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SRI LANKA'S
2022 CRISIS
AND SOCIAL
COHESION
A SNAPSHOT SURVEY

AN INITIATIVE BY THE
SRI LANKA BAROMETER



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Snapshot of the 2022 Crisis and Social Cohesion

In 2022, Sri Lanka plunged into an unprecedented economic crisis that exacerbated economic hardship for many and will impact the lives of all Sri Lankans for the foreseeable future. But the crisis also brought calls for greater unity and solidarity to the fore of public debate in Sri Lanka, where more than 10 years after the civil war, social divisions remain deeply embedded in the country's social fabric.

The Snapshot Survey “Sri Lanka's 2022 Crisis and Social Cohesion” explores how the crisis impacted issues related to social cohesion and reconciliation. It was carried out as part of the Sri Lanka Barometer initiative that is implemented by a consortium of partners, namely the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), and the Strengthening Social Cohesion and Peace in Sri Lanka (SCOPE) program. SCOPE is co-financed by the European Union and the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by GIZ in partnership with the Government of Sri Lanka.

The following sections summarise the Snapshot Survey's key findings that are based on responses to six survey questions from a nationally representative sample of 1,018 individuals aged 18 years and over.

1. The Crisis and Political Engagement

The findings show that the crisis motivated 50.3% of Sri Lankans to become more politically engaged. At the same time, 26.2% of Sri Lankans disengaged. Hence, while for just over half of Sri Lankans the worsening situation presented a call to action to participate more actively in the democratic process, others may have become disillusioned and ultimately withdrew.

2. The Crisis and the Inclusiveness of the *Aragalaya*

While a majority of Sri Lankans (64.2%) felt represented in the *Aragalaya*, the findings also demand caution around a general notion of unity associated with the movement. Specifically, the findings show that people from the Sinhalese community felt more represented (66.7%) than people from the Tamil (52.9%) or Muslim (52.3%) communities, indicating that a nuanced understanding of the *Aragalaya* needs to be cultivated as it may have been a people's movement for some more than for others.

3. The Crisis and Inter-ethnic Relationships

While roughly a third of Sri Lankans (32.4%) believed that relationships between ethnic groups improved as a result of the crisis, most Sri Lankans believed that relationships stayed the same (56.0%) and some believed that they had in fact gotten worse (11.6%). This indicates that while the impact of the crisis may have momentarily transcended historical divisions, inter-ethnic relationships require longer-term engagement to create meaningful connections and change.

4. The Crisis and the Importance of Recognising Past Injustices

A majority of Sri Lankans agreed that the crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices suffered by ethnic minorities (59.1%). While agreement levels have been higher among Muslims (72.3%) and Tamils (70.9%), still more than half of the Sinhalese community (56.6%) agreed that the crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices suffered by ethnic minorities, which is encouraging in a society where grievances from different social groups remain prevalent.

5. The Crisis and Confidence in Political Leadership

The findings show that while 39.5% of Sri Lankans experienced no change and 11.1% experienced an increase in confidence in the political leadership as a result of the crisis, 49.5% of Sri Lankans experienced a decrease in confidence. This reveals that the crisis had a substantial effect on Sri Lankan's confidence in the political leadership and indicates a sense of disappointment and disillusionment among many Sri Lankans that needs to be addressed.

I. Introduction

In 2022, Sri Lanka plunged into its worst economic crisis since the country’s independence in 1948, marked by sovereign debt default, soaring living costs, and shortages of petrol, gas, food and medicine. With many Sri Lankans struggling to maintain their livelihoods and afford basic necessities, a protest wave gained momentum across the country, effectively forcing the Prime Minister and President to resign.

Amidst the economic and social hardship, many people of diverse backgrounds – ethnic, religious, caste, class, and political views – came together in the *Aragalaya* movement (“struggle” in Sinhala) to protest shared economic and political issues and challenges. For some, the *Aragalaya* became a symbol of national unity, but there were also critical voices pointing to the hardships many people in the country, especially in the war-affected North and East, have endured for years.

Despite the differing and often discrepant characterisations of the *Aragalaya*, there is general consensus that the 2022 crisis had a profound impact on the country. To better understand how these developments impacted Sri Lanka’s social fabric, social cohesion and reconciliation, the Sri Lanka Barometer (SLB) initiative commissioned a Snapshot Survey titled “Sri Lanka’s 2022 Crisis and Social Cohesion”. This focused survey complements the SLB’s bi-annual public opinion survey, which provides a wider perspective on reconciliation and social cohesion in the country.

The SLB is a research initiative aimed at deepening the understanding of how Sri Lankans perceive reconciliation and its most salient dimensions, as well as tracking progress in each of these dimensions. The SLB comprises three components: a nationally representative public opinion survey conducted every two years; complementary qualitative research to further explore the findings of the survey; and an outreach component to stimulate an informed, evidence-based public discourse. Its overarching objective is to inform policy-making in the country’s pursuit of greater unity and inclusion.

The SLB is steered and implemented by a consortium of partners, including the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, who lead the quantitative research work; the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), who lead the qualitative research work; and the Strengthening Social Cohesion and Peace in Sri Lanka (SCOPE) program, who lead the communication and outreach work and are responsible for overall coordination. The SLB was first piloted under the program Strengthening Reconciliation Processes in Sri Lanka (SRP) between 2018 and 2022. Both SRP and SCOPE are co-financed by the European Union and the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by GIZ in partnership with the Government of Sri Lanka.

The findings of the Snapshot Survey are presented in this report; the findings of the bi-annual, large-scale SLB Surveys are available in separate reports,¹ but will be referred to here when relevant.

¹ See www.thebarometer.lk

2. Methodology and Sampling

The Snapshot Survey “Sri Lanka’s 2022 Crisis and Social Cohesion” was conducted as a module in a syndicated survey undertaken by Verité Research.² The Verité syndicated survey adopts a quantitative methodology and runs periodically to measure public opinion on selected issues at one point in time.

The SLB module comprised the following six survey items or questions/statements. Each of these questions/statements required respondents to select one of a maximum of four provided answers that best reflected their opinion or sentiment. All questions/statements and provided answers were translated into Sinhala and Tamil; respondents were interviewed in their language of choice. Data collection was carried out by Verité between 9 and 16 October 2022.

1. The present crisis has motivated me to become more politically engaged.

Answer options: yes, a lot / yes, a little / no, stayed the same / no, I have disengaged
2. The interests of my family and my community are being represented in the Aragalaya.

Answer Options: strongly agree / agree / disagree / strongly disagree
3. As a result of the present crisis, relationships between different ethnic communities have ...

Answer Options: gotten better / stayed the same / gotten worse
4. The present crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices suffered by ethnic minorities.

