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The Galle Face protest (2022) in Sri Lanka and social media activism through Facebook

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Abstract

The public uprising that took place in the year 2022 in Sri Lanka mainly in the Galle Face esplanade in the Colombo Fort administrative area against the then government headed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksha was a major public uprising in the Sri Lankan history and it is identified here as the Galle Face protest (2022). An anti-government protest of this scale, which ran for several months, needed good communication among the activists and social media played a major role in this regard. The goal of this research was to evaluate the impact of the social media platform Facebook as a medium of communication in the initiation and development of the Galle Face protest. The study examined how activists used the social medium Facebook as a tool to shape public opinion by instigating people at the outset and during the development of the protest. Views of the activists in this regard were examined and based on them, recommendations were made on how to use Facebook as an effective as well as responsible mode of communication for political activism. For this qualitative analysis of data collected from fifteen protesters through interviews were used as primary data and records on the protest and reports on global protests were used as secondary data. Data contributors were selected and interviewed using purposive and snowball sampling methods of non-probability sampling technique. The data were analysed based on nine main themes under thematic analysis, including creating communication networks, motivation, building self-interest, protection of activists, etc. The findings revealed that Facebook played a main role in the initiation and dissemination of the Galle Face protest and thus Facebook worked as an effective medium of communication for the success of the protest. In contrast, conventional media in the form of television and newspapers owned and controlled by the government failed against the protest while the privately owned such media stayed away from the fray giving in to the onslaught of social media.

Keywords: Galle Face protest, Social media, Facebook

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Introduction

According to the Cambridge dictionary (1995) meaning of Public in English is relating to or involving people in general, rather than being limited to a particular group of people. Meaning of protest is to say or do something to show that you are against something. (Cambridge Dictionary, 1995). Public protests are often made against a socially visible injustice drawing the attention of others to it. Melgaco and Monaghan (2018) in their book titled 'Protests in the Information Age' pointed out that most of the mass demonstrations that take place in the social media era have ended by achieving the goals of the protest (Melgaco and Monaghan, 2018). However, the public demonstration history of Sri Lanka before the era of social media shows that only a few public protests have ended by achieving the objectives of the protest while most of the others have ended without achieving the goals. Breuer, Landman, & Farquhar, (2012) described the influence of social media in mass mobilization for the first time in the world in Tunisia against the government headed by Ben Ali. The 17th of December 2010 marked the beginning of protests in Tunisia when a young man named Mohamed Bouazizi set fire on himself in the town of Sid Bouzid. Since then, mass uprisings have been organized around the world through new awakenings created on social media, many of which have ended with the realization of the initial objective.

In the year 2022, the protest known in the local language Sinhala as '*Aragalaya*' that took place in the Galle Face area in Colombo, Sri Lanka was a remarkable event in the history of the island. According to activists the camp named as '*Gotagogama*' (to mean the camp or village that demands the departure of Gotabhaya, the president of the republic) erected by the protestors in the Galle Face esplanade was the epicentre of the uprising against the political regime of that time (Polkotuwa, 2022). People took to the streets in different areas of Sri Lanka displaying placards criticizing the then government for a prevailing economic crisis. The severe shortage in fuel, electricity and cooking gas, fuel shortage that affected the generation of electricity forcing lengthy power cuts, contributed to the economic misery faced by the people (Dahanayaka, 2022). A visible public discontent appeared in the vicinity of Colombo. To organize this protest, the coordination of the protests by activists using social media started on the 09th of April 2024. The cause of the economic crisis was seen in social media as corruption in the government (Polkotuwa, 2022). Although the government owned and controlled two television stations and several newspapers in Sinhala, English and Tamil, the three prominent languages in the country, all such conventional mass media were found to be inefficient against the onslaught of social media. The protests which ended on the 22nd of July culminated in toppling the government headed by the then president Gotabhaya Rajapaksha forcing him to flee the country. The 2022 Galle Face protest is seen as a model for Sri Lankan social revolution (Palliyaguru, 2022). Social media took over as the leading mode of communication in the protest. A platform for novel and creative ideas was provided by social media, especially by Facebook. Mobile phone live videos circulated wildly in Facebook and similar media were used as evidence to support the release of arrested activists who were not involved in anything illegal (Perera, 2022). Social media helped to rally around many from the middle classes including professionals, artists, and intellectuals who had been largely elusive to mass activities. Rajaratnam (2022) named communication activities through social media during the 2022 protests as citizen journalism.

