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ASSERTION OF RELIGION IN SRI LANKAN POLITICS

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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List of Abbreviations

ACBC	All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress
ACIUF	All Ceylon Islamic United Front
ACJU	All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama
ACMC	All Ceylon Muslim/Makkal Congress
AD	Anno Domini
BBS	Bodu Bala Sena
BCE	Before the Christan Era
CE	Common Era
DDC	District Development Council
EBP	Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IPHRC	Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission
IS	Islamic State
JHU	Jathika Hela Urumaya
JMI	Jamathei Millathu Ibrahim
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MMDA	Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act
MSGR	Muslim Self Governing Region

MULF	Muslim United Liberation Front
NMC	National Muslim Congress
NPP	National People's Power
NTJ	National Thowheed Jamath
NUA	National Unity Alliance
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
PA	People's Alliance
PM	Prime Minister
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
SIMI	Student Islamic Movement of India
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLJI	Sri Lanka Jama'athe Islami
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
SMS	Sinhala Maha Sabha
SU	Sinhala Urumaya
SVV	Sinhala Veera Vidhana
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UF	United Front
UN	United Nations
UNFGG	United National Front for Good Governance
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNP	United National Party
UPFA	United People's Freedom Alliance

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Introduction

Sri Lanka, the teardrop–shaped island in the Indian Ocean, is officially known as the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. It is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic country. The main religions practised in Sri Lanka include Buddhism (70.1 per cent), Hinduism (12.58 per cent), Islam (9.66 per cent) and Christianity (7.7 per cent).[1] Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Moors, Indian Moors[2], Malays, Europeans[3], Burghers and Eurasians (very few are left in Sri Lanka), Veddhas[4], Sri Lanka Chettys[5], Bharathas and other communities make up the ethnic mix in the country. Sinhalese mostly practise Buddhism, but a few are also Christians. Burghers are mostly Christians. Hindus and Muslims are Tamil-speaking people. Some Muslims also speak Sinhala, and some Tamil-speaking people also follow Christianity. The Veddha community is considered as the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka, and they speak both Tamil and Sinhala, depending on which part of the country they live in. In terms of religion, they are animists. Buddhism was introduced on the island in 257 BCE. The exact year of the entry of Tamils in Sri Lanka is debatable; however, it is believed that since the 1st century BCE, there had been intermittent Tamil invasions from South India, and permanent Tamil settlements took place only from

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1 Department of Census and Statistics, *Statistical Pocket Book – 2024 Sri Lanka,* Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies Sri Lanka, at https://www.statistics.gov.lk/Publication/PocketBook2024 (Accessed 10 January 2025).

2 From 1981 onwards, the Indian Moors are included in the category of "others" in the Sri Lankan Census Report.

3 Europeans are included in the category of "others" in the Census Reports since 1963.

4 Veddhas are included in the category of "others" in the Census Reports since 1963.

5 Before 2001, Sri Lanka Chetty community was incorporated in the category of Sri Lankan Tamils, but from 2001 onwards, they have been categorised as a different group in the Census Report.

the 13th century, according to Sinhala historians. Muslims came to the island in the 7th century AD, while Christianity was introduced on the island by the colonial rulers in the 16th century.

Until the advent of the colonial powers, Buddhism enjoyed the patronage of the kings. The colonial powers-Portuguese, Dutch and British- after establishing their control over the island, introduced social reforms, which had a significant impact on the existing religions and religious sentiments in Sri Lanka. The privileges enjoyed by the Buddhist monks were not bestowed by the colonial powers. Hindus and Muslims in Sri Lanka, too, became victims of the religious policies of the Portuguese and the Dutch. The so-called secular liberal policy of the British granted some religious favour to the Muslims, but Buddhism lost its state privileges and protections.

When the Soulbury Constitution– under which Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948- was drafted, the first Prime Minister (PM) of Sri Lanka Don Stephen Senanayake emphasised the continuation of the secular aspect of the polity, acknowledging the ethnic and religious plurality of Sri Lanka. However, a section of political leaders in Sri Lanka called for government policies based on the traditional Sinhalese-Buddhist line.[6] The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, adopted in 1972, finally gave Buddhism the foremost place, and subsequently, the 1978 Constitution, which is still in effect, makes it the imperative for the state to protect and foster the Buddha *Sasana*[7], while other religions are assured all the rights granted by Article 10[8] and 14(1)(e)[9].

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6 K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka,* Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2005.

7 Teaching of Buddha or Buddha philosophy.

8 According to the Article 10, every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice. The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, at https://www.parliament.lk/files/pdf/constitution.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2024).

9 According to the 14 1(e), every citizen is entitled to the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practise and teaching. The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Ibid.

Even after Buddhism was granted the foremost position in the Constitution, demand for Buddhist supremacy continued. The agenda of maintenance and restoration of Buddhist supremacy has been repeatedly emphasised in Sri Lankan politics even after 1972. The issue has not only been exploited by the political actors, but the religious actors too entered into politics on this particular agenda. At the beginning of the new millennium, Buddhist monks formed a political party and entered politics. A section of radical monks also exists in Sri Lanka to protect the interests of the Buddhists.

The Muslims in Sri Lanka, who are mostly Tamil-speaking, too assert their religious identity in Sri Lankan politics. Muslim political parties were formed from the late 1980s to emphasise the claim that Muslims in Sri Lanka have a separate political identity from the Tamils.

After the end of the armed ethnic conflict in 2009, the assertion of religious identity has become more prominent in the post-war nation-building process. What is problematic about post-war identity politics is that resorting to violence has been justified (by a few members of these religious communities) to emphasise religious identity. Since 2011, several violent incidents have been reported due to the religious tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka. A few members of both communities justified violence to protect their respective religious identities. Both the parties to the communal violence also justified their acts of violence as a reaction to the violence committed by others.

These developments, however, cannot be labelled as completely novel in Sri Lanka. Assertion of religion and use of violence to assert religious identity were practised in the pre-independence period too. During the Buddhist revival movement in the colonial period, the proponents of the movement argued in favour of religious legitimacy on the use of violence against those threatening Buddhism. In the history of Sri Lanka, communal violence between Muslims and Buddhists was first reported in 1915. In the first three decades of independent Sri Lanka, there were a few large-scale violent communal incidents between the prominent religious communities. Since the post-Eelam War period, religious tensions have increased.

But the question is, why is there a resurgence of ultra-nationalist Buddhism in the post-Eelam War period? The political structure and

the existing Constitution of Sri Lanka provide an adequate guarantee of protection and privileges to Buddhism. Victory in the Eelam War has facilitated further consolidation of the Sinhala-Buddhist identity. Why then is there a resurgence of Buddhism in the post-2009 period? Since the colonial period, the threat to Buddhism has been perceived from varied actors, including colonial powers, ethnic and religious minorities within Sri Lanka, Western powers, and even Sri Lankan political rulers who are influenced by Western powers and their neo-liberal ideologies. The Sri Lankan state today is facing multiple challenges due to the unresolved ethnic crisis, incomplete reconciliation process, growing radicalism and violent extremism, economic crisis, pressure from Europe and Western countries on the issue of violation of human rights, and also due to the challenges emanating from geopolitical and geostrategic competition among the big powers. As the Buddhist nationalists consider themselves as protectors of the Sinhala-Buddhist race and the Sri Lankan state as a "Sinhala-Buddhist state", do they consider all the challenges Sri Lankan state is facing today as a challenge to the Sinhala-Buddhist identity? How does the assertion of religion or use of violence help the Buddhist nationalists to achieve their goal?

Similarly, the redefinition and construction of the Muslim identity by itself during the peak of armed ethnic conflict poses several questions: Why did they feel the need to emphasise their religious identity over the linguistic identity? Despite being a minority, why did the Muslims refuse to join hands with the other minority groups politically and prefer to ally with the parties in power? Did they perceive Tamils instead of the Sinhalese as a threat to their political identity?

Another visible feature in the process of religious assertion of Muslims in Sri Lanka is the growing tendency among some community members to shed their "unique Sri Lankanness" that they have been practising traditionally and getting "Arabised" and "Wahhabised". Some of them are extending support to the Salafi-Jihadist ideologies too, to the extent that they went to Syria to fight for the Islamic State (IS). The Easter Sunday bombing in Sri Lanka in April 2019 was masterminded by an IS-inspired extremist group called National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), which killed around 268 people, including foreign nationals. The question however, is why are the Muslims, who did not participate in the militant movements during the armed ethnic conflict, now feeling

the need to assert their (a small section of the community) identity by violent means? Is it just because of the discrimination and alienation, the Muslims face domestically, or are there any external influences motivating them? How has the new wave of Islamic resurgence at the global level impacted Sri Lankan Muslims? How does the adoption of "Wahhabism" in the reconstruction of Muslim identity help the Sri Lankan Muslims in achieving their goal in the Sri Lankan political context? Do they have any global ambitions?

Addressing these questions becomes extremely important as violent assertions of religion pose serious security challenges not only to Sri Lanka but also to the entire region. The recent phenomenon of the assertion of religious identity in Sri Lanka has severe national security repercussions as it has intensified communal tensions and violence. Even though only a small section of these communities justifies violence based on religious interpretation (read misinterpretation), the majority of these communities have either failed or are unwilling to come out with a counter-narrative to prevent religious violence. This has facilitated polarisation based on religion. Domestically, the government has been blamed for its inability to prevent and control the polarisation and violence used in the name of religion. Sri Lanka has also come under international scrutiny for its approach to the issue of assertion of religion in the country. The issue, therefore, not only has implications for domestic politics but also for Sri Lanka's foreign policy and international affairs.

Any kind of political, economic and security issues in Sri Lanka have a spillover effect on India, due to the geographic proximity, as well as the maritime and people-to-people connections. There is evidence of Sri Lankan religious extremist groups having linkages in parts of India and other parts of the world.[10] Therefore, it is in India's interests too to minutely observe the developments in its neighbourhood emanating from the assertion of religious identity.

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[10] Media reports suggest a close connection between the Sinhala-Buddhist militant group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Myanmar's 969 movement. The Islamic State-inspired Muslim extremist group NTJ had connections with radical groups in South India.

This monograph, however, does not focus only on the militant or hardline religious groups and their violent activities. It has been observed that the political use of religion or the use of religion for political purposes, even if it does not lead to violence, has a far-reaching impact on politics as well as the national security of the country. The rise of religious violent extremism in the post-Eelam War period in Sri Lanka is not an isolated phenomenon which occurred suddenly without having any connection to the divisive politics being practised on the island since the colonial period. Therefore, it is not just enough to investigate the issue from the narrow perspective of violent extremism or terrorism studies alone.

The monograph undertakes a broad discussion on the use of religion in Sri Lankan politics and how it has impacted the country in the political, security and foreign policy domains. For this purpose, the monograph studies the politics of the Sinhala-Buddhist and the Muslim communities as they have explicitly used their religion for political purposes. To conduct a focused study on the political use of religion, the issue of linguistic nationalism is not discussed in this monograph. Therefore, the Tamil question or Tamil politics is not discussed separately. However, it must be acknowledged that, since for the majority Sinhala community, ethno-linguistic and religious identities are intertwined, it is difficult to separate the ethno-linguistic and ethno-religious identity politics of the Sinhala-Buddhist community. Hence, the issue of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism cannot be discussed without referring to the long-drawn armed ethnic conflict between the Sinhala and the Tamil community, which was mainly fought on the ethno-linguistic identity. Even after the end of the armed ethnic conflict, the impact of radical Buddhism in the Tamil-dominated areas is visible. Similarly, the issue of Muslim identity politics cannot be discussed without referring to Tamil politics. Thus, the brief mention of Tamil politics is found throughout the monograph.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The global resurgence of religion in international politics towards the end of the Cold War and the post-Cold War period has garnered scholarly attention on the theme of religious nationalism or the formation of identity based on religion. The focus of most of this

literature is on Islamic resurgence either in Western countries or in the Middle East. In the Indian subcontinent, due to the long-drawn armed ethnic conflict, the role of ethno-linguistic identity in the nation-building process has received some attention. In the discussion of the role of ethno-linguistic identity in the Sri Lankan Eelam War, the discussion on ethno-religious identity has found space as the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists use both religion and language as inevitable markers of their ethnic identity.

K.M. de Silva's book *A History of Sri Lanka* is one of the pioneering works, which provides facts about Sri Lankan society, politics, and foreign policy from the ancient period till 1994 with in-depth analyses.[11] This book is an important source of information to understand the linkages between religion, politics and the state. Developments in the religious identity politics of Sri Lanka post-1994 are discussed adequately by Neil DeVotta in his several works such as, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka*[12]*; Majoritarian Politics in Sri Lanka: The Roots of Pluralism Breakdown; Religious Intolerance in Post-Civil War Sri Lanka*[13]*; Jathika Hela Urumaya and Ethno-Religious Politics in Sri Lanka*[14]*; Engaging Sinhalese Buddhist Majoritarianism and Countering Religious Animus in Sri Lanka: Recommendations for the Incoming US Administration*[15] and *Island of Violence: Sinhalese Buddhist Majoritarianism*

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[11] K.M. de Silva, No. 6.

[12] Neil DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka*, East-West Center, Washington D. C., 2007.

[13] Neil DeVotta, "Religious Intolerance in Post-Civil War Sri Lanka", *Asian Affairs*, 49 (2), 2018, pp. 278–300, at https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1467660 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

[14] Neil DeVotta and Jason Stone, "Jathïka Hela Urumaya and Ethno-Religious Politics in Sri Lanka", *Pacific Affairs*, 81(1), Spring, 2008, pp. 31-51, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/40377481 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

[15] Neil DeVotta, "Engaging Sinhalese Buddhist Majoritarianism and Countering Religious Animus in Sri Lanka: Recommendations for the Incoming U.S. Administration", *The Review of Faith and International Affairs,* 14 (2), 20 June 2016, at https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1184440 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

and Ethno-Religious Conflict in Sri Lanka[16]. His focus is mostly on Buddhist nationalism and majoritarian politics. *Buddhism Betrayed* by Stanley J. Tambiah is another book which reflects upon religion, politics and violence in Sri Lanka.[17]

Neil Devota on the issue of political Buddhism argues that:

> Political Buddhism and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism have contributed to a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology that is fully embedded and institutionalised as state policy. A fundamental tenet of that national ideology is the belief that Sri Lanka is the island of the Sinhalese, who in turn are ennobled to preserve and propagate Buddhism. The ideology privileges Sinhalese Buddhist super ordination, justifies subjugation of minorities, and suggests that those belonging to other ethnoreligious communities live in Sri Lanka only due to Sinhalese Buddhist sufferance.[18]

Other scholars on the subject also tend to agree. The developments since independence provide sufficient evidence in support of this argument. It is also argued that even though all members of the Buddhist community do not subscribe to the sentiment of ultra-nationalist and radical Buddhism, the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology is widely accepted. But, minute observation of Sri Lankan politics since independence indicates that there were aberrations on the part of the political actors from the majority community or the ruling elites in adhering to the principle of Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy as part of the state strategy. The defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was known for championing the cause of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists

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[16] Neil DeVotta, "Island of Violence: Sinhalese Buddhist Majoritarianism and Ethno-Religious Conflict in Sri Lanka", in Ali Riaz, Zobaida Nasreen and Fahmida Zaman (Eds.), *Political Violence in South Asia,* Routledge, London, 2018.

[17] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

[18] Neil DeVotta, No. 12.

in the 2015 Presidential elections, and subsequently mass protests against the Rajapaksa family in 2022 in the form of *Aragalaya*, and the absence of the rhetoric of communal identity in the agenda of 2024 Presidential and Parliamentary election, necessitates a critical analysis on the rationale behind the use of Buddhism for political purposes. Has religion always played an important role in Sri Lankan politics? If not, then what are those moments in Sri Lankan politics, when religion is considerably used for political purposes and why? The existing literature does not address these questions adequately and directly.

There are very few scholarly works on Sri Lankan Muslim politics. *Pragmatic Muslim Politics: The Case of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress* by Andreas Johansson is the only book, which discusses how Islam has been used in the politics of Sri Lanka by analysing the main and the first Sri Lankan Muslim political party-the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC).[19] There are several other works on Sri Lankan Muslim politics, such as *Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict* by Dennis B McGilvray and Mirak Raheem[20]; *Islam, Politics and Violence in Eastern Sri Lanka* by Bart Klem. Dr. Ameer Ali is another Sri Lankan scholar who has contributed significantly to the study of Sri Lankan Muslims.

Based on this literature, it can be argued that Muslim identity is the construction of social relations and interactions, religious traditions and reform movements, economic activities, violence and political dynamics. As a result, Sri Lankan Muslims are highly heterogeneous, and thus in Bart Klem's words, "they employ varied discourses to engage or disengage with politics and if their principles do not suit the situation, they find pragmatic ways to circumvent them."[21] The pragmatic nature

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19 Andreas Johansson, *Pragmatic Muslim Politics, The Case of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress,* Springer, Switzerland, 2019.

20 Dennis B. McGilvray and Mirak Raheem, *Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict,* East-West Center, Washington, 2007, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06530 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

21 Bart Klem, "Islam, Politics and Violence in Eastern Sri Lanka", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 70 (3), August 2011, pp. 730-753, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/41302391 (Accessed 22 November 2024).

of Sri Lankan Muslim politics has also been emphasised by Andreas Johansson. However, these analyses are made in the context of armed ethnic conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhala community. There is a gap in the literature on the prospects of pragmatism of Muslim identity politics in the post-Eelam War period and particularly in the post-Easter Sunday Jihadi attacks in 2019.

Drawing on the existing literature on Sri Lankan Buddhism and Sri Lankan Muslims, this monograph explores the central questions: why, when and how religion is used in Sri Lanka for political purposes? What are the implications of the political use of religion for the religious communities, the country, and the region?

Analytical Framework

The monograph does not claim to provide any new information. However, drawing on the existing literature, the historical and contemporary political developments are discussed and analysed in the religious context by applying the integrative theory of religion and politics offered by Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, which combines insights from primordialism, instrumentalism, constructivism, resource mobilisation and the religious economy model. Why, when and how religion is used for political purposes is a complex question and cannot be explained by simply applying one theoretical approach. This is particularly so while explaining the political use of religion by two different communities in Sri Lanka. Even though the primordialists, constructivists and instrumentalists differ in their explanations on identity politics, they independently offer useful explanations on various aspects of religion and politics, but fail to provide a comprehensive explanation. The integrative approach by combining all the compelling arguments of the existing theoretical framework provides a nuanced analysis of religion and politics.

According to the instrumentalist theory, "religion creates a collective entity and provides a set of institutions that are legitimised by religious belief and unites a community.[22] The primordial and constructivist

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[22] Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, *Scriptures, Shrines, Scapegoats, and World Politics,* University of Michigan Press, 2020, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11353856.6 (Accessed 20 October 2024).

theory too, like instrumentalist theory, consider religion as an "identity marker" and a source of instilling a sense of solidarity.[23] Therefore, all these theories have identified religion as one of the important, if not the only, factors in driving domestic politics. Based on the premises of these three theories, the integrated theory of religion emphasises that "religion is an instrument of political control and is subject to manipulation by political and religious elites."[24]

To fulfil the political and economic goals, political leaders try to mobilise resources and support, and for this purpose, they use religion (religious ideas, symbols, institutions or religious leaders) as a political tool for mobilisation. The political elites may have particular visions for their country or people, and work to fulfil those visions. However, the ultimate aim of the political elite is to achieve power and sustain it as long as possible by mobilising the support of the people.

The instrumentalist perspective talks about two kinds of use of religions in politics, which are: 1) elite instrumentalism and 2) collective instrumentalism. Elite instrumentalism talks about the use of religion as a political tool by the political leaders to further their goal of political survival. For this purpose, religion and policies are manipulated by the political leaders to mobilise people's support. In this case, there may be differences in the interests and purposes of using religion in politics between the political leaders and the section of the masses whose supports are mobilised. Collective instrumentalism does not differentiate between political leaders and the masses and views religion as a collective good. Both political leaders and masses who are believers of that particular religious faith, work together for the protection, preservation and expansion of the religion for the collective good. As per the collective instrumentalist theory, religion is a comprehensive instrument for fostering communal solidarity and cultivating individual allegiance to a group. Since religion is seen as a collective good, it becomes easy for the political actors to use religion as a means to bridge the gap with the masses, who have divergent interests and goals.

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[23] Rhys H. Williams, "Religion as Political Resource: Culture or Ideology?", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35(4), December 1996, pp. 368-378, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/1386412 (Accessed 20 October 2024).

[24] Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, No. 22.