Answer Options: Strongly agree / Agree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree
5. Before the present crisis, how much confidence did you have in the political leadership?

High confidence / Medium confidence / Low confidence / No confidence
6. As a result of the present crisis, my confidence in the current political leadership is ...

High / Medium / Low / No confidence

This report presents basic frequencies of all responses at the national level as well as an analysis of the data along four demographic variables: province, gender, age group, and ethnicity.

7. Additionally, a new variable was constructed to measure the change in confidence in the political leadership from before the crisis to after the crisis began (questions 5 and 6), as follows:

Change in confidence – with scores indicating a very large decrease (-3), a large decrease (-2), a minor decrease (-1), no change (0), a minor increase (1), a large increase (2) or a very large increase (3).

The Verité syndicated survey employed a stratified multi-stage sampling method to select a sample of households to be representative of all households in the country. Drawn from a national database built and periodically updated since 2019 by Verité Research, the sampling frame ensured adequate randomisation in selecting the sample and the geographic stratification of the sample across the 25 districts in the country. Data from the Department of Census and Statistics was used as source information for population distribution and geographic stratification.

The final sample size of 1,018 individuals aged 18 years and over is representative at the national level with a 95% confidence level and a maximum error margin of 3%.

² See <https://www.veriteresearch.org/>

3. KEY FINDINGS

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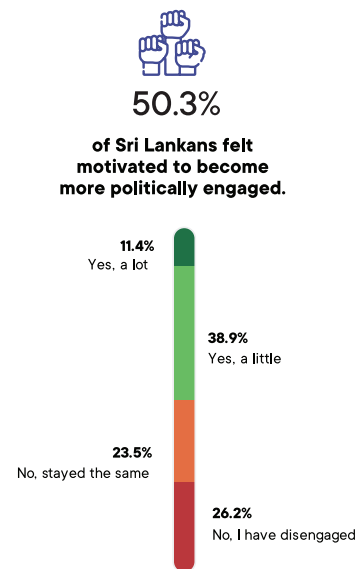
THE CRISIS AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The SLB initiative has previously identified active citizenship as one of the eight domains relevant to reconciliation and social cohesion in Sri Lanka.³ Findings from the large-scale SLB Perception Surveys of 2020 and 2021 indicate that civic participation is generally low in Sri Lanka, indicating that only small pockets of people are politically engaged. These findings seem to stand in stark contrast to the rise in people joining the island-wide protests in 2022, prompting the SLB Snapshot Survey to explore if the crisis indeed motivated people to more actively practise their civic rights.

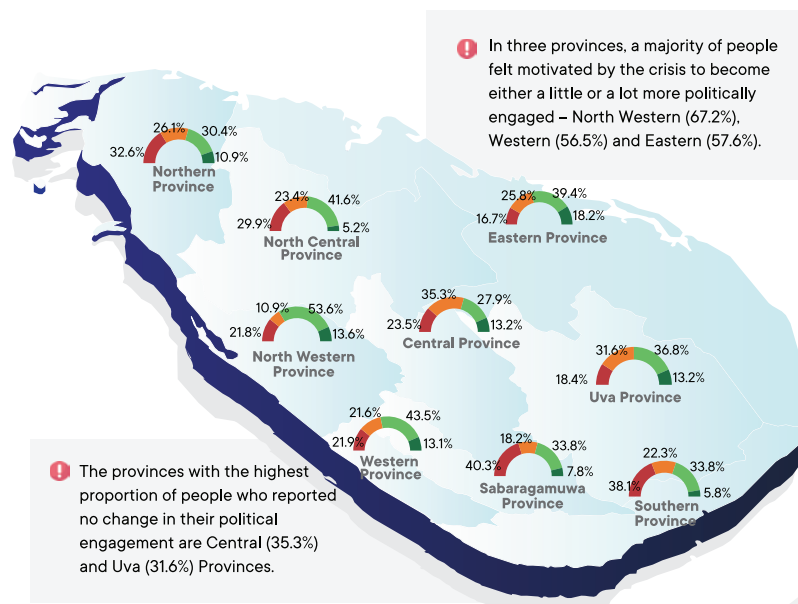


THE PRESENT CRISIS HAS MOTIVATED ME TO BECOME MORE POLITICALLY ENGAGED.

National Level



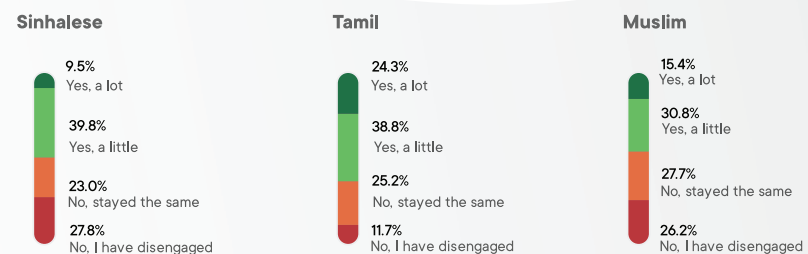
Provincial Level



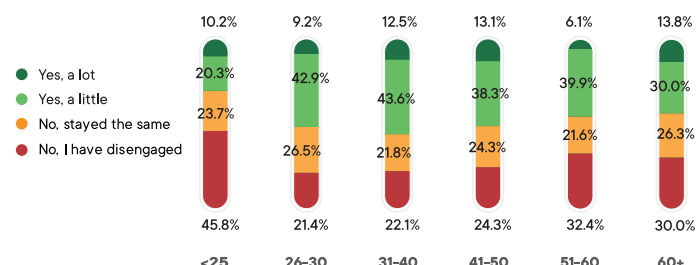
Across Ethnic Groups



Tamils are the most motivated to become more politically engaged, followed by Sinhalese and Muslims.

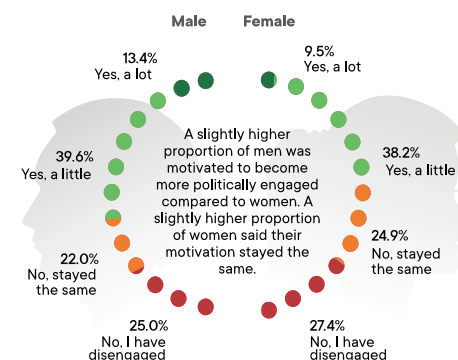


Across Age Groups



Just under half (45.8%) of the youngest age group said that they have disengaged. This is a higher proportion than in any other age group and almost 20% higher than the national average.

By Gender



3.1. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

5

The findings show that the 2022 crisis motivated Sri Lankans across provinces, gender, age groups, and ethnic communities to become more politically engaged. This may indicate that through the crisis, many Sri Lankans have discovered a new sense for holding decision-makers accountable and for getting more actively involved in the democratic process. At the same time, over a quarter of Sri Lankans have disengaged amidst a worsening crisis and mass protest movement.