Citizen journalism builds on the citizens' ability to use digital media as a platform for citizen discourse. According to Senanayaka and Edirisinghe (2022), new political concepts were introduced into public dialogue by providing both a substitute and a critique for illiberal democracy. Social media created a digital platform for the people of a country to demand their right to information, free speech, and peaceful assembly. The need for citizen journalism by means of social media arises against traditional media which are often controlled by various political or business agendas. Society, which constantly watches what will happen next, immediately embraces communication created by social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Jinadasa, 2022). Social media became a platform to create, edit, research, verify and analyse information collectively. The function of Facebook as a social media platform used during the Galle Face protest creating a global platform for citizen journalism, was what was investigated in the present research. The views of social media activists on the need for information and on the impact of Facebook were assessed. The specific aim of the research was to explore the impact of Facebook as a citizen media on social activism during the Galle Face protest 2022 in Sri Lanka and the results were used to make recommendations for the effective and responsible use of Facebook by citizens.

Methodology

The research methodology was primarily based on interpretivism, a research philosophy that emphasizes the importance of understanding the experiences and perspectives of individuals and groups and how they construct interpretations within their social and cultural contexts. By studying how the protesters used Facebook as a medium of communication for citizens during the Galle Face protest, it was possible to explore the influence of such citizen media. The data analysis of the study was based on qualitative research methodology and the research approach was of deductive research orientation.

The research was conducted using data taken from social media activists and public opinion leaders who were involved in the initiation and spread the news of the protest. How Facebook was used for communication in the period of protest was obtained as primary qualitative data through the semi-structured interviews conducted with the protesters using a pre-determined interview guide. Face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews or Zoom interviews were conducted as per the wishes of the participants. Open-ended questions were prepared based on data obtained from previous research. Participants were interviewed as data contributors using purposive sampling and snowball sampling. A sample of fifteen people was selected to study the research problem. Four face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted. Two interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform and the remaining nine interviews were conducted over the telephone. All the face-to-face semi-structured interviews were recorded in real time using a telephone recording application. Out of the telephone interviews, six interviews were conducted through WhatsApp and the remaining three were conducted through conventional telephone calls. All the online interviews were also recorded. The recording of all the interviews were done with the prior permission of the interviewees. The use of Facebook by the activists during the period of protest was studied using the content analysis of their Facebook accounts and pages. The data thus obtained were computerized securely with passwords and were converted into soft copies with the help of Microsoft Word. To sample the data obtained, NVIVO software was used and then double-checked to ensure the accuracy of the data samplings.

Newspaper reports, booklets, and research papers about the protest published in both Sinhala and English languages were used as the secondary data. The advertisements made by the protesters on Facebook during the protest period were also extensively used as secondary data. The secondary data was used to understand, contextualize and analyse the collected data to obtain some form of utility. Data obtained through interviews were analysed by thematic analysis method. Interpretations, theme identification and organization were made about the data and themes. Both repetitive and reversible coding processes were used. A pilot study was also carried out based on the data obtained.

Results and discussion

According to the results, corruption by politicians was perceived as a major factor in the protest. The interviewees believed that the people were constantly being oppressed by the unfair and unjust policies and decisions made by the politicians who held power in Sri Lankan politics for decades. All the contributors of data stated the fact that ordinary life was becoming a struggle for people and that was a contributory factor for the protest. According to their views and perceptions, people were severely affected by the incomprehensible decisions taken by the rulers, and the demonstrations started appearing once it was no longer tolerable. The depreciation of the value of the local currency against the US dollar worsened the economic crisis, persuading more people to join the protest. A few respondents agreed that the protest was organized to rectify the wrongdoing made in Sri Lankan history, in the form of looting of public money by politicians. They believed that the situation that has arisen because of many of such contributory factors existed throughout time and culminated in 2022.

The use of Facebook as the main medium of communication in place of conventional media such as television and newspapers for directing and communicating the protest was found to be due to the following weaknesses of conventional media as pointed out by the interviewees. Ten of them believed that conventional media organizations worked according to their own political agendas. Two people agreed that the conventional media were unilateral in views, and people used social media as an alternative means of communication. It was stated by three respondents that Facebook was used as a means of communication in the protest because Sri Lankan conventional mass media were distorting information. This was found to be the main reason for activists to rely upon Facebook, which was widely used by the Sri Lankan populace, to manage the protests.

A post posted by Buddhi Prabodha Karunaratne on his Facebook account on the 29th March, 2022 was instrumental in organizing the silent protest held near Viharamaha Devi Park in Colombo. The post received more than 300 responses and all of them agreed with the post. The date and time were decided mainly in discussion with less than 10 people gathered as a group called “*Nagitimu* Sri Lanka”. The final decision thus made was communicated through Facebook to all those who had responded positively to the original post on the morning of the 30th of March 2022. The message was “Come to Viharamahadevi park today (Wednesday) at 5.30 pm. Bring items like a torch, a flash, a lantern, a candle” (3rd protester, 2023.03.08, personal communication).

