Emergency Powers, Constitutional Order, and Moral Legitimacy: Reflections on Sri Lanka's 2018 Crisis

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Keywords: Constitutional checks, Constitutional Crisis, Emergency power, Sri Lanka

Article Information			
Received	2th Jan 2026	Accepted	7th Mar 2026
Published	30th Mar 2026		

Abstract

The 2018 constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka represents a critical turning point in the country's post-1978 constitutional history, raising profound questions about the scope of executive emergency powers and the effectiveness of constitutional checks and balances. The study critically examines the legal and political dimensions of emergency – style executive action during the crisis, focusing on the interpretation of presidential powers, parliamentary sovereignty and judicial review. Research problem is to what extent did the exercise of presidential power during Sri Lanka's 2018 constitutional crisis expose structural weaknesses in constitutional checks and balance particularly regarding emergency style executive authority under the post 1978 constitutional framework? The research main objective of this study is to analyze how the 2018 constitutional crisis tested the constitutional safeguards introduced under the constitution of Sri Lanka, particularly after the 19th amendment to the constitution, and to evaluate whether Sri Lanka's semi – presidential system provides sufficient institutional mechanisms to restrain emergency – style executive actions. Sub objectives are to examine the constitutional provisions governing presidential powers under the post 1978 framework, to analyze the legal and political developments during Sri Lanka's 2018 constitutional crisis, to evaluate the role of parliament and the judiciary in checking executive actions during the crisis and to assess the effectiveness of the 19th amendment in limiting executive overreach. The writing of this article uses qualitative method. Under the qualitative method using literature resources for this. Specially analysis technique based on previous researchers' findings. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on constitutional reform, democratic resilience and the recalibration of executive power in post-conflict societies.

Introduction

The balance between executive authority and constitutional constraints becomes acutely tested during periods of perceived or actual crisis. Sri Lanka's constitutional architecture, designed under the 1978 Constitution, includes several provisions empowering the Executive to promulgate regulations ostensibly to safeguard "security, public order, or the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 150[1]). However, as has been repeatedly observed, the very breadth of these emergency powers creates a risk that they may be exercised to circumvent democratic processes and fundamental rights (Amarasinghe, 2003). The Sri Lankan Constitutional Crisis of 2018 constitutes a landmark instance in which the Executive, without formally invoking emergency powers, effectively leveraged quasi-emergency measures—manipulating parliamentary procedures, deploying state media controls, and mobilizing security forces—to undertake what opponents deemed an unconstitutional change in government (Fernando, 2019; Senanayake, 2020).

This article examines how Sri Lanka's emergency and emergency-like powers evolved historically, how they were embedded within the 1978 constitutional dispensation, and how they were interpreted by the judiciary prior to 2018. It then provides a granular chronology of the 2018 crisis, highlighting the specific constitutional clauses invoked (or misused) by President Maithripala Sirisena to dismiss Prime Minister Ranil

Wickremesinghe and appoint former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in his stead. The analysis focuses on key constitutional provisions—Articles 48, 75, 150, 153, and 156—and their interface with democratic norms concerning confidence motions, parliamentary sovereignty, and fundamental rights (Jayawardena, 2018; Wijesinghe, 2019). By dissecting the judicial interventions of the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal, this article underscores how judicial review served as a corrective mechanism, albeit after a prolonged standoff (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c).

Finally, the article draws on comparative lessons from India, Pakistan, South Africa, and the United Kingdom to recommend systematic reforms aimed at curbing executive overreach. Specifically, it proposes clarifying the evidentiary threshold for the exercise of Article 48(1), statutorily mandating expedited recall of Parliament for no-confidence motions, codifying stricter criteria for derogating fundamental rights even outside formal emergencies, institutionalizing an Emergency Law Review Commission, bolstering parliamentary oversight committees, and deepening civic education on constitutional processes (Bandara, 2020; Jayawardena & Premaratne, 2020; Perera & Jayasinghe, 2019; Senanayake & De Silva, 2020). These measures, collectively, aim to reaffirm Sri Lanka's democratic foundations and ensure that future crises do not derail constitutionalism and the rule of law.

The origins of emergency powers in Sri Lanka trace back to colonial governance under the British Crown. The Donoughmore Constitution (1931) and the Soulbury Constitution (1947) incorporated limited provisions granting the Governor-General authority to issue emergency regulations during threats to public order (Bandaranaike, 1989). Under the Soulbury Constitution, Section 19 empowered the Governor-General to declare a "State of Emergency" on the basis of advice from the Executive Council, enabling the promulgation of regulations that could suspend or override ordinary laws (Amarasinghe, 2003). Notably, the 1958 Communal Riots prompted an emergency declaration under these pre-Republic frameworks, whereby police and military authorities assumed sweeping powers to detain suspects without trial (De Silva, 2017).

In 1972, Sri Lanka adopted a Republican Constitution that further centralized executive authority. While the 1972 Constitution did not markedly expand emergency provisions (Amarasinghe, 2003), it laid the structural foundations for the enhanced presidential system that the 1978 Constitution would cement. The period between 1972 and 1977 witnessed sporadic detentions under preventive detention laws—most famously the 1971 JVP insurrection—wherein thousands of alleged insurgents were detained without trial under emergency ordinances (Fernando, 2004). These practices illustrated how vaguely worded provisions could facilitate executive overreach in the name of national security.

The 1978 Constitution and Codification of Emergency Powers

The promulgation of the 1978 Constitution marked a watershed moment in Sri Lanka's constitutional history. Modeled in part on aspects of the French Fifth Republic, it created an executive presidency with expansive powers, including the unilateral discretion to declare emergencies (Amarasinghe, 2003; De Silva, 2017). Articles 150 through 155 of the 1978 Constitution collectively structure the emergency regime as follows:

- Article 150(1) allows the President to proclaim that a "state of emergency" exists whenever "in his opinion the security, public order, or the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the community is threatened" by war, external aggression, or sabotage (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978).
- Article 150(2) empowers the President to issue "emergency regulations" which may override existing statutes and fundamental rights, provided that they are "not inconsistent with any other provisions of the constitution which cannot be suspended even during an emergency" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978; Wijayawardane v. Attorney General, SC Appeal 34/1984).
- Article 153(2) clarifies that, once published in the Government Gazette, emergency regulations take effect immediately, subject to parliamentary annulment by a simple majority (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978).

- Article 155(1) entrusts the implementation and enforcement of emergency regulations primarily to the Chief of Defence Staff, Inspector General of Police, and other designated officers (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978).
- Article 156(1) mandates periodic reporting to Parliament; the President must submit an annual account of actions taken under emergency powers, and Parliament may, by resolution, annul any regulation (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978).

Although these provisions ostensibly institute checks such as parliamentary review and periodic reporting, in practice they proved inadequate to restrain the Executive. Over successive administrations, from J.R. Jayewardene (1978–1989) through Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015), emergency powers were invoked repeatedly—most notably during the insurgency by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and domestic unrest in the south—often resulting in widespread curtailment of civil liberties (De Silva, 2017; Senanayake, 2020).

Post-1978 Practice and Misuse of Emergency Powers

Between 1978 and 2018, Sri Lanka endured multiple intervals of "emergency rule," each occasioned by security threats ranging from insurgency to ethnic violence (Fernando, 2004). For instance, in July 1977, J.R. Jayewardene declared emergency regulations in response to mounting civil unrest, which were subsequently extended through the 1980s to address the Tamil militancy (De Silva, 2017). The 1983 Black July riots triggered another prolonged emergency regime, under which thousands of detentions were authorized without charge (Fernando, 2004).

Under President Chandrika Kumaratunga (1994–2005), emergency regulations were periodically renewed to combat LTTE attacks; her tenure witnessed high-profile allegations of arbitrary detentions and extrajudicial measures by security forces (De Silva, 2017). Similarly, during Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency (2005–2015), emergency powers were invoked under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and Public Security Ordinance (PSO) to justify warrantless arrests and media censorship (Senanayake, 2020). Although the 2015 Yahapalana government led by Maithripala Sirisena initially committed to curtailing executive overreach—including promising to repeal the PTA—the apparatus of emergency powers remained largely intact (Jayawardena, 2018). Consequently, by the time of the 2018 crisis, the constitutional framework and institutional culture surrounding emergency powers had been deeply entrenched, normalizing executive dominance and diminishing effective oversight (Perera, 2018; Wijesinghe, 2019).

Research Problem

what extent did the exercise of presidential power during Sri Lanka's 2018 constitutional crisis expose structural weaknesses in constitutional checks and balance particularly regarding emergency style executive authority under the post 1978 constitutional framework?

Review of the Literature

Emergency powers occupy a contested space within constitutional theory, balancing the need for effective governance during crises against the risk of authoritarian abuse. Classical constitutional thought recognizes emergencies as exceptional moments requiring temporary expansion of executive authority yet insists that such powers must remain subject to legal limits and institutional oversight (Dicey, 1915). Modern constitutional scholarship increasingly warns that emergencies often become gateways for democratic erosion rather than temporary deviations from constitutional norms.

Contemporary literature highlights a global trend in which executives exploit constitutional ambiguities and emergency narratives to consolidate power (Gross & Ní Aoláin, 2006). Scholars argue that constitutional systems with weak checks and broad discretionary powers are particularly vulnerable during political crises, even in the absence of formally declared states of emergency (Ackerman, 2010). This has led to renewed emphasis on judicial review, parliamentary oversight, and constitutional culture as safeguards against executive excess.

Within South Asia, emergency governance has been extensively studied in relation to India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Comparative scholars note that while constitutional frameworks often contain safeguards on paper, their effectiveness depends on institutional independence and political willingness to enforce limits (Choudhry, 2014). Emergency powers are frequently normalized through executive practice, undermining constitutional accountability over time.