At the provincial level, the findings show that people in provinces that are largely agricultural and economic hubs such as the North Western, Western, and Eastern Provinces were most motivated to become more politically engaged. On the other hand, a large proportion of people in the Southern and Sabaragamuwa Provinces, who predominantly voted for the government in power during the crisis, disengaged politically, which could indicate disappointment in the political leadership. Almost a third of people in the Northern Province also indicated that they disengaged as a result of the crisis, which contrasts with the fact that in the post-war context, people in the Northern Province have been highly active in demanding changes in the political landscape – albeit to little avail. Their disengagement may indicate skepticism that change is likely to occur.

Sri Lankans across all ethnic groups have become more motivated to engage, indicating that the impact of the economic crisis – at least momentarily – transcended historical divisions. While the proportion of people whose engagement stayed the same is relatively similar across ethnic groups, it is notable that Tamils did not only have the highest proportion of people motivated to become more engaged, but also the lowest proportion of people disengaging as a result of the crisis. This may indicate that the Tamil community is more motivated to be politically engaged in general (not only due to the crisis) compared to the Sinhalese and Muslim communities.

Looking at age groups, the youngest age group (under 25 years) and the oldest age groups (51-60 years and over 61 years) have disengaged more than others. With regard to the youngest age group, this could indicate a certain sense of apathy, possibly due to young Sri Lankans being dependent on their parents and consequently feeling least immediately impacted by the crisis. Further, this apathy may also speak to the lack of education about civic rights during primary and secondary education, leading to political engagement being a culture that is cultivated mostly during university education (Samaranayake 2013; Udugama 2014). The older age groups may have had a sense of lost-hope, having lived through waves of revolutions that they may feel have not led to substantial change. The middle age groups from 26 to 50 years have been motivated to engage the most due to the crisis – possibly because these age groups, making up the majority of the active labour force (Department of Census and Statistics 2012), feel most negatively impacted by the economic crisis. At the same time, a significant proportion across all age groups indicated that their motivation to become politically engaged stayed the same. This could indicate a general passiveness towards both the crisis itself and the economic mismanagement that has contributed to it (Pande 2022; Saadoun 2022; Wanigasinghe 2022); however, people who were already politically engaged before the crisis and did not experience a change in their motivations to engage may also be captured in this category.

³ The eight reconciliation domains were developed by the SLB in a consultative process including both academia and communities and consist of: Dealing with the Past; Justice for All; Identity and Belonging; Interpersonal, Social and Political Trust; Equality of Opportunity; Active Citizenship; Accountable Governance; Security and Wellbeing. See the full SLB Survey reports for more details (www.thebarometer.lk).



THE CRISIS AND THE INCLUSIVENESS OF ARAGALAYA

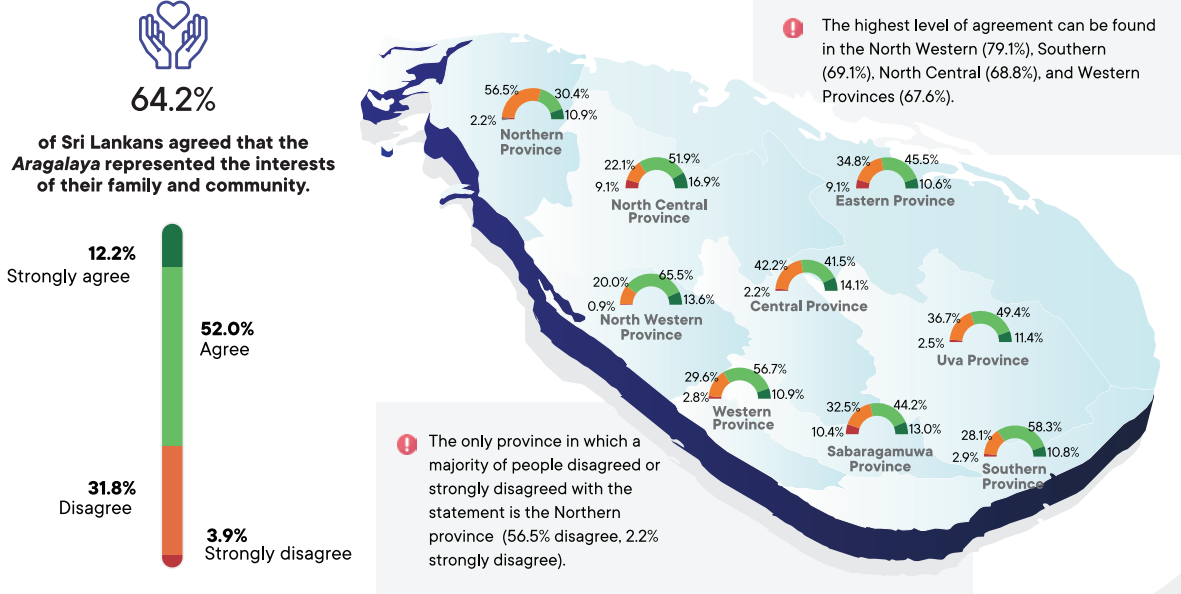
The *Aragalaya* movement has been viewed with diverse perspectives. While many saw it as a nonpartisan peaceful protest to initiate systemic change (CPA 2022) and even as a symbol of national unity (Ranaraja 2022; Silva et al. 2022), others felt as if this sense of unity was misplaced or came about for the wrong reasons (Silva et al. 2022). Thus, the SLB Snapshot Survey wanted to better understand how Sri Lankans perceived the *Aragalaya*, specifically if they felt that their interests were being represented in the movement – which would indicate whether it was perceived as inclusive and did in fact positively impact social cohesion across different social groups in the country.



THE INTERESTS OF MY FAMILY AND MY COMMUNITY ARE BEING REPRESENTED IN THE ARAGALAYA.