This postulates that religion as a tool can emerge as grassroots or as elite-driven movement.[25] Nonetheless, grassroots movement can succeed only when it is adopted by the political elites. Political elites on the other hand, espouse a grassroots movement only when they see political benefit from it.[26] N. Leustean who has written on the integrated theory of religion and politics argue that "religion mainly plays an influential role in society, when an institutionalised religion encounters the opposition of or acceptance from political authorities."[27]

Circumstances Under Which Religion is Used as a Political Weapon

According to the instrumentalist and constructivist theories, the importance of religion as a motivating political force may not be constant. Instrumentalist theory argues that religion remains important as long as political actors see it as beneficial for pursuing their goals. There is also a possibility that using religion for political mobilisation may affect the political future of the political actors. In such circumstances, religion is not used as a political weapon.[28] Usually, the political elites collaborate with the religious actors when they use religion as a political weapon. However, as the religious economy suggests, there can be a clash of interests between political actors and religious actors. The main concern for the political elite is political survival. The elite instrumentalism argues that political elites use religious values and symbols, and exploit religious institutions to further their personal political objectives and ambitions, which may not have any genuine connection with religious values. The religious actors are also motivated

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Lucian N. Leustean, "Towards an Integrative Theory of Religion and Politics", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 17(4), 2005, pp. 364-381, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/23551746 (Accessed 20 October 2024).

28 Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, No.22.

by self-interest.[29] The religious economy model argues that under certain social conditions, political elites may be inclined to support religious freedom and allow for free competition among religious actors. Under such conditions, political elites focus on ensuring an "open market for religion", which typically promotes economic development and political stability. On the other hand, a religious actor may like the political elites to suppress other religious groups and affect political stability. According to Gill, in a plural society, hegemonic religions will prefer restrictions on religious liberty of the religious minorities; and religious minorities will prefer laws favouring religious freedom.[30]

In other words, political elites' support or opposition to the religious elites will depend on the political circumstances and social structures. The integrative theory of religion developed by Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson identified the following structural and situational conditions under which political elites find it feasible to use religion as a source of political mobilisation and under which it may not be possible to attract support.[31]

When the Political Future is at Risk

As per integrative theory, domestically, "safe" leaders do not need to use religion to divide people; they can rely on either legitimate support or oppressive power to ensure their political survival. Religious ideas and symbols become a political weapon when the political future of leadership is at risk.[32] Leaders at risk need to maintain their support base, prevent defections, or mobilise new supporters to secure their

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[29] Anthony Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty,* Cambridge University Press, September 2012, at https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790805 (Accessed 10 September 2025).

[30] Ibid.

[31] Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, No. 22.

[32] Ibid.

political survival. Whenever political actors feel that their support base is weakening due to other socio-economic issues, they may use religion to divert attention from those issues which are making the leader unpopular. In such cases, rational defence of one's policies may not be seen as effective. Calls based on religious affinities or on religious animosities against domestic enemies may be seen as more effective.

This argument, however, does not explain why Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, after defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, joined hands with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists and the radical monks and played a divisive role in the politics based on Buddhist supremacy. After defeating the LTTE, President Mahinda Rajapaksa emerged as a national hero. Rajapaksa was compared with King Duttugemunu, who is celebrated for uniting the Sinhala kingdom after defeating the Tamil King Elara in the ancient period. Rajapaksa's popularity among the Sinhala-Buddhist community soared. In the 2010 Presidential elections, Mahinda Rajapaksa won by securing 57.88 per cent of the votes. The main opposition political party, the United National Party (UNP), was grappling with intra-party issues. There was no other prominent leader who could compete with his soaring popularity. Till 2012, official figures indicated that there was a post-war economic boom. Even though the international community accused him of war crimes, domestically, his government was politically secure.

He used the ultra-nationalist divisive forces to mobilise domestic support against international pressure, and most importantly, consolidate his power without much domestic opposition. Post-elections, the way in which he consolidated his power through constitutional means with the support of the ultra-nationalist forces, explains the real reason behind his interest in religious mobilisation. Hence, it can be argued that religion is used not only when the political future is at risk, but also when a leader wants to consolidate his authoritarian power.

A Conducive Social Structure

Religion can be a useful tool to incite political tensions or violence or create dissent against a regime in a religiously plural society. Political actors invoke actual or perceived threats to the religious identity of their support base from an internal or external group of different faith, to unite and mobilise the people through promises to protect

and preserve the identity. This is possible in a religiously plural and divisive society. In a religiously homogeneous society, religion may not be a useful tool for political mobilisation. According to Maoz and Henderson, in a plural society, political elites find it useful to use religion as a tool for political mobilisation only when the level of religious belief is high and when the religious community or group being mobilised is cohesive and homogeneous.[33]

In the case of Sri Lanka, neither the Buddhists nor the Muslims are a cohesive and homogeneous community. Sectarianism, caste and regional differences made these communities non-monolithic. Despite the differences that exist within the Buddhist community, a concern that Buddhism is under threat and needs to be protected, preserved and maintained binds the community together. Hence, simply being cohesive and homogeneous is not enough; the community must perceive a common religious threat. Only then is religious mobilisation possible.

External Support

Based on Maoz and Henderson's premises, it can be argued that political actors, who are not necessarily political elites, find it useful to use religion as a tool for furthering their goals if they are confident of getting external support (both material and ideological) on grounds of religious affinity.[34] This is particularly true for the political actors who resort to the use of violence instead of constitutional means. Religion is used to justify an illegal, immoral or unethical act during the contestation for political power. Religious structures can channel social and political protest, especially for those who lack the means of communication and influence available to social elites. Religious activists can resort to sacred texts and deep-rooted historical traditions to narrate popular grievances in terms of social justice and egalitarian discourse.[35]

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Jodok Troy, "The Power of the Zealots: Religion, Violence, and International Relations", *Journal of Religion and Violence*, 1 (2), 2013, pp. 216-233, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/26671402 (Accessed 20 October 2024).

The Relationships between Religious Institutions and Political Institutions

The primordial and integrative theorists argue that the impact of religion in politics not only depends on the willingness and capacity of the political actors but also on the relationship between the state and religion. As per these theories, the interaction between religious diversity and state-religion relations creates the context in which religion becomes a significant factor in a state's policies. In a plural society, a state's preference over a dominant religion or religion of a majority community, gives the political actors of the minority community enough scope to mobilise minority support for their personal or national goals, if the other conducive political circumstances mentioned above are in place.

Role of Religious Actors

While all these theories have focused on the use of religion as a political instrument by political actors, the role of religious actors has not been discussed adequately. There are, however, examples of religious actors participating in the political arena using religion. Maoz and Henderson argue that religious leaders play a political role when employed by the state, or to confront the state. That, however, may not always be true. There is also a possibility that the religious actors participate in politics using their religious identity, to influence the policies of the state instead of confronting the state, or may also like to further their political or economic interests. There can be various circumstances when religious actors get directly involved in politics. When the political actors isolate themselves from religion in the political sphere and create a vacuum, the religious actors fill that vacuum. Nonetheless, without the support of the political leadership, religious actors cannot achieve much success in mobilising support. While religious actors may continue their political activism and may influence the personal lives of the citizens or members of the same religious community to support a narrative, outward support in the public domain from the people does not come until and unless the threat to their identity or survival is directly experienced in day-to-day life. In the constructivist perspective, the importance of religious factors as motivating political forces may change over time due to the experiential evolution of a given community.[36]

[36] Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, No.22.

Maoz and Henderson argue, "Domestic politics reflect a constant competition between the leader and his/her coalition against some counter elite (or several counter elites) that seeks to replace them. In that context, the use of religion may also be part of that competitive struggle."[37] The religious actors can benefit the most from this competitive struggle.

Political Mobilisation Using Religion

Whether political or religious actors, they manipulate religious symbols, rhetoric and institutions to mobilise resources and support for their own interests. For such mobilisation, the leadership highlights a threat to religion or creates a narrative of religion being in crisis based on the prevailing feeling of insecurity of a few and mobilising support of the members of the religious community. The threat can be viewed from both objectivist and constructionist perspectives.[38] In collective instrumentalism, the threat is seen in an objectivist perspective. The threat is constructed when religion is used for personal goals as per elite instrumentalism. In a situation where a feeling of marginalisation already exists, it becomes easy to manipulate support by constructing a threat narrative.

Cohen's moral panic theory can be useful to explain how the narrative of threat is constructed for political manipulation.[39] According to sociologists, moral panic arises under a social phenomenon where inappropriate reactions of the concerned authorities to an event, which is perceived as a severe threat, are exaggerated, distorted and amplified

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, "Moral Panics: Culture, Politics, and Social Construction", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 20, 1994, pp. 149-171, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/2083363 (Accessed 20 October 2024).

[39] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, Routledge, London & New York, 2002.

by media, and unconfirmed rumours are taken as fresh evidence of further atrocities, which further escalates disturbances.[40] In Cohen's words:

> "A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself."[41]

This kind of situation of moral panic in society gives an excellent opportunity to political and religious actors to use religion as a tool for political mobilisation. However, for widespread moral panic, there must be pre-existing concerns or latent fears among the public. According to Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, these latent fears need to be intensified, expanded, articulated, and brought into the public domain through an organised movement.[42] The mobilisation potential of a group is determined by the degree of pre-existing group organisation. Highly organised groups sharing strong, distinctive identities and deep interpersonal networks can be easily mobilised.[43]

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40 Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, No. 38.

41 Stanley Cohen, No. 39.

42 Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, No. 38.

43 J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9, 1983, pp.527-553, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/2946077 (Accessed 20 October 2024).

A situation of moral panic emerged in Sri Lanka after the Easter Sunday Attack in 2019. The widespread moral panic response of the Sri Lankan authorities was possible, because the ultra-nationalist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) was spreading fear of Jihadi attacks since their formulation in 2012. Demonisation of the Muslims after the Easter Sunday attack received countrywide support. This facilitated religious mobilisation during the 2019 Presidential elections. What is interesting to note is that the moral panic response of the Sri Lankan state did not result in counter-mobilisation against the state by the Sri Lankan Muslims. Explanation of this is sought in the subsequent chapters.

Implications of the Nexus between Religion and Politics

According to the primordial theory, "when religion becomes an important marker of identity, it affects the degree of internal political and social stability of states. It also affects the degree of conflict and cooperation between a given state and its external environment."[44] Since religion is a powerful divisive force, it can be easily used to incite enmity between different religious groups and becomes a problem for the state when religious loyalty supersedes other loyalties, even to the state, as it threatens the unity of the community. On the other hand, such tensions can be avoided by separating the religious and political spheres and promoting religious freedom.[45]

Thus, political use of religion by political or religious actors may help them to fulfil their political or economic interests, but it can potentially disturb the social harmony, peace and stability in a religiously plural country, particularly if one or more religions are discriminated against by the regime. Maoz and Henderson argue, "societies that are religiously diverse tend to exhibit instability when religious minorities are discriminated against by the regime, and when they anticipate support from outside groups."[46]

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[44] Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, No. 22.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

Based on these theoretical approaches, the monograph tests the following hypotheses:

- Religion is an effective bridge between political leaders and the masses, and therefore, it is used extensively to acquire, maintain and consolidate political power, provided a conducive atmosphere exists to use religion as a tool for political mobilisation.

- The prerequisite of a conducive atmosphere for the political mobilisation of religion includes: a cohesive religious community with a common religious threat perception that is being mobilised, the state's approach to the religion that is being mobilised and the assurance of external material and ideological support to the political or religious actors.

- In the absence of any of these prerequisites, political actors may fight shy of using religion for political gains and may create space for religious actors to play a political role. Nonetheless, religious actors' political roles have limitations without the support of political actors.

VARIABLES

Three variables are identified as crucial to test the hypotheses. These include the social structure of the state; the relationship between the state and the religion, and the external connection and support to the actor using religion for political purposes.

Social Structure of a State

Societies can be either homogeneous or plural in terms of ethnicity, religion, languages, and castes. As discussed above, religious homogeneity or heterogeneity plays an important role in shaping the politics of a country. While the religious or ethnic plurality has been acknowledged and considered as a factor of analysis, often the plurality within a particular religious or ethnic community has been overlooked while analysing the social structure of a particular state. For example, the sectarian or caste differences within a particular religious community are not taken into consideration while analysing the political behaviour of the community. The internal differences in a particular community vary from state to state. Hence, it is important to discuss the level of

cohesiveness of a particular community in a state, which is the subject of analysis. The internal cohesiveness of a community is an important factor, which will determine the political elites' willingness or capacity to manipulate the religion.

Relations between Religious and Political Institutions or State-Religion Relations

When religion becomes an identity marker and religious and political institutions are closely linked in a religiously plural society, it affects the degree of internal political and social stability and may lead to civil conflict. However, if the state provides constitutional equality to all the constituent religions and there is complete separation between religion and state, there is little motivation for using religion for political mobilisation. Hence, the state-religion relationship is an important variable and must be examined while conducting empirical studies on the relationship between religion and politics in a particular country.

External Connection and Support

External connection or support to political or religious actors is an important variable and must be examined. The extremist political actors may continue their religious movements and affect stability and peace with external support, even if there is a lack of domestic support from the same community members. The relationship between state and religion and the broader political environment in the country will determine the external influence on the religious extremist groups as well as on the state itself. Nonetheless, the connection between external forces and religious extremist groups may develop, irrespective of the religious structure of the society.

Chapterisation

Based on this analytical framework and the three above-mentioned variables, the monograph is divided into five chapters, including the conclusion, to discuss the political use of religion in Sri Lanka. The first chapter titled "Nature of Polity, Religion and Social Structure in Sri Lanka", discusses the social and political structure of the country from the ancient period till date with special reference to the status of religion. The chapter discusses how the changes in the political system over the

period have impacted the social structure and inter-community relations in Sri Lanka. The state-religion relationship under different political systems has also been discussed to understand how the religious communities were affected by the state's policies. This chapter provides the required information to measure the three variables mentioned above. The second chapter titled "Buddhism in Sri Lankan Politics" and the third chapter "Muslim Identity in Sri Lankan Politics" examine the political use of Buddhism and Islam in Sri Lankan politics, respectively. The fourth chapter, "Political Use of Religion in Sri Lanka: Security and Strategic Ramifications" delves into the security and strategic implications of the political use of religion in Sri Lanka and in the region. Finally, the concluding chapter summarises the research findings and tests the hypotheses.

The study is carried out by employing a historical and analytical method. For this purpose, both primary and secondary sources are used. Regarding secondary sources, the data were collected from the existing literature. Seminar and study reports by eminent researchers and scholars were also consulted. K.M. de Silva, Neil DeVotta, Ameer Ali, Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson are some scholars whose works are extensively referred to in the monograph. For primary sources, data was collected from government documents, various Acts and speeches, official statements, media releases, etc. A field visit to Sri Lanka, in addition to online interviews, was conducted to get the local perspective on the issue. My sincere gratitude to Jehan Perara,

Chapter 1

Nature of Polity, Religion and Social Structure in Sri Lanka

In the absence of written history, the *Mahavamsa,* the historical chronicle, has been widely referred to explain the early history of Sri Lanka or Ceylon (as known officially until 1972), from the beginning of the Sinhala kingdoms up to the reign of Mahasena of Anuradhapura (302 CE).[1] Later, the *Culavamsa*— "Lesser Chronicle"—was compiled by Sinhala monks, which covered the period from the 4th century to the British takeover of Sri Lanka in 1815. As per the *Mahavamsa*, the origin of man in Sri Lanka began with the arrival of Vijaya along with 700 companions from India in 543 BCE and their settlement in the Puttalam area on the northwest coast of Sri Lanka. At the time perhaps the indigenous people, now known as Veddhas, were living on the island. But, according to the *Mahavamsa*, it was the land of *Nagas* and *Yakkhas* when Vijaya, the founder of the Sinhala community, landed on the island.[2] From 543 BCE to 1815, the island was governed by monarchs from eight Sinhala dynasties, along with other political entities such as the Jaffna (Tamil) Kingdom, and Portuguese and Dutch for a brief period. In 1815, the island came under the control of the British who ruled the country till 1948 when Sri Lanka became an independent sovereign country. However, the British King (till 1952) and then the Queen was the nominal Head of State until it became a Republic in 1972. From 1948 to 1978, it followed the parliamentary form of government. Since 1978, it has been following the presidential system.

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1 *Mahavamsa* is based on earlier compilations *Atthakatha* and *Dipavamsa. Mahavamsa* was originally compiled in the 5th century A.D. by a priest from the Royal House called Mahanama. John Still, *Ancient Capitals of Ceylon: Historical Sketches and Guide,* H.W. Cave & Co., Colombo, 1907.

2 Mahanama, *The Mahavamsa: Great Chronicle of Ceylon,* Translated by Wilhelm Geiger (Germany)/Mabel Hynes Bode (English), Asian Educational Service, New Delhi, 2003.

The social structure of Sri Lanka experienced a significant change, along with changes in administrative and political systems under different powers since the ancient period. Today, Sri Lanka is known more for its highly fragmented society, divisive politics and communal violence.

This chapter aims to map the nature of the Sri Lankan polity over the centuries and analyse how the political developments over the period have shaped the social structure of the country. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section talks about the political developments and the nature of political administration during the ancient, colonial and post-independence periods. The second section discusses the relationship between the state and religion under different political and administrative systems, while the third section talks about the social structure and social relations among the communities.

I

Political Developments and the Nature of Political Administration

Ancient Period

The historical accounts of ancient Sri Lanka mainly focus on the Sinhala kingdoms. The Sinhala kingdoms during 543-1815 include the Kingdom of Tambapanni (543-437 BCE), Anuradhapura Kingdom (437 BCE-1017 AD), Kingdom of Polonnaruwa (1055 AD -1236 AD), Dambadeniya, Gampola, Kotte, Sitawaka and Kandy. In the ancient period, the island was divided into three parts: Rajarata, Ruhunu and Dakkina or Maya. Till the 12th century, Rajarata was the main administrative centre for the Sri Lankan monarch. From 543 BCE to 12th century, the capital of the monarch was in Uppatisa, Anuradhapura, Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa.[3] Theoretically, the monarch from Rajarata controlled the areas under Ruhunu and Dakkina, which were operating

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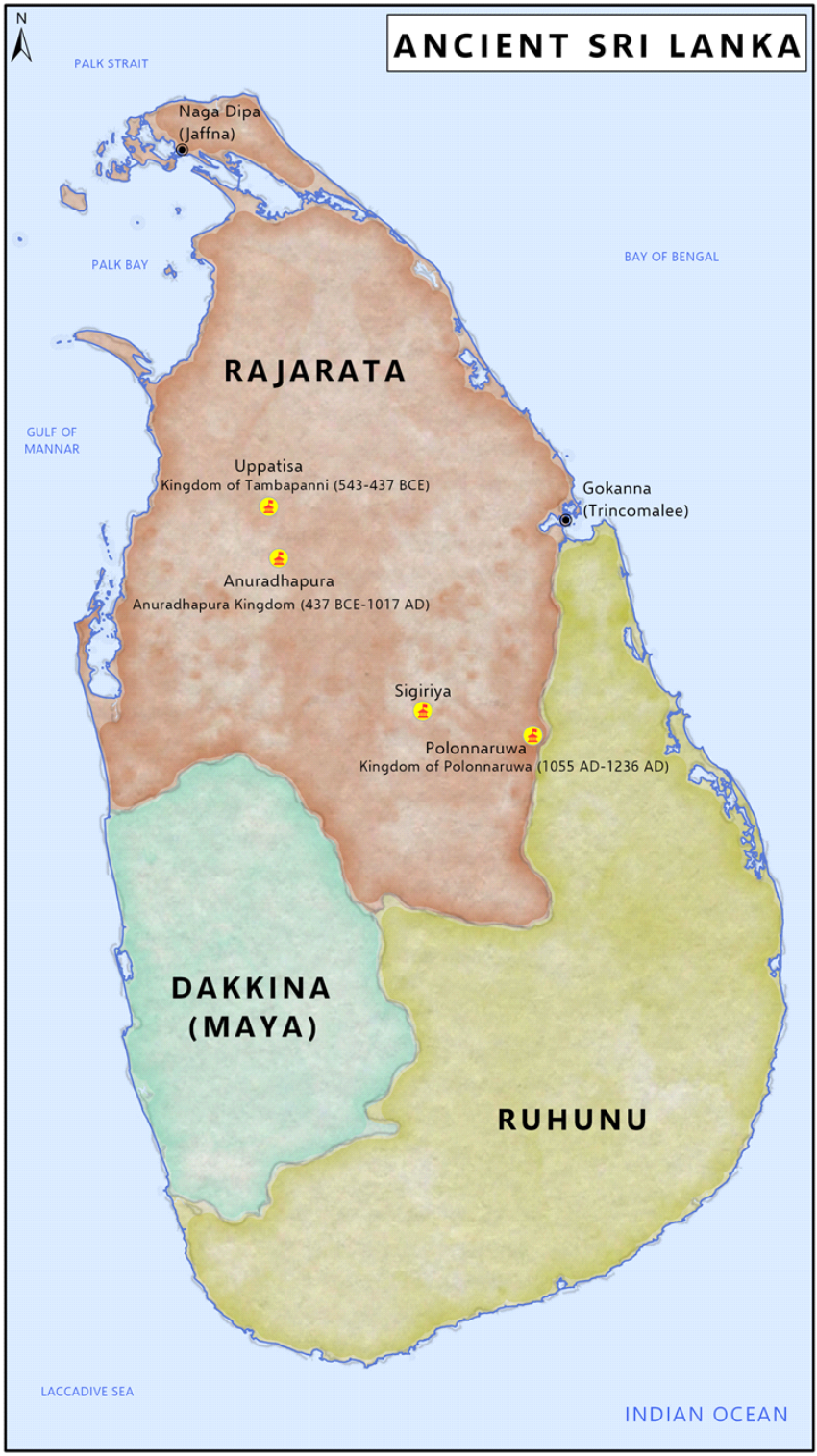
[3] According to the *Mahavamsa*, the Sinhala kingdom was established by Vijaya, known as the Kingdom of Tambopani in around 543 BC who ruled for 38 years. Uppatisa was the capital. As he did not have any heir, after Vijay's death, his nephew from India, Panduvasudeva, succeeded him and ruled from Uppatissa. Panduvasudeva was succeeded by his two sons Abhya and

under the chieftains or Sinhalese princes of the royal line. Usually, the chieftains and the princes who were administering Ruhunu and Dakkina were loyal to the king. But there are examples when the monarch did not have control over the chieftains and princes of Ruhunu and Dakkina. According to H.W. Tambiah, "petty rulers were controlling the governance systems in various parts sometimes by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Rajarata kings and sometimes considered themselves as independent sovereigns in their respective principalities". On several occasions, Rajarata came under the control of the Tamil invaders, but Ruhunu and Dakkina were always ruled by the Sinhalas until the Portuguese entered the island. Whenever, the Tamil invaders captured Rajarata, the Sinhala monarch took refuge in Ruhunu. When Anuradhapura was under the Cholas, the Ruhunu king became the sovereign of Ruhunu.