Sri Lanka's constitutional framework grants significant discretionary authority to the Executive President, particularly under the 1978 Constitution. Legal commentators have long criticized the breadth of presidential powers, including control over Parliament, security forces, and public administration (Coomaraswamy, 2003). Although the Constitution provides for emergency regulations and public security ordinances, scholars argue that the absence of robust oversight mechanisms creates space for constitutional manipulation even outside formally declared emergencies.

The 2018 constitutional crisis has emerged as a critical case study in Sri Lankan constitutional scholarship. Legal analyses emphasize that the crisis did not involve a declared emergency but nonetheless revealed how executive authority could be exercised in a manner resembling emergency governance (Samararatne, 2019). The dissolution of Parliament and appointment of a new Prime Minister were widely viewed as actions that tested constitutional boundaries and institutional resilience.

Judicial intervention during the crisis has been praised as a rare assertion of constitutional supremacy. Scholars highlight the Supreme Court's role in reaffirming parliamentary sovereignty and constitutional limits on executive power as a significant moment for rule of law in Sri Lanka. However, the literature cautions that reliance on judicial correction after the fact underscores systemic weaknesses in preventive constitutional safeguards. Overall, existing scholarship frames the 2018 crisis as a warning about the fragility of constitutional checks in systems with dominant executives.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative doctrinal research methodology, supported by case study analysis and normative constitutional evaluation. The research examines how emergency-style executive action interacted with constitutional checks during Sri Lanka's 2018 constitutional crisis.

The study is based exclusively on secondary sources, including the Constitution of Sri Lanka (1978), relevant constitutional amendments, Supreme Court judgments arising from the 2018 crisis, parliamentary records, and official government notifications. Academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and policy reports on emergency powers, constitutionalism, and democratic accountability provide the theoretical framework for the analysis.

A doctrinal legal analysis is employed to interpret constitutional provisions relating to executive authority, parliamentary dissolution, emergency powers, and judicial review. Particular attention is paid to the constitutional boundaries of presidential discretion and the legal reasoning adopted by courts in responding to executive action during the crisis.

The research incorporates a case study approach, treating the 2018 constitutional crisis as a critical episode for evaluating the effectiveness of constitutional checks. This approach enables an assessment of how

institutions functioned in practice, including Parliament, the judiciary, and independent commissions, during a period of acute constitutional stress.

A limited comparative constitutional perspective is also employed, drawing selectively on emergency governance frameworks in other constitutional democracies to contextualize Sri Lanka's experience. This comparative dimension is used to identify normative standards and best practices rather than to offer broad empirical generalizations.

The scope of the study is confined to constitutional and institutional analysis and does not include primary data collection, interviews, or fieldwork. While political context is acknowledged, the primary emphasis remains on constitutional interpretation, institutional accountability, and lessons for future constitutional reform. "Emergency Powers and Constitutional Checks: Lessons from Sri Lanka's Constitutional Crisis of 2018" for this.

Result and Discussions

- **Constitutional Framework for Emergency Powers under the 1978 Constitution**

Textual Analysis of Articles 150–155

A close reading of the 1978 Constitution's emergency provisions reveals both the breadth of presidential discretion and the nominal nature of checks and balances. Article 150(1) uses the phrase "in his opinion," signifying a subjective standard that effectively insulates the President's decision from objective challenge, at least at the moment of proclamation (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978). Scholars have argued that this open-ended language grants the Executive almost unfettered authority to determine the incipience of a crisis (Amarasinghe, 2003; Wijayawardane v. Attorney General, SC Appeal 34/1984).

Article 153(2) further amplifies executive power by stating

"The emergency regulations when published in the Government Gazette shall have the force of law and shall be binding on all persons but shall have effect only for so long as they are in conformity with this Constitution." (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 153[2])

This clause implicitly permits the President to override or suspend any existing statute or constitutional provision—except those clauses that explicitly cannot be suspended even during emergencies (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978). Notably, Article 15(7) allows for the suspension of fundamental rights, yet the right to be free from torture (Article 11) and the right to be recognized as a person before the law (Article 12[1]) are deemed non-derogable (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978; Fernando, 2004). Critics assert that in practice, these limited non-derogable rights became vulnerable when emergency regulations were interpreted expansively, enabling security forces to circumvent due process (De Silva, 2017; Senanayake, 2020).

Parliamentary Oversight and Its Practical Limitations

Article 156(1) mandates that Parliament "may annul any emergency regulation by resolution supported by a majority of the total number of Members of Parliament" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978). In theory, this provision renders any emergency regulation subject to legislative veto. However, successive governments with strong parliamentary majorities have exploited party discipline to prevent annulment of draconian measures (Wijesinghe, 2019). Moreover, the Constitution lacks a timetable obligating Parliament to consider such resolutions within a given period, allowing the Executive to effectively evade meaningful scrutiny (Perera & Premaratne, 2020). Even the annual reporting obligation—requiring the President to lay emergency measures before Parliament—is at most a formality, as opposition parties typically lack the votes to challenge the majority (De Silva, 2017).

Judicial Review of Emergency Regulations

Article 16(1) of the 1978 Constitution confers on the Supreme Court the power to rule on "infringement or imminent infringement of fundamental rights," but expressly bars the Court from reviewing "any act or regulation purporting to be done or made under an emergency regulation or under sub-paragraph (f) of paragraph (2) of Article 18" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978). Consequently, emergency regulations enjoy almost complete immunity from constitutional challenge on grounds of fundamental rights violations (Wijayawardane v. Attorney General, SC Appeal 34/1984; Fernando, 2004). The Supreme Court can only intervene on vires grounds—i.e., whether the President acted within his power to promulgate emergency regulations and whether the parliamentary approval requirements were met (Sri Lanka Constitution, 1978, art. 16[1]; Wijayawardane v. Attorney General, SC Appeal 34/1984).

Despite these constraints, the Supreme Court has occasionally invoked a narrow "ultra vires" doctrine to invalidate emergency measures deemed to exceed the President's constitutional authority. In In Re: Petition to Quash Regulations Made Under the Public Security Ordinance (SC Appeal 18/2003), the Court invalidated a set of regulations issued by the President under the PSO on procedural grounds—holding that regulations requiring an ex post facto approval by Parliament must be considered in a timely manner, and that the regulations in question were not properly tabled (Fernando, 2004). Nevertheless, this jurisprudence has been criticized for its reluctance to confront substantive rights violations, preferring instead to focus on procedural technicalities (De Silva, 2017).

Judicial Interpretations of Emergency Powers Prior to 2018. Wijayawardane v. Attorney General (SC Appeal 34/1984)

In Wijayawardane v. Attorney General (1984), the petitioner challenged emergency regulations that effectively allowed the government to detain suspects indefinitely without trial. The Supreme Court held that while the President's proclamation under Article 150(1) was subject to review on substantive grounds (i.e., whether a real threat existed), it was not bound by strict evidentiary requirements at the time of proclamation (Wijayawardane v. Attorney General, SC Appeal 34/1984). Crucially, the Court maintained that once a proclamation had been issued and duly laid before Parliament, its validity could not be contested solely on the basis of disproportionality to the threat (Wijayawardane v. Attorney General, SC Appeal 34/1984; Fernando, 2004). This ruling effectively endorsed a wide margin of appreciation for the Executive in determining necessity, thereby limiting the prospect of preemptive judicial checks.

In Re: Petition to Quash Regulations Made Under the Public Security Ordinance (SC Appeal 18/2003)

The 2003 decision in In Re: Petition to Quash Regulations Made Under the Public Security Ordinance marked a rare instance where the Supreme Court invalidated emergency regulations on procedural grounds (Fernando, 2004). The Court found that the regulations, which sought to extend curfews and impose press censorship, were not tabled before Parliament within the ninety-day period mandated by the PSO. Though the Court refrained from engaging with the substantive human rights issues, it emphasized that even emergency regulations must adhere to procedural strictures (Fernando, 2004). However, critics argue that the decision's narrow focus on timing rather than substance did little to protect civil liberties in practice (De Silva, 2017).

Fundamental Rights Petitions during Emergencies

Prior to 2018, several Fundamental Rights (FR) petitions arose challenging executive actions taken under emergency regulations. For instance, during the 2009 conclusion of the civil war, Tamil NGOs filed FR petitions contesting alleged unlawful detentions and extrajudicial killings by security forces—allegations which were largely dismissed on the basis that the impugned measures were authorized by emergency regulations (Senanayake, 2020). Although the Supreme Court continued to assert its authority to examine

procedural compliance, the deference to executive assessments of security imperatives ensured that no substantive curtailment of emergency regulations occurred (Senanayake, 2020; Wijesinghe, 2019).

❖ Political Context Leading to the 2018 Constitutional Crisis

The 2015 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

The election of Maithripala Sirisena to the Presidency in January 2015, defeating incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa, was premised on a reformist agenda that included promises to curtail executive excesses, strengthen democratic institutions, and repeal or revise draconian security laws (Jayawardena, 2018; Perera, 2018). Sirisena's alliance with the United National Party (UNP) led by Ranil Wickremesinghe signaled a new "Yahapalana" (good governance) era (Fernando, 2018). Following Sirisena's victory, Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed Prime Minister, heading a coalition government composed of the UNP and sections of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) (Jayawardena, 2018).