National Level

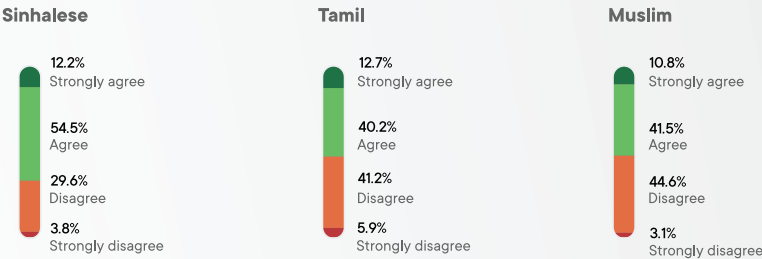
Provincial Level



Across Ethnic Groups

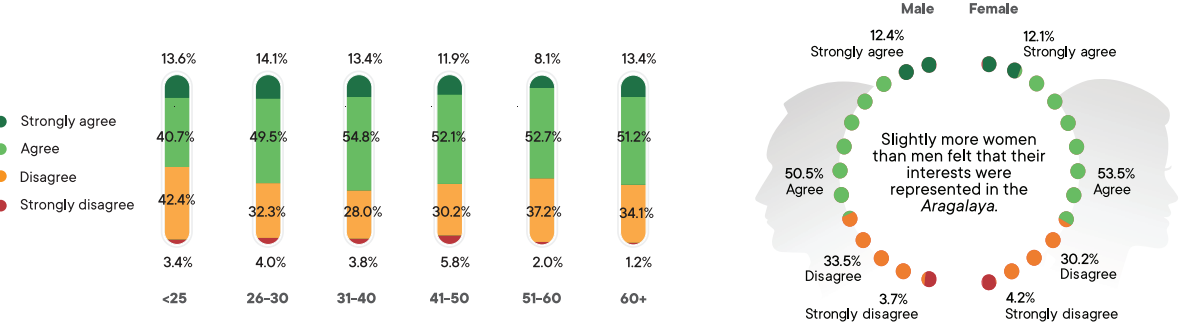


Sinhalese showed the highest levels of agreement, while among Tamils and Muslims, results are more even.



Across Age Groups

By Gender



Overall, roughly two out of every three Sri Lankans considered the *Aragalaya* to be inclusive of their interests. This broad-based appeal to a significant proportion of people across different social groups reflects the potential character of the *Aragalaya* as a people's movement. These sentiments also indicate that the *Aragalaya* may have created a space where common issues could be raised and where people from diverse social groups were able to express issues that mattered to them. However, not all Sri Lankans shared this positive view, with one third of adults reporting some disenchantment that the *Aragalaya* was not able to represent their interests.

When disaggregated by province, the findings show that in eight out of nine provinces, a majority of Sri Lankans agreed or strongly agreed that the *Aragalaya* represented their interests. However, in some provinces the level of agreement was stronger than in others. The Northern Province, one of the provinces most directly affected by the war, was the only province where a majority of people disagreed that the *Aragalaya* represented their interests. This may reflect the fact that these war-affected communities have been protesting for war time grievances to be addressed for years with minimal support from the rest of the citizenry (Peterson and Sandran 2022).

While a majority of Sri Lankans across ethnic groups agreed that their interests have been represented by the *Aragalaya*, the level of agreement varied. Notably, a higher proportion of Sinhalese agreed as compared to Tamils or Muslims. This indicates that the movement, while bringing different communities together for a common cause, was perceived as inclusive of interests of minority groups only to a limited extent; its formation was not in itself sufficient to bridge entrenched historical divisions. This further shows that more political engagement as a result of the crisis – where Tamils showed the highest proportion of engagement and the lowest proportion of disengagement (see section 3.1) – cannot automatically be equated with engagement in the *Aragalaya*.

From an age group perspective, the findings show that the level of agreement also varied across different generations. Notably, the youngest Sri Lankans (under 25 years) feel least represented; they were also the age group that disengaged the most (see section 3.1). While the above findings show that political engagement as a result of the crisis cannot automatically be equated with engaging in the *Aragalaya*, disengagement does seem to go along with a lower sense of representation.



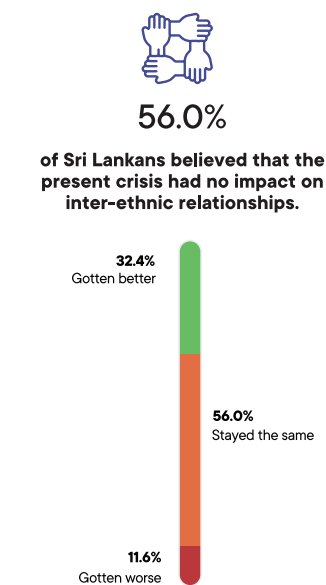
THE CRISIS AND INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS

The economic crisis has focussed attention on the socio-economic dimension of social cohesion. Socioeconomic inequalities typically fracture social cohesion, specifically trust between different groups which is usually a result of economic equality and equality of opportunity (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). At the same time, 2022 has seen many Sri Lankans coming together across different groups and regions in a shared struggle (see sections 3.1. and 3.2.). The SLB Snapshot Survey wanted to understand how Sri Lankans perceive the impact of the crisis on relationships between ethnic communities, assuming it could have either acted as an opportunity to bring communities together or revealed even more inequalities that could potentially deepen societal fractures.

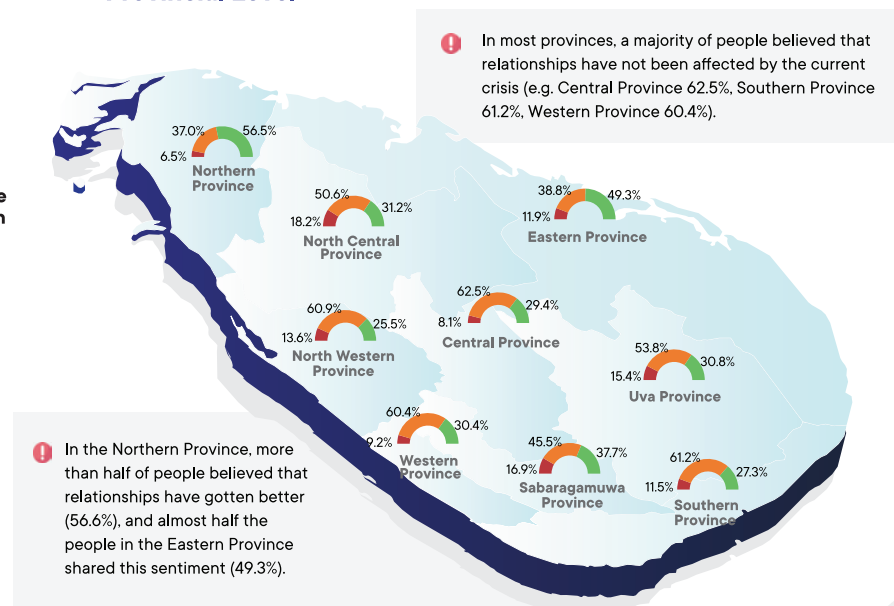


AS A RESULT OF THE PRESENT CRISIS, RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DIFFERENT ETHNIC COMMUNITIES HAVE...