The protest organizers created the text with the hashtag “#GoHomeGota2022”. A group of people, including a social media activist, came together and created the hashtag, and people with abilities

in using digital media joined them. While people gathered for the silent protest of the 03rd of April, Facebook content started using the hashtag “# GoHomeGota”. “We went to Colombo on 9th of April. I decided to go because of the campaigns on Facebook and what I saw on social media” (9th protester, 2023.03.19, personal communication). Since then, they created a variety of hashtags such as #Gotagohome, #giveourstolenmoney, #giveourstolenmoneyback, #gotagogama, #gotagohome2022 to spread their opinions via Facebook. It was clear that a lot of people involved in the protest used the hashtags. The use of hashtags became a powerful communication strategy commonly used by the protesters. It was proved that many people involved in the protest communicated Facebook content by using hashtags.

The basis for the Galle Face protest was the protest that started from Viharamaha Devi Park. Based on its motivation, the protest that started near the then president’s private residence in Pagiriwatte, Mirihane, Sri Lanka, soon developed into a violent protest. From there, as decided by a group of protestors, the main site of protest was created in the next morning in the Galle Face Green. Due to the initial low participation, one of the activists immediately posted the following on his Facebook account. “For the protest, 04 people have joined the Galle Face Green field, including myself, representing blind people” (7th Protester, 2023.03.31, personal communication).

Friends on his Facebook account started responding and those who could arrived at the venue of protest. People with Facebook accounts who read the post started posting content stating that a struggle started at Galle Face Green. As the protest progressed gradually, they named Galle Face Green as “Gota-go-gama”. The entire activities of on the Galle Face green were carried out under the leadership at the Galle Face by means of the communication network built through Facebook. Accordingly, hundreds of thousands of people became parties of the communication using the networking built through Facebook.

Facebook was used not only to persuade people to join in the protest but also to keep the camp going on by providing the necessary infrastructure facilities. It is the opinion of the data contributors that no one had the idea of providing a permanent site of protest with the required facilities. About 1,500 people daily visited the site but there was no water supply. “As a first step, later in the evening, I and others personally asked for water and as a result received a lot of responses with the Facebook requests” (7th protester, 2023.03.31, personal communication).

As the protest gradually progressed, the need for various facilities increased. There were not enough shelters, toilet facilities, food and drink to cater people who arrived at the site from all over Sri Lanka. Protesters used Facebook to call on the public to help meet those needs. As a solution groups such as food committee, health committee, and finance committee were formed using social media to organize the supply of those needs. When the protest was created, although there was no proper shape, purpose or direction, at the beginning, the protesters soon recognized the need to establish formal action committees with the necessary legal basis. Realizing that people constantly need legal advice to maintain the legality of the protest, the protest committee established a legal camp on the site of protest. The work of bringing in lawyers for that the legal camp was done mainly through Facebook and WhatsApp group called LEGAL AID CAMP. “The evidence needed to secure the release of the arrested activists was collected through Facebook and provided it to the lawyers” (2nd protester, 2023.03.02, personal communication). While

continuing the protest, a camp called Citizen's Council was created on the site by the protesters to make it a people-friendly protest. Facebook media were used to notify certain activities and decisions taken against the government in a confidential manner. The confidential and reliable communication network built through Facebook helped the activists to get the information that wooden sticks from a military camp in Dambulla were brought to Colombo by a lorry to attack the people engaged in the protest. Facebook was solely used to create and maintain a communication network between the activists and the public to share information about the protest plans and to discuss strategies. Activists used Facebook to get information from the public and to coordinate actions. Facebook groups and Facebook pages specifically created for the protest allowed the protesters and ordinary people to connect with each other and act accordingly. "We often used Facebook to discuss the next steps in the struggle, what actions to avoid, the legal situation, people's opinions about the struggle, and more" (15th protester, 2023.03.18, personal communication).

The social media process that brought a large gathering to the protest site on the 9th of April was remarkable because at that time, hardly any conventional media channels saw the protest as a people's protest. Instead, they called it something akin to a beach party. The protestors mainly used Facebook for the difficult task of bringing people into one place with one determination. The reason behind this success was that Facebook was the most popular social media in Sri Lanka at that time. Facebook was used by most Sri Lankans as their social media (OOSGA, 2023). According to the DataReportal website (2022), the number of social media users in Sri Lanka was 8.20 million as of January 2022. The following short phrases were used to encourage people to join the protest on the 09th of April: "9 April Colombo", "A million in Colombo", "Let's get the country together", "Let us see a victorious end to the ARAGALAYA", "April 9 at 9 am", etc.