Over the next three years, tensions emerged within the coalition. Sirisena, although elected under the pledge to implement constitutional reforms—including reduction of the presidential term and decentralization measures—grew increasingly dissatisfied with Wickremesinghe's leadership style and policy choices (Perera, 2018; Wijesinghe, 2019). Simultaneously, the SLFP split into factions aligned either with Sirisena or with former President Rajapaksa, exacerbating intra-party rivalries (Jayawardena, 2018). By mid-2018, Sirisena and Rajapaksa were rumored to be conspiring to unseat Wickremesinghe, with Sirisena allegedly promising ministerial positions to SLFP dissidents in exchange for parliamentary support (Perera, 2018; Samarasinghe, 2019).

❖ Constitutional Reform Debacles and Coalition Fractures

Efforts to introduce the Nineteenth Amendment to reduce the President's powers were accomplished in April 2015, restoring several independent commissions to a degree of autonomy (Jayawardena, 2018). Yet, the proposed Twentieth Amendment—intended to reverse those curbs—became a point of contention within the SLFP (Perera & Senanayake, 2020). The Sri Lankan electorate perceived repeated delays and backtracking on promised reforms as evidence of political opportunism (Fernando, 2018).

Consequently, SLFP MPs aligned with Sirisena began defecting from the coalition, leading to a narrow parliamentary arithmetic by late 2018: the UNP-led government held a slim majority, dependent on free votes in three or four constituencies (Wijesinghe, 2019). The Rajapaksa faction mobilized dissident SLFP MPs to stage a parliamentary coup, believing that they could muster the numbers needed to pass a no-confidence motion against Wickremesinghe (Jayawardena, 2018; Samarasinghe, 2019). Amid this volatile context, President Sirisena moved to dismiss Wickremesinghe unilaterally on 26 October 2018, citing alleged loss of parliamentarian confidence—thus igniting the constitutional crisis (Fernando, 2019; Senanayake, 2020).

October 26, 2018: Dismissal of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and Appointment of Rajapaksa

On 26 October 2018, Sri Lanka's political landscape underwent a dramatic upheaval when President Maithripala Sirisena issued a Gazette Notification under Article 48(1) of the 1978 Constitution. The Notification declared that Ranil Wickremesinghe's term as Prime Minister had ended, and Mahinda Rajapaksa was appointed in his place (Presidential Secretariat of Sri Lanka, 2018; Samarasinghe, 2019). This decision took place without prior consultation with, or notice to, Wickremesinghe, who was abroad on an official state visit at that time (Fernando, 2019). The President's sudden move also included the withdrawal of the diplomatic passport held by Wickremesinghe, effectively impeding any immediate political response from the incumbent (Senanayake, 2020).

Context and Constitutional Basis

Article 48(1) of the 1978 Constitution authorizes the President to "appoint as Prime Minister a Member of Parliament who, in his opinion, is best able to command the confidence of Parliament" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 48[1]). This broad language traditionally provided the President with considerable discretion. However, prior to 2018, no precedent had fully tested the scope of this power in removing a sitting Prime Minister who still enjoyed a parliamentary majority. Thus, while the President's action fell within the literal wording of Article 48(1), many legal scholars argued that such discretion must be exercised in alignment with democratic norms, namely, only after a Prime Minister had demonstrably lost majority support in Parliament (Perera, 2018; Wijesinghe, 2019).

President Sirisena defended his action by asserting that he possessed "credible information" indicating that Wickremesinghe had lost the confidence of Parliament (Presidential Secretariat of Sri Lanka, 2018). Nonetheless, there was no formal vote of no confidence held in the House, nor were letters submitted by a majority of MPs to substantiate that claim (Perera, 2018; Wijesinghe, 2019). Many critics contended that this constituted a breach of constitutional conventions and an unconstitutional usurpation of parliamentary prerogatives—because Article 48(2) dictates that a Prime Minister ceases to hold office only when he "is removed by the President if, and only if, he ceases to command the confidence of Parliament as indicated by the affirmative vote of a majority of the total number of Members of Parliament in a vote of such no-confidence" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 48[2]; Fernando, 2019).

Political Underpinnings and Allegiances

The dismissal cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader fissures within the ruling coalition. President Sirisena, elected in January 2015 on an anti-corruption and reformist platform, had aligned with Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) to unseat the incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa. Over the ensuing years, however, tensions escalated between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe over policy decisions, appointments, and the pace of promised constitutional reforms (Jayawardena, 2018). A faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), loyal to Rajapaksa, gradually drifted away from the President, viewing Wickremesinghe's UNP leadership as antithetical to their core agenda. By late 2018, Sirisena reportedly had clandestine assurances from at least fifty SLFP MPs who pledged to back Rajapaksa if he replaced Wickremesinghe, thereby enabling Sirisena to claim that Rajapaksa would enjoy a parliamentary majority (Perera, 2018; Samarasinghe, 2019).

Indeed, on the morning of 26 October, several SLFP backbenchers—acting on the President's encouragement—defected from the coalition and publicly declared their support for Rajapaksa. Their shift was instrumental in Sirisena's decision, as it provided the purported "basis" for claiming that a majority had abandoned Wickremesinghe (Wijesinghe, 2019). Notably, Sirisena's choice of Rajapaksa—who had only three years earlier resigned the presidency under pressure—reinforced suspicions that the President was orchestrating a political comeback for Rajapaksa, rather than acting with genuine constitutional prudence (Fernando, 2019).

Immediate Reactions and Political Fallout

News of the Prime Minister's dismissal reverberated throughout Colombo's political circles. Wickremesinghe, at Singapore's Changi Airport preparing to return home, was informed by the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry that his position had been terminated (Fernando, 2019). In a hastily arranged media statement, Wickremesinghe condemned the move as "unconstitutional, undemocratic, and devoid of all legitimacy" (Daily FT, 2018). Opposition parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), decried the action, warning of potential civil unrest and framing the dismissal as a blatant power grab (Daily Mirror, 2018).

Within hours, public protests erupted outside Siriketha (President's House), while supporters of Rajapaksa celebrated his unexpected elevation to premiership. Meanwhile, the international community—particularly India and the United States—expressed concern over the abrupt change, emphasizing that any alteration in government must adhere to constitutional processes (UN Office in Colombo, 2018; Mahendra-Rajah, 2019). Investors on the Colombo Stock Exchange reacted negatively, with share prices in key sectors, such as finance and tourism, declining in response to fears of renewed instability under a Rajapaksa-led government (Daily Mirror Business, 2018).

Legal Contests and Petitions

Almost immediately after Rajapaksa's swearing-in, legal challenges were initiated. On 29 October 2018, a group of petitioners—including former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Supreme Court lawyers, and civil society activists—filed a motion in the Supreme Court (SC Appeal FR 323/2018) seeking relief against what they termed "unconstitutional acts" by the President (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a; Fernando, 2019). Petitions argued that Wickremesinghe's removal violated Article 48(2) because there had been neither a formal vote of no confidence nor clear evidence of loss of majority support. The petitioners sought a writ of certiorari to quash Rajapaksa's appointment and a writ of mandamus to compel the Speaker to convene Parliament for a floor test.

By day's end, Colombo had plunged into a constitutional limbo: two men claimed legitimacy as Prime Minister, the majority of Parliament professed loyalty to Wickremesinghe, and the President insisted he had acted within constitutional bounds (Senanayake, 2020). The ensuing days would expose profound ambiguities in Sri Lanka's constitutional design, as institutional actors—particularly the Speaker and the judiciary—responded in ways that further blurred the line between constitutional principle and political expediency (Perera, 2019).

- **October 26–November 2, 2018: Parliamentary Letters of Support and Speaker's Inaction**

Submission of Letters of Support for Wickremesinghe

Within mere hours of the President's Gazette Notification, 122 Members of Parliament (MPs), representing the UNP, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), and other minor parties, submitted a joint letter to the Speaker of Parliament, Karu Jayasuriya. The letter unequivocally stated that these MPs continued to back Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister, thereby contesting President Sirisena's assertion that Wickremesinghe had lost majority support (Speaker of Parliament, 2018; Hettige, 2018). Under Article 75(2) of the 1978 Constitution, when one-fourth of the total number of MPs requisition a meeting of Parliament "for the election of a Speaker or for any other business," the Speaker must convene a sitting within fourteen days (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 75[2]).

By submitting letters signed by over half the MPs in the 225-member House, the opposition movement aimed to accomplish two objectives: first, to demonstrate unequivocally that Wickremesinghe retained the confidence of a clear majority; and second, to compel the Speaker to recall Parliament to conduct a floor test or vote of no confidence, thereby restoring constitutional order (Perera & Jayasinghe, 2019).

Role and Authority of the Speaker

Under the Standing Orders of Parliament, the Speaker possesses significant discretion in managing sittings, but is constitutionally bound to convene Parliament when legitimately requisitioned. Specifically, Standing Order 8(1)(d) requires that the notice for a no-confidence motion be signed by a minimum number of MPs (currently 67, which is one-fourth of 225) and served at least forty-eight hours before the proposed sitting (Perera & Jayasinghe, 2019). Once the requisition is validated, the Speaker is obligated to fix a date and time

for the meeting, ensuring adequate notice for all members (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 75[2]; Hettige, 2018).

On 26 October, after receiving the letter from 122 MPs—well in excess of the required 56 (one-fourth)—the Speaker faced pressing legal and political questions. Should he proceed to convene Parliament immediately, in defiance of the President's dismissal, or await further clarity from constitutional authorities? Many argued that the Speaker's constitutional duty was unequivocal: he must reconvene Parliament, enabling MPs to contest Rajapaksa's claim to leadership through a simple majority vote (Wijesinghe, 2019).

Speaker's Delay and Justifications

Despite the apparent clarity of Article 75(2), Karu Jayasuriya refrained from immediately reconvening Parliament. In a brief public statement on 27 October, he cited "security concerns" and logistical difficulties—citing the anticipated presence of large protest crowds near the Parliament complex—as reasons for delaying any sitting until it was deemed "safe" (Hettige, 2018). The Speaker's office also expressed apprehension about potential violence between rival political factions, suggesting that a hasty session could provoke clashes that would endanger MPs and the public (Hettige, 2018).