National Level

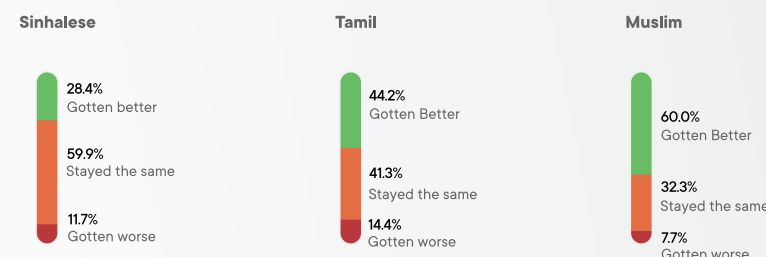


Provincial Level

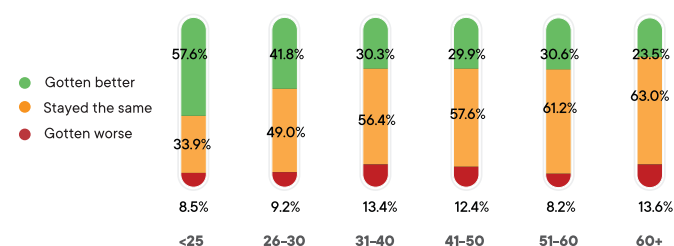


Across Ethnic Groups

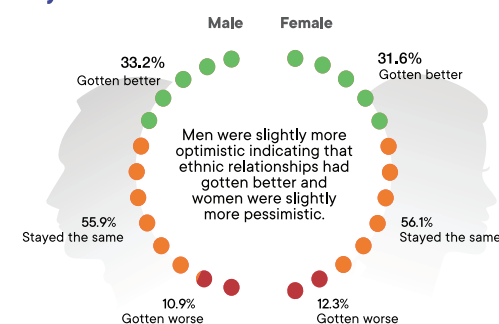
A majority of Muslims believed that relationships had gotten better. The highest proportion of Tamils also said that relationships had gotten better, while most Sinhalese believed that relationships stayed the same.



Across Age Groups



By Gender



Most Sri Lankans believed that inter-ethnic relationships remained unchanged as a result of the crisis, despite the fact that it was often represented as a unifying force (Perera and De Silva 2022; Silva et al. 2022; Ranaraja 2022). This underscores the complexity of inter-ethnic social relationships that demand longer-term engagement to create meaningful connections and change. At the same time, a third of Sri Lankans did in fact perceive an improvement in relationships between ethnic communities, indicating optimism that may have resulted from a sense of shared struggles. Roughly one in ten Sri Lankans sensed a deterioration in inter-ethnic relationships as a result of the crisis. One possible explanation for this may be that socio-economic inequalities, which were both highlighted and deepened by the economic crisis, can intensify already existing divisions – particularly if some people are more vulnerable to the effects of the crisis than others, or if the crisis response unfairly favours certain social groups over others.

Similarly, a majority of people at the provincial level believed that inter-ethnic relationships were unaffected by the crisis. The Northern Province was in fact the only province where a majority of people experienced an improvement. In the Eastern Province, just under half of the population shared this sentiment. Interestingly, therefore, optimism was more likely to be expressed by those living in the provinces most directly affected by the war, which may signify a sentiment that their plight has received more recognition by other groups as a result of the crisis. These findings further indicate that changed relationships, forged during the crisis, may not be directly attributable to the *Aragalaya*, where a majority of the Northern Province did not feel represented (see section 3.2.).

Looking at ethnicity, the findings reveal most optimism among Muslims, where a majority of people believed that relationships improved. This response could be attributed to the fact that public attention shifted to economic hardship and mismanagement during the crisis, which refocused religious intolerance that manifested in the post-war context mainly against Muslims, for example in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday Attacks in 2019 or during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest proportion of Tamils also expressed the view that relationships improved. At the same time, Tamils also had a higher proportion of people than Muslims or Sinhalese indicating that relationships had gotten worse. This may reflect heterogeneity within the Tamil community based on geopolitics and different lived experiences. A majority of Sinhalese believe that relationships stayed the same, which could be reflective of a limited realisation that strained inter-ethnic relations is the post-war default condition. Still, there is optimism about improved inter-ethnic relationships among almost a third of Sinhalese, with only a small proportion believing relationships deteriorated.

From an age perspective, the findings show that younger Sri Lankans were more optimistic about the impact of the crisis on inter-ethnic relationships. In fact, the youngest Sri Lankans (under 25 years) constitute the only age group in which a majority of people indicated that relationships improved. The oldest age group (over 60 years) was the most pessimistic, with less than a quarter indicating that relationships improved. An explanation for this could be that Sri Lankans under 25, who were born in the post-war era, are least affected by the direct consequences of the war and thus may not carry as much baggage as older generations, who may have been witness to a repeating pattern of cycles of violence manifesting in different eras (Palansuriya 2021).

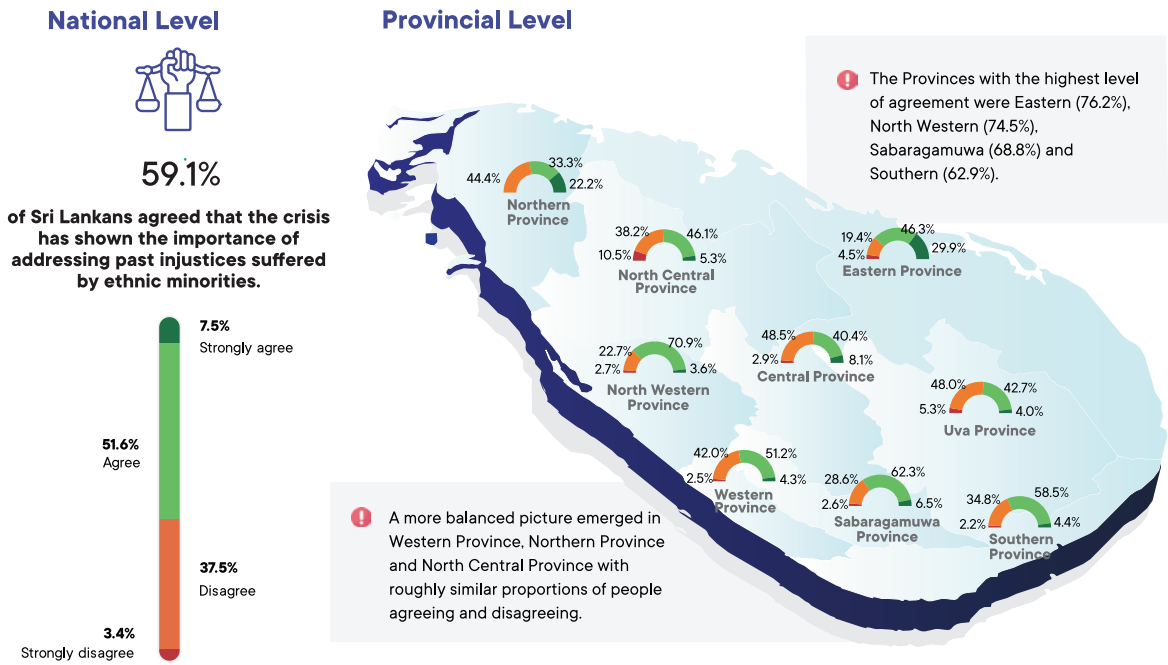


THE CRISIS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING PAST INJUSTICES