The intermittent Tamil invasions from South India and internal political struggles were the main challenges for the Sinhala rulers. In the 2nd century BCE, the Sinhala kingdom came under Chola occupation for 40 years. Elara was a prominent king of the Cholas in Anuradhapura. Duttugemunu, the Sinhala ruler from Ruhunu, defeated Elara and restored the Sinhala rule (161-137 BC) in Anuradhapura. In the early part of the 5th century AD, Tamils ruled over Anuradhapura again until Dhatusena defeated the Tamil king and brought the entire Lanka under the Sinhala kingdom. In the 6th century AD, there was a civil war-like situation and invasion by Pandyas and Cholas in the 9th and 10th centuries led to the decline of the Anuradhapura Kingdom. The last Sinhalese king to rule at Anuradhapura, Mihindu V, was captured by the Cholas in 1017 AD. The Cholas then ruled it as the province of the Chola Empire till 1055 AD and decided to shift the capital from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa (See Map 1.1). In 1055 AD, Sinhala rulers defeated the Cholas and continued their rule from Polonnaruwa till 1255 AD. The Polonnaruwa period came to an end with the invasion of the Pandyas and the formation of the Jaffna Kingdom.

Tissa who reigned for 20 years and 17 years each. Panduvasudeva's daughter's son, Pandukabhaya, dethroned his uncles and became the king and shifted the capital from Upatissa to Anuradhapura. Anuradhapura was the main centre of administration for the Sinhala rulers from 437 BCE to 1017 AD. During this period, for a few years, the capital was shifted to Sigiriya before Anuradhapura became the capital again.

Map 1.1: Ancient Sri Lanka



With the decline of Polonnaruwa and the formation of the Jaffna Kingdom, Sri Lankan polity got fragmented. The Sinhala rulers and people shifted into the hills and coastal areas of the southwestern part of the country. Since then, the Sinhala rulers ruled from Dambadeniya, Gampola, Kotte, Sitawaka and Kandy subsequently. These areas were chosen as the capital by different Sinhala kings to ensure and maintain security from internal and external attacks.

The Tamils occupied the Jaffna Peninsula in the northern plains and the Wanni area between Jaffna and Anuradhapura and established the Jaffna Kingdom. Later, Tamils withdrew from Wanni and permanently settled in the Jaffna Peninsula and some parts of the eastern coast. In the 14th century, Tamils tried to capture the southwest part but were defeated by the Gampola Kingdom. After defeating the Tamils, the Sinhala capital was shifted to Kotte. For a brief period, the Sinhala king from Kotte captured Jaffna and Kandy in the Central Hills under a unified Sinhala kingdom. But in the early part of the 16th century, both Jaffna and Kandy asserted their independence and remained free until the Portuguese entered the political scene in 1620.

Due to the internal succession struggles, the Kotte Kingdom was divided into three minor kingdoms – Kotte, Sitawaka and the Principality of Raigama (See Map 1.2). There was a major conflict between Kotte and Sitawaka. Internal conflict facilitated the colonial powers- the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British to gain control over the island. During this period, the Chinese also tried but could not succeed in their mission to establish their influence.

Map 1.2: Sri Lanka in the 16th Century

Colonial Period

The Portuguese entered Sri Lanka with an interest in establishing their control over the island's external trade, particularly the cinnamon trade. Initially, they conducted their trade from a factory in Colombo. However, the internal conflict among the Sinhala rulers facilitated Portuguese involvement in the island's political affairs. The rulers of Kotte and Kandy sought assistance from the Portuguese to deal with the threats from the ruler of Sitawaka. By 1540, both Kotte and Kandy accepted their status as Portuguese satellites to deter attacks from the Sitawaka ruler. The Portuguese annexed the Kotte Kingdom in 1597, then Sitawaka and then conquered Jaffna in 1619. The Portuguese signed a treaty with Kandy in 1617, by which Kandy acknowledged Portuguese authority over the maritime districts of the Sinhala kingdoms, and the Portuguese recognised Senarat as ruler of Kandy. Kandyans also agreed to pay tribute to the Portuguese and promised to deny entry to any of their enemies. The Kandyans, by signing another agreement in 1633, recognised Portuguese control over the ports of the eastern coast. Despite signing the agreement, later Kandyans changed their policy towards the Portuguese and aimed to drive them out of Sri Lanka.

Accordingly, Kandy signed an agreement with the Dutch in 1638. Under the agreement, the Dutch agreed to hand over the areas captured by the Portuguese to the Kandyan Kingdom. In return, the Dutch would be provided a trade monopoly over the cinnamon. But neither side respected the agreement. The Dutch expelled the Portuguese from Sri Lanka in 1658 and ruled Ceylon's coastal areas till 1796.[4]

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[4] Howard Wrigging, *Ceylon: Dilemmas of New Nation,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1960, p. 181.

Map 1.3: Portuguese Rule over Sri Lanka

© GIS Section, MP-IDSA. Map not to scale.

Sri Lanka first came under the control of the English East India Company in 1795-96. From 1798-1802, the company shared the administration with the British Crown and enjoyed a trade monopoly, particularly in the cinnamon trade. Through the Treaty of Amiens in 1802, Sri Lanka was surrendered to the British by the Dutch. On 1 January 1802, it became the British Crown colony of Ceylon. However, Kandy was still an independent kingdom. On 2 March 1815, the Kandyan Kingdom was formally ceded to the British, with the signing of the Kandyan Convention. The Kandyan Convention preserved the powers and privileges of the chiefs, the laws, customs and institutions of the country and the Buddhist religion. However, in 1817, a rebellion erupted against the British, which was crushed in 1818, and the British became the rulers of the whole of Sri Lanka until 1948, when the island was granted independence.

Pattern of Administration and Political System

Pre-Colonial Period

As mentioned before, the form of government was monarchy during the ancient period till the advent of the British. The king was assisted by a council of ministers (*sabha)*, which consisted of the prime minister, the *purohita*, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces (*senapati)*, treasurers (*bhandagarika),* adhyaksas and mahamatras. The *purohita* performed a judicial function, particularly when disputes arose in the *Sangha*.[5] There were provisions of local government. *Gamekas* were the treasurers of local bodies. Buddhist Monasteries were also allotted administrative work. The structure of administration in the Sinhala kingdom was not very centralised, as the central authority of Rajarata over other parts was very weak at times.

Colonial Period

The Portuguese and the Dutch were mostly interested in trade and the export of spices. These two colonial powers, therefore, only controlled the maritime provinces and did not radically change the prevailing

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[5] Ibid.

indigenous administrative system.[6] Portuguese governors administered the provinces under Portuguese control, but the customary hierarchy, determined by caste and land ownership, was continued. Traditional Sinhalese institutions were used to serve the Portuguese rulers. The Portuguese, however, introduced modifications in the traditional land tenure system, i.e., the substitution of quit rents for a service tenure at the village level; entry of the Portuguese settlers to the ranks of village landholders; gradual alienation of royal villages to Roman Catholic missionaries and Portuguese settlers. These changes had significant social implications.

After gaining political control, the Dutch followed the Portuguese pattern of minimal interference with local social and cultural institutions. However, they changed the traditional land grant and tenure system. Dutch governors were appointed to territories and supervised local officials who were mostly traditional *mudaliyars* (chief headman). The Dutch introduced their laws and courts in the areas under Dutch rule. The Dutch codified local customary law of the Muslims and the Tamils and introduced Roman-Dutch law where local law was insufficient.[7] During the Dutch period, it was difficult to fully apply the Roman-Dutch law to the local inhabitants, as it did not acknowledge the local customs, and thus created resentment. Hence, Roman-Dutch law was applied to both Europeans and local inhabitants for criminal cases and local customs were applied in civil cases.[8]

The British, during their long colonial rule over Ceylon, totally changed the native administrative system. Within a few months of taking over, the East India Company officials introduced far-reaching social and economic reforms, including the abolition of the *Rajakariya* system

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6 Yarina Liston, "The Transformation of Buddhism during British Colonialism", *Journal of Law and Religion*, 14 (1), 1999-2000, pp. 189-210, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/1051784 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

7 L.J.M. Cooray, "The Reception of Roman-Dutch Law in Sri Lanka", *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa,* 7(3), November 1974, pp. 295-320.

8 Ibid.

and the radical transformation of the traditional tax structure, which affected all strata of society. As a reaction, a rebellion erupted in December 1796 and stopped in 1798 after the reforms were revoked and old systems were restored. After the maritime provinces under Dutch control came under the British Crown Colony in 1802, two administrative systems were in operation- one for Kandyan and another for maritime provinces. Even after the annexation of Kandy in 1815, the Kandyan Kingdom managed to have their own traditional administrative structure until 1831.

In 1831, a significant step was taken to establish a uniform administrative structure for the island. The Advisory Council was established in 1831, and its power was extended to the Kandyan Kingdom. In 1833, the Colebrook-Cameron Reforms were introduced. With the implementation of the Colebrook-Cameroon Reforms, the British broke away from the Dutch pattern of administration. The Legislative Council and a new judicial system was introduced. The Legislative Council consisted of government officials and unofficial representatives appointed by the governor on a communal basis. The governor appointed three Europeans, one each from the Sinhala, Tamil and the Burgher community. There was no Muslim representation in the Legislative Council. In 1889, Muslim and Kandyan representatives were included in the Legislative Council through the Gordon Reforms of 1889.

In 1912, a new system was introduced. Under the new system, voting was opened for the English-educated Ceylonese, who were around four per cent of the population at that time. Under the new system, the Council had 21 members, including 11 government officials, six nominated members to represent ethnic groups and four elected members. Six nominated members included one Kandyan Sinhalese, one Muslim, two low-country Sinhalese and two Tamils. The four elected members included one European urban, one European rural, one Burgher and one educated Ceylonese.

In 1920, the Legislative Council was expanded to a membership of 37. In the Legislative Councils, officials had the majority. The 1920 Constitution was revised in 1923. Under the 1923 Constitution, elected members for the first time since 1912 were in the majority in the

Legislative Council, but the responsibility to govern remained in the hands of the government officials. The 1923 Constitution was the last constitution which contained provisions for communal representations, a strictly limited franchise and the Legislative Council.[9]

The Donoughmore Constitution of 1931 replaced the 1923 Constitution. The 1931 Constitution had provided for a State Council, which had both legislative and executive functions. The State Council consisted of 65 elected members (elected through universal adult franchise), 3 non-voting government officials and 12 nominated members to take up interests otherwise unrepresented. The three official members were responsible for service, defence and foreign affairs, the administration of justice and legal matters, and the handling of revenue and supervision of departmental expenditures. Other government departments were divided among seven standing executive committees made up of the other members of the State Council. Each of these committees elected its chairman, who controlled a number of government departments. The three official members and seven ministers together formed a Board of Ministers, which was equivalent to the cabinet.[10] The governor had the power to veto the decisions of the Council. The Donoughmore Constitution introduced territorial representation, which created conflicts of interest among the Sinhala and other native minority communities.

The Soulbury Constitution came into effect in May 1946. The main provisions of this Constitution were: 1) universal adult franchise; 2) territorial representation, but the delimitation of electorates was done in a particular way to help minorities secure more seats; 3) the governor-general was bestowed with full powers relating to external affairs, defence and certain other matters explicitly reserved to him and Westminster; 4) a cabinet of ministers presided over by the Prime Minister (PM), was responsible to an elected legislature; 5) 95 elected members and 6 representatives of special groups formed the House

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9 Howard Wrigging, No. 4.

10 Ibid, pp. 86-87.

of Representatives with full powers in all domestic matters, including finance; 6) A second chamber – the Senate – comprising 15 members elected by the House of Representatives and 15 members nominated by the governor general. The Constitution granted Ceylon full and responsible self-government in all matters of civil internal administration, barring defence and external affairs.[11] In June 1947, the Secretary of State for the Colonies decided to grant Ceylon responsible status within the British Commonwealth. Accordingly, the Ceylon Independence Act of 1947 conferred on the Parliament full legislative powers and deprived the UK of all powers and responsibilities for Ceylon's affairs.

Post-Colonial Political System

Sri Lanka gained independence in February 1948 and became an independent dominion within the British Commonwealth of Nations. The British handed over power to D.S. Senanayake of the UNP, who won the elections in 1947 and formed a coalition with the Sinhala Maha Sabha and Tamil Congress. No new constitution was drafted to grant independence to Sri Lanka. The 1946 Soulbury Constitution was revised to give the island complete political independence.[12] As per the revised Constitution, the Governor General was at the apex of the Cabinet government, with the power of summoning, proroguing and dissolving the parliament. The Governor General appointed the leader of the majority party in the Lower House of Parliament as the PM and appointed other ministers on the advice of the PM. The Parliament, which consisted of two houses, had the legislative power. The British King till 1952 and then the British Queen was the nominal head of Ceylon until 1972.

There were demands for a new constitution for the newly independent state, but it was postponed until 1972. In 1972, under the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led United Front (UF) government, a new

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[11] Ibid, p. 92.

[12] Ibid, p. 94.

constitution was adopted, by which Ceylon became the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. The 1972 Constitution provided for a unicameral assembly known as the National State Assembly with absolute power. No court administering justice had the power to question the validity of any law enacted by the National State Assembly.[13] The Constitution, for the first time, provided for Fundamental Rights and Freedoms to the citizens of the country. The power of the executive authority was vested in the PM, who was empowered to nominate the President for a term of four years or remove him/her at any time as per the constitutional provision. The President was the titular head. The cabinet of ministers was subservient to the PM. There was no separation of power among the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary. The Legislature was vested with executive authority exercised by the President and the cabinet of ministers, and the Judiciary was under the control of the National State Assembly. On language issues, the 1972 Constitution introduced three basic divisions: (1) the official language, (2) the language of legislation, and (3) the language of the courts.[14] The 1972 Constitution also provided for discriminatory policies by granting Buddhism the foremost place and introducing the system of standardisation in higher education, which alienated the minority community. This resulted in Tamils demanding a separate state, leading to the armed ethnic conflict, which later grew into a full-fledged war between the separatist militants and the Sri Lankan military.

In 1978, under the UNP government, a new constitution was adopted, which changed the political system of the country from a parliamentary to a presidential form of government. The President is the head of the government and the head of the cabinet under the 1978 Constitution. A new electoral system with proportional representation was introduced. Under the new Constitution, 24 districts were given

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[13] Urmila Phadnis and Lucy M. Jacob, "The New Constitution of Sri Lanka", *India Quarterly*, 28 (4), October-December 1972, pp. 291-303, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/45070338 (Accessed 28 November 2024).

[14] W. A. Wiswa Warnapala, "Sri Lanka's New Constitution", *Asian Survey*, 20 (9), September 1980, pp. 914-930, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/2643737 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

constitutional status. The 1978 Constitution brought about several significant changes, the most important being the recognition of Sinhala and Tamil as national languages.[15] Indian Tamils were granted citizenship. However, it could not appease the Sri Lankan Tamils, and the demand for separate Eelam continued. Subsequently, war broke out between the Sri Lankan Tamil militant group—the LTTE – and the Sri Lankan armed forces in 1983, which ended in May 2009. The 26 years of war, known as the Eelam War, changed the country's political landscape.

When President Chandrika Kumaratunga came to power in 1994, she proposed constitutional reform providing greater devolution of power in 1995, to provide the Tamils greater autonomy in governing their local affairs, known as the devolution proposal package. According to D.B.S. Jayeraj, "these proposals were hailed by impartial academics as the most progressive breakthrough in the political sphere of resolving the Tamil national question."[16] However, the Sinhala hardliners alleged the package was promoting separatism, whereas the LTTE and other hardline Tamil groups opposed it for betraying Tamil interests. The proposal was tabled as a White Paper on 24 October 1997. The main opposition party opposed the proposal and put forward a counterproposal in 1998. Meanwhile, the two mainstream political parties -the UNP and the SLFP-agreed to have a bipartisan approach to resolve the ethnic conflict. But there were widespread protests against the proposed Constitution by the Buddhist clergy, Catholic priests and Sinhala-nationalist demonstrators. Hence, by August 2000, the government shelved the process of bringing in a new constitution.

As the attempt to bring in a new constitution failed in 2000, the 17th Amendment was tabled and enacted in 2001 to control the President from behaving in an arbitrary manner. A Report prepared by the Asian Human Rights Commission argues that, "the parties that collaborated

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[15] Ibid.

[16] D.B.S. Jayeraj, "Neelan Tiruchelvam, LTTE and the Devolution Package", *Daily FT,* 27 July 2022, at https://www.ft.lk/Columnists/Neelan-Tiruchelvam-LTTE-and-the-devolution-package/4-737947 (Accessed 23 December 2024).

to bring about the 17th Amendment were not committed themselves to it in any decisive or consistent manner" to reduce the power of the executive presidency.[17] As a result, there was no follow-up practical measure to implement the law. In 2010, the 17th Amendment was repealed and the 18th Amendment was enacted to consolidate the power and position of the Executive President. In 2015, the 19th Amendment was enacted to restore some of the components of the 17th Amendment and dilute some of the powers of the executive presidency. The 20th Amendment, passed in October 2020, reversed the reforms and amendments brought in the Constitution by the 19th Amendment. The 21st Amendment, passed in October 2022, brought back some of the provisions of the 19th Amendment and curtailed the power of the Executive President to some extent as the President was made accountable to the Parliament. Nonetheless, the President of Sri Lanka still enjoys significant powers. Thus, the demand for the abolition of the executive presidency is on.

Several amendments were also made in the 1978 Constitution to deal with the emerging security, political and governance issues as per the political interests and ideology of the ruling elites. While the war continued for 26 years, (half-hearted) efforts were made to provide political rights to the Tamils within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. The 13th Amendment was the most controversial amendment in the Constitution, which is still awaiting full implementation. The Amendment provided for the Provincial Council. There is apprehension on the part of the majority community about the full implementation of the 13th Amendment. While the Tamil community feels that the 13th Amendment is not adequate to address their political grievances, the main Tamil political party, the Tamil National Alliance, wants the implementation of the 13th Amendment until a new, mutually agreed

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[17] Basil Fernando, "The Tussle between the Executive President & Public Authorities of Sri Lanka", Asian Human Rights Commission, September 2005, at http://www.humanrights.asia/resources/journals-magazines/article2/focus-an-x-ray-of-the-sri-lankan-policing-system-torture-of-the-poor/the-tussle-between-the-executive-president-public-authorities-of-sri-lanka/ (Accessed 24 December 2024).

solution is found. The hardline Tamil community, on the other hand, opposes the 13th Amendment. There are demands for change in several other constitutional provisions, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), the existing electoral system and so on.

The process to draft a new constitution began in the post-2015 period, which is yet to see the light of day. Under the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government that came to power in 2019, the process of constitution drafting took a back seat. However, with the emergence of *Aragalaya* in 2022, there has been a demand for a complete change in the country's political and governance system. In that context, the National People's Power (NPP) government that came to power in 2024, is committed to bringing in a new constitution.

II

State-Religion Relations

Ancient Period

Brahminism was the main religion of the ruling elites until Buddhism was introduced in the country. According to the *Mahavamsa,* Buddhism entered Sri Lanka during the rule of Devanampiya Tissa from 250-210 BC. Devanampiya Tissa was converted to Buddhism and with his patronage, the religion was soon accepted by the people and emerged as the country's established religion. According to K.M. De Silva, in the process of spreading over the island, Buddhism was "transformed by assimilation of pre-Buddhistic cults and rituals and came to terms with the Sri Lankan environment."[18] Sri Lanka follows Theravada Buddhism, but since the ancient period, it has come under the influence of Mahayanism, Tantric Buddhism and Hinduism without getting overwhelmed by all these influences.