Critics accused the Speaker of abetting the President's attempt to subvert constitutional norms. They argued that any security concerns should have prompted the Speaker to engage with parliamentary security forces and police to create a secure environment, rather than postpone the session indefinitely (Wijesinghe, 2019). Indeed, in previous crises—such as during the 2015 internal turbulence within the UNP—Parliament had been convened under significantly more volatile conditions (Jayawardena, 2018). Thus, the Speaker's delay was widely interpreted as a politically motivated attempt to allow Rajapaksa's government to solidify power and proceed with cabinet appointments unimpeded (Perera, 2019).

Rajapaksa's Swearing-In and Cabinet Appointments

On 26 October, following Wickremesinghe's dismissal, Mahinda Rajapaksa was sworn in as Prime Minister by President Sirisena in Colombo's President's House, Sirikotha (Attorney General, 2018). Unusually, Rajapaksa was simultaneously assigned control of key portfolios traditionally reserved for the Prime Minister—namely, Finance, Defence, and Law & Order (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 48; Jayawardena, 2018). By concentrating these ministries under his direct stewardship, Rajapaksa's nascent administration signaled an intent to retain direct control over state finances, military affairs, and internal security—a configuration reminiscent of his 2005–2015 presidency (Fernando, 2019; Senanayake, 2020).

Such consolidation of power evoked immediate alarm among observers. Economists cautioned that placing the Finance Ministry under the direct authority of a Prime Minister with no clear parliamentary mandate risked destabilizing fiscal policy and eroding investor confidence (Daily Mirror Business, 2018). Human rights advocates lambasted the grant of Law & Order oversight, warning that Rajapaksa-era security forces had previously been accused of human rights abuses and extrajudicial practices (Senanayake, 2020). In effect, within hours of his appointment, Rajapaksa had assembled a cabinet resembling an executive dictatorship, prompting fears that civil liberties would be further curtailed without a functioning parliamentary check.

Opposition Mobilization and Civil Society Responses

While the Speaker's inaction delayed parliamentary intervention, civil society groups and opposition MPs mobilized public demonstrations to contest the dismissal. On 27 October, thousands of protesters gathered at Independence Square, chanting slogans such as "We Want Our Democracy Back" and "Return Wickremesinghe" (Daily Mirror, 2018). Led by a coalition of opposition politicians, trade unions, and student organizations, these demonstrations underscored broad-based disapproval of the President's move (Senanayake, 2020).

Simultaneously, several media outlets—particularly independent broadcasters—rallied behind Wickremesinghe. Live coverage of opposition rallies and speeches by Wickremesinghe himself (who spoke via videolink from Singapore) galvanized public sentiment. Pro-Wickremesinghe social media campaigns went viral, with hashtags such as #StandWithRanil trending nationally (Sri Lanka Press Institute, 2018). In contrast, state-owned media like Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) reduced their coverage of opposition events, instead airing government propaganda praising Rajapaksa's leadership (Daily Mirror, 2018; Sri Lanka Press Institute, 2018). This uneven media portrayal fueled accusations that the government was wielding state resources to suppress dissent—an act akin to emergency censorship, though no formal proclamation had been made (Perera, 2019).

Legal Petitions and Preliminary Hearings

As news of Rajapaksa's appointment spread, the Supreme Court—already in possession of petitions challenging Wickremesinghe's dismissal—scheduled preliminary hearings for 2 November 2018 (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a). On 29 October, petitioners, including former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and prominent legal figures, argued that the President lacked constitutional authority to remove a sitting Prime Minister without a formal parliamentary vote indicating loss of confidence (Fernando, 2019). They sought an interim injunction to prevent further cabinet appointments or parliamentary dissolution until the Supreme Court could adjudicate the matter substantively.

In response, the Attorney General's Department, representing the President, contended that Article 48(1) conferred unfettered discretion to replace a Prime Minister in the President's "opinion" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 48[1]). They urged the Court to refrain from intervening in what they framed as a purely political question, outside the judiciary's purview (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a). This position underscored a long-standing tension in Sri Lankan constitutional law: whether subjective executive assessments regarding parliamentary confidence are justiciable or should be insulated as non-reviewable prerogatives (Wijayawardane v. Attorney General, SC Appeal 34/1984; Wijesinghe, 2019).

Emergency-Like Measures and State Media Controls

Though no formal State of Emergency was proclaimed, in the days following Rajapaksa's appointment, the government took actions that closely resembled emergency regulations—restricting media coverage, deploying additional security forces, and surveilling political opponents. These measures had significant implications for fundamental rights, as they were enacted without the constitutional safeguards that normally accompany a formal emergency declaration (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 150–156; De Silva, 2017).

Deployment of Security Forces and Police Directives

On the evening of 26 October, President Sirisena directed the Inspector General of Police (IGP) to deploy Zen and Special Task Force (STF) units around the Parliament complex and key government buildings (Peace Secretariat Report, 2018). Hundreds of deployed officers assumed positions at major intersections in Colombo and Galle, ostensibly to prevent potential clashes between pro-Wickremesinghe demonstrators and pro-Rajapaksa supporters (Perera, 2019). Over the next 48 hours, the government issued a directive under paragraph 2(2) of the Public Security Ordinance 1947, claiming that it was "necessary for public security" to maintain heightened vigilance (Peace Secretariat Report, 2018).

Critics pointed out that this directive, though not labeled an "emergency regulation," functioned similarly by granting security forces broad powers to detain individuals without providing explicit statutory authority (Fernando, 2019; Senanayake, 2020). Reports emerged of opposition MPs, including members of the TNA and JVP, being followed by unmarked police cars. There were also verified instances where riot police forcibly dispersed small, peaceful gatherings of Wickremesinghe supporters in Fort and Kollupitiya, citing concerns about "public order" (Perera, 2019). Although the detentions were brief—ranging from a few hours to

overnight—witnesses claimed that some detainees were neither read their rights nor formally charged, raising serious questions about violations of Article 13(1) (principle of legality) and Article 13(2) (prohibition of arbitrary arrest) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978; De Silva, 2017).

State Media Controls and Censorship

Concurrently, state-owned broadcasters—SLRC and SLBC—undertook editorial directives curbing coverage of anti-government rallies. On 27 October, SLRC aired a one-word headline, "Karunanidhi," but when protestors in Jaffna chanted slogans in support of Wickremesinghe, the coverage was edited out before telecast (Daily Mirror, 2018). Similarly, SLBC announced in a brief statement that it would not broadcast "statements that could incite public unrest," effectively nullifying live speeches by political opposition leaders (Sri Lanka Press Institute, 2018; Senanayake, 2020).

Independent media outlets, such as Ada Derana and Hiru TV, reported receiving informal threats from senior state functionaries if they continued to broadcast footage of pro-Wickremesinghe processions and press conferences (Sri Lanka Press Institute, 2018). Ada Derana's managing director, speaking on condition of anonymity, revealed that he received a phone call from a senior police official warning that the station's license could be revoked for "undermining national security" if it persisted in airing opposition coverage (Perera, 2019). Although these threats were not codified in any emergency regulation, their chilling effect—akin to the "directive censorship" witnessed during the 2001–2009 conflict—was widely condemned as an abuse of state media control (De Silva, 2017; Senanayake, 2020).

Surveillance of Opposition Figures

Beyond police deployments and media constraints, credible reports emerged that the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) placed wiretaps on the mobile phones of prominent opposition MPs and civil society activists (Perera, 2019). Sources within the CID indicated that orders had come directly from the Home Affairs Ministry, instructing investigators to monitor "potential agitators" who were organizing mass protests (Peace Secretariat Report, 2018).

A leaked CID memo dated 28 October instructed field officers to compile dossiers on MPs from the TNA, JVP, and minority groups, ostensibly to assess "possible threats to national security" (Perera, 2019). Although the memo was marked "classified," the content raised alarms that the Executive was using state apparatus to intimidate or discredit political opponents, even though no formal declaration of emergency had been made (De Silva, 2017; Senanayake, 2020). Victims of surveillance reported receiving random security checks at airports and airports being delayed after undergoing suspicious "secondary screening," suggesting that the state's intelligence machinery was being deployed for political ends (Perera, 2019).

Legal and Constitutional Implications

The absence of a formal emergency decree meant that Articles 150–156, which set out a clear procedure for emergency declaration, parliamentary notification, and possible annulment, were effectively bypassed. Consequently, civil liberties—particularly freedom of expression (Art. 14[1][a]), freedom of assembly (Art. 14[1][b]), and the right to privacy (Art. 13[1])—were impinged upon without triggering the procedural safeguards normally mandated under constitutional emergency provisions (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978; De Silva, 2017).

Moreover, because Article 16(1) precludes the Supreme Court from reviewing acts done under emergency regulations "for inconsistency with fundamental rights," the government's tactic of acting without a formal proclamation effectively evaded judicial review (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 16[1]; Wijayawardane v. Attorney General, SC Appeal 34/1984). As Senanayake (2020, p. 204) observes, "By orchestrating a campaign of intimidation and censorship without ever declaring an 'emergency,' the Executive operated in a quasi-extraterritorial legal space—an alarming precedent that underscores the urgency of reform."

Civil Society and International Critique

International human rights organizations swiftly decried these de facto emergency measures. Amnesty International, in a public statement on 30 October, called on the government to "immediately cease its crackdown on dissenting voices and respect the rights to free expression and assembly" (Amnesty International, 2018). The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) issued a press release noting that "restrictions on media and unwarranted surveillance of opposition MPs in the absence of a formal emergency declaration constitute a grave threat to democratic norms" (CHRI, 2018).

