables*, seeing the marching with the flags and posters, watching hidden communities become seen. “I was so hopeful and naive. I got caught up in the spirit of unity and love I witnessed,” she said, nostalgic. “I have no regrets about being a part of it. But the country needs change beyond the economy- it needs fundamental change.”

I recently passed Galle Face Green, now empty of the protest site that changed our lives in 2022. I saw kites high up in the sky, kids running around on the grass, and teenagers licking popsicles while watching the sunset. The normalcy of the scene was palpable. Seeing the Green back to the way it was, devoid of chants, posters and tents, made me realise how important it is to record people’s thoughts, and preserve them. There is barely anything left on the ground for future generations to visit and learn from, and for the

current youth to refer to. This is my small way of protecting what happened: maybe someone will remember this essay when there's another spark of revolution in the air.

# Echoes of the Aragalaya

## A Multifaceted Glimpse into the Sri Lankan Protest Movement

**Kimaya Balendra**

*Echoes of the Aragalaya: A Multifaceted Glimpse into the Sri Lankan Protest Movement* provides a deeply personal and reflective account of the mass protests that swept Sri Lanka in 2022. Through a series of one-on-one interviews with activists, students, and community leaders who were at the heart of the Aragalaya, this essay explores the diverse motivations and distinctive stories behind the uprising. From the initial frustrations over economic collapse and political corruption to the powerful moments of unity at Galle Face Green, it captures how citizens from all walks of life, from environmentalists and feminists to students and farmers, came together to demand change. The narrative extends to key events such as the violent crackdown on protesters, the emergence of religious and ethnic unity, and the transformative role of art and culture in the movement. As the country continues to navigate its challenges, this essay is a definitive reminder of the resilience, collective power, and ongoing struggle for justice that defined the Aragalaya.



INTERNATIONAL  
CENTRE FOR  
ETHNIC STUDIES