Since its inception, Buddhism enjoyed state patronage. There was a strong link between the state and Buddhism, as both supported each

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[18] K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka,* Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2005.

other. The Buddhist king was elected by the *Sangha*[19] and other high ministers, and was required to patronise the *Sangha* and enforce social stability. Leading monks had the final word in selecting a king when the succession was disputed.[20] When the *Sangha* felt the king had overstepped the boundaries of his privileges as king, it could rouse the peasantry to revolt. The *Sangha*'s close connection to the peasantry allowed it some control over adjudication on monastic property.[21]

Kingship was instrumental in the formation and spread of the Buddhist *Sangha* in Ceylon[22]. Maintenance of the *Sangha*, construction of religious edifices and monuments using the state's economic resources and protection of the religion were some of the responsibilities of the rulers. Several notable kings even offered their kingdoms to the *Sangha*.[23] Possession of the Tooth relic was a symbol of the legitimate right to rule.[24]

Even though Buddhism enjoyed state patronage, ancient Ceylon was tolerant of Hinduism and Islam, and thus they could survive and maintain their religious freedom. Muslims enjoyed religious freedom and administrative positions in the Sinhala kingdoms. Due to their expertise in maritime trade, Sinhala rulers welcomed the Muslims. Hindu Brahmins enjoyed importance in society because of their knowledge.[25] Many Buddhist kings supported Hindu temples. Hindu culture was nurtured by the Brahmins and the Tamil kings and flourished during the 14th -16th centuries under the Jaffna Kingdom.

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19 *Sangha*, Buddhist monastic order, traditionally composed of four groups: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. The *Sangha* is a part—together with the Buddha and the dharma (teaching)—of the Threefold Refuge, a basic creed of Buddhism.

20 Howard Wrigging, No. 4.

21 Yarina Liston, No. 6.

22 Ibid.

23 Howard Wrigging, No. 4, p. 181.

24 Ibid, p. 180.

25 K.M. de Silva, No. 18, p. 58.

Colonial Period

With the Portuguese ruling over Ceylon, Roman Catholicism became the most important religion under the official patronage of the Crown of Portugal. Local religious practices were banned. As a result, Buddhism lost its glory and state patronage. *Sanghas* were the most affected due to Portuguese policies.[26] Proselytisation was conducted. A large number of Sinhalese and Tamils converted to Christianity. To convert the masses, mission schools were opened. The Muslims resisted conversion. The Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus who refused to convert faced religious persecution. Many Muslims and Buddhists took refuge in Kandy. Portuguese rule's impact on Hindus on the north was much more destructive than on Buddhists.[27]

The Dutch promoted Calvinism. The Dutch tried to convert Buddhists and Catholics to Dutch Protestantism. The Dutch were more tolerant towards the indigenous religions than the Portuguese, even though harassment of the Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims continued. They prohibited open Buddhist and Hindu religious performances in urban areas but did not interfere in the rural areas. The Muslims were barred from appointment as renters during Dutch rule.[28] The relationship established between the proselytisation and education introduced by the Portuguese, was continued by the Dutch. By the beginning of the 18th century, however, the Dutch had stopped religious persecution.[29]

After the Portuguese consolidated its rule, the Kandyan Kingdom remained the only link between the state and Buddhism. Possession of the Tooth relic and the alms bowl made the Kandyan Kingdom the

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[26] K. D. Paranavitana, "Suppression of Buddhism and Aspects of Indigenous Culture under the Portuguese and the Dutch", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, 49, 2004, pp. 1-14, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/23732424 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

[27] K.M. de Silva, No.18, p. 262.

[28] Ibid, p. 253.

[29] K. D. Paranavitana, No. 26.

legitimate Sinhala ruler as per the Ceylonese tradition. However, Buddhism was in a state of waning. There was no valid ordination ceremony for *bhikkhus* to enter the Buddhist order through prescribed rites. In the mid-18th century, reformist movement was initiated to restore *upasampada* (ordination) to address the issue of indiscipline within the *Sangha*. Monks from Thailand were brought to ordain the *bhikkhus*. In the process, Siyam Nikaya and within it Malvatta and Asgiriya chapters were established. They were granted exclusive rights over the entry of novices to higher ordination not only within the Kandyan Kingdom but also in the Sinhala areas under colonial control. However, the reform excluded the non-Goyigama *bhikkhus* from the *Sangha*. As a reaction to this, a non-Goyigama fraction of *bhikkhus*- the Amarapura Nikaya-was established in the littorals. Measures were also initiated to centralise the affairs of *Sasana* with close links with the state. Chief *bhikkhus* were appointed by the king to endow Buddhist temples with land grants.[30]

When the British took over Ceylon in 1815, they agreed to maintain the connection between Buddhism and the state by signing the Kandyan Convention. The official proclamation of the beginning of British rule in the Kandyan Kingdom mentioned: "The religion of Boodhoo, professed by the chiefs and inhabitants of these provinces, is declared inviolable, and its rights, ministers, and places of worship are to be maintained and protected".[31] British could not protect the religion as promised and alienated the *bhikkhus*, as it followed the policy of separation of state and religion. From 1800 to 1832, the British were not openly hostile, yet not very neutral towards the religious communities. The Christian missionaries were allowed to continue their activities, particularly in the education sector, on their own. It was declared that no new places of religious worship would be established

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[30] K.M. de Silva, No. 18.

[31] Sujit Sivasundaram, "Buddhist Kingship, British Archaeology and Historical Narratives in Sri Lanka c. 1750- 1850", *Past & Present*, 197, November 2007, pp. 111-142, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096692 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

or new schools be allowed to function without a license obtained from the government. This proclamation benefited the Roman Catholics. As a guardian of the Anglican Church, Britain allowed the activities of the organised missionary associations.

The withdrawal of British support for Buddhism led to the outbreak of a rebellion in 1848. Following the 1848 rebellion, the colonial office took a moderate approach to the issue of the separation of Buddhism and the state. The colonial office continued to maintain its policy of the separation of state and religion, but acknowledged its responsibility to initiate and oversee the execution of a specified legal function, especially regarding the Buddhist temporalities.[32]

The British relaxed religious laws that were discriminatory towards Muslims and Roman Catholics under the Dutch rule. The Muslims were allowed to resume their commercial activities. Due to the positive approach towards the Muslims, the Moors in Kandy were loyal to the British during the 1817-18 rebellion. However, the British policy of mandatory English education for government jobs offended the Muslims, as they considered English-medium missionary schools as a weapon for conversion to Christianity. It is interesting to note that though many of the Tamils availed of English education, they did not convert.

The British, on the one hand, tried to promote the separation of state and religion, and on the other, tried to apply a divide-and-rule policy among the religious communities.

Post-Independence Period

The first PM of independent Ceylon adopted the secular policy under the amended Soulbury Constitution. The Constitution provided equal rights to all religions, and said, that parliament cannot bring any law which "(a) prohibits or restricts the free exercise of any religion, (b) make provisions of any community or religion liable to disability or

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[32] K.M. de Silva, No.18, p. 358.

restrictions to which persons of other communities or religions are not made liable, (c) confers on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions, (d) alter the constitution of any religious body except with the consent of the governing authority of that body…"[33] This constitutional guarantee was not considered adequate either by the Buddhists or the other minority communities. The Buddhists felt that an independent sovereign Ceylonese government would provide Buddhism and the *Sangha* the same status and facilities they used to enjoy in the pre-colonial period. As that did not happen, the Buddhist monks continued their demand for Buddhist supremacy.

The 1972 Constitution shifted the constitutional provision for the religions of Sri Lanka. Article 6 of the 1972 Constitution granted Buddhism the foremost space, which said, "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the state to foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by section 18(1)(d)."[34] Section 18 (1)(d) under the chapter on Fundamental Rights said, "Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."[35]

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[33] Ceylon (Constitution) Order in Council [as Amended by the Ceylon Constitution (amendment) order in Council, 1947, the Ceylon constitution (Amendment No. 2) order in Council, 1947, the Ceylon Constitution (Amendment No. 3) order in Council, 1947, the Ceylon Independence Order in Council, 1947, and Acts Nos. 29 of 1954, 35 of 1954, and 36 of 1954, at https://tamilnation.co/srilankalaws/46constitution.htm#PART (Accessed 28 November 2024).

[34] The Constitution of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), 1972, at https://www.parliament.lk/files/ca/4.%20The%20Constitution%20of%20Sri%20Lanka%20%20-%20%201972%20(Article%20105%20%E2%80%93134)%20Chapter%20XIII.pdf (Accessed 28 November 2024).

[35] Ibid.

The 1978 Constitution retained the basic tenets of Articles 6 and 18 (1)(d) of the 1972 Constitution, but made them ingrained provisions.[36] In addition to giving the foremost place to Buddhism, the 1978 Constitution made it the state's duty to protect 'Buddha *Sasana',* meaning a wider range of Buddhist practices and ideology, not limited to teaching and practices but also including "temples, relics, temple lands and lay devotees". Article 9 of Chapter 2 of the 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka says, "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha *Sasana*, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)."[37] Article 10 of Chapter 3 of the Constitution says, "Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice."[38] Article 14 (1) (e) says, "Every citizen is entitled to the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."[39]

Even though the constitutional provision does not make Buddhism a state religion, there is Buddhist supremacy in the country, leading to majoritarian politics. Despite the constitutional guarantee, the religious minority communities often reported becoming victims of majoritarian politics. The Religious Freedom Index reports about discrimination faced by religious minority communities and religious violence in the island. Despite the constitutional provisions, the Sri Lankan government

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36 Ayesha Wijayalath, "Constitutional Contestation Of Religion In Sri Lanka", NUS Centre for Asian Legal Studies Working Paper 18/03, at https://law.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CALS-WPS-1803.pdf (Accessed 28 November 2024).

37 The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1978, at https://www.parliament.lk/files/pdf/constitution.pdf (Accessed 28 November 2024).

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

and state machinery allegedly failed to protect the religious rights of the minority communities in Sri Lanka.[40]

It is unlikely that any future constitution, if it comes into being, will change the existing positions of religion. However, the NPP government has tried to convince people about religious equality. There is a hope that religious discrimination is likely to decline under the NPP government.

III

Social Structure and Social Relations

Nagas and *Yakkhas* were there when Vijaya came to the island and established his kingdom in Uppatisa. From the 4th century BCE to the 13th century AD, the Sinhala population were settled in Rajarata, Dakkina and Maya Rata areas. After the decline of the Polonnaruwa period, the Sinhala population started settling down in the southwest part of the country and the hills of the Central Province. During the Anuradhapura and the Polonnaruwa period, according to the *Mahavamsa*, there were intermittent Tamil invasions and rule, but permanent settlement of the Tamils in the Jaffna Peninsula and some parts of the east coast began with the formation of the Jaffna Kingdom. From around the 10th century, Muslim traders also started settling in Sri Lanka. By the 16th century, as international trade developed significantly, the number of Muslim settlers increased first in the port areas and gradually moved into the interiors.

Colonial rule introduced new religious and ethnic communities to the social system of Sri Lanka. The Portuguese introduced Christianity and Roman Catholics as a new religious community on the island. A Portuguese-Burgher community emerged in Sri Lanka during this period.

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[40] "Sri Lanka 2022 International Religious Freedom Report", US Department of State, at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/441219-SRI-LANKA-2022-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS (Accessed 28 November 2024).

The Portuguese carried out proselytisation among the local Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims and the converts were granted privileges. They got preferential treatment under the law and were exempted from certain taxes. Therefore, many local Ceylonese, particularly the lowland Sinhalese, converted voluntarily.

The Dutch introduced Calvinism and compelled the Roman Catholics to adopt Calvinism. With the decline of Dutch rule, the community disappeared; however, the Roman Catholic community remained intact. Dutch rule introduced the Dutch-Burgher community in Sri Lanka.

The Muslims from Malaya were brought to Sri Lanka as soldiers by the Portuguese, who subsequently served under the Dutch and the British and permanently settled in the country. The Malay Muslims enjoyed privileges because of their loyalty to the colonial masters, while the native Muslims faced persecution under Portuguese rule. British economic policy, particularly in the transportation and plantation sector, added another community in the Sri Lankan society, i.e. the Indian Tamils.

The policies of the three colonial powers brought several changes in Sri Lankan society in addition to adding different communities to the social structure. Ownership rights of land to individuals and the *Sangha* other than the king, led to a hierarchical system in Sri Lankan society in the ancient period. The hereditary nobility who owned lands enjoyed privileges and a position of strength in society. They enjoyed immunities such as guaranteed freedom from interference by royal officers and exemption from taxes.[41] However, during the colonial period, special privileges were granted to the loyalists of the colonial masters and English-educated converts. This affected the social interaction and interpersonal relations among the members of various communities.

In the ancient period, as mentioned before, it was the duty of the king to allocate resources to the monasteries for the maintenance of the *Sangha*. Over the periods, the monasteries owned vast temporalities

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[41] K.M. de Silva, No. 18, p. 96.

and emerged as the biggest landholders in the kingdom. The authority and the influence of the *Sangha* in the society, as the landholders, significantly declined due to the loss of state patronage under the British.

Colonial policies also led to significant changes in the caste system. The Sinhalese caste groups include the Goyigama, the Salagama, the Durava, and the Karava. The Salagama castes were the main cinnamon peelers. As the Portuguese gained a monopoly over the cinnamon trade and it started flourishing, the Portuguese started recruiting non-Salagamas to peel cinnamon. By 1650, people belonging to the Karavas, Hunu and Padu caste also took up the job. The Portuguese also tried to simplify the appointment system of the headman based on caste. The Dutch also made changes in the caste system while appointing the headman. Due to the introduction of Roman-Dutch law, the headman became the holder of large privately held landed property, which led to inequalities in landholding. As a result, the peasantry's dependency on the headman increased.[42] This resulted in the exclusion of Goyigamas from a limited number of higher positions in the traditional hierarchy. The change in the system of landownership affected the Goyigama elites, who used to be the only landowners.[43] The new jury system that was introduced disregarded the caste-based appointment.

After the British introduced a new land system, where land could be sold through auction, Karavas also started acquiring land. This affected the Goyigama's superior position in society. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Salagamas enjoyed a dominant position. In the late 19th century, the Karavas emerged as the most assertive non-Goyigama caste. In fact, the three non-Goyigama castes— Karavas, Salagama and Duravas became more affluent in the plantation economy during the colonial period, which resulted in caste rivalry. The introduction of compulsory English education for eligibility for government jobs further affected the elite status of the Goyigamas.

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42 Ibid, p. 257.

43 Ibid.

In the Tamil areas, however, because of caste rigidity, the lower castes never questioned the status of the upper caste— the Vellalas, and therefore, unlike Sinhala areas, the caste structure did not get disturbed and the traditional upper castes continued to be the main beneficiaries of the colonial reform policies in the Tamil areas.

British policy in the early years of the 19th century revived the caste-based traditional elites' lost privileges and status. However, in the second half of the 19th century, new Western-educated anglicised elites emerged, alongside the traditional elites. The success of coffee plantations led to the emergence of local entrepreneurs. The English education system introduced by the colonial powers affected the religious schools in the country. In the bureaucracy, the Burghers outnumbered the Kandyan aristocracy in official rankings. In the later part of the 19th century, Burghers were replaced by the Tamils and Sinhalas. In the early years of the 20th century, the Tamils and the Burghers competed for clerical jobs.

The constitutional reform programme, particularly since 1921, created competition for political power among the elite constitutionalists from various ethnic communities, which over the period, led to major ethnic complications in the country. Till 1920, there was harmony among the Tamil and the Sinhala elites, particularly the low-country Sinhalese, who were working together for constitutional reforms. In the 1921 election for the reformed Legislative Council, there were 13 Sinhala representatives against three Tamils. This disappointed the Tamils, because before the reforms, both the communities enjoyed equal representation in the Legislative Council. Therefore, the Tamils began demanding the restoration of the proportion of Tamil to Sinhalese representation that had existed before 1920.

The territorial representation implemented in 1931 through the Donoughmore Constitution, weakened the political position of the minority community and thus became a matter of confrontation between the Sinhala and the minority communities, including the Tamils, Muslims and Burghers. The Sinhalas preferred territorial representation, whereas the minorities demanded the continuation of communal representation. The Tamils left the Ceylon National Congress and opposed the Donoughmore Constitution. Thus, they did not have any political representation in the State Council from 1931 to 1942. In

1936, the Board of Ministers in the State Council did not have any minority representatives. When the new Constitution was drafted, the British totally disregarded the minority demand of communal representation and provided for territorial representation, which was supported by the Sinhalese. Interestingly, though the Muslims, initially supported the Tamils to demand communal representation, they subsequently withdrew their support from the Tamils when the Tamil leaders demanded 50:50 representation, under which 50 per cent representation was reserved for Sinhalas, 25 per cent for the Tamils, and the other communities would share the remaining 25 per cent. Instead of supporting the 50:50 representation, Muslims supported territorial representation and joined hands with the Sinhala leaders. Thus, the representation issue created problems not only between the majority Sinhalas and the minority Tamils, but also between the two minority communities – Tamils and Muslims. This ethno-religious difference between the communities still exists in the post-independence period.

The political changes during the colonial period also sowed the seeds of conservatism and radicalism, which have had a severe effect in the post-colonial period. Due to religious discrimination, Christian missionary activities in various parts of the country and a large number of local people availing English education in missionary schools, native religious revival movements were started by the Buddhists, Hindus and the Muslims in Sri Lanka during the British period. The main focus of the revival movement was to uplift the community through education by establishing both vernacular and English-medium schools.[44] Religious revival movements improved the education of the communities, but at the same time, strengthened the orthodoxy and conservatism among the community members.

The Buddhist revival movement was initiated by the monk Miguettuwatte Gunananda. The main aim of the Buddhist revival movement was to instil a sense of pride in traditional culture as a response to Christian propaganda. As many Sinhalas were converted

[44] K.M. de Silva, No. 18, p. 443.

to Christianity and availed of Western education, it was felt by a section of Buddhists that the people were getting alienated from the Buddhist culture. It was propagated by the reformers that the Sinhalese had to "turn back to pre-colonial era in search for identity".[45] The movement initiated by the Buddhist monks, got crucial impetus with the involvement of the Theosophical Society and Anagarika Dharmapala, who is widely known as the father of Buddhist revivalism. The Countrywide Temperance Movement against the British was at the forefront of the Buddhist revival. From 1916 onwards, the Buddhist revival movement was muted. When Anagarika Dharmapala started the Buddhist revival movement, he had advocated Sinhala-Buddhist domination in the country. In the post-independence period, Dharmapala's justification is used to establish Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy.

The Hindu revival movement was initiated by Arumuga Navalar, an exponent of *Saiva Siddhanta* philosophy, to defend the Hindu faith from the Christian missionaries. He published classical Tamil texts and established *Saivite* schools in every village in the north and east to impart education in a Hindu environment. At the same time, Navalar emphasised the importance of English education by establishing Saivangala Vidyasalai in 1872, which later became the Jaffna Hindu College.[46] Perhaps due to Navalar's efforts, despite Christian missionaries' active presence in Jaffna and many Tamil people availing English education, Hindu resistance to Christian missionaries was quite strong, even though many of them adopted Christianity. The caste

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[45] Howard Wrigging, No. 4, p. 170.

[46] Navalar's other contributions included establishing a printing press, producing pamphlets and delivering lectures on Hindu doctrines in simple language for common people and the formation of secular organisations such as Saiva Pragasa Sabhai and Saiva Paripala Sabhai to propagate Hindu ideals. He also insisted on changing some of the temple practices such as the *Devdasi* system. R. Balachandran and Bala, "Pioneers of Tamil Literature: Transition to Modernity", *Indian Literature*, 49 (2), March-April 2005, pp.179-184, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/23346641 (Accessed 28 November 2024).

privileges enjoyed by the Vellalas – the uppermost caste in the Tamil caste system– was maintained through the sanctions of the *Saivite* doctrine, which was propagated by Navalar.[47]

Unlike the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Hindu-Tamils, Muslims refused to get enrolled in the Christian missionary schools fearing conversion or being influenced by Christianity due to English education. As a result, the Muslims in Sri Lanka remained the most backward community economically and socially. Siddi Lebbe, one of the prominent Muslim enlightened personalities, emphasised the importance of education to revive the community, and thus along with Orabi Pasha, initiated the Islamic revival movement in the latter half of the 19th century, which continued till the first half of the 20th century. The Islamic revival movement, in addition to imparting modern education to the Muslims, also propagated for restoration of Islamic values by returning to Islam in its pure form.[48] In the process, it encouraged the Muslims in Sri Lanka to shed the unique Sri Lankan Muslim identity and adopt an Arabised identity for the upliftment of the community.

The process of the construction of religious identity based on a pure form of religion initiated during the religious revival movement, still continues in Sri Lankan society. The process has affected the syncretic culture that emerged due to the assimilation of various communities over centuries. As a result, conservatism and radicalism have grown exponentially on the island.

Conclusion

The seeds of ethno-religious conflict and radicalisation sown in the colonial period manifested as the armed ethnic conflict, religious tensions and terror attacks in the post-independence period. Independent Sri

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47 Ibid, p. 444.