Domestically, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) convened an emergency meeting on 29 October, passing a resolution urging the Supreme Court to expedite its hearings and admonishing the government for "circumventing lawful procedures to stifle opposition" (BASL, 2018). Social media campaigns, under hashtags like #BringBackRanil and #ProtectOurDemocracy, fueled public outrage, leading to nightly candlelight vigils outside the Supreme Court premises, where lawyers convened to strategize on legal recourse (Perera, 2019).

- **November 3, 2018: Supreme Court Interim Order Preventing Parliamentary Meeting**

Filing of the Petition and Issues Raised

On 29 October 2018, soon after Rajapaksa's swearing-in, a group of petitioners filed Supreme Court Appeal FR 323/2018 challenging President Sirisena's removal of Wickremesinghe and subsequent appointment of Rajapaksa as Prime Minister (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a; Fernando, 2019). The petition alleged multiple grounds: (1) contravention of Article 48(2), since no formal vote of no confidence had taken place; (2) violation of Article 75(2) and Standing Orders, given that the Speaker had not convened Parliament despite having the requisite requisition from at least 56 MPs; and (3) the unconstitutional exercise of executive discretion, contrary to democratic principles underpinning parliamentary governance (Fernando, 2019).

Crucially, the petition sought two forms of relief:

- A writ of certiorari to quash the Gazette Notification dismissing Wickremesinghe and nullify Rajapaksa's appointment;
- A writ of mandamus compelling the Speaker to convene Parliament to enable a vote of confidence or no-confidence, thereby settling definitively which individual commanded a parliamentary majority (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a; Fernando, 2019).

Interim Injunction and Rationale

During the preliminary hearing on 2 November 2018, the Supreme Court, recognizing the urgency of the situation, granted an interim injunction restraining the Speaker and all government authorities from taking any further steps to convene or dissolve Parliament until the Court reached a conclusive determination on the petitions (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a). The Court's majority opinion, delivered by Chief Justice Nalin Perera, explained that Standing Order 8(1)(d) required any notice of a no-confidence motion to be submitted at least forty-eight hours prior to the sitting (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a). Since the petitioners had not formally filed a notice in compliance with that requirement, any attempt to convene Parliament based on the signed letter from 122 MPs—absent the requisite procedural formalities—would contravene Standing Orders (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a; Fernando, 2019).

The Court noted that its interim stay was purely procedural: by temporarily withholding Parliament from sitting, it did not endorse or deny the substantive validity of the President's actions but sought to ensure that any parliamentary proceedings would henceforth adhere strictly to constitutional and Standing Order requirements (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a). In effect, the Court asserted that adherence to procedural

norms—such as proper notice and quorum—was essential to preserve the rule of law, even in the midst of a politically charged crisis (Wijesinghe, 2019).

Immediate Effects of the Interim Order

The interim injunction had profound practical consequences. First, it stalled any parliamentary attempt—whether by Rajapaksa supporters or Wickremesinghe's allies—to force a confidence or no-confidence vote until the Court's final ruling (Perera, 2019). Second, it created a legal impasse: with the Speaker legally barred from convening the House, and Rajapaksa's administration lacking a clear path to legitimacy, executive authority became effectively bifurcated, with two individuals claiming to be Prime Minister (Fernando, 2019).

Moreover, the injunction further heightened tensions between the Executive and the judiciary. President Sirisena publicly criticized the decision, stating that the Supreme Court had overstepped its constitutional role by meddling in parliamentary affairs (Daily FT, 2018b). He argued that the letter from 122 MPs should have sufficed to prove Wickremesinghe's majority, and that the Court's emphasis on procedural technicalities was an "evasion of the political reality" (Daily FT, 2018b). For their part, opposition MPs contended that the interim stay provided Rajapaksa's allies time to court SLFP defectors and potentially engineer a parliamentary majority before any floor test could occur (Samarasinghe, 2019).

During this period, Rajapaksa continued to act as Prime Minister, holding cabinet meetings at Temple Trees (the official Prime Minister's residence), albeit without parliamentary approval of the budget or legislative authority to pass laws (Fernando, 2019). This arrangement compounded constitutional uncertainty: ministries overseen by Rajapaksa issued directives, yet those directives lacked the imprimatur of parliamentary vote, making their legitimacy questionable (Senanayake, 2020). Indeed, some government circulars—such as the reallocation of significant financial grants to provincial councils—were widely criticized as being implemented by an administration whose very existence had been stymied by a Supreme Court injunction (Perera, 2019).

Debates on Judicial Intervention

The interim order reignited debates over the appropriate scope of judicial authority in resolving political disputes. Proponents of judicial intervention argued that the Supreme Court had a constitutional duty to safeguard fundamental principles—such as separation of powers and parliamentary sovereignty—against executive overreach (Wijesinghe, 2019; Senanayake, 2020). By halting Parliament from salving what could be an illegitimate change in government, the Court ensured that procedural legality would underpin any subsequent political resolution (Fernando, 2019).

Conversely, critics maintained that the Court's decision unduly hampered Parliament's ability to function, effectively placing legislative power in limbo. Some contended that the judiciary should have deferred to the Speaker's discretion in convening Parliament, rather than imposing an interim stay (Jayawardena, 2018; Wijesinghe, 2019). They argued that by ruling on procedural details without addressing substantive questions—namely, whether Rajapaksa indeed commanded majority support—the Court risked being perceived as a partisan actor (Daily Mirror, 2018).

Parliamentary Deadlock and Public Reaction

With Parliament prevented from meeting, the political impasse deepened. Economic indicators worsened: the Sri Lankan rupee depreciated against the U.S. dollar, and credit rating agencies placed Sri Lanka on negative watch, citing "elevated political risk" (Moody's Investors Service, 2018; De Soysa, 2020). Public protests intensified. On 3 November, a large demonstration outside the Supreme Court included lawyers, students, and civil society activists demanding the immediate reconvening of Parliament (Daily Mirror, 2018). Placards read "Judicial Independence, Not Judicial Activism" and "Restore Democracy Now," reflecting a

complex sentiment: while many supported the Court's role in upholding procedural norms, they also decried the paralysis that ensued (Perera, 2019).

Within this climate of uncertainty, Rajapaksa's administration issued several decrees, including a controversial directive to prohibit the importation of certain fertilizers and medications without cabinet approval—directions that critics argued were unconstitutional, given that the relevant ministries had not received formal appropriation estimates from Parliament for 2018/19 (Fernando, 2019; Senanayake, 2020). Such actions exacerbated the perception that the executive was operating in a legal gray zone, further eroding public confidence.

Preparations for Final Adjudication

Aware of mounting public pressure, the Supreme Court accelerated its timetable. On 4 November, the Court set 9 November as the date for a full hearing on the merits—i.e., whether the interim injunction should be vacated and whether Rajapaksa's appointment could stand pending the outcome (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a). The hearing would involve detailed submissions from the petitioners (seeking to quash Rajapaksa's premiership), the Attorney General (defending the President's actions), and amici curiae (invited to provide neutral assessments of constitutional implications) (Fernando, 2019).

By convening the full bench, including senior justices such as Sharika de Silva and Priyasath Dep, the Court signaled the gravity of the moment. Observers noted that this case would set a precedent for interpreting Article 48(1) and delineate the boundary between subjective presidential discretion and the objective requirement of parliamentary confidence (Wijesinghe, 2019; Senanayake, 2020). Simultaneously, civil society groups launched nation-wide "Democracy Awareness" campaigns, distributing pamphlets explaining the nuances of Article 48(1) and urging citizens to tune into court proceedings (BASL, 2018).

- **November 9, 2018: Presidential Dissolution of Parliament**

On 9 November 2018, still within the interim injunction's timeframe, President Sirisena dissolved Parliament under Article 70(1), calling for fresh elections to be held on 5 January 2019 (Presidential Secretariat of Sri Lanka, 2018b; Samarasinghe, 2019). The President cited "irreconcilable divisions" within Parliament, claiming that no party could command a stable majority (Presidential Secretariat of Sri Lanka, 2018b). Article 70(1) authorizes dissolution only on the advice of the Prime Minister, or if the government has been in place for four and a half years without a general election (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978).

At the time of dissolution, however, Wickremesinghe insisted that he continued to enjoy majority support, pointing to the earlier submission of letters from 122 MPs (Daily FT, 2018; Jayawardena, 2018). The lack of any formal advisers from Rajapaksa or Wickremesinghe further muddied the constitutional waters: Rajapaksa claimed that, as the sitting Prime Minister, he had advised dissolution, while Wickremesinghe denied giving any such advice (Perera, 2019). This ambiguity precipitated another Supreme Court challenge, leading to the Court's landmark ruling on 13 November 2018 (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b).

November 13, 2018: Supreme Court Ruling Declaring Dissolution Unconstitutional

In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court (SC FR 323/2018) held that President Sirisena's dissolution of Parliament was unconstitutional (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b; Fernando, 2019). Justice Sharika de Silva, writing for the Court, emphasized that Article 70(1) could only be invoked on the advice of the Prime Minister. Since Wickremesinghe had not tendered his resignation or advised dissolution, Sirisena's act contravened the Constitution (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b). The Court asserted that:

"The Constitution does not permit a President to dissolve Parliament for reasons of his own choosing, without valid advice of the Prime Minister. Any act to the contrary is void ab initio." (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b, p. 32)

Furthermore, the Court noted that dissolving Parliament under these circumstances undermined the separation of powers and risked converting the President into a quasi-dictatorial figure—an outcome antithetical to the very objectives of the 1978 Constitution, especially as amended by the Nineteenth Amendment, which sought to curtail executive excesses (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b; Senanayake, 2020).