Dealing with the past was identified by the SLB initiative as one of the eight domains relevant to reconciliation in Sri Lanka, which includes looking back and recognising past injustices in order to move forward. During the 2022 crisis, pertinent post-war issues came to the fore of the public debate (CIVICUS 2022; Bala 2022). Therefore, the SLB Snapshot Survey wanted to better understand whether Sri Lankans felt that these issues were recognised and acknowledged in the dominant discourse as a result of the crisis.

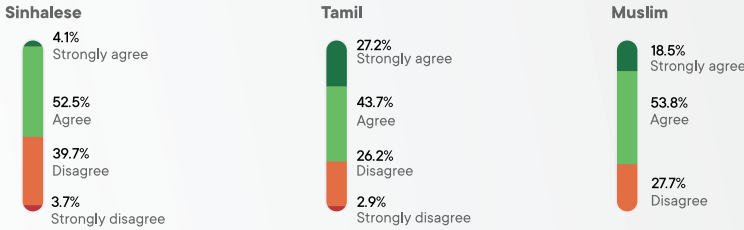


THE PRESENT CRISIS HAS SHOWN THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING PAST INJUSTICES SUFFERED BY ETHNIC MINORITIES.

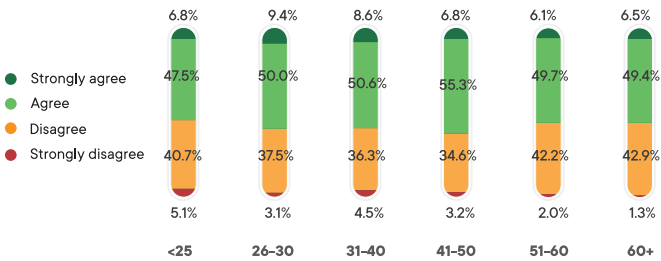


Across Ethnic Groups

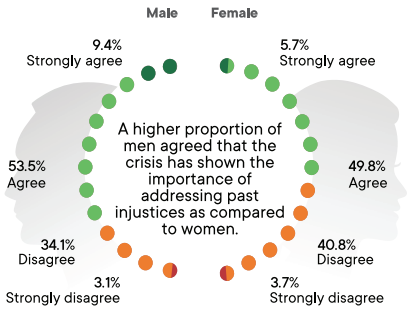
Muslims showed the highest level of agreement, followed by Tamils. A smaller majority agreed among the Sinhalese community.



Across Age Groups



By Gender



The findings reveal that Sri Lankans were divided on the extent to which they think the crisis highlighted the importance of addressing past injustices. While a majority of respondents felt that this was the case, a substantial minority disagreed.

Looking at the provincial level, in seven out of nine provinces, a majority of Sri Lankans agreed that the crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices, but the level of agreement varied across provinces. Agreement was highest in the Eastern, North Western, Sabaragamuwa and Southern Provinces. In the Eastern Province, this could be explained by the fact that it is one of the provinces most directly affected by past injustices and is predominantly made up of ethnic minorities. The fact that largely Sinhalese populated provinces follow closely in agreement levels may indicate that the struggles endured during the crisis have in fact shown the importance of addressing past injustices faced by minorities also to the majority community. In contrast, people in the Northern, Western and North Central Provinces were more divided about whether the crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices, and a slim majority of people in the Uva and Central Provinces disagreed with this notion.

A majority across all ethnic communities agreed that the crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices. Higher agreement levels among ethnic minorities than among the Sinhalese majority reflect the fact that more is to be done to constructively address the past and create adequate spaces for communities to heal and move forward. However, the fact that more than half of the Sinhala community agreed that the crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices is encouraging in a society where grievances from different social groups remain prevalent over a decade after the end of the war.



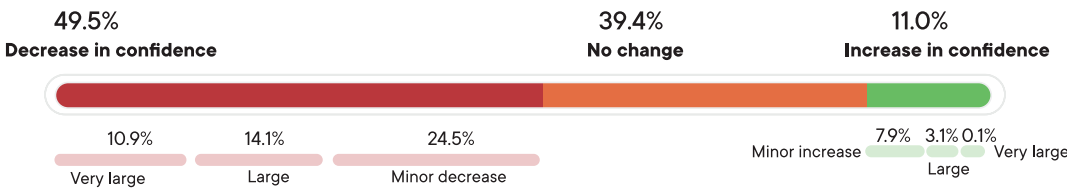
THE CRISIS AND CONFIDENCE
IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP



CHANGE IN
CONFIDENCE

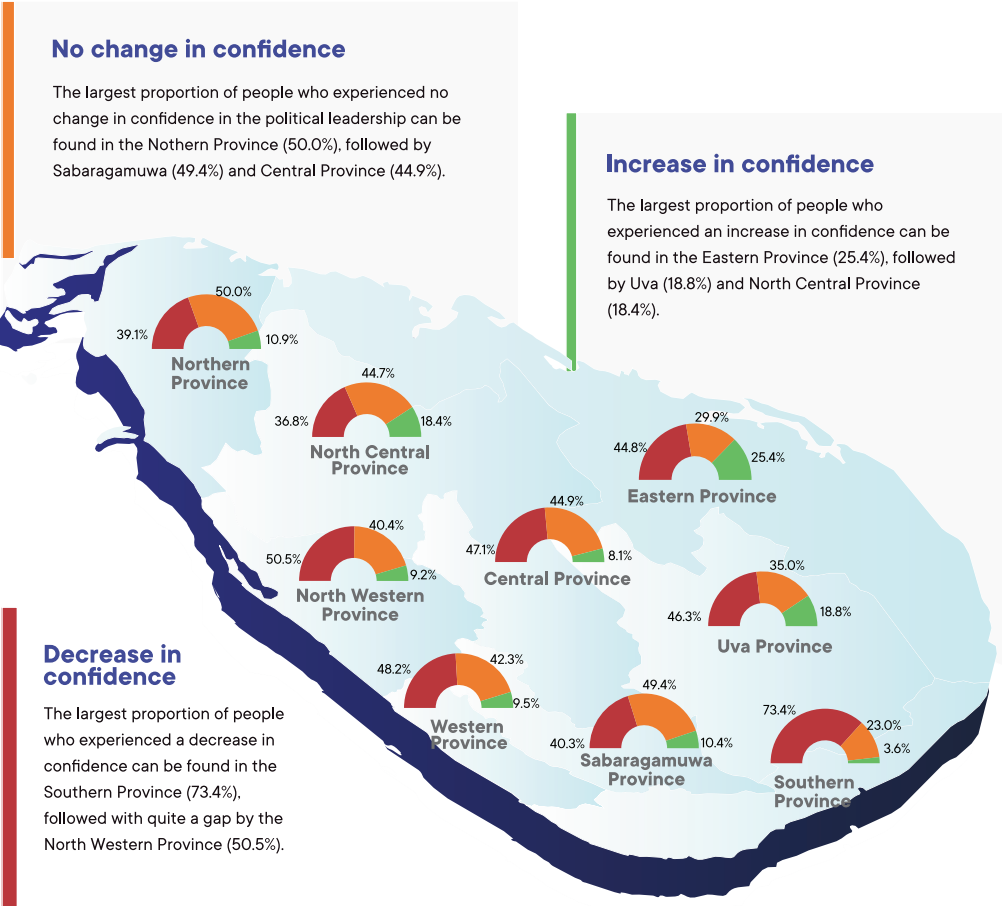
Accountable governance and (social, interpersonal and) political trust make up two of the domains identified as relevant for reconciliation in Sri Lanka within the SLB initiative. This aligns with the idea that accountability and strong, independent institutions are precursors to reconciliation and social cohesion (Perera 2001; Sørensen 2008). For many, the economic crisis and its detrimental and far-reaching effects seem to have emphasised the importance of transparent and accountable governance. Therefore, the SLB Snapshot Survey explored how the crisis impacted people's confidence in the political leadership in order to generate findings that could reveal where a potential lack of confidence would need to be urgently addressed in order to move forward towards recovery.

National Level



Provincial Level

Decrease in confidence No change Increase in confidence

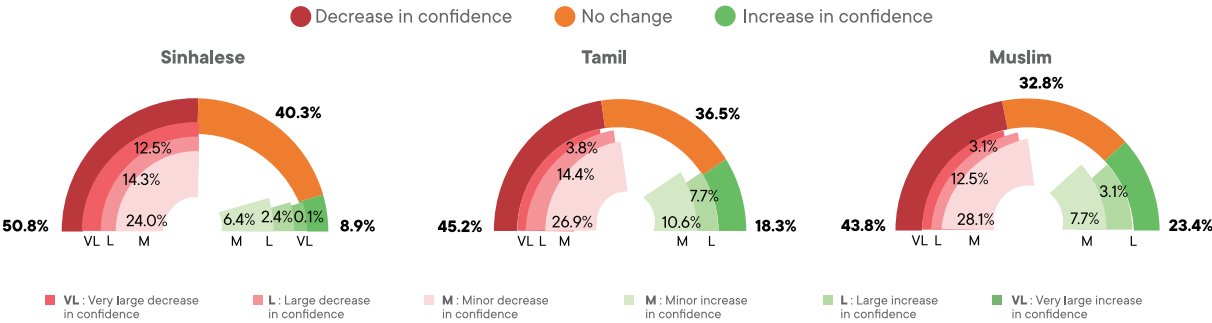


BEFORE THE PRESENT CRISIS, HOW
MUCH CONFIDENCE DID YOU HAVE
IN THE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP?

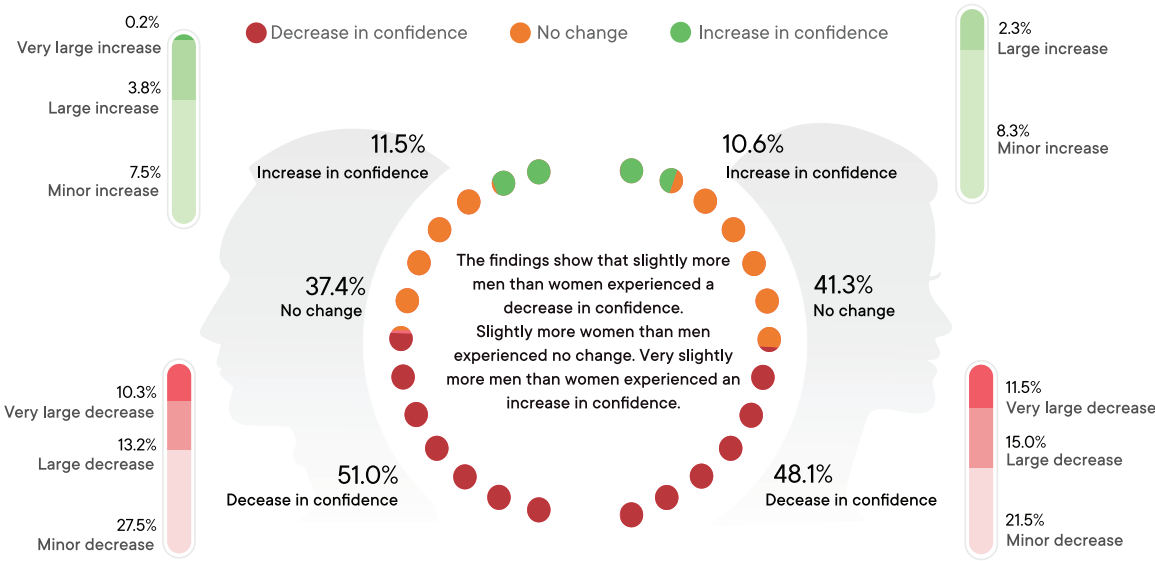


AS A RESULT OF THE PRESENT CRISIS,
MY CONFIDENCE IN THE CURRENT
POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IS...