48 Mohamed Arkam and Fatmir Shehu, "Exploring the History of Islamic Revivalism in Modern Sri Lanka", *Journal of Islam in Asia*, 21 (1), June 2024, at https://journals.iium.edu.my/jiasia/index.php/jia/article/view/1212/606 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

Lanka could not provide equal treatment to all these communities. The political developments and the administrative and governance systems in the post-independence period further widened the social fault lines that appeared during the British period. The language policy of 1956, the majoritarian politics and the armed ethnic conflict, gradually reduced interactions and communications among different communities, leading to cultural prejudice and racial distrust.[49] The conflict is not just between the majority and minority communities, but there are issues amongst the minority communities too, such as between the Muslims and the Tamils, the Muslims and the Christians. Sectarianism has caused intra-community conflicts too. This, however, does not mean that the communities are constantly fighting with each other in their day-to-day existence. However, the underlying factors of distrust, bitterness and hatred get triggered by incidents such as communal riots, acts of terror or enactment and implementation of controversial and discriminatory government policies. Resurgence of religious politics, radicalism and violent extremism at the global level also impacts the social interactions among the communities within Sri Lanka.

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[49] Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Sri Lanka: The Crisis of the Anglo-American Constitutional Traditions in a Developing Society,* Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1984.

Chapter 2

Buddhism in Sri Lankan Politics

According to the *Mahavamsa*, Buddhism and Sri Lanka have a special connection, as Gautam Buddha himself visited the country thrice.[1] Sri Lanka, therefore, has a cherished role in protecting and propagating Buddha's teachings. It is deemed that it is the responsibility of the state or the king to protect Buddhism. Ever since Buddhism was introduced to the island, this religion was patronised by various kings who ruled over it. The *Sangha* enjoyed special privileges under the monarchy. Due to several factors, Buddhism was perceived to be under threat at different moments in history. Intermittent foreign invasions and occupation of the Sinhala kingdom by foreign forces is believed to have affected the purity of Buddhism. In fact, during the colonial period, maintaining Buddhist identity was a concern. In the history of Sri Lanka to date, therefore, an effort has been made to restore the purity of Buddhism and revive its lost glory and maintain its supremacy in the country. The Buddhist revival movement initiated in the late 19th century helped to revive the religion during the colonial period and provided intellectual support to assert its supremacy. The long-drawn effort of the Buddhist activists to revive state patronage that Buddhism enjoyed in the pre-colonial period fructified in the post-independence period in 1972, when Buddhism was granted the foremost space in the Constitution of Sri Lanka.

The movement for maintaining Buddhist supremacy has endured, despite the special provision in the Constitution of Sri Lanka, as there

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[1] Mahanama, *The Mahavamsa: Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, Translated by Wilhelm Geiger (Germany)/Mabel Hynes Bode (English), Asian Educational Service, New Delhi, 2003.

is a constant fear on the part of Buddhist nationalists that Buddhism will lose its supremacy. Different threats are highlighted over different periods in Sri Lankan history – Hindu-Brahminic practices of the Tamil invaders in the ancient period, state propagation of Christianity during the colonial period, support of the Sri Lankan leaders for the secular-pluralistic constitution in the post-independence period, and finally, the growing radicalisation of the Sri Lankan Muslim community. The assertion of Buddhist identity emerged as a strategic response to perceived threats and underlying concerns. Yet, such efforts did not consistently yield the intended outcomes. Success was contingent on specific political conditions, as these assertions were driven not solely by religious aspirations to restore and uphold Buddhist supremacy, but also by the calculated pursuit of political and economic ambitions by influential religious and political actors. The focus of this chapter is to explore the circumstances in which Buddhism was used as a political weapon.

Ancient Period

In the ancient period, many of the Sinhala kings found it challenging to have full control over the Sinhala areas due to the intermittent invasions from Southern India and due to internal power struggles. In such circumstances, Buddhism was a great source of political unification for the Sinhala rulers. The first war of unification between the Sinhala King Duttugemunu and the Tamil King Elara was projected as the war for the protection of Buddhism in the *Mahavamsa*. It is mentioned in the *Mahavamsa* that after regaining the Sinhala areas from Elara, Buddhism was restored and strengthened. From the 5th century onwards, there were several instances of the weakening of the Buddhist *Sangha* and its influence due to various factors, including the sectarian dispute within the *Sangha* between the Theravada supporters and Mahayanists. As Theravada Buddhism came under the influence of Mahayanism and Hinduism, and the influence and state privileges of Mahavihara (believer in Theravada school) started declining, a fear of an existential threat to Buddhism was circulated by citing the example of the decline of Buddhism in India around 10th century AD.

It was commonly believed among Buddhists in the island that the *Sangha's* position and influence deteriorated under weak kings and

foreign rulers, but could be restored whenever there was a strong Sinhala-Buddhist king in power. The concept of the "divine and strong" king was advocated to restore Buddhism in Sri Lanka. For example, "in a tenth-century inscription it was asserted that none but future Buddhas would become kings of prosperous Lanka."[2] During the invasion of the Kalinga King Mâgha in the 13th century, it was asserted that "only Buddhist kings protecting the *sâsana* should – and indeed would – be able to rule over Lanka.[3]

While undoubtedly, there was Tamil Hindu influence in the Sinhala society, the view that Buddhism was not protected under the Tamil rulers, was contested. There is literature available which suggests that Buddhism was not always threatened by the South Indian invaders. John Still argued that though not himself a Buddhist, Elara treated Buddhism favourably, and employed Buddhists as his personal attendants and ministers.[4] He was respected by his Sinhala subjects. According to K.M. DeSilva, Duttugemunu, during his fight against Elara, had to face resistance of several of his Sinhala rivals, as they preferred Elara's rule over Duttugemunu's political ambition.[5] Even after defeating Elara, Duttugemunu had to continue his war with 32 rulers to maintain his dominance in Rajarata.[6]

By the 10th century, though the influence of Mahavihara had declined, and different sects were brought under one leadership within the *Sangha* under the patronage of the Sinhala king after freeing the Sinhala areas from the Cholas, sectarian competition continued. Subsequently, to end the sectarian dispute, an official form of Buddhism was developed

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2 Alan Strathern, "The Digestion of the Foreign in Lankan History, c. 500–1818", in Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (Eds.), *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History,* UCL Press, 2017.

3 John Still, *Ancient Capitals of Ceylon; Historical Sketches & Guide,* H. W. Cave & Co., Colombo, 1907, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/saoa.crl.26422471 (Accessed on 5 November 2024).

4 Ibid.

5 K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka,* Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2005.

6 Ibid.

which absorbed some of the doctrinal and ritualistic practices of different sects, including Hindu deities. Sinhala-Buddhists believe that since the Polonnaruwa period (1017-1232)[7], Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka lost its purity. Post Polonnaruwa period, *Sangha* witnessed a decline in its morale and discipline due to the political instability and fragmentation of the Sinhala kingdom. Yet Sri Lanka was regarded as a holy land of Buddhism.[8]

Therefore, scholars are of the view that the assertion of Buddhism by various rulers was perhaps to ensure a form of political unity and to mobilise local support against the foreign rulers.[9] Robin A.E. Conningham argues, "Buddhism became identified with the Sinhalese throne, helping Sri Lankan monarchs to keep their polity ideologically and physically separate from the powerful Hindu states across the Palk Straits."[10]

Colonial Period

In the 16th century, with the advent of the Portuguese, Buddhism faced a real challenge of annihilation due to the Portuguese policy of

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7 The Polonnaruwa period (c. 1017–1232 CE) marks a transformative chapter in Sri Lankan history, following the fall of the Anuradhapura Kingdom and the Chola conquest. It was a time of political consolidation, architectural brilliance, and cultural revival, cantered in the city of Polonnaruwa, which became the island's new capital. Although Buddhist kings like Vijayabahu I, Parakramabahu I reunified the island, restored Buddhist institutions and brought about a synthesis of religious revival and engineering ingenuity leading to great architectural and hydraulic achievements, the 'Polonnaruwa period' is viewed by many Sinhala-Buddhists as a time of religious compromise and eventual decline—especially when contrasted with the earlier Anuradhapura era, which is idealised as a bastion of pure Theravada orthodoxy.

8 K.M. de Silva, No. 5.

9 Alan Strathern, No. 2.

10 Robin A. E. Coningham, "Monks, Caves and Kings: A Reassessment of the Nature of Early Buddhism in Sri Lanka", *World Archaeology*, 27 (2), October 1995, pp. 222-242, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/125083 (Accessed 29 January 2025).

propagating Roman Catholicism and establishing it as the state religion. Through proselytisation, the Portuguese ruthlessly destroyed Buddhist temples. People who refused to convert faced persecution. On the other hand, special privileges were accorded to the converts to Roman Catholicism. Due to the preferential treatment, many Sinhalas and Tamils adopted the new religion either for higher posts in the government or to escape caste-based discrimination under traditional religions.

The challenge for the Sinhala-Buddhists continued when the Dutch overthrew the Portuguese and introduced Calvinism. To avoid forceful conversion, the Buddhists took refuge in the Kandyan Kingdom, which remained free from Portuguese and Dutch control. So, during the Portuguese and Dutch period, the Kandyan Kingdom was the only trustee of Buddhist rights on the island, where there was a resurgence of Buddhism. However, "throughout the 18th century, Buddhism was in a state of ineffectiveness as *bhikkhus* were ordained without prescribed rites. During the Portuguese and Dutch periods, *ganinnânses*[11] and *silvattana*[12] (a pious community of lay practitioners) played a major role in protecting Buddhism by looking after the destroyed temples and attending the religious rites of the devotees as laymen. They wore white robes to disguise themselves as laymen.[13] A Buddhist resurgence

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[11] Ganinnânses are lay religious figures who adopted monastic-like roles during times when the formal Buddhist ordination lineage (*upasampada*) had collapsed—particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries. Though not fully ordained monks, they were deeply respected and played a crucial role in preserving Buddhist practices under colonial rule, especially in the maritime provinces where Portuguese and Dutch repression had decimated the *Sangha*.

[12] The members of this community under Weliwita Sri Saranankara Thero in the 18th century, committed themselves to Buddhist discipline and moral conduct and sought to revive Theravada Buddhism by organising these lay devotees into a disciplined group that could uphold Buddhist values until formal ordination was restored. They were instrumental in maintaining religious continuity, conducting rituals, and safeguarding temple spaces during a time of institutional fragility.

[13] M.U. De Silva, "Suppression of Buddhism under the British and the Resistance of the Buddhists", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, 2004, 49, 2004, pp. 15-52, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/23732425 (Accessed 29 January 2025).

movement emerged to address the issue of corrupt practices and indiscipline within the *Sangha.* Under the patronage of Kandyan kings, monks from Thailand were brought to ordain the *bhikkhus* through prescribed rites. While this resurgence movement was to bring discipline within the *Sangha,* another Buddhist revival movement was launched, towards the end of the 19th century, to bring back the lost glory of Buddhism and to instil a sense of pride and confidence among the Sri Lankan Buddhists.

Under the patronage of the Theosophical Society and Anagarika Dharmapala, the revival movement succeeded in improving the status of Buddhism in the society by imparting education. At the same time appealed to the colonial government to ensure the welfare of the Sinhalese.[14] Though the revivalists blamed the Christian missionaries and the British for the decline of Buddhism in Ceylon, they did not pose a direct challenge to colonial rule. They demanded the basic rights of the Buddhists, such as declaring *Vesak* Day as a public holiday, to consolidate and amend the law relating to Buddhist temporalities. There was a strong demand for direct responsibility of the state for the administration of Buddhist temporalities. The Buddhist revival movement also extended its support towards the temperance agitation against the liquor industry, which was considered a Western influence against Buddhist tradition. The large-scale mass support for the temperance movement could potentially lead to a political agitation against the British. The political reform movement that was going on in the country at that time could have easily politicised the movement. However, there was no connection between the Buddhist revival movement and the political reform movement; both movements ran parallel to each other.

The main advocates of the political reform movement were not keen to exploit the issue of Buddhism. The political reform movement to

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[14] Harshana Rambukwella, "Anagarika Dharmapala: The Nation and its Place in the World", in *Politics and Poetics of Authenticity: A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism,* UCL Press, London, 2018, at https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/29578/The-Politics-and-Poetics-of-Authenticity.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (Accessed 31 August 2025).

make the Legislative Council more representative was initiated by the Europeans, who were settled in Sri Lanka.[15] From 1840 to 1888, Sri Lankan natives (Sinhala and Tamils) did not make any demand for reforms. In 1840, Dr. Christopher Elliot initiated the agitation to reform the Legislative Council, which was rejected by the colonial authorities. In the 1850s, the reform movement was revived by the European merchants, planters and Burghers[16] on the island who demanded an increase in the unofficial representation in the Legislative Council. A similar reform movement continued in the 1860s and 70s.

It was only in 1888, with the formation of the Ceylon National Association, that the native Sri Lankans launched an agitation for constitutional reform. However, the anglicised political elites within the Ceylon National Association refused to participate in the temperance movement. The Sinhala leaders were quite inactive in the first decade of the 20th century. Tamil political elites played a significant role in demanding political reform during that time. Tamil leaders like Ramanathan did take an interest in the issue of the *Vesak* holiday and the Buddhist Temporalities Bill, but post-1905, there was a lack of interest even among the Tamil political elites for political reform. Therefore, despite the existence of an opportunity to use the Buddhist revival movement and temperance movement, no effort was made to politicise the religious issue, particularly in the second half of the 19th century and in the early years of the 20th century. There was no common interest or ambition behind extending support to the temperance movement.

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15 K.M. de Silva, No. 5, p. 449.

16 The term Burgher originates from the Dutch word burger, meaning "citizen," and was originally a label for civil status rather than an ethnic one. Over time, it has assumed ethnic colours. The Burghers of Sri Lanka are a small but historically significant Eurasian ethnic group descended from European settlers—primarily Portuguese, Dutch, and British—who intermarried with local Sri Lankan populations during the colonial period. According to the 2012 census, there were around 38,000 Burghers in Sri Lanka. Most of them live in the Western Province, especially in Colombo, with smaller populations in the Eastern and Central Provinces.

The political elites, during that time, were mostly anglicised and Christian and therefore, perhaps did not take an interest in initiating a national movement based on religion. They were mostly constitutionalists who did not want to disturb the constitutional or political situation. Their main demand was reform in the Legislative Council and the entry of Sri Lankans into the higher bureaucracy. Therefore, Buddhist revivalists did not get support from the constitutionalists in their movement against the missionaries. The Buddhist revivalists, on the other hand, were not dedicated and aggressive on the issue of independence or political representation. As a result, there was no connection between the political and religious leaders.

After the Ceylon National Association became defunct, the political organisations which were pushing reforms, were either ethnic or communal bodies, such as the Dutch Burgher Union, Jaffna Association, and the Chilaw Association, which were not interested in exploiting the Buddhist cause. These reform organisations were criticised by the Sinhala traditional elite who believed in maintaining the status quo.

Caste rivalry among the Sinhalas was another reason why religion was not exploited for political purposes at the time. The Sinhala political elites were competing for non-official seats in the Legislative Council based on caste. As the Goyigama castes were getting nominated repeatedly, the Karavas began demanding elective principles from 1905.

Until 1912, there was no provision for elective representation. Provision for an elective representation in the Council was announced only in 1910, that too for English-educated Ceylonese; the traditional elites were satisfied with the reform, but Buddhist media condemned the decision for excluding the Sinhala-educated people from these rights. There were also differences in views between the low country and upcountry Sinhalese. The upcountry Sinhalese or the Kandyans found it politically disadvantageous when limited representation was announced in 1910. The Kandyans supported communal representation. In the absence of universal franchise, there was no motivation for religious mobilisation.

The 1915 riot was a setback for the temperance movement. The Buddhist revivalists decreased their activities following the riot. In 1931, with the passage of the Buddhist Temporalities Ordinance, which

conceded the demand for state intervention in, and supervision of, the administration of Buddhist temporalities, the Buddhist activists' attention remained focused on education.[17] By then, the Sri Lankan secular leaders dominated the movement for political reforms, and they refused to support the Buddhist demand for state control of the mission schools.

With time, differences started cropping up among the Sri Lankan political reformists. The Ceylon Reform League was formed, which later evolved into the Ceylon National Congress. There were issues within the Ceylon National Congress between the Constitutionalists and the Radicals. From 1922 onwards, the Tamil leaders broke away from the Ceylon National Congress on the issue of territorial representation.

Universal adult suffrage was introduced in 1931, which led to the resurgence of religious nationalism, particularly with the establishment of the Sinhala Maha Sabha in 1937 and radical nationalism started gaining prominence. The moderate Sinhala politicians did not extend support to the religious nationalism of the Sinhala Mahasabha; yet there were many Sinhala leaders who used the platform of the Mahasabha to oppose the activities of the Tamil leaders like G. G. Ponnambalam, who were demanding communal representation. However, leaders like D.S. Senanayake and Jayatilake did not support a divisive policy. In 1940, Congress refused membership to those supporting communal politics. The Sinhala Mahasabha, however, remained within the Congress. In 1942, D.S. Senanayake assumed the leadership role and followed a secular policy. His strong will to follow a secular policy did not allow communal politics to play a role.

USE OF BUDDHISM FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

In the post-independence period, political use of Buddhism can be categorised into four different phases: 1948-55, when Buddhism was not used as a political weapon by the political actors; 2) 1956-2000:

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[17] K.M de Silva, No. 5, p. 576.

Assertion of Buddhism in Sri Lankan politics; 3) 2000-2009: Era of political monks; 4) 2009-2022: political use of militant Buddhism.

1948-55

At the time of independence, the Buddhist activists tried to emphasise the revival of Buddhism. However, they lacked the support of the political leadership. The first Prime Minister (PM) of Ceylon, Don Stephen Senanayake, preferred a secular system. The 1947 Soulbury Constitution, issued under the authority of PM Senanayake and the Board of Ministers, contained Section 29(1), which instituted a distinct separation of state control from religious entities and the affairs of religious bodies. The Buddhist activists were disappointed with the decision as the independent Ceylonese leader did not re-establish a Ceylonese system of governance and give primacy to Buddhism. In February 1948, the head monks of the Kandyan Asigiriya and Malwatte chapters of the *Sangha* requested Senanayake to include Article 5 of the 1815 Kandyan Convention, which stated the government's responsibility to protect Buddhism, in the new constitution. Senanayake refused to elevate the status of any particular religion and distort the characteristics of the modern, religiously pluralistic nation-state.[18] The request from the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) to appoint a royal commission "to examine the question of giving Buddhism its rightful place in the land" was denied by the PM.

An official ACBC committee, called the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry, conducted surveys around the island and compiled *The Betrayal of Buddhism Report* in 1954, and published it in 1956.[19] The Buddhist

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[18] Hannah Clare Durham, "Sangha and State: An Examination of Sinhalese-Buddhist Nationalism in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka", Bard, Spring 2015, at https://sangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Sangha-and-State-An-Examination-of-Sinhalese-Buddhist-Nationalism.pdf (Accessed 5 November 2024).

[19] "The Betrayal of Buddhism", An Abridged Version of the Report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry, 1956, at https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83-00418R004000080002-6.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2024).

Committee of Inquiry called for the re-establishment of Buddhism as a freely accessible and practicable religion in Sri Lankan society; the appointment of a Minister for Religious Affairs, as well as general sovereignty and equality for all religious bodies and the promulgation of the Buddha Sasana Act to create a Buddha Sasana Council.[20]

As the then Government of Sri Lanka and the ruling UNP did not give importance to the Buddhist activists, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who had split from the UNP due to personal differences with D.S. Senanayake and formed a new party, took an opportunity to exploit religion in the 1956 elections.

1956-2000

In the mid-1950s, the Buddhist activists realised that without political support, their efforts to revive the lost status of Buddhism would not make much progress. They tried to challenge the UNP's secularism by seeking support from the conservative segment of the Sinhala leadership. The ACBC, came together before the 1956 elections with the Sri Lanka Maha Sangha Sabha[21] to form Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna (EBP) "to establish a true Sinhala-Buddhist government in Sri Lanka in the Buddha Jayanthi year" of 1956. They also tried to mobilise support in the rural areas among those who were in a disadvantaged position due to the British and post-independent government's language policy and looking for an alternative to D.S. Senanayake's UNP and the left parties. According to Shyamika Jayasundara Smits, due to the Buddhist revival movement, Sinhala-Buddhist ideology was already successfully internalised by the rural lower classes. Therefore, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's party, which was formed on the basis of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and opposed D.S. Senanayake's Sri Lankan nationalism, could easily mobilise popular support. Bandaranaike was sympathetic to the cause

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20) Ibid.

21 In 1953, the Sri Lanka Maha Sangha Sabha, an interest group consisting of Buddhist monks from all three main sects, was formed to articulate Buddhist grievances. Their main purpose was to prepare for the Buddha Jayanti celebrations, marking the 2500th anniversary of Buddha's death, and restore Buddhism to its rightful place on the island.

of Buddhists since the pre-independence period, but his support for the Buddhists during the 1956 elections can be explained through the perspective of elite instrumentalism theory.