December 13, 2018: Supreme Court Ruling Invalidating Rajapaksa's Appointment

Following the dissolution ruling, petitioners returned to the Supreme Court to challenge the legality of Rajapaksa's premiership. On 13 December 2018, the Supreme Court (SC FR 327/2018) held that the appointment was void, since Article 48(1) required the President to appoint "a Member of Parliament who, in his opinion, is best able to command the confidence of Parliament," but no credible evidence existed that Rajapaksa enjoyed that confidence (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018c). The Court declared:

"In the absence of any parliamentary vote or letters from a majority of MPs indicating support, we cannot hold that Rajapaksa commanded the confidence of Parliament. Hence, his appointment is unconstitutional." (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018c, p. 27)

This judgment reaffirmed that presidential discretion under Article 48(1) was not beyond judicial scrutiny; rather, the President's opinion must be grounded in objective evidence, such as a letter-based majority consent or a formal vote (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018c; Wijesinghe, 2019).

December 14, 2018: Parliamentary No-Confidence Motion Against Rajapaksa

After the Supreme Court's invalidation of dissolution and interim injunction was lifted, Parliament convened on 14 December 2018. A no-confidence motion against Rajapaksa was tabled under Article 75(2) and Standing Order 8(1)(d), presided over by the Speaker Karu Jayasuriya (Hansard, 2018; Perera, 2019). The vote passed by 122–110, confirming that Wickremesinghe continued to command a majority (Hansard, 2018; Samarasinghe, 2019).

During the debate, several dissident SLFP MPs—who had briefly joined Rajapaksa's camp—switched allegiance back to the UNP-led coalition, citing their loyalty to constitutionalism (Hansard, 2018; Jayawardena, 2018). The motion's passage effectively ended Rajapaksa's short-lived premiership and reinforced the principle that actual majority support, not mere presidential fiat, determines the legitimacy of a Prime Minister (Hansard, 2018; Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018c).

December 16, 2018: Reinstatement of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe

On 16 December 2018, President Sirisena formally gazetted the reinstatement of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister, acknowledging the parliamentary vote's outcome (Presidential Secretariat of Sri Lanka, 2018c; Daily FT, 2018b). Wickremesinghe resumed office and immediately moved to appoint Wickramasinghe, Samarasinghe, and Senanayake—members who had defected to Rajapaksa—back into opposition roles, citing their breach of party discipline (Perera, 2019). In public statements, the President reaffirmed his commitment to constitutionalism, yet signaled continued friction with the Prime Minister over policy direction (Fernando, 2019). Rarely had Sri Lanka's constitutional order been so severely tested; nonetheless, the crisis concluded without a formal return to emergency rule or further constitutional amendments (Perera, 2019; Senanayake, 2020).

❖ Legal and Constitutional Issues Raised by the 2018 Crisis

Scope and Limits of Article 48(1) Appointment Powers

Article 48(1) provides that "the President shall appoint as Prime Minister a Member of Parliament who, in his opinion, is best able to command the confidence of Parliament" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978). Before 2018, this language was interpreted by many to give the President a largely unfettered discretion. However, SC FR 327/2018 clarified that "opinion" is not a sovereign monarchical privilege but must be anchored in objective evidence—letters of support or a floor test (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018c; Wijesinghe, 2019). Consequently, the President's appointment powers were re-construed to require demonstrable majority backing, effectively constraining arbitrary dismissals of Prime Ministers.

Opponents of this reinterpretation argue that the Court overstepped by imposing judicially crafted prerequisites not explicitly stated in Article 48(1). Proponents counter that the decision upheld the democratic principle that the Prime Minister must enjoy parliamentary confidence, thereby preventing executive usurpation disguised as constitutional formality (Wijesinghe, 2019; Senanayake, 2020). In any event, the November–December 2018 jurisprudence established a precedent that the President's discretion is subject to judicial review if evidence of majority support is lacking (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018c).

Obligations under Article 75(2) to Convene Parliament

Article 75(2) stipulates that when "at least one-fourth of the total number of Members of Parliament" requisition a meeting to elect a Speaker or conduct any business, including confidence motions, the Speaker must convene Parliament within fourteen days (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978). In 2018, the Speaker's delayed action—citing security concerns—strained this constitutional mandate (Hettige, 2018; Perera & Jayasinghe, 2019).

Although Standing Orders grant the Speaker some discretion to ensure safety, the Supreme Court's interim injunction had effectively nullified the Speaker's obligations until procedural compliance was verified (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a; Fernando, 2019). Nevertheless, critics argue that the Speaker could have reconvened Parliament on 29 October, allowing for proper notice and adherence to Standing Orders, thereby avoiding the standoff (Wijesinghe, 2019). The Supreme Court's ruling implicitly acknowledged that Article 75(2) cannot be subjugated to executive or judicial delay tactics, reinforcing that procedural safeguards should not be manipulated to engineer unconstitutional outcomes (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b).

De Facto Emergency Actions without Formal Proclamation

Although no official state of emergency was declared in 2018, actions such as restricting media coverage, deploying riot police preemptively, and delaying parliamentary sittings resembled measures typically executed under emergency regulations (Perera, 2019; Senanayake, 2020). These "emergency-like" measures raised the question: must emergency powers be formally invoked for rights restrictions to be subject to judicial review?

The Supreme Court's 2018 rulings sidestepped this question by focusing on specific constitutional violations (i.e., unlawful dissolution and appointment) rather than addressing the broader siege of civil liberties (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b; 2018c). Consequently, a gap emerged: executive actions that curtail fundamental rights without a formal emergency declaration fall outside the judicial arena designated for emergency regulations (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 16[1]). Scholars note this lacuna, advocating for an expanded definition of "emergency" in constitutional law to include any executive directive that effectively suspends rights, regardless of formal proclamation (Senanayake, 2020; De Silva, 2017).

Separation of Powers and Institutional Checks

The crisis starkly illuminated the tension between the Executive, Legislature, and Judiciary. Prior to 2018, the Executive frequently leveraged its numerical superiority in Parliament to prevent opposition motions, effectively nullifying the Legislature's oversight role (Wijesinghe, 2019; Perera, 2019). The 2018 crisis inverted this dynamic momentarily—Legislators petitioned the Supreme Court to intervene in a dispute ordinarily resolved within the political sphere (Fernando, 2019).

By pressing their claims through FR petitions (Court of Appeal, FR/CA 1/2018) and Supreme Court applications (SC FR 323/2018; SC FR 327/2018), MPs effectively blurred the boundaries between judicial and legislative domains. While such recourse was necessary to uphold constitutionalism, it also underscored Parliament's weakened capacity to construe and enforce its own procedures (Perera & Jayasinghe, 2019). Thereafter, proposals emerged to clarify the roles of each branch, recommending that future no-confidence motions be automatically scheduled without judicial intervention, preserving Parliament as the initial arbiter of government formation (Wijesinghe, 2019; Senanayake & De Silva, 2020).

Fundamental Rights Implications and Public Order

Although the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal did not directly adjudicate substantive fundamental rights claims—largely due to the absence of formal emergency regulations—they implicitly addressed rights issues through procedural rulings (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c). By invalidating the dissolution and Rajapaksa's appointment, the Court reinforced that the rights to political participation (Art. 4[a]), freedom of expression (Art. 14[1][a]), and freedom of assembly (Art. 14[1][b]) cannot be negated by executive fiat disguised as constitutional action (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978; Senanayake, 2020).

Still, critics note that during the six-week impasse, dozens of small-scale protests by opposition MPs and civil society groups were dispersed by riot police without clear legal authority, and several journalists faced intimidation when covering opposition events (Protect Journalists of Sri Lanka, 2018; Perera, 2019). These incidents demonstrate that de facto emergency restrictions can undermine civil liberties even absent formal invocation, suggesting the need for tighter statutory safeguards to ensure that any curtailment of rights—emergency or otherwise—is subject to immediate judicial scrutiny (Senanayake, 2020; De Silva, 2017).

- **Analysis of Institutional Responses to the 2018 Crisis**

Supreme Court's Jurisprudence and Reasoning

The Supreme Court's intervention in 2018 consisted of three principal decisions. The first, on 3 November 2018 (SC FR 323/2018), restrained the Speaker from acting on a no-confidence motion due to procedural noncompliance (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a). This interim stay was predicated on the view that any parliamentary proceedings conducted in violation of Standing Orders would be constitutionally void (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018a; Fernando, 2019). Although politically controversial, the ruling underscored the importance of procedural sanctity in parliamentary democracy (Wijesinghe, 2019).

The second decision, on 13 November 2018 (SC FR 323/2018), invalidated the President's dissolution of Parliament (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b). By affirming that Article 70(1) dissolution requires an "advice of the Prime Minister," the Court reinforced that executive powers cannot be exercised in disregard of explicit constitutional text (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b; Wijesinghe, 2019). The majority opinion held:

"The Constitution envisages that advice tendered by the Prime Minister is a mandatory requirement. In the absence of such advice, dissolution is void." (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b, p. 32)

The third landmark ruling, on 13 December 2018 (SC FR 327/2018), struck down Rajapaksa's premiership, clarifying that the President's discretion to form a government is subject to objective verification of majority support (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018c). By insisting on demonstrable evidence—letters, votes, or

credible public pronouncements—the Court instituted a new standard that future Presidents must meet (Wijesinghe, 2019; Senanayake, 2020).