As Facebook was mostly used by the youth of the country, the content creators targeted them, using slogans such as, "You messed with a wrong generation", "We are the last generation whose dreams will die", "We are the first generation to win dreams", "Let's change, let's change the next generation", "The new generation is changing that", "The love protest of youth", "We are the new generation to corrects the mistakes of history", etc. Such slogans were posted on Facebook during peak times, around 8-10 p.m., to reach the youth. During this period, the uploads were shared very quickly (15th protester, 2023.03.18, personal communication).

The protest was different compared to the previous Sri Lankan protests. The protestors who wanted it not to be seen as a radical militant protest named it as the Protest of Love. By creating a "Protest of Love" Facebook page, activists focused on motivation and enthusiasm among the protestors and encouraged others to participate in the protest. They worked to organize the protest based on environment-friendly ideas. The protestors mostly used black and white colours in the protest being careful not to use any colours identified with political parties. Red, which is mostly used in radical militant demonstrations, were used only minimally in the Galle Face protest.

Music was used in the protest as a powerful motivational medium. They created a lively and energetic atmosphere at the protest site by using simple musical instruments like guitars and drums. This process was very helpful in engaging the public in the protest as well as retain the activists throughout the duration of the protest. Furthermore, they also created and shared songs

based on special events, photos and videos of the protest, and songs promoting patriotism on Facebook. Heroic student songs, poems, etc. used by the Inter-University Student Union in their protests were used frequently during this time. Facebook accounts of prominent Sri Lankan figures such as popular singers and other artists came to the protest site were used to share and distribute the posts during the protests. Their fans were motivated through that. Also, the positive ideas presented by prominent people, were quickly shared through Facebook.

Results of the research suggested that motivation for the protest was accomplished through Facebook. During the peak of the protest, protesters focused more on using Facebook as a medium to build personal profiles. The photos, videos and Facebook live footage of how the ordinary people were subjected to police or army brutalities were shared and the injustice of those attacks motivated more people to join in. Data contributors largely agreed that people showed interest in preserving the image of women. Facebook medium was also used to prevent the spread of misinformation about the protest.

It was also observed that the protestors were interested in national unity and Facebook communication played a leading role in spreading the concept of national unity. Another key use of Facebook media was to guarantee public and activists' safety. 14 out of 15 contributors agreed that activists were anxious to defend themselves through Facebook Live videos. They identified Facebook as the most suitable safety net to protect themselves in an anti-government protest. Lawyers and professionals in law posted legal views on Facebook.

In cases where legal assistance was needed for those who were involved in the protest, support was sought through Facebook. They used Facebook to provide evidence related to their protest to show that nothing illegal occurred. Protesters formed groups on Facebook to share their evidence with each other.

The results showed that Facebook was used to get international support in case of a crackdown on the activists. Mainly by making Facebook posts using hashtags, it was possible to give updates about the protest from anywhere in the world. In addition, when the protesters did not get help within the legal framework of Sri Lanka, people who joined through Facebook and had relations with international organizations made the international community aware about this. Human Rights Organizations, the United Nations, the Geneva Committee etc. were able to prevent many illegal activities by creating awareness. Facebook media were also used for the protection of imprisoned activists. As an alternative medium, Facebook was used for official communication activities of citizen journalism. ARAGALAYA FM – A Facebook radio channel named Aragalaya FM devoted to the protest was created. Facebook discussion groups such as the People's Council and the Citizens' Council were created. Further, the action plan of the protest generated and socialized through Facebook explained the goals and the demands of the Galle Face protest 2022.

It was observed in this research that Facebook was used effectively as a crucial social media. The protesters used it very sensibly to reach the public, share the achievements of the protest and to reach their goals successfully. They created through Facebook protest-centred organizations and groups, increased public confidence about the protest, and created a space for expression of public opinion. Further, they conveyed a message to the people as well as to the government about its future goals and to set a proper direction for the protest.

Conclusions

When focusing on the use of Facebook looking at how the Galle Face Protest 2022 initiated and developed, it became clear that Facebook played a major role in this regard initially by organizing small demonstrations, as the precipitating actions led to the main protest. The public opinion was shaped to culminate as the Galle Face protest 2022 mainly through Facebook activities. The protesters got mass media coverage needed for the movement through Facebook. It was evident from the findings that social media platforms such as Facebook can be used very effectively in mass movements. Habermas' theory of public space (1991) encouraged individuals to act as members of the public space in a civic social need to build common opinion. He described the public space as a space related to holding civic discussions etc. for political society. It could be concluded that Facebook acted as a public space of protest for the initiation and maintenance of the Galle Face 2022 protest. Facebook interventions related to the protest were mostly done by the younger generation who actively engaged in Facebook activities questioning social injustices.

Lasswell (1948), who proposed the idea of functionalism, stated that functionalism expresses the response to environmental changes to maintain equilibrium among multiple groups in society. Activists took their message to the public using Facebook in all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors confirm that they had no conflict of interest.

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