



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

REVIEW BY SHAKTHI DE SILVA
Lecturer, Royal Institute of Colombo

GOTABAYA FAILS TO OFFER EVIDENCE Where's the "International Conspiracy" That Toppled His Regime?

Gotabaya Rajapaksa, *The Conspiracy To Oust Me From The Presidency: How Internationally Sponsored Regime Change Made A Mockery Of Democracy In Sri Lanka*, published by Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Colombo, 2024, 193 pages, Sri Lankan Rupees 1800.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa's ascendancy as the Executive President of Sri Lanka in 2019 marked an inflection point in the island's political history. He was the first male non-career politician, and the first former military officer, to be democratically elected in the island since independence in February 1948. During his presidential term however, the island ran out of foreign exchange needed for essential imports, power cuts ranged from eight to twelve hours a day, and he was eventually ousted from power through public protests in July 2022 (Thowfeek, 2022). Several scholarly publications, as well as a recent Supreme Court ruling, ascribed a significant portion of the blame to the



policies adopted by the Gotabaya Administration (De Silva, 2025; Ng, 2023; Wickramasinghe, 2023; Wignaraja, 2024). These include a value-added tax cut and an income tax cut that cost Sri Lanka over 2 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (Bery, 2022); a ban on imported fertilizers, which contributed to crop failure, and increased reliance on food imports, thereby depleting the island's foreign reserves (De Silva, 2022); and the decision to engage in excessive money printing (Wijesinha, 2022).

It is against this backdrop that the release of the former President's autobiography, *The Conspiracy To Oust Me From The Presidency: How Internationally Sponsored Regime Change Made A Mockery Of Democracy In Sri Lanka*, marks a significant addition to the discourse surrounding Sri Lankan politics. The book was published in March 2024 and was reportedly sold out soon after its release (Deshapriya, 2024; Subramanian, 2024). As it is an autobiography, it provides a firsthand account of a Sri Lankan president's perspective on the events that led to his downfall. This is in contrast to previous biographies written by K.M. De Silva and Howard Wriggins (1988) of J.R. Jayewardene, Graeme Wilson (2005) of Chandrika Kumaratunga, Muthu Padmakumara's (2010) text *Mahinda* on Mahinda Rajapaksa, and Chathurika Sirisena's (2017) work on Maithripala Sirisena.

By examining Gotabaya's first-hand reflections, readers can gain deeper insights into the challenges of governance in Sri Lanka, the consequences of leadership choices, and the broader dynamics of power and accountability in a deeply polarized political landscape. Even so, it fails to make a convincing case for "internationally sponsored regime change," as it offers no empirical evidence of foreign involvement, and instead exposes a presidency hobbled by domestic interest groups,

ideological rigidity, and ultimately brought down as a consequence of economic mismanagement.

This review is based on the vernacular Sinhalese text rather than on the translated English version, to ensure precision and fidelity to the author's thoughts. The 193-page, 15-chapter autobiography is anecdotal rather than empirical. The original vernacular text (in Sinhalese) is written in a terse style in a first-person point of view. It runs through several important topics that mark his short-lived presidency from 2019 to 2022. The book covers the global Covid-19 pandemic, the policies adopted to deal with the pandemic, the regime's agriculture, investment and economic policies, and the reasons why his administration was overthrown in 2022. This review will focus primarily on the events leading up to his overthrow in 2022, evaluating whether his ouster was a case of internationally sponsored regime change, as the subtitle suggests.

The Myth of "Strongman Gotabaya"

As mentioned earlier, a striking duality from an optics standpoint is the public's perception of Gotabaya in 2019 as a decisive leader, unfazed by domestic interest groups, and how vulnerable his administration actually was to the pressure exerted by groups operating in the country (Wattegama, 2019). One of the first challenges his administration faced is detailed in pages 70-73. The author provides a lengthy explanation of how trade union workers were able to prevent his administration from finalizing an agreement to allow Japan and India to develop the Colombo Port's Eastern Container Terminal. In pages 75-77, he adds that trade unions and other domestic interest groups thwarted his ability to finalize an agreement for the West Coast LNG Power Project. Both cases give us an interesting illustration of the gap between Gotabaya Rajapaksa's

public image as a strong, decisive leader and the reality of his administration's susceptibility to domestic political interest group pressure. This duality highlights the challenges of governance in a politically fragmented environment, where even a leader perceived as a 'strongman' can be constrained by the very forces he is expected to transcend. More importantly, from the onset, it is apparent that Sri Lanka's foreign and domestic policy appears to be significantly influenced, not necessarily by foreign nations as the subtitle suggests, but rather by domestic interest groups.