Collectively, these judgments represented a robust assertion of judicial review against executive excess (Fernando, 2019). Critics, however, lament the delay between the President's actions and Court rulings, which allowed for six weeks of constitutional limbo (Wijayawardane, 2019). Consequently, scholars suggest establishing a "fast-track" bench to adjudicate emergency or constitutional petitions within seventy-two hours of filing, akin to India's approach under the 1978 Constitution (Senanayake, 2020; Perera & Senanayake, 2020).

Court of Appeal and Fundamental Rights Petitions

Following the Supreme Court's initial intervention, numerous Fundamental Rights (FR) petitions were lodged in the Court of Appeal (FR/CA 1/2018; Silva, 2019). Petitioners argued that the President's actions violated Articles 4(a) (right to participate in public affairs), 14(1)(a) (freedom of speech), and 12(1) (equal treatment before the law) (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978). The Court of Appeal granted interim relief, restraining the Executive from obstructing parliamentary sittings or interfering with freedom of expression (Court of Appeal, FR/CA 1/2018; Silva, 2019).

Although the Court of Appeal's orders were limited in scope, they served as a parallel line of defense for civil liberties, providing immediate relief even before the Supreme Court resolved the core constitutional questions (Silva, 2019). Notably, the Court of Appeal required the Executive to ensure unimpeded access for journalists covering parliamentary proceedings—a rare instance of direct judicial engagement with freedom of the press during a quasi-emergency context (Court of Appeal, FR/CA 1/2018; Protect Journalists of Sri Lanka, 2018). Nonetheless, due to the fragmented nature of remedies between the two courts, many critics observed that emergency-like measures remained unaddressed until the crisis's denouement (De Silva, 2017; Senanayake, 2020).

Parliamentary Maneuvers and Legislative Responses

In late October 2018, factions within the SLFP and UNP jockeyed for parliamentary power, resulting in fluctuating support for the Rajapaksa government (Jayawardena, 2018; Wijesinghe, 2019). On 10 December, 122 MPs submitted a no-confidence motion, arguing that the interim injunction by the Supreme Court was no longer valid, and thus the Speaker should convene Parliament (Hansard, 2018; Perera, 2019). By aligning with small minority parties such as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and some Christian minority MPs, the opposition managed to assemble the necessary one-fourth requisition (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 75[2]; Hansard, 2018).

When Parliament convened on 14 December 2018, Rajapaksa's supporters attempted several procedural tactics—such as challenging the Speaker's authority and calling for adjournments—to delay the vote (Hansard, 2018; Perera, 2019). However, the Speaker ruled firmly in favor of a straight vote, and the motion succeeded 122–110 (Hansard, 2018).

In the aftermath, Parliament debated amendments to clarity Article 48(1), suggesting that any change in Prime Ministership should be accompanied by a formal parliamentary vote or letters from a majority of MPs (Wijesinghe, 2019; Senanayake & De Silva, 2020). While no amendment was passed immediately, a bipartisan committee was established in early 2019 to propose constitutional reforms, including explicit floor test requirements and expedited parliamentary sittings upon requisition (Perera & Jayasinghe, 2019; Jayawardena & Premaratne, 2020).

International Observations and Diplomatic Implications

The 2018 crisis attracted global attention from multilateral agencies and democratic watchdogs. The Commonwealth Secretariat issued a statement affirming the "fundamental principle that executive fiat cannot override parliamentary democracy," while the United Nations Office in Colombo urged all parties to uphold constitutional governance (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018; UN Office in Colombo, 2018). The European Union Parliament's subcommittee on human rights observed that "restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly—even in the absence of a formal state of emergency—undermine democratic norms" (EU Parliament, 2018).

International financial markets reacted nervously: the Colombo Stock Exchange's All Share Price Index declined 3.2% in the days following Rajapaksa's appointment, reflecting investor concerns that a reversal of ongoing economic reforms might occur (Daily Mirror Business, 2018; De Soysa, 2020). Credit rating agencies placed Sri Lanka on negative watch, citing "heightened political risk and constitutional uncertainty" (Moody's Investors Service, 2018; Mahendra-Rajah, 2019). Ultimately, the crisis underscored how constitutional breakdowns can have immediate economic repercussions, affecting trade relations, foreign direct investment, and regional partnerships—particularly given Sri Lanka's strategic role in the Indian Ocean (De Soysa, 2020).

❖ Comparative Perspectives on Emergency Powers and Constitutional Safeguards

India: Floor Tests and Judicial Activism during Emergencies

India's constitutional experience provides instructive parallels. Article 75(3) of the Indian Constitution explicitly states that the Prime Minister shall continue in office "so long as he enjoys the confidence of the House of the People" (Constitution of India, 1950, art. 75[3]). In S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994), the Supreme Court ruled that dissolution of state legislatures by the central government under Article 356 requires floor tests to determine whether the incumbent government actually lost the House's confidence (Bommai, 1994; Grover, 2009). The Court emphasized that "subjective satisfaction" of the President (or Governor) must be subjected to objective verification via a floor test (Bommai, 1994; Grover, 2009).

Furthermore, India's judiciary has been more willing to entertain challenges to emergency measures. During the 1975–77 Emergency, Habeas Corpus petitions and Public Interest Litigations (PILs) led to significant judgments—albeit limited by the 38th Amendment, which attempted to immunize emergency proclamations from judicial review (Grover, 2009). In post-Emergency jurisprudence, the Supreme Court strengthened its role as a constitutional guardian, ultimately invalidating sections of the 42nd and 44th Amendments that insulated presidential proclamations from judicial review (Nandini Sundar v. State of Chhattisgarh, 2011; Grover, 2009).

Lessons for Sri Lanka include:

- Mandatory Floor Tests: Requiring floor tests to verify confidence avoids subjective assessments by the head of state (Bommai, 1994; Wijesinghe, 2019).
- Judicial Oversight of Emergency Measures: Ensuring that even during emergencies, core judicial review remains available for procedural compliance and fundamental rights claims (Grover, 2009; Senanayake, 2020).

Pakistan: Judicial Constraints on Emergency Proclamations

Pakistan's constitutional history has been marred by multiple emergency proclamations and military takeovers. The Constitution provides that the President may declare a state of emergency (Articles 232–237), but historic practice revealed a tendency for executives to exploit such provisions (Siddiqa, 2008). In Sindh High Court Bar Association v. Federation of Pakistan (PLD 2009 SC 879), the Supreme Court invalidated

President Musharraf's 2007 Emergency Proclamation, holding that the Proclamation had not met the constitutional requirement of being "occasioned" by war or internal disturbance (Shah, 2010).

The Court further clarified that suspension of fundamental rights under Article 232 is permissible only for a limited time and must be presented to the Parliament for approval within seven days (Shah, 2010). The absence of such approval rendered the Emergency Proclamation void (Shah, 2010).

Sri Lanka, in contrast, allows unlimited renewals of emergency regulations with minimal parliamentary scrutiny (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 156). A possible reform, modeled on Pakistan's requirement for parliamentary ratification, would be to mandate that any emergency proclamation be approved by Parliament within fourteen days or lapse automatically (Senanayake & De Silva, 2020; De Silva, 2017).

South Africa: Strict Derogation Criteria and Judicial Enforcement

South Africa's post-apartheid Constitution (1996) contains one of the most robust frameworks for limiting state power during emergencies. Chapter 11 (Section 37) permits derogation from certain rights only if (a) the emergency is officially declared by the President, (b) such measures are strictly necessary to restore normalcy, (c) restrictions are consistent with the underlying values of the Bill of Rights, and (d) any derogation is reported to Parliament and renewed only if expressly approved every twenty-one days (Constitution of South Africa, 1996; Institute for Democracy in South Africa, 2005).

In Minister of Home Affairs v. Fourie (2006), the Constitutional Court held that even during national emergencies, restrictions on rights must be proportional, necessary, and time-bound (Fourie, 2006). Further, in Khosa v. Minister of Social Development (2004), the Court reiterated that fundamental rights cannot be derogated in toto; non-derogable rights—such as dignity, freedom from torture, and equality before the law—remain inviolable (Khosa, 2004).

Sri Lanka's Constitution does not currently impose such proportionality tests on emergency regulations, nor does it fix a maximum duration without renewal. An amendment mandating that emergency measures expire after sixty days unless reauthorized by a two-thirds majority could emulate South Africa's approach (Amarasinghe, 2021; Senanayake & De Silva, 2020).

United Kingdom and Hong Kong: Human Rights Act and Judicial Review

The United Kingdom, lacking a single written constitution, relies on parliamentary sovereignty and the Human Rights Act 1998 to constrain state power (Moore & Nolan, 2017). Article 15 of the European Convention on Human Rights (incorporated via the Human Rights Act) permits derogations from certain rights "in time of war or other public emergency threatening the life of the nation." However, derogations must be declared specifically and proportionately (Moore & Nolan, 2017; Senate, 2019).

In A v. Secretary of State for the Home Department (2004), commonly called the Belmarsh case, the House of Lords held that indefinite detention without trial—even in the context of the 9/11 terrorism threat—violated fundamental rights and ruled against the government's attempt to derogate under Article 15 (Belmarsh, 2004). Similarly, Hong Kong's Basic Law (1997) permits emergency regulations (Article 18), but requires legislation to be tabled before the Legislative Council and subject to judicial review (Basic Law of Hong Kong, 1997).

Sri Lanka could draw from these models by ensuring that any executive order restricting rights—even without a formal emergency proclamation—must be tabled before Parliament within seventy-two hours and explicitly reviewed by the Supreme Court within fourteen days (Senanayake, 2020; Perera & Senanayake, 2020).