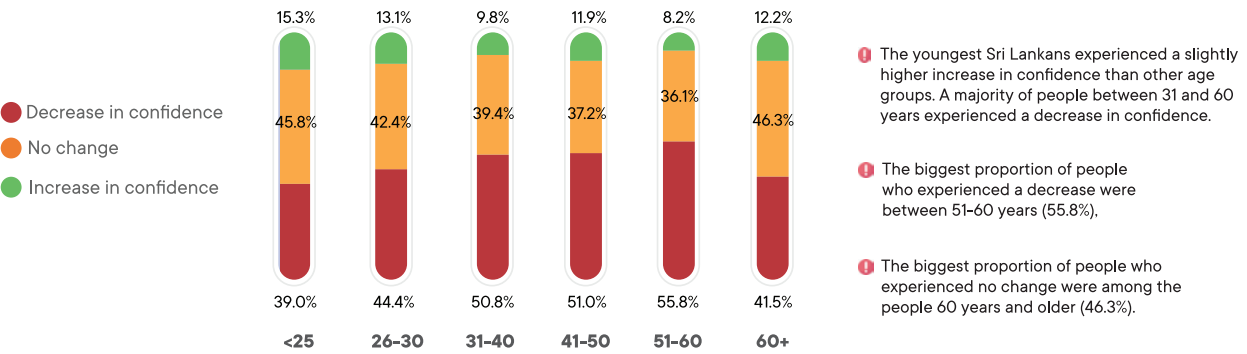
Across Ethnic Groups



By Gender



By Age Group



The findings reveal that confidence towards the political leadership decreased as a consequence of the crisis for almost half of Sri Lankans, showing a significant effect of the crisis on political confidence. While confidence remained the same or even increased for the other half – a very slight majority – of Sri Lankans, the widespread decrease in confidence indicates a sense of disappointment and disillusionment among many Sri Lankans in the current political leadership.

Looking at the provincial level, almost three quarters of people in the Southern Province experienced a drop in confidence, marking the highest decrease in the country. This may speak to a significant level of disappointment in a province that largely contributed to the landslide victory of the SLPP government in the 2020 general elections (Election Commission of Sri Lanka 2020). The fact that the highest proportion of people showing no change in confidence can be located in the Northern Province could indicate disillusionment with any majoritarian government that is perceived to have ignored the needs and grievances of the Tamil community that make up a majority of the residents in the Northern province. At the same time, about a quarter of people in the Eastern province showed an increase in confidence, which could be attributed to the Eastern Province’s more evenly distributed ethnic make-up (39.5% Tamil, 36.9% Muslim, 23.3% Sinhalese; Department of Census and Statistics 2012) and thus perhaps more diverse political preferences as well.

In terms of ethnicity, just over half of the Sinhalese community experienced a decrease in confidence in the political leadership. As the Sinhalese mainly elected the government in power during the crisis (Election Commission of Sri Lanka 2020), a possible explanation for this could be a sense of disappointment in having put their faith in a government that was unable to protect its citizens from the effects of the crisis.

Looking at age groups, a majority of people between 31 and 60 years experienced a drop in confidence. The highest proportion of people whose confidence stayed the same can be found in the oldest age group (above 60 years) and in the youngest age group (below 25 years). For both these age groups, this may indicate passiveness towards the political leadership, seeing that both these groups also indicated higher levels of political disengagement (see section 3.1). Another explanation for the youngest age group may be found in the fact that a lack of civic and political education (Jeganathan 2022) has created an impressionable youth that goes along with the political preferences of their parents/families (Chandrasekara 2015). Looking at the oldest age group, their preferences may be well established and remain unchanged even by large-scale events like the crisis. Compared to other groups, the youngest Sri Lankans had a slightly higher proportion of people who experienced an increase in confidence, which may hint at more optimism among young people that change is possible.

4. Conclusion and the Way Forward

In 2022, Sri Lanka plunged into an unprecedented economic crisis that exacerbated economic hardship for many and will impact the lives of all Sri Lankans for the foreseeable future. But the crisis also brought calls for greater unity and solidarity to the fore of public debate in Sri Lanka, where more than 10 years after the civil war, social divisions remain deeply embedded in the country’s social fabric. The Snapshot Survey “Sri Lanka’s 2022 Crisis and Social Cohesion” explored how issues related to social cohesion and reconciliation were impacted by the crisis in five areas (see below) that relate to the work of the Sri Lanka Barometer initiative and the large-scale Sri Lanka Barometer Surveys conducted every two years.

1. The Crisis and Political Engagement

The findings of the Snapshot Survey show that the crisis motivated just over half of Sri Lankans to become more politically engaged. At the same time, a quarter of Sri Lankans disengaged. Hence, while for many Sri Lankans the worsening situation presented a call to action to participate more actively in the democratic process, others were disillusioned and ultimately withdrew. This shows that going forward, there is a need to respond to demands from the citizenry, work towards tangible change, and to reconnect with those who have turned away.

2. The Crisis and the Inclusiveness of the Aragalaya

The *Aragalaya* was often represented in the public discourse as a symbol of national unity that brought together Sri Lankans from different communities for a common cause. While the findings of the Snapshot Survey show that there is some truth to this, with a majority of Sri Lankans feeling that their interests were in fact represented in the *Aragalaya*, the findings also demand caution around a general notion of unity associated with the movement. Specifically, the findings show that minority communities felt less strongly about the inclusiveness of the *Aragalaya*, indicating that the movement may have only momentarily overcome underlying divisions. Hence, a nuanced understanding needs to be cultivated of a movement that – while making commendable efforts towards promoting diversity and inclusion – may have been a people’s movement for some more than for others.

3. The Crisis and Inter-ethnic Relationships

Along similar lines, the crisis was often presented as an opportunity for greater solidarity and unity, with people across different communities facing similar difficulties. The findings of the Snapshot Survey reveal that this is true for roughly a third of Sri Lankans, who were of the opinion that relationships between ethnic groups had in fact gotten better as a result of the crisis. However, most Sri Lankans believed that inter-ethnic relationships stayed the same, indicating that such relationships that have been hampered over decades require more consistent efforts and longer-term engagement to create meaningful connections and change. The fact that some Sri Lankans believed inter-ethnic social relations had actually gotten worse as a result of the crisis demands caution in the social and political response to the crisis that has both highlighted and deepened socio-economic inequalities.

4. The Crisis and the Importance of Recognising Past Injustices

The findings of the Snapshot Survey show that the crisis may have created an opportunity to engage more with these issues, as most Sri Lankans agreed that the crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices suffered by ethnic minorities. Higher agreement levels among minorities than among the Sinhalese majority emphasise that more needs to be done, but the fact that more than half of the Sinhalese community agreed that the crisis has shown the importance of addressing past injustices is encouraging in a society where grievances from different social groups remain prevalent over a decade after the end of the war. This presents an opportunity to continue to prioritise reconciliation and social cohesion efforts and to consider and integrate reconciliation and social cohesion measures into efforts that address the economic crisis and its effects.

5. The Crisis and Confidence in Political Leadership

The findings of the Snapshot Survey show that the crisis had a substantial effect on Sri Lankans’ confidence in the political leadership. This indicates a sense of disappointment and disillusionment among many and emphasises the need for the incumbent or successive governments to take effective action to instil confidence in their constituents to pave the way towards recovery and further create positive preconditions to advance reconciliation and social cohesion in the country.

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**SRI LANKA'S
2022 CRISIS
AND SOCIAL
COHESION
A SNAPSHOT SURVEY**

**AN INITIATIVE BY THE
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