Gotabaya's attitude towards Sri Lankan minority communities surfaces throughout the text. The book begins with the former president reflecting on his election victory in 2019, ascribing it to the votes by the Sinhalese Buddhist majority community, juxtaposing this, rather strongly, against the minorities (both ethnic and religious) who, in his view, were against him from the outset (pp. 9–11). On page 97, he specifically mentions that almost no Sinhalese Buddhist citizens participated in the *Aragalaya* (civil protest movement), which ousted him from power in July 2022. He adds, on page 98, that the *Aragalaya* was an "anti-Sinhalese, especially anti-Buddhist" movement led by minority communities. The movement, in his view, was not driven by the absence of fuel, essential medicine, or the runaway inflation that was plaguing the economy, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary (pp. 95–98; also see Bhattacharjee, 2022).

Gotabaya addresses one of the long-standing criticisms against his administration (pp. 116–154): why didn't Sri Lanka turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for help sooner, given the looming debt crisis? In the author's view, the only policy required to address the debt crisis in the island was to spur economic growth. IMF recommendations were believed to hinder such prospects (p. 122). This conviction

demonstrates how the former President's predisposition against the IMF clouded his judgment. His unwarranted optimism about short-term economic growth in late 2021, and his belief that foreign reserves would increase quickly after the Covid-19 crisis, suggests a misreading of economic conditions or overconfidence in short-term recovery (Fernando, 2022). This rare opportunity to peer into the inner workings of Sri Lanka's decision-making paints a picture of a leadership shaped more by ideological convictions than by responsiveness to Sri Lanka's looming economic crisis.

Lack of Hard Evidence on Foreign Interference

The autobiography also illuminates Gotabaya's tendency to direct blame onto his subordinates (pp. 160–170). He admits that 'apolitical' appointees from the *Viyathmaga*—a group of professionals with a background in academia, economics, and law—failed to effectively perform their duties when appointed to important positions in government, leading the public to believe that his administration was incompetent. The head of the state intelligence service, Major General Suresh Sally, is also criticized for not obtaining support from all quarters to effectively perform his duties. Similarly, Defense Secretary Kamal Gunaratna, and Commander of the Army General Shavendra Silva—once close allies of Gotabaya—are blamed for not having taken decisive measures to quell the public protests.

Interestingly, while the book's subtitle places foreign actors at the centre of the narrative, they hardly feature in the text. The author provides no empirical evidence that foreign actors funded or organized domestic interest groups, the *Aragalaya*, or even coordinated with key officials in his administration to damage his public image. In sum, despite its modest empirical foundation, *The Conspiracy* offers a rare

glimpse into the mindset of a former Sri Lankan president, shedding light on Gotabaya Rajapaksa's views on minority communities, international institutions like the IMF, and the roots of Sri Lanka's economic crisis. It informs us of the influence wielded by trade unions and civil society in shaping Sri Lanka's domestic and foreign policy—even in an administration which claimed that it would be devoid of such undue influence—and the extent to which policymakers such as Gotabaya can reflect on his term and identify where he went wrong. The book also exposes the top-down nature of policymaking, as the President appears to have adopted policies with little to no input from those who might disagree with him (pp. 182–192).

In the end, the autobiography prompts a broader discourse on leadership accountability and the complexities of governance in Sri Lanka's political landscape, while also underscoring the need to engage critically with political legacies. For scholars and practitioners of South Asian politics—and Sri Lankan politics in particular—this book is a critical addition to ongoing debates on governance, leadership, and the fragility of democratic institutions in times of crisis.

Note on the Reviewer

Shakthi De Silva serves as a Lecturer for the University of London International Relations programmes at the Royal Institute of Colombo. He also teaches International Relations courses at the Bandaranaike International Diplomatic Training Institute (BIDTI), the Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC), and the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS). His recent publications include a 2025 book chapter titled “Unpacking Australia's ‘China Threat’ Discourse: A Constructivist Approach” in *The Role of Threat Perceptions in International Relations* (Taylor and Francis), and an Op-Ed in the *St.*

Anthony's International Review (published by the University of Oxford) on American soft power. He previously served as a Vasey Fellow (Non-Resident) at Pacific Forum International in Hawai'i (2023–2024), and as a Lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. His research focuses on Indian Ocean geopolitics, great power politics, and Sri Lanka's foreign policy.

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