❖ **Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Constitutional Reform**

Clarifying the Threshold for Exercising Article 48(1)

The 2018 Supreme Court rulings established that the President's opinion under Article 48(1) must be grounded in objective evidence of majority support (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018c; Wijesinghe, 2019). To cement this principle, Parliament should amend Article 48(1) to require that any change in Prime Ministership be accompanied by one of the following:

- A floor test on the floor of Parliament, showing that the sitting Prime Minister has lost majority support; or
- Written letters from at least 113 MPs (a simple majority of 225 seats) endorsing the nominee.

Such an amendment would eliminate subjective executive discretion and restore the primacy of parliamentary confidence (Bandara, 2020; Senanayake & De Silva, 2020).

Mandating Expedited Recall of Parliament for No-Confidence Motions

To prevent Speakers from delaying sessions and abetting executive maneuvers, a constitutional amendment or a revision of Standing Orders should stipulate that, upon receipt of a requisition signed by at least one-fourth of MPs, Parliament must convene within seventy-two hours (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 75[2]; Perera & Jayasinghe, 2019). Failure to do so would allow any MP to file a motion in the Supreme Court seeking a writ of mandamus compelling the Speaker to recall Parliament (Senanayake & De Silva, 2020). This measure would insulate parliamentary oversight from political engineering and ensure that confidence motions occur with minimal delay (Wijesinghe, 2019).

Codifying Criteria for Emergency Declarations and Rights Derogations

The 1978 Constitution's vague language—"in his opinion" (Constitution of Sri Lanka, 1978, art. 150[1])—facilitates unscrupulous proclamations. A proposed amendment should define "emergency" with specificity:

- It must be precipitated by an "imminent threat to national security, public order, or essential services," supported by an independent report from the Inspector General of Police or an equivalent authority;
- Any declaration must be tabled in Parliament within seven days, and subject to annulment by a two-thirds majority within fourteen days (Amarasinghe, 2021; Senanayake & De Silva, 2020);
- Emergency regulations limiting fundamental rights must satisfy a "strict necessity and proportionality test," demonstrating that the measures are the least restrictive means of addressing the identified threat (Fourie, 2006; Khosa, 2004).

Implementing these criteria would align Sri Lanka with best practices from South Africa and Pakistan, ensuring that rights are not suspended arbitrarily and that judicial oversight remains available (Senanayake, 2020; De Silva, 2017).

Establishing an Emergency Law Review Commission (ELRC)

To ensure ongoing scrutiny, Parliament should create a permanent Emergency Law Review Commission (ELRC) composed of:

- Three retired Supreme Court judges;
- Two senior legal academics specializing in constitutional law;
- Two civil society representatives (e.g., from human rights organizations);
- Two opposition MPs on a rotating basis.

The ELRC's mandate would include reviewing all emergency regulations within five days of gazette publication, publishing biannual reports assessing compliance with constitutional norms, and recommending amendments to ensure proportionality and legality (Jayawardena & Premaratne, 2020; Senanayake & De Silva, 2020). Though the ELRC's findings would be advisory, the publication of detailed reports would generate public scrutiny and political accountability (Perera, 2020).

Strengthening Parliamentary Oversight Committees

Parliament should establish a permanent Joint Committee on Executive Oversight (JCEO) with the authority to investigate any executive action suspected of overreach, including "emergency-like" measures not formally promulgated. The JCEO should have powers to:

- Summon ministers and senior bureaucrats for testimony under oath;
- Request production of relevant documents, including Cabinet minutes related to security decisions;
- Issue binding recommendations to the President and Prime Minister, subject to parliamentary approval; and
- Refer matters for criminal prosecution if evidence of willful constitutional breach emerges (Perera, 2020; Wijesinghe, 2019).

By institutionalizing a robust checking mechanism, Parliament can reclaim its oversight role and discourage future executive excesses (Wijesinghe, 2019).

Enhancing Public Accountability, Transparency, and Civic Education

Transparent governance requires that communications between the President's Office and security agencies concerning "public order" be published in the Government Gazette within twenty-four hours, except for matters involving immediate operational security (Hettiarachchi, 2021). This transparency ensures the public can monitor whether purported security measures align with constitutional mandates.

Moreover, a sustained civic education campaign is essential. The Ministry of Education, in partnership with the Human Rights Commission, should develop curricula at the secondary and tertiary levels explaining the separation of powers, parliamentary procedures for confidence motions, and channels for citizens to challenge executive actions (Hettiarachchi, 2021; De Silva & Perera, 2021). Concurrently, civil society groups and legal aid organizations should provide "Constitutional Clinics" in major cities, offering free legal advice when citizens suspect rights violations (De Silva & Perera, 2021).

❖ **Implications for Democratic Governance and Rule of Law**

Rebalancing Executive-Legislative Relations

The 2018 crisis highlighted how ambiguous constitutional provisions can allow the Executive to subvert parliamentary prerogatives (Wijesinghe, 2019). Reforms clarifying Article 48(1) and enforcing timely parliamentary sittings are critical to ensuring that government formation remains a parliamentary matter, not a unilateral presidential decision (Senanayake & De Silva, 2020). By requiring floor tests or written endorsements, Sri Lanka can restore the principle that executive legitimacy derives from legislative confidence (Bommai, 1994; Wijesinghe, 2019).

Strengthening the Judiciary's Role as Constitutional Guardian

Though the Supreme Court ultimately checked the Executive's excesses, the delay in adjudication allowed parallel governance structures to emerge (Fernando, 2019). Establishing a fast-track jurisdiction for constitutional petitions—particularly those challenging emergency or emergency-like measures—will empower courts to act swiftly, preventing prolonged constitutional vacuums (Senanayake, 2020; Perera &

Senanayake, 2020). Furthermore, embedding clear criteria in the Constitution for judicial review of executive actions—even those not formally labeled "emergency"—will ensure that citizens' fundamental rights remain protected (De Silva, 2017).

Restoring Public Trust and Ensuring Political Stability

Public opinion surveys conducted in early 2019 revealed that 65% of citizens distrusted political institutions following the crisis, citing perceptions of "back-room deals" and "constitutional manipulations" (Social Indicator Research Center, 2019). Restoring trust requires both structural reforms and normative shifts. Politicians must internalize that legitimacy stems from adherence to constitutional norms, not tactical maneuvering (Fernando, 2019). Transparency measures—such as mandatory public disclosure of letters of majority support for prime ministers—will enable citizens to verify claims and hold representatives accountable (De Silva, 2017; Hettiarachchi, 2021).

Protecting Civil Liberties against Quasi-Emergency Measures**

The lessons of 2018 show that civil liberties can be threatened even without formal emergency proclamations, through the coercive use of state media controls and security force deployments (Senanayake, 2020; Perera, 2019). Constitutional reforms must therefore clarify that any executive directive curtailing fundamental rights—regardless of its formal status—can be challenged in the Supreme Court under a fast-track procedure (De Silva, 2017). Only by eliminating loopholes can Sri Lanka ensure that emergencies—formal or de facto—cannot be used to trample on freedoms of speech, assembly, and political participation.

Conclusion

The Constitutional Crisis of 2018 stands as a cautionary tale of how ambiguous or inadequately enforced constitutional provisions can enable the Executive to circumvent democratic norms without ever formally invoking emergency powers. President Sirisena's dismissal of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and appointment of Rajapaksa tested the resilience of parliamentary democracy and revealed significant gaps in Sri Lanka's constitutional design—specifically concerning Articles 48, 70, 75, and the emergency regime under Articles 150–156. The Supreme Court's eventual rulings restored constitutional order, affirming that the President's discretion to appoint a Prime Minister must be grounded in objective evidence of parliamentary confidence, and that dissolution of Parliament without proper advice is void ab initio (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, 2018b; 2018c).

Nonetheless, the crisis exposed how easily executive actors can employ emergency-like measures—restricting media, delaying parliamentary sittings, and mobilizing security forces—to achieve political ends under the guise of "national interest" (Fernando, 2019; Senanayake, 2020). To safeguard against future abuses, Sri Lanka must undertake comprehensive reforms: clarifying appointment thresholds under Article 48(1), mandating expedited parliamentary convening for confidence motions, codifying precise criteria for emergency proclamations and rights derogations, establishing an independent Emergency Law Review Commission, strengthening parliamentary oversight committees, and enhancing civic education on constitutional governance (Bandara, 2020; Jayawardena & Premaratne, 2020; Perera & Jayasinghe, 2019; Senanayake & De Silva, 2020).

Comparative lessons from India's mandatory floor tests (Bommai, 1994), Pakistan's requirement for parliamentary ratification of emergency proclamations (Sindh High Court Bar Association, PLD 2009 SC 879), South Africa's proportionality and time-bound derogations (Constitution of South Africa, 1996; Fourie, 2006), and the United Kingdom's Human Rights Act safeguards (Belmarsh, 2004) demonstrate that robust checks and balances are feasible within diverse constitutional frameworks. Sri Lanka's challenge lies in tailoring these principles to its unique socio-political landscape, ensuring that the balance of powers remains durable even amid crisis.

Ultimately, the 2018 crisis affirmed that constitutional supremacy is neither self-executing nor self-enforcing. It demands vigilant citizens, prudent legislators, and an independent judiciary committed to upholding the rule of law. By embedding clearer thresholds, stronger oversight, and expedited judicial remedies into the constitutional text, Sri Lanka can fortify its democratic foundations and prevent future episodes of executive overreach—even under the most trying.

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Article Information and Declarations

Declarations

Author's Contribution:

- Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions, Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript
- The author agrees to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

Conflict of Interest: NIL

Funding Sources: NIL

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How to Cite:

Emergency Powers, Constitutional Order, and Moral Legitimacy: Reflections on Sri Lanka's 2018 Crisis. (2026). Wah Academia Journal of Global Religions, 2(1), 35-60. https://doi.org/10.63954/32ah4e59