Bandaranaike's support to the EBP was purely to mobilise popular support in the elections. This became evident, as after his victory in the election, he was not keen to toe the line of the Buddhist monks' demand for the establishment of Buddhist supremacy. Bandaranaike did not make a serious effort to establish the Sasana Council as demanded by the EBP, even though in the pre-independence period, he supported Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The SLFP manifesto, despite its evident leanings towards Buddhism, insisted that formally instituting a state religion would be a detrimental move, due to the religious plurality of the island's population.[22] This stand was taken perhaps because he sought the Left's support during the 1956 elections, who were in favour of a secular policy.[23] *Bhikkhus* were disappointed when Bandaranaike agreed on an act with the Federal Party in 1957, to give the Tamil language a national status.[24] Two hundred *bhikkhus* and 300 other Sinhalese Buddhists staged a sit-in outside Bandaranaike's residence in April 1958 to demonstrate their opposition to the pact. The Buddhist resurgence movement was intertwined with linguistic nationalism, and the Tamils were considered a threat to Buddhist supremacy. After the assassination of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike by a Buddhist monk on 26 September 1959, the *bhikkhus* took a back seat as far as political involvement was concerned. However, post-1959, the political situation took such shape that even without the pressure of the Buddhist activists, the Sinhala-Buddhist political actors felt the necessity to play the communal card in politics.

During the 1956 elections, Bandaranaike created an electoral base founded on Sinhala-Buddhist ideology. After the defeat in the 1956 elections, the UNP leadership realised that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism had been entrenched among the majority community and that it would

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[22] Hannah Clare Durham, No. 8.

[23] Ibid.

[24] K.M de Silva, No. 5, p. 630.

not be possible to have an electoral victory by ignoring Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and continuing Sri Lankan nationalism. Hence, the UNP also began to partake in communal politics and tried to champion the cause of the Buddhist monks. It exploited the opportunity when S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike agreed to a pact with Chelvanayakam and disappointed the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist activists. After 1956, the political ideological competition between Sri Lankan nationalism and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism dissipated. The main contest among the Sinhala-Buddhist political leaders was, who could champion the Sinhala-Buddhist cause more.

From 1960 onwards, the SLFP-led government in power adopted several policies in line with the demands of Buddhist nationalist activists, such as the abandonment of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact;[25] a policy of state control of education in 1961 and quotas based on religion were introduced for education and jobs. The SLFP-led government emerged as a brazen advocate of Sinhalese-Buddhist domination. In 1962, a coup was attempted against Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in which Catholic Christians were allegedly involved. Many argue that the government patronised the Buddhist activists who were against the Roman Catholics. The UNP government that came to power in 1965 initiated pro-Buddhist policies, such as introducing the *Poya* holiday scheme.

In her first tenure during 1960-65, Sirimavo Bandaranaike delayed the adoption of Buddhism as a state religion even though she came to power using Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. However, in her second tenure, the government faced a serious challenge in the form of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection in 1971. Following the 1971 JVP insurrection, the government was under pressure from the rural Sinhalese youth on economic grounds. This challenge perhaps led Sirimavo Bandaranaike to drop the communal card again to maintain her political power. Consequently, the SLFP-led UF government adopted a new Constitution in 1972, which granted Buddhism the foremost place. Accordingly, it became the duty of the state to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring all other religions the rights secured

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[25] Hannah Clare Durham, No. 8.

by Article 18 (i)(d) of the Constitution. In the post-1972 period, Buddhist supremacy was consolidated when the 1978 Constitution was adopted by the UNP leader J. Jayewardene, which made it the state's duty to protect 'Buddha *Sasana*'.

The Ministry of Buddha *Sasana* and the Supreme Advisory Council came into being to manage Buddhist affairs, including the registration of monks and temple property during the tenure of UNP President R. Premadasa.[26] The rationale behind the Council was that 'the state shall consult the Supreme Council in all matters pertaining to the protection and fostering of the Buddha *Sasana'*.

Thus, the political atmosphere after 1956 and particularly after 1972 became very conducive to communal politics. With the emergence of war in the 1980s and internationalisation of the ethnic conflict with Indian involvement, the Left parties like JVP also asserted Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. With the emergence of the Eelam War in 1983, there was complete polarisation of the Sinhala-Buddhist community. Irrespective of ideological orientation, all the political parties belonging to the majority community asserted Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

Although President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who assumed power in 1994, advocated a secular ideology, she too made symbolic use of Buddhism and did not abandon the Buddhist monks and pressure groups. Kumaratunga maintained the Supreme Advisory Council formed by President Premadasa. The 1997 constitutional draft proposed by President Kumaratunga also maintained Buddhism's close relationship with the state. However, she was not ready to listen to the monks' views on the issue of the devolution package. As a result, the monks opposed the Kumaratunga government and protested against the proposed devolution package for the Tamils.

Chandrika Kumaratunga came to power on the promise to end the war. Her party, with the support of the Left and minorities, won the Parliamentary election in 1994. Later in November, she won the

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[26] Iselin Frydenlund, "The Sangha and its Relation to the Peace Process in Sri Lanka", PRIO, 2005, at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/38124/2005_01_SanghaRelationPeaceProcessSriLanka.pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

Presidential elections. She, however, did not have an absolute majority in the Parliament. She relied on the support of the Left, Muslims and a section of Tamils. As her government was fragile, she did not want to follow a direct, clear-cut policy on the ethnic issues, but followed a two-pronged approach, i.e. a combination of military operations and political devolution. She offered the devolution package to appease the Tamils; on the other hand, she continued military operations, as she did not want to ignore the sensitivity of the Sinhala-Buddhist community. Even though she could not continue a balanced approach and focused more on a military approach, she continued to talk about devolution, not only because of her personal principles, but also perhaps to avoid international pressure. The UNP, interestingly, though it criticised the Chandrika government, was committed to support the devolution package. However, as it failed to support the draft proposal of the PA administration, the government asked UNP to forward its own proposal or else the government decided to have a referendum. The UNP later put forward its own proposal.

With this background, the Buddhist activists began to feel marginalised, and Sinhala-Buddhist *bhikkhus* once again raised the issue of "Buddhism in danger".[27] A body of Sinhala-Buddhist intellectuals formed a Sinhala Commission in 1996 to report how the package would affect the Sinhalese socially, politically and economically and submitted the Report to the government on 17 September 1997.[28] The then government ignored the Report. Reacting on the Report, the then Minister of Media,

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[27] "Text of Sri Lankan Proposal for Devolution – Released by President Chandrika Kumaratunga", *Tamil Nation,* on 3 August 1995, at https://tamilnation.org/conflictresolution/tamileelam/cbkproposals/95proposals (Accessed 1 December 2024).

[28] It is believed that there was financial support for the Sinhala Commission and its political slogans were coming from well-organised political organisations that committed to the "promotion of Sinhalese commercial interests as a way of redressing the supposed threat of competing Tamil and Muslim business in the country". Geethika Dharmasinghe, *Third Wave Politics: Violence and Buddhists in Sri Lanka*, Dissertation, Cornell University, December 2022, at https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/a486fbf6-367e-4950-916e-d5fd1521421d/content (Accessed 5 November 2024).

Mangala Samaraweera commented that "the right place of the Commission [R]eport is the dustbin of history". This led almost all politically active Sinhala-Buddhist organisations to stage a protest. The SLFP government, the opposition UNP, and other parties were criticised for not supporting the Buddhist cause. The supporters of the Sinhala Commission held the view that the two main political parties were planning to divide the country and therefore propagated the idea of a third force that would truly represent Sinhala-Buddhist interests. Responding to the growing public demand to safeguard 'Buddhism,' the government appointed the Buddhist Commission in 2000 to report on the grievances of the Sinhala Buddhists. In 2002, the Commission released its Report and mentioned that Christian and evangelical conversion, the destruction of Buddhist archaeological artefacts and ancient temples due to Muslim and Tamil resettlement, and lack of Sinhala-Buddhist population growth put Buddhism in danger. Based on these threat perceptions, the political monks started mobilising popular support.

However, there are speculations that there were vested economic interests of some Sinhala-Buddhist businessmen behind the Buddhist monks' protests. The Sinhala Veera Vidhana (SVV) was formed and, backed by seven successful Sinhala-Buddhist middle and upper-class businessmen, who were competing with their Muslim and Tamil counterparts for the dominance of the domestic market for the production of textiles, rubber products, gas and fuel, and the banking sector. SVV reportedly provided financial support to the Sinhala Commission.[29]

2000-2009: Political Monks

The concept of political monks was initiated by Walpola Rahula. Walpola Rahula wrote *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (*Bhiksuwage Urumaya*) in 1946, where the author argued that monks had from earliest times, played a significant political and social role in Ceylon.[30] Inspired by Rahula's writing, many monks have played a role in politics, but in the post-

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

2000 period, for the first time, the monks directly participated in parliamentary politics. In the backdrop of Chandrika Kumaratunga's devolution package, the political monks argued that their political agenda was to promote social unity and collective good in contrast to the aims of self-interested politicians. As they lost faith in the politicians, the monks ventured into direct politics by forming their own political party to protect Buddhism.

Accordingly, the Sinhala Urumaya (SU), or Sinhala Heritage Party, was formed in April 2000. The main aim of the SU was to rebuild the "unique" Sinhalese Buddhist civilisation founded in the 3rd century BCE and prevent President Kumaratunga from implementing her devolution proposals for the Northern and Eastern Provinces and saved the country from division. The SU promised to confiscate the businesses of the minority community and hand them over to the Sinhalese Buddhists if elected, during the October 2000 parliamentary elections campaign. The SU won one seat in the 2000 parliamentary elections and four local government seats in 2002. The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) or National Heritage Party was formed in February 2004. The JHU emerged as the third largest political force in the country, winning over 500,000 votes and nine seats in the parliamentary election in April 2004.

It is usually argued that a lack of interest of the political actors in issues of religion facilitates the religious actor to play a political role. On the surface, one could argue that the support of the two mainstream political parties to the devolution package facilitated the monks to get directly involved in politics. However, it should be noted that, despite the Liam Fox Agreement, the two main political parties were not ready to implement the devolution package; in fact, they opposed each other's initiative. This suggests that, lack of support from the political actors was not the main reason why the monks ventured into politics. As mentioned above, there was backing from a section of the businessmen community as well as political patronage too facilitated the political monks to play an active role in the parliamentary politics.

Even though, SLFP leader Chandrika Kumaratunga did not give heed to the political monks' demands, JHU enjoyed the patronage of SLFP leader Mahinda Rajapaksa who won the 2005 Presidential elections. Before the 2005 Presidential elections, the SLFP was going through internal conflict. Therefore, Mahinda Rajapaksa relied on the support

of smaller parties, including the JHU, during the Presidential elections. These parties were assigned prominent roles in national politics. However, Mahinda Rajapaksa too did not directly support the JHU's religious nationalist propaganda after assuming the presidency.

In 2004, the JHU, through a private member's bill, presented an amendment bill to declare Buddhism as the state religion. The proposed bill was challenged before the Supreme Court, with the argument that the bill was vague, ambiguous and inconsistent with the Constitution. One month later, Buddhist monks from the JHU launched a fast-unto-death campaign demanding that the government enact anti-conversion legislation within 60 days and forced then PM Ranil Wickremesinghe to agree to the demand. However, before the expiry of 60 days, the President dissolved Parliament. Subsequently, the JHU proposed a bill limiting religious conversions as well as the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, to make Buddhism a state religion.[31]

In November 2005, newly elected President Mahinda Rajapaksa prorogued parliament, thereby annulling all bills going through any stage of the process of being enacted by parliament, including the JHU's bill on religious conversion.[32] In 2009 when the issue of anti-conversion again came up, the Rajapaksa government refused to enact the proposed anti-conversion bill and referred the bill to the Consultative Committee on Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment, for discussion.[33]

Despite being a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist himself, Rajapaksa did not support the JHU's anti-conversion bill due to a practical reason. The bill was introduced during the last phase of the Eelam War. Rajapaksa

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[31] Roshini Wickremesinhe, "The Role of Government and Judicial Action in Defining Religious Freedom: A Sri Lankan Perspective", *The International Journal for Religious Freedom,* 2 (2), 2009, pp. 29-44, at https://www.ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/184 (Accessed 5 November 2024).

[32] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2006, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/USCIRF_2006_AnnualReport.pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

[33] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2009, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/2009%20Annual%20Report.pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

was reaching out to all the important countries for wartime assistance against the LTTE. In such circumstances, the anti-conversion bill proposed by the JHU caught the attention of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Since then, the USCIRF has started monitoring developments in Sri Lanka and reported on the Sri Lankan government's approaches to religion. To avoid international pressure and any complications, Mahinda Rajapaksa refused to enact the bill.

Moreover, the *Sangha* was not united on the proposed bill. Venerable Thibbotuwawe Sri Sumangala, one of the two chief monks in Kandy, opposed the anti-conversion bill, saying that it was "not possible to stop Buddhists from converting to other religions through legislation".[34]

Thus, despite its electoral win, the monks' party could not have much influence to bring controversial amendments in the Constitution.[35] It also failed to bring any positive change to society. Its divisive politics did not help the party either. It became quite clear that the main purpose of the JHU was to mobilise Buddhist nationalist support by propagating the theory of danger to Buddhism.[36] The formation of the JHU led to a debate in Sri Lanka on whether monks should participate in politics. Some Sri Lankan Buddhists, including the All-Island Clergy Organisation, denounced the decision by monks to enter politics. However, many supported the idea.

After defeating the LTTE, Mahinda Rajapaksa emerged as a national hero who had saved the country from disintegration. He has been compared with Duttugemunu, who defeated Elara and unified the Sinhala kingdom. Among the SLFP leaders, Rajapaksa emerged as the most right-wing. As the Rajapaksa-led government emphasised Buddhist supremacy, the relevance of the political monks in Sri Lankan politics was debated. Reportedly, in May 2009, JHU had a crucial meeting to

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34 Iselin Frydenlund, No. 26.

35 Neil DeVotta and Jason Stone, "Jathika Hela Urumaya and Etho-Religious Politics in Sri Lanka", *Pacific Affairs*, 81(1), Spring 2008, pp. 31-51, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/40377481 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

36 Ibid.

discuss the party's next course of action, where the idea of discontinuing JHU's representation in the Parliament was mooted since it had already achieved its goal because of Mahinda Rajapaksa's policy of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. However, the majority within the group decided to continue its representation, claiming that the party's presence in parliament was mandatory given the government's vulnerability in the face of growing pressure from the international community to devolve wide-ranging powers to the north and the east.[37] Therefore, the party continued but lost much of its vigour and influence. Party leader Patali Champika Ranawaka, of late, adopted a more liberal political approach and thus has outgrown the party. From 2010 onwards, its representation in the Parliament declined, and in 2024, it did not have any seats in the parliament.

Post 2009: Militant Nationalism Espoused by the Monks

Post 2009, there emerged radical monks in Sri Lanka who espouse militant nationalism.[38] The groups which are involved in propagating this militant nationalism include: Bodu Bala Sena(BBS), Sinhala Ravaya (2013), Ravana Balaya (2017), Sinha Le (2017), Sinhale Api (2018) and Mahasohon Balakaya (2019).[39] The groups that emerged in the pre-2009 period, such as Thrastha Virodhi Vyaparaya (1998), SU and JHU, are also known for supporting militant nationalism, but the newly emerged groups are comparatively more radical in their approach, and they are not directly participating in parliamentary politics. They are adopting violent means in the pursuit of their demand for the maintenance of Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy. Post-Eelam War, the threat to Buddhism is perceived from the Muslims and the Christian churches. The threat to Buddhism is also seen as coming from the West on the

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37 "Fifteen Years of Jathika Hela Urumaya", *Daily Mirror,* 20 February 2019, at https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/Fifteen-years-of-Jathika-Hela-Urumaya%E2%80%94EDITORIAL/172-162605 (Accessed 5 November 2024).

38 Geethika Dharmasinghe, No. 28.

39 Ibid.

pretext of International Human Rights, War Crimes, International Humanitarian Law and UN Human Rights Council Resolutions, all of which are believed to undermine the Sri Lankan state, which is the protector of Buddhism.

Media reports indicate that these militant groups, particularly the BBS, had the political support of the Rajapaksa administration.[40] Their act of communal violence enjoyed immunity. As he was enjoying unwavering support from the Sinhala-Buddhist constituency, Rajapaksa was facing serious human rights violation allegations from the international community. There were also allegations of corruption committed by the Rajapaksa administration. Despite his popularity, opposition political parties started highlighting Rajapaksa's authoritarian practices, corruption, and nepotism. In this context, he espoused the cause of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and gave a free hand to the militant monks. The fear that was spread by the militant monks was not curbed because it was facilitating Rajapaksa's strategy of using Sinhala-Buddhist ideology for his political ends. The Buddhist monks' activities and demands helped Mahinda Rajapaksa continue his politics domestically, despite facing criticism at the international platform.

In addition to political patronage, economic interests and foreign support have also strengthened militant nationalism in Sri Lanka. Since 2012, Muslim business houses have been their main target. The BBS proposed "a Buddhist Brotherhood" as a solution for the economic grievances of the Sinhala-Buddhist people.[41] The BBS also proposed a Buddhist Business Network and a Buddhist Bank to promote the businesses of Sinhala-Buddhist businessmen, to enhance access to business opportunities nationally and internationally, to assist Buddhist

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[40] In a March 2013 speech celebrating the opening of a BBS training school, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, said, "It is the monks who protect our country, religion and race." The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Annual Report: 15th Anniversary Retrospective: Renewing the Commitment", 2014, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202014%20Annual%20Report%20PDF.pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

[41] Ibid.

entrepreneurs who are facing various financial difficulties, to facilitate access to start-up capital for young Buddhist entrepreneurs and to establish a Buddhist Development Bank based on Buddhist principles.[42]

The Buddhist radical groups were also allegedly getting external assistance during this period. There is evidence of a direct connection between the 969 movement of Myanmar and the BBS. Allegedly, as part of its Islamophobic agenda, Norway too supported militant activism. Norway, however, has denied this.

Mahinda Rajapaksa was defeated in the 2015 presidential elections. The euphoria of winning the Eelam War was not permanent. The Eelam War united the Sinhala-Buddhist community, and after the war, the community got disintegrated. The militant monks tried to mobilise people by instilling fear or threats in the post-war period. According to Shyamika Jayasundara Smits, in the post-war period, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was elevated to a Sinhala-Buddhist supremacist project.[43] However, in the wake of increasing cases of corruption, misgovernance, and economic decline, religious mobilisation could not play a role during the 2015 presidential elections.

Since President Sirisena took office in January 2015, he has taken several steps to improve religious unity and religious freedom. For example, he created three new ministries to handle religious affairs for the Muslim, Christian, and Hindu communities, respectively. Additionally, the new Ministry of Christian Affairs appointed a special coordinator for Charismatic, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian churches. The special police unit created by the former government has been disbanded. [44]

After Rajapaksa's defeat in 2015 and the formation of the National Unity Government, the violent activities of the militant monks subsided as legal action was taken against the perpetrators of the communal

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Shyamika Jayasundara Smits, *An Uneasy Hegemony: Politics of State-Building and Struggles for Justice in Sri Lanka*, Cambridge University Press, London, 2022.

[44] The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, No. 40.

violence and hate propaganda. However, since 2017, there has been an increase in communal violence in the country. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) Report, "militants in 2017 were apparently emboldened by the government's failure to prosecute those responsible for violence and hate speech under the Rajapaksa regime."[45] The NUG failed to conduct a proper investigation of past instances of violence and thus failed to end impunity. Due to the fear of losing the support of the Sinhala voters, no action was taken against the perpetrators, mostly those Buddhist monks thought to be involved. The NUG was also fragile due to the problem between the PM and the President. In the local Council election, the NUG candidates performed poorly. As a result, maintaining political power was the main concern; hence, they did not want to upset the voters from the majority community by taking action against the monks.[46]

Since 2017, the radical monk groups have constantly raised the issue of Islamic extremism in Sri Lanka and have cited it as a threat to Buddhism. Even though many in Sri Lanka were not supporting the violent monk groups like BBS, the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attack and the Victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the 2019 presidential elections emboldened the radical monks. The 2019 Easter Sunday attack brought the Sinhala-Buddhist community together, and religious and political actors could successfully use religion for political purposes.

Many in Sri Lanka believe that the attack was masterminded for political benefit. The allegation has not been proven yet. However, the attack is said to have helped Gotabaya Rajapaksa to come back to power on the communal plank and intensify the ultra-nationalist agenda.

Like the JHU, the BBS's relevance was also in question after Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a Sinhala-Buddhist hardliner, assumed power as President of Sri Lanka. Gotabaya Rajapaksa adopted several government policies that were in line with the Buddhist supremacist agenda.

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[45] Alan Keenan, "Buddhist Militancy Rises Again in Sri Lanka", International Crisis Group, 7 March 2018, at https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/buddhist-militancy-rises-again-sri-lanka (Accessed 29 January 2025).

[46] Ibid.

Reportedly, the BBS disbanded after Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power in 2019. In a press conference, BBS leader Galagodaaththe Gnanasara said:

> "Now we have a good leader who, in his address to the nation after being appointed the Executive President of this country, pledged to protect the Buddha Sasana. He acknowledged the contribution of the Maha Sangha to his journey to become the President. We had great joy in our hearts, and we felt that after 71 years, during which the Sinhala race was being degraded and humiliated. We finally have a leader we can trust who will uplift the Sinhala race. We are also happy that we could have contributed in some way to gaining this victory, even without the support of the minorities. We defeated the myth that no Sinhala leader could come to power without the votes of the minority, and we enjoy this victory with humble pride. We believe that we won't have to struggle in the future, and that the newly appointed President will ensure that the country is safe and prosperous. We have faith in him and his ability. In the past, the main issue was that the country's law was not enacted properly. If this President takes measures to enforce the laws of the country fairly, in the whole country, without any difference, this alone will be a major factor in uniting these estranged communities. Therefore, we believe that our movement is not necessary anymore, as we don't see a need to protest and fight for justice; we have faith that our new leader will ensure that all Sri Lankans are protected…earlier, Buddhist monks had to take to the streets and confront the police because the leaders of the country failed to listen to them. But, now, he said that won't be necessary as the current President understands, and they can talk to him and resolve issues. The reality of the *Dhamma* triumphed over myth and falsehood. Therefore, there is no need for the Bodu Bala Sena anymore to fight against myths and falsehoods."[47]

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[47] Camelia Nathaniel, "Bodu Bala Sena to Disband after Gen. Election – Ven Gnanasara", *Daily News,* 20 November 2019, at https://archives1.dailynews.lk/2019/11/20/local/203359/bodu-bala-sena-disband-after-gen-election-vengnanasara?page=7 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the politico-economic situation in Sri Lanka changed. The unprecedented economic crisis in 2022 led people's uprising—*Aragalya*— against the ruling establishment. There was a call for system change, as it was believed that the divisive politics, misgovernance and corruption had ruined the country. With the economic crisis, a new force has come to power; the political scenario has shifted. Now, there is no conducive atmosphere for the political use of religion. In the wake of the economic crisis, the time is not ripe for the use of religion for political purposes. Moreover, the government is also not taking any drastic steps either for the Tamils or the Muslims, or any measure which could impact the Sinhala-Buddhist. In such circumstances, the religious actors do not have a pretext to politicise religion. In such circumstances, the political and religious actors could not indulge in communal propaganda during the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections.

Conclusion

Religion and politics in Sri Lanka were always interlinked. However, the use of religion for political purposes was mainly observed in post-independence electoral politics. Even though the universal adult franchise was introduced in 1933, religion was not used for political purposes, as political leadership was not very keen. It was in the 1950s that S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's political ambition resulted in the use of religion for political purposes. The religious actors, too, by that time, realised the need for a nexus between religion and politics. Political parties like the UNP and JVP, though ideologically trying to mobilise people based on economic interests and class consciousness, could not ignore the Sinhala-Buddhist ideology, as it was internalised by the majority of the population. With the progress of the armed ethnic conflict, all the Sinhala political parties began championing the Sinhala-Buddhist cause. Secondly, despite their party politics and competition, they subscribed to the same views on religion. As a result, not using religion for political mobilisation was not an option.

Since the colonial period, regaining lost patronage, privileges, and influence had been the main aim of the religious actors. Post-1972, maintaining the status quo, economic and political factors have been important reasons why Buddhism has been used for political purposes

by the political monks. In other words, maintaining Buddhist supremacy is the main reason for the political monks. However, the political actors' main aim was to achieve their political goals. They may not always be wholly devoted to the agenda of Buddhist supremacy like the religious actors; therefore, the nexus between the religious and political actors has not been linear. Political actors will use Buddhism or the ultra-nationalist agenda of the Buddhist monks and activists, for political purposes as it suits them.

Chapter 3

Muslim Identity in Sri Lankan Politics

Muslims are one of the minority communities in Sri Lanka. As per the 2012 Census Report, the total population of Sri Lanka is 20,359,439 (20.3 million), out of which 1,967,523 belong to the Muslim community. According to the 2012 Census, Muslims in Sri Lanka can be ethnically divided into Sri Lankan Moors[1] and Malays. There are 1,892,638 Sri Lankan Moors while Malays number 44,130. A small number are from the Bohra community. Until independence, the Moors and the Malays maintained a distinct ethnic identity, as the Malays were practising their own unique culture and language. However, over time, the differences between the two communities began to blur. As the Malays hardly speak their own language, the *lingua franca* of the Muslims, including the Moors and Malays today, is Tamil. Muslims living in Sinhala areas also speak Sinhala. Today, Muslims in Sri Lanka prefer their religious instead of linguistic identity, mainly to emphasise their separation from the Tamil community. This trend has become obvious since the late 1980s, and since then, the community has been asserting its religious identity to claim its political rights.

This chapter argues that the process of assertion of religion in politics by the Muslim community started during the colonial period, which was reinforced during the post-independence period, when the community felt marginalised as the ethnic conflict between the Sri

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[1] According to Ponnambolam, "when the Portuguese navigated the eastern seas in the 15th century and found Muhammadans along the western shores of India and Ceylon, they gave them the name of Moros, which in English is Moor." P. Ràmanáthan, "The Ethnology of the "Moors" of Ceylon", *The Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, 10 (36), pp. 234-262, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/45377245 (Accessed 30 November 2024).

Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese. In the post-Eelam War period, however, the political situation in the island nation has not been conducive for the Muslim political actors to assert their religious identity.

To understand the nuances of the assertion of religious identity by Muslims, the chapter focuses on the origin of the Muslims in Sri Lanka, their economic, political and social status in the country, and their role in Sri Lankan politics during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Origin of Sri Lankan Muslims

The origin of Sri Lankan Muslims can be traced back to around the 7th century AD when the Malay traders from Java in Indonesia and the Arab and Persian traders from the Gulf, visited Sri Lanka which was an important entrepot or transhipment centre for these traders. During their voyage from the Persian Gulf to Sumatra, they used to break journeys on the Sri Lankan coasts. Some of these traders settled on the island. It is also believed that some of the Arab settlers in South India, particularly on the Malabar and the Coromandel coast, came and settled in Sri Lanka as intermediaries in trade. The descendants of these Arab traders and settlers are called the Moors. Many experts, however, also traced the origin of the Sri Lankan Moors to the 10th century traders and settlers from Iraq and Persia.

The Malay Muslims in Sri Lanka originated from the Indonesian and Malay Archipelago and mostly came as soldiers. It is believed that Kalinga Magha, who captured Raja Rata and established power at Polonnaruwa in 1214, brought Malay soldiers as part of his army of 24,000 personnel. Subsequently, Malays came during the colonial period under the Portuguese and the Dutch. In 1505, the Portuguese brought Malay soldiers from Malacca, and with their support, took over territories in Sri Lanka. The Dutch, who overthrew the Portuguese and established their rule in 1640, also brought Malays from the Indonesian and Malay archipelagos.[2] Sri Lanka was used as a place of exile for

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[2] "'Malays of Sri Lanka': Story of a Vibrant Culture, People", *The Sunday Times*, 4 December 2022, at https://www.sundaytimes.lk/221204/plus/malays-of-sri-lanka-story-of-a-vibrant-culture-people-2-503604.html (Accessed 1 November 2024).

Indonesians who were considered harmful to the Dutch.[3] The descendants of these Malays from Indonesia and the Malay Archipelago make up the Malay community in Sri Lanka. The previous Sri Lankan census included Indian Muslims too, but the 2012 census does not make any mention of them.

In the past, there were distinct differences between the Sri Lankan Moors and the Malays, in terms of language and social status, due to different approaches of the colonial masters towards the two communities. The Moors were the victims of religious persecution by the Portuguese and the Dutch and took refuge in the Kandyan Kingdom. During the British period, the Moors became comparatively free to practice their religion, but remained backward in terms of education and government jobs, as they resisted English education to protect their religious identity. On the other hand, as soldiers, the Malays were much admired by the colonial powers for their courage and fighting ability. After the Dutch surrendered in 1796, the British employed the Malay prisoners of war as soldiers and formed a battalion of the Malay Corps, which later grew to be a native regiment known at first as His Majesty's Malay Regiment, and subsequently incorporated into the Ceylon Rifle Regiment in 1827.[4] The British provided living quarters for the soldiers and military schools for their children. The Malays, therefore, had a high degree of literacy. When the Malay Ceylon Rifle Regiment was disbanded, they came out of the cantonment area and settled with other local people.[5] Since most of the Malays were English-educated, many of them secured government jobs. [6] Up to the 1940s,

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[3] J.G. de Casparis, "Senarat Paranavitana Memorial Lecture: Sri Lanka and Maritime Southeast Asia in Ancient Times", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, 41, 1996, pp. 229-240, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/23731555 (Accessed 1 November 2024); B.A. Hussainmiya, "Baba Ounus Saldin: An Account of a Malay Literary Savant of Sri Lanka (b. 1832 —d. 1906)", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 64 (2), 1991, pp. 103-134.

[4] B.A. Hussainmiya, No. 3.

[5] Ibid.

[6] M.M.M. Mahroof, "The Sinhala Language and the Muslims of Sri Lanka: Language as National Discourse", *Islamic Studies*, 34 (2), 1995, pp. 207-222, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/20840204 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

Malays were represented in most branches of government service. The Police, the Customs, and the Colombo Fire Brigade were mainly Malay-staffed. Some Malays are also fishermen.[7]

The professional differences between the Moors and Malays during the colonial period are no longer distinct. Today, the majority of Muslims are involved in business ventures. Sri Lanka's gem industry, including mining, is dominated by Muslims. There are some small Muslim fishing villages and masons on the island. On the east side of Sri Lanka, there are some Muslim peasants.[8]

In terms of languages also there were differences between the two communities, which have gradually disappeared over the years. The Malays used to speak Malay Creole (or Java *Jati*), whereas the Sri Lankan Moors speak Tamil.[9] Under British rule from 1798 to 1873, the Malays were able to retain their language and culture. The language policy of independent Sri Lanka emphasised the indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in the schools and English was gradually replaced as the medium of instruction. The Sinhalese were taught in the Sinhala language and the Tamils in Tamil; however, Muslims (including Malays), Burghers and students of mixed races were allowed to study in English. In the 1970s, this concession was withdrawn and Malays had to choose between Sinhala and Tamil as the medium of instruction at all levels of education. Many Malays thus chose Tamils. People living in Sinhala areas chose Sinhala. By that time there was also intermingling between the Malays and the Moors through cultural exchanges and marriages. The Malays adopted "the dominant customs and traditions of local

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7 M. M. M. Mahroof, "Malay Language in Sri Lanka: Socio-Mechanics of a Minority Language in its Historical Setting", *Islamic Studies*, 31 (4), 1992, pp. 463-478, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/20840097 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

8 "Moors of Sri Lanka", at https://www.everyculture.com/South-Asia/Moor-of-Sri-Lanka.html#ixzz86TeCaTCE (Accessed 1 November 2024).

9 "Malay Creole of Sri Lanka", Bethany World Prayer Center, 1997, at http://kcm.co.kr/bethany_eng/p_code/844.html (Accessed 1 November 2024).

Moor Muslims".[10] Many Malays are now not using their traditional name but prefer to give typical Muslim names.

Assimilation of the varied cultural traditions of the migrants from Arab, Persia, Iraq, Indonesia and South India, with the prevailing customs and traditions of the areas on the island where the migrants settled on different occasions, created a unique Sri Lankan Muslim identity. Sri Lankan Muslims adhere to the Shafiite school of the Sunni sect. At the same time, there is a strong Sufi culture prevailing on the island. However, since 1940, Sri Lanka has been influenced by the Wahhabi orthodoxy. Post-independence, a strong growth in Wahhabi interpretations of Islam has provoked conflicts among different sects within the Muslim community. There have been attempts to stop traditional Sufi rituals, as it is believed that a pure form of Islam needs to be propagated. An event was reported in 1948 when the founder of the Thowheed group and Jamiyyathul Ansaris Sunnathul Mohammatiyya destroyed Sufi shrines in his village. Violent conflict between Thowheed and Sufi representatives in Kalmunai was reported in 1951.[11] Such conflicts have grown over the period. Orthodox Muslims also reject the small Ahmadiya sect as "un-Islamic", who have been subjected to harassment and attacks.[12]

The process of Arabisation has influenced a large section of Sri Lankan Muslims; yet there are Muslims who oppose the Arabisation and radicalisation of their community. The presence of sectarianism makes the Muslims in Sri Lanka a non-monolithic community. Sectarianism has even created conflict and differences between families and relatives.

The Arabisation or Wahhabisation of Sri Lankan Muslims can be called a byproduct of the Islamic revival movement in 19th century Sri Lanka,

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[10] B. A. Hussainmiya, "Orang Regimen: The Malays of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment", Review by Pamela Sodhy, *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 6 (2), 1991, pp. 136-139.

[11] International Crisis Group, "Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire", *Asia Report*, No.134, 29 May 2007, at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/32062/134 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

[12] Ibid.

the main aim of which was to inspire the Sri Lankan Muslims intellectually to take political action and to assert a Muslim identity.

Islamic Revivalism

When the Portuguese and the Dutch practised the religious policy of proselytisation, Muslims in Sri Lanka resisted the conversion and protected their religious identity, even though they had to face religious persecution. One of the means to spread Christianity was through promoting English-medium schools. Muslims, therefore, totally refused to avail of English medium education, even though it was a means to political, economic and social advancement. As a result, during the British period, when English education was made mandatory for career advancement, Muslims in Sri Lanka were way behind the Tamils and the Sinhala communities, some of whom availed of English education. Influenced by the Buddhist and Hindu revival movements, as well as revival movements in India, Turkey and Egypt, some of the educated Sri Lankan Muslim elites, such as M.C. Siddi Labbe, with the support of an Egyptian-Orabi Pasha, initiated an Islamic revival movement in Sri Lanka towards the end of the 19th century. The aim of the movement was to spread awareness and convince Muslims to acquire education. At the same time, the movement also propagated Islam in its pure form, as it was believed that the upliftment of the community would not be possible without restoring pure Islam.[13] Orabi Pasha, an Egyptian, came to Sri Lanka on exile in 1883. During his stay for over two decades on the island, Pasha sensitised the Sri Lankan Muslims about a transnational Muslim identity, provided intellectual guidance to uplift the Muslims spiritually and culturally, based on Islamic teachings. He promoted political action while inspiring a resurgence of Islam.

Siddi Labbe established the first Muslim school in 1882 called Madrasul Zahira, which was later renamed as Zahira College in Colombo. In

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[13] Mohamed Arkam and Fatmir Shehu, "Exploring the History of Islamic Revivalism in Modern Sri Lanka", *Journal of Islam in Asia*, 21(1), June 2024, at https://journals.iium.edu.my/jiasia/index.php/jia/article/view/1212/606 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

1884, he opened the first Anglo-Mohammedan school – Al Madurasathul Khairiyyatul Islamiah in Colombo with the assistance of Orabi Pasha and Wapchie Marikkar. Subsequently, several other schools offering an English education were established. Emphasis was also given on the need for Tamil, Sinhala and Arabic languages for the Muslims. *Muslim Nissan*, a monthly publication, was launched in 1882 to highlight the transformation in Muslim society in Sri Lanka. The proponents also convinced Muslim parents to send their children to English-medium missionary schools.

Islamic revivalism was the intellectual response to the Western colonial influence and the English language.[14] Experts, however, believe that the Islamic revivalism primarily emerged as a means to protect elite interests by fostering broader community awareness in response to Sinhala and Tamil revivalist programs and encouraged by their activities.[15] Islamic revivalism evolved into a movement that gave the community a sense of identity and direction.

As individuals like Orabi Pasha was trying to instil a sense of identity among the Sri Lankan Muslims based on the global Islamic resurgence movement, local development within the island encouraged the elite Muslims to emphasise their religious identity. But interestingly, the political aim of local Muslim leaders was not only to resist Christian conversion. It was a reaction to assert that Muslims in Sri Lanka are different from the Tamil Hindus and thus entitled to political rights on their own merit.

The immediate cause of the assertion of Muslim identity vis-a-vis the Tamils was Ponnambalam Ramanathan's article, "The Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon", published in the *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* in 1888. In the article he claimed that the Moors of Ceylon were ethnologically Tamils and

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[14] Ibid.

[15] M. A. Nuhman, *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity*, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2007, p. 104.

discounted the Arab heritage of the Ceylonese Muslims.[16] There was immediate opposition to Ramanathan's view. Subsequently, the Moors formed their union led by M.C. Siddi Lebbe and I.L.M. Azeez, to assert their ethnic and religious identities. I.L.M. Azeez published a rebuttal titled 'A Criticism of Mr. Ramanathan's Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon' in 1907 which highlighted the Arab origin of the Sri Lankan Moors. This debate can be contextualised within the debate on constitutional reform on communal representation that was going on in Sri Lanka at that time.

Historically, Muslims in Sri Lanka are not known as important political actors. As a result, Muslims are historically at a disadvantageous position to claim a separate political identity. Culturally also they are similar to the Tamils. That is why, probably, some elites felt the need to assert their unique identity and promoted Arabisation in Sri Lanka. However, in the post-independence period, the process of Arabisation continued in private life more than in political life. As a result, radicalisation and conservatism started growing among the Muslims in Sri Lanka.

The Islamic Reformist movements in the post-independence period were promoted by Jaamat-e-Islami and Tablighi Jamaat from India and Pakistan, and Tawhid Jamaat from Saudi Arabia.[17] In 1954, the Sri Lanka Jamat Islami (SLJI) was established. SLJI's philosophy was to combine secular education with Islamic thought, ideology, and analysis. The SLJI has an active women's wing and student movement. Jamiah Naleemiah was founded in 1973 to provide an integrated system of Islamic education, which accommodated modernism within the framework of the traditional system of education among the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.[18]

From the early 1990s onwards, Sri Lankan migrant workers who went to the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, brought back thoughts

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16 P. Ràmanáthan, No. 1.

17 Mohamed Arkam and Fatmir Shehu, No. 13.

18 Ibid.

and practices of Tawhid Jamaat (often labelled as "Wahhabism") to Kattankudy in the Eastern Province.[19]

Both Tabligh and Thowheed discount the local Sufi practice and promote purifying Islam. While "Tabligh emphasises the internal purification of the individual, Thowheed aims at purifying the community of believers of Islam".[20]

The Islamic revivalism launched during the colonial period made the Sri Lankans politically conscious. At the same time, it led to disunity within the Sri Lankan Muslim community. There were several violent clashes between the Sufi and Wahhabi followers. The syncretic culture came under pressure from the Islamic revivalist movement. The process of radicalisation and conservatism has been very visible in the attire and daily lifestyle of the people. Arab influence is very much visible in Muslim-dominated areas like Kattankudi. Islamic revivalism has changed Muslim society, and this has resulted in, particularly due to global Islamic resurgence, islamophobia in the country among other communities. Post-Easter Sunday attack in 2019, Islamophobia has grown manifold. However, some in Sri Lanka believe that Islamophobia has decreased in the post-*Aragalaya* movement of 2022.

Rise of Muslim Political Consciousness in the Colonial Period

Muslims got political representation under the British in 1889, without demanding it. As the agitation for constitutional reform increased, Governor Gordon introduced a reform in 1889 by which two additional unofficial seats were created in the Legislative Council. One of these two seats was allotted for the representation of Muslims,

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19 Shahul Hasbullah and Benedikt Korf, "Muslim Geographies, Violence and the Antinomies of Community in Eastern Sri Lanka", *The Geographical Journal*, 179 (1), March 2013, pp. 32-43, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/23360884 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

20 Ibid.

even though the Muslims did not show much interest in the constitutional reform.[21] The Muslim agitation for political reform began much later with the formation of organisations like the Young Muslim Association and All Ceylon Muslim League (ACML), in the first part of the 20th century.

Under the communal representation system in the Legislative Councils, the minority communities were enjoying equal rights with the Sinhalese. The introduction of the territorial representation system affected minority interests.[22] Consequently, the minority members, including Tamil and Muslims, in the Council formed the "Minority Group" to fight for their rights. T.B. Jayah, Sir M. Macan Markar and A.C.M. Khaleel were the Muslim members in the group.[23]

The period between 1936 and 1945 witnessed the split of the Muslim movement when the Ceylon Moors Association was formed in 1938 under Sir Macan Markar and the Ceylon Muslim League was formed in the same year under the leadership of Abdul Cader and T.B. Jayah. This weakened not only the Muslim agitation movement for political reforms but also the unity of the community.

Even though initially, both the Tamils and Muslims opposed territorial representation, the Muslims shifted sides later and joined the Sinhalese and supported territorial representation. The main issue with the Tamils arose when G.G. Ponnambolam demanded 50-50 representation, under which 50 per cent seats were to be reserved for the Sinhalese, 25 per cent for the Tamils, and the remaining 25 per cent be shared by other minority communities. Muslims opposed this and agreed to support

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21 K.M de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka,* Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2005, p. 454.

22 Ibid, p. 524.

23 P.K. Balachandran, "Early Political Attempts by Lankan Muslims to Voice their Concerns", *Daily Mirror,* 22 September 2020, at https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/news-features/Early-political-attempts-by-Lankan-Muslims-to-voice-their-concerns/131-196360 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

D.S. Senanayake's 43: 57 formula for the minorities and the majority communities, respectively, in return for territorial representation.[24] In 1946, the Ceylon Muslim League and Ceylon's Moore Association joined D.S. Senanayake's National Congress along with several other parties to form the United National Party (UNP). However, they maintained their separate group identity within the UNP.

MUSLIM POLITICS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

In the post-independence period, Muslim political leaders preferred to join the mainstream political parties. Muslim leaders were with the UNP till Premadasa's presidency in the 1990s. Since the 1950s, several government policies affected the Muslims along with the other minority communities, such as the 1956 language policy, property law, and Sinhalisation of the north and east. The Sinhala-Muslim Riot in 1975 in Puttalam and subsequently the LTTE violence against the Muslims created a sense of discrimination and alienation not only in the Sinhala areas but also in the Tamil-dominated north and east among the ordinary Muslim population. This sense of alienation was perhaps not so strong among the elite Muslims– the businessmen and the political leaders living in the southwest of the country.

The Muslim political and business elites, particularly in the first two decades of independence, adopted a quiet approach to the politics of alienation or grievances of the Muslim community. As the ruling UNP was a capitalist party, its policy favoured the Muslim business class. There were Muslim parliamentarians belonging to the mainstream political parties, but they hardly raised issues of Muslim grievances in the parliament, not even the issue of the killing of Muslims in Puttalam in 1976. The Muslim Parliamentarians found it convenient to resolve their issues with the government through peaceful negotiation. The approach of the Muslim political elites was disappointing for the Muslim fishermen and farmers from the northeast. The farmers and

[24] Ibid.

the fishermen in the north and east felt unrepresented by this capitalist leadership.[25]

At this point in time, the LTTE overtly supported Muslim concerns over land acquisition by Sinhalese settlers as a way of gaining their support for the separatist movement. However, the Muslim intellectuals in the east refused to join the Tamil militant movement. Instead, they formed the Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), in 1986 to give voice to the grievances of the Muslim community. Before the formation of the SLMC, a couple of attempts were made to form Muslim political party.

The All-Ceylon Islamic United Front (ACIUF) was formed in 1960 by M. S. Kariapper. ACIUF contested the July 1960 legislative election, but it could not win. The party was later disbanded. The Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF) was formed by M.I.M. Mohiddeen in 1977. M.H.M. Ashraff, the founder of the SLMC, was the driving force behind the MULF. He signed an electoral coalition agreement with Appapillai Amirthalingam, the leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which paved the way for MULF candidates to contest the elections under the TULF symbol in 1977. Ashraff did not contest the 1977 general election, but he actively campaigned. TULF won a landslide victory in the 1977 general elections, but no Muslim from the party won a seat in the polls. The MULF also failed to win any seats in the District Development Council (DDC) elections held in 1981 as an alliance partner of the TULF. The failure of the 1977 general election and the 1981 DDC election, perhaps, made Ashraff realise the lack of political future for the Muslims under separatist Tamil politics, and parted ways with the TULF.

As the armed ethnic conflict began in 1983, Muslims in the north and east became victims of both the Tamil and government pogroms. The 1985 Tamil-Muslim riots totally frustrated the Muslim youth. Not much assistance was coming from the government. The national level Muslim politicians were silent spectators of the torture meted out by the Muslims

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[25] International Crisis Group, No. 11.

in the north and the east. As a result, Muslim youth decided to start a militant movement of their own. Around that time M.H.M. Ashraff prevented and diverted the Muslim youth to follow a democratic path by launching the SLMC in 1986. SLMC took most Muslim seats in the North East Provincial Council elections in 1988 and successfully contested national elections in 1989. As the issues between the Tamil militants and the Muslims increased in the 1990s, Muslim youth refused to join hands with the Tamil militants and supported the SLMC. Thus, during the 1990s, the SLMC emerged as the dominant Muslim force in northeast Sri Lanka.[26]

Political Strategy of the Muslims

The main political strategy of the Sri Lankan Muslims in the post-independence period was to "join hands with the majority parties to try to win concessions from whichever government comes to power."[27] The strategy did not help much to resolve the Muslims' grievances, particularly the Muslims of the north and east. The formation of the SLMC, made a slight difference for the Muslims particularly in the north and east.

The SLMC joined the mainstream party in power as an independent political party and extended support as an alliance partner. As an alliance partner, the SLMC leaders were in a better position to influence the decision of the ruling powers compared to the previous Muslim leaders, who were just members of the ruling party. Earlier, Muslim leaders as members of the ruling party had to follow the party's diktats to avoid disciplinary action. They did not have power or were not willing to

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[26] Mohammad Agus Yusoff, Athambawa Sarjoon, Nordin Hussin, Azhar Ahmad, "Analyzing the Contributions of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and its Founder–Leader to Muslim Politics and Community in Sri Lanka", *Social. Sciences*, 6(4), 2017, at https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6040120 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

[27] Ameer Ali, "Islamic Revivalism in Harmony and Conflict: The Experience in Sri Lanka and Malaysia", *Asian Survey*, 24 (3), March 1984, pp. 296-313, at https://doi.org/10.2307/2644068 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

oppose the party's decisions. SLMC leader Ashraff could bargain better for the community as an alliance partner. In order to support the presidential candidate R. Premadasa in 1989, he put forward a condition to reduce the cut-off vote of 12 per cent to five per cent in the proportional representation system. After winning the election, the Premadasa government promulgated the 15th Amendment in the Constitution to fulfil the condition. While supporting President Premadasa, Ashraff was able to initiate many development plans in the Eastern Province for the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the people. Similarly, later by supporting the People's Alliance (PA) government (1994-2001), he could bring various projects to the northeastern region.[28] Ashraff bargained for two important ministries: the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction and the Ministry of Ports and Shipping. Through these ministries, Ashraff was able to create thousands of job opportunities for the Tamils and resettled thousands of war-affected families, including Muslims, and rebuild their livelihoods.[29]

While the Muslims in the north and east gained from the formation of the SLMC and Ashraff's leadership, he was not accepted as a Muslim leader by all the Muslims of the country. Muslims living in the southwest did not gain any special benefit from the formation of the SLMC. Many Muslim elites in the southwest were unhappy about the formation of the SLMC and the party emerging as the sole representative of all the Muslims, as the Sri Lankan Muslims are not a monolith. Many blamed and criticised Ashraff for initiating communal politics.

Therefore, he realised perhaps that regional politics based only on religion would not help him to establish a political future at the national level. In 1998, Ashraff formed the National Unity Alliance (NUA) between the SLMC and the Sri Lanka Progressive Front. In the 2000 Parliamentary elections, the SLMC participated as an alliance partner of the PA and NUA contested independently but joined the PA coalition

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[28] Mohammad Agus Yusoff, Athambawa Sarjoon, Nordin Hussin, Azhar Ahmad, No. 26.

[29] Ibid.

government. In the 2000 Parliamentary elections, SLMC won several seats under PA tickets and the NUA won 13 seats by securing 197,983 votes (2.29 per cent). Later, however, both the SLMC and the NUA created problems for the PA government by leaving the coalition and making it a minority government. During the election campaign, Ashraff lost his life in a helicopter crash.

Subsequently, there was a leadership dispute within the SLMC between Rauf Hakeem and Ashraff's wife Ferial Ashraff. As Ferial failed to get a leadership position, she left the SLMC and joined the NUA. After leaving the PA coalition in 2001, both the SLMC and the NUA[30] took different paths. SLMC, under the leadership of Rauf Hakeem, joined the UNP-led coalition UNF, and Ferial refused to join the UNP. In the 2001 parliamentary elections, the SLMC allied with the UNP and continued the alliance till the 2010 parliamentary elections. After the election, the SLMC joined the UPFA government led by the SLFP. However, during the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections SLMC joined hands with the UNP and other parties to form the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) government.

The electoral performance of the SLMC deteriorated from 2004 onwards. Following Ashraff's death, leadership disputes within the party made the SLMC weak and it was unable to unite the community as several small Muslim political parties were formed. The Democratic Unity Alliance was founded in 2004 after Z.A. Naseer Ahamed and others broke away from the SLMC. The SLMC further split, when three members left and eventually formed their own party called All-Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC) in 2005. The ACMC was later renamed the All-Ceylon Makkal Congress (All Ceylon People's Congress). Another party was formed by a former member of the SLMC, ALM Athaullah called the National Muslim Congress (NMC). Later the party changed its name to National Congress.

In the context of the Eelam War, SLMC held crucial influence and significance for the government. For example, when the PA government

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30) By February 2010, the NUA became moribund after Ferial joined the SLFP. The NUA was later activated by Ajath Sally in 2012.

initiated peace negotiations to find a lasting political solution to the ethnic conflict through sharing powers among the regions and regionally-concentrated ethnic groups, Ashraff proposed a more eastern-based autonomous unit for Muslims. During the peace negotiations in 2002, "the PA government proposed a Muslim-majority 'south-eastern regional council' to accommodate the SLMC's demand for an eastern-based autonomous unit for Muslims, even though the SLMC was not a coalition partner of the PA. It could not, however fructify due to the failure of the peace negotiation and political settlement process."[31] The SLMC still demands the autonomous council but in the post-war period, no government is giving serious attention to it.

The other Muslim political parties mentioned above have started focusing more on national issues. Parties like the ACMC and NMC have removed the word Muslim from their parties' nomenclature and renamed the parties. This is perhaps due to the realisation that the organisation of a party on the basis of Muslim identity would not help the leaders in fulfilling their political goals at the national level. Therefore, as a pragmatic approach, many of the parties have decided not to use the religious symbol.

These Muslim political parties have never formed any alliance with the SLMC or among themselves. Rather they prefer to be an ally of the party in power because the political interests of the Muslim voters are deeply divided and situational. From 2004 to 2014, ACMC was an alliance partner of the UPFA. In 2015, it joined the UNFGG coalition and made its presence felt with five seats in the coalition. In the parliamentary election, however, it could not win any seat on its own. In the 2020 parliamentary election, it won only one seat. From 2004 till 2015, NMC was with the UPFA and won parliamentary seats (two seats from 2004-2007 and one seat from 2007-2014.).[32] In 2015, it

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[31] Mohammad Agus Yusoff, Athambawa Sarjoon, Nordin Hussin, Azhar Ahmad, No. 26.

[32] From 2007 it is enjoying one parliamentary seat.

remained loyal to Mahinda Rajapaksa. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, it won one seat by contesting on its own. The SLMC's position during the 2020 parliamentary elections declined significantly; it won only one seat.

Table 3.1: Muslim Party Representative in Sri Lankan Parliament

Party	Parliament	Votes secured	Number of Seats
SLMC	1989	202,016 (3.61%)	4
SLMC	1994	143,307 (1.80%)	7
SLMC	2000	-	7 seats under the PA
NUA (SLMC+ Sri Lanka Progressive Front)	2000	197,983 (2.29%)	13
SLMC	2001	105,346 (1.18%)	5
SLMC	2004	186,876 (2.02%)	5
SLMC	2010	-	
SLMC	2015	44,193	1
SLMC	2020	34,428 (0.30%)	1
MNA	2020	55,981 (0.48%)	1
ACMC	2020	43,319 (0.37%)	1
NC	2020	39,272 (0.34%)	1
SLMC	2024	87,038 (0.78 %)	3
ACMC	2024	33,911 (0.30%)	1

Source: Election Commission of Sri Lanka

Assertion of Religious Identity by Muslim Political Parties

During 2002 and 2003, Sri Lankan Muslims in the north and east demonstrated for the assertion of their rights, when they demanded participation in the Norway-facilitated peace process between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE as a party, and establishment of the Muslin self-governing region in the Eastern Province. They had no independent representation at the peace talks. Muslim leaders were present but they were considered a stakeholder but not a party to the peace talks. The lack of unity and consensus among the Muslim political parties justified the argument that 'no one knows who was the true representative of the Muslims' made by the government and the LTTE for not making Sri Lankan Muslims a third party to the peace talks.

To protect their political identity in the north and east, the Muslims in 2003 came forward with a Muslim Self-Governing Region (MSGR) proposal in the context of Tamil demands for a merged North and East Province. The main fear of the Muslims was that in the merged North and East Province, the Tamils would emerge as a majority community and the position of the Muslims would deteriorate. Therefore, the Muslims in the area made a territorial claim.

The idea of an MSGR was first articulated in the mid-1980s by Muslim academics and politicians, including the Eastern People's Muslim Front. Later, it was emphasised in the Oluvil Declaration of 29 January 2003, promulgated by Muslim students at South Eastern University.[33]

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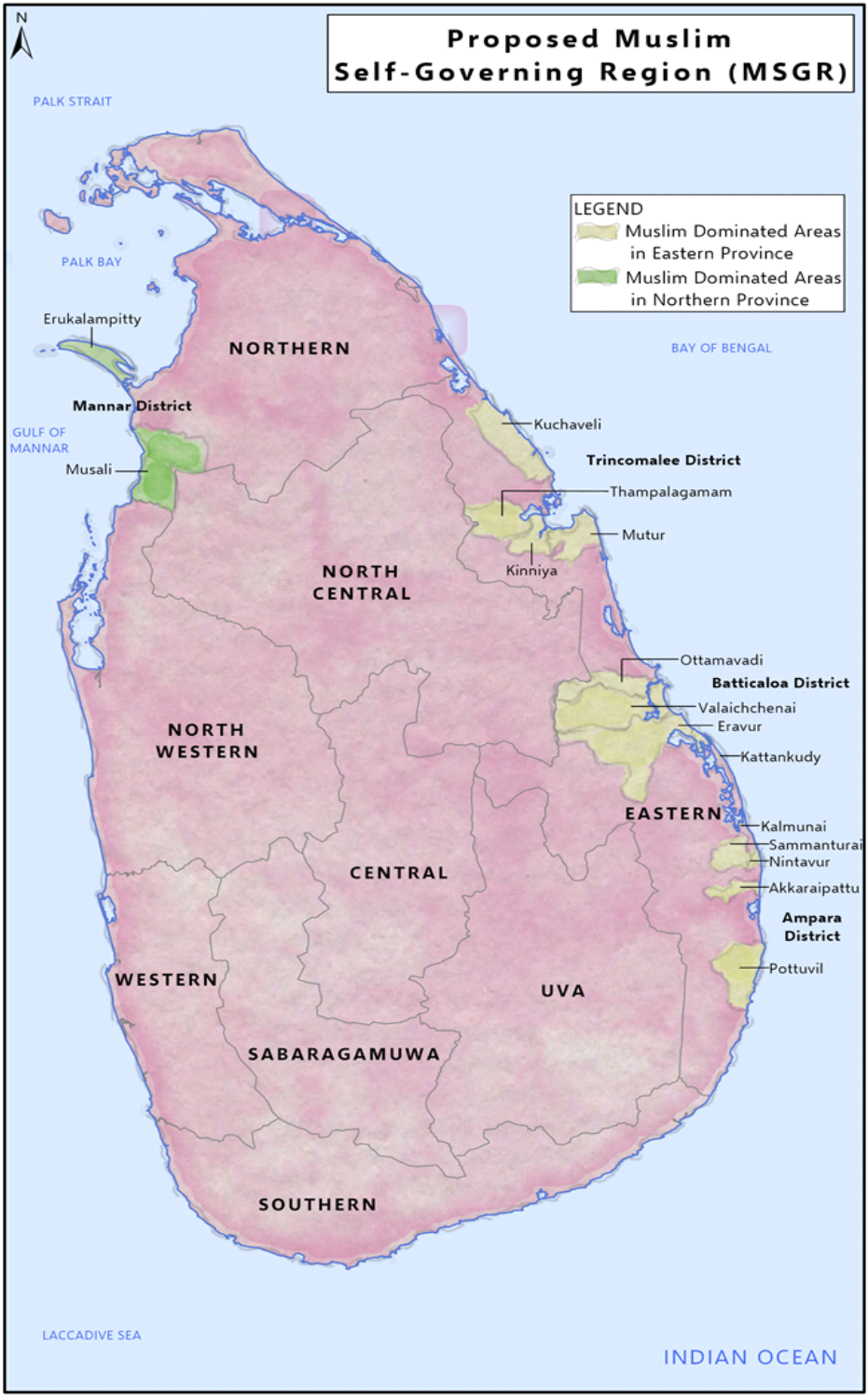
[33] Dennis B. McGilvray and Mirak Raheem, *Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict,* East-West Center, Washington, 2007, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep06530.pdf (Accessed 1 November 2024).

Map 3.1: Proposed Muslim Self-Governing Region



© GIS Section, MP-IDSA. Map not to scale.

The core territory of the MSGR would be Muslim area in Ampara District, including Kalmunai, Sammanturai, Nintavur, Akkaraipattu, and Pottuvil. A larger non-contiguous federal unit integrating other Muslim populations in the northeast would presumably include Kattankudy, Eravur, Valaichchenai, and Ottamavadi in Batticaloa District; Mutur, Kinniya, Thampalagamam, and Kuchaveli in Trincomalee District; and Musali and Erukalampitty in Mannar District.[34] Within such a non-contiguous MSGR, the Muslim inhabitants would constitute a majority of 68 per cent.[35] This demand became irrelevant as the North and East Provinces were de-merged. However, the SLMC still demands for a Muslim-majority district council.

All Muslims of Sri Lanka did not support this demand. The Muslims living on the southwest coast of Sri Lanka opposed it because their main concern was that a separate Muslim "homeland" of any kind in Sri Lanka might "someday be used to justify or legitimise a xenophobic call for the ethnic cleansing of the Muslims from the Sinhala areas, just as the LTTE expelled the Muslims from the north in 1990".[36] Hence, the Muslim leaders in the south and west were concerned about politically associating with the Eastern Muslims, believing that it would spoil their political equation with the majority community. In the post-war period, the assertion of Muslim territorial rights has mellowed.

Post-2010, Buddhist extremist groups have targeted Muslims. Allegedly, the state has facilitated some of the hardline campaigns, such as anti-halal[37] and anti-animal slaughtering campaign, and calls for banning the hijab have curbed the rights of Muslims. While, the Muslims have expressed their disappointment, and the Muslim political leaders have

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 The All-Ceylon Jamiatul Ulama (ACJU) gave up voluntarily providing Halal certification, when the BBS questioned its legal authority to do so. "Halal Certificate to be Issued by HAC from Today", *Adaderana*, 9 January 2014, at https://www.adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=25374 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

condemned them publicly, there is not much political mobilisation on those issues by political actors. Many Muslims criticised the Sri Lankan Muslim leaders for their inability to convince the government to take measures against the attack and discriminatory policies against the community.[38] Many in fact blamed Ashraff for forming SLMC – a religion-based Muslim party, and instilling doubts among the Sinhalas about the intention of all the Muslims living peacefully in the country.[39] The NTJ which was an Islamist organisation and had linkages with foreign Islamist groups used the lack of Sri Lankan Muslim leaders' voice on government's discriminatory policies an excuse to conduct the terrorist attack. However, NTJ's ambition was beyond domestic politics.

The 2019 Easter Sunday attack by NTJ made the situation worse for the Muslims, as the attack substantiated the Buddhist militant group's claim that Muslims are a threat to national security. After the Easter Sunday attack, the Muslim community has faced the wrath of the non-Muslim Sri Lankan citizens, including those who opposed Buddhist extremism, as well as from the government.

The Sri Lankan government took harsh measures, banning the covering of faces of Muslim women and closing down the madrasas and mosques. There were island-wide boycotts of Muslim businesses, vigilante attacks on women wearing hijab, and media rumour campaigns by Sinhala nationalist groups alleging Muslim plots to sterilise Sinhalese women.[40] The demonisation of the Muslims in the post-Easter Sunday

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[38] Salithamby Abdul Rauff, "Sri Lanka Muslim Congress: A Failed Leadership of a Hapless Community", *Colombo Telegraph,* 4 May 2013, at https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sri-lanka-muslim-congress-a-failed-leadership-of-a-hapless-community/ (Accessed 1 December 2024).

[39] Latheef Farook, "SLMC: Liability on the Muslim community", *Daily FT,* 23 December 2014, at https://www.ft.lk/opinion/slmc-liability-on-the-muslim-community/14-377247 (Accessed 1 December 2024).

[40] International Crisis Group, "After Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Reducing Risks of Future Violence", Report No. 302, Asia, 27 September 2019, at https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/302-after-sri-lankas-easter-bombings-reducing-risks-future-violence (Accessed 1 November 2024).

attack was at its peak. Nine Muslim Ministers in Sri Lanka — including four of Cabinet rank — resigned to take a collective stand against this demonisation.

The Gotabaya administration that came into power in 2019 implemented more discriminatory policies against Muslims. The worst of all was the forceful cremation of the COVID-19 infected deceased bodies. Even though the policy was later altered and a public apology was issued by the successive government, the issue created a deep wedge among the Muslim community.

Following the "moral panic" response of the government after the Easter Sunday attack, it was assumed that there would be more radical assertions of identity from the Muslim population and the political party, particularly after the COVID-19 tragedy. However, the response from the community was quite the opposite. "Muslim political and religious leaders cooperated with investigations, helped security forces to identify and locate suspects, and tried to reassure Sri Lankans of other faiths that they rejected the attacks – including by refusing Islamic burial rites to the dead attackers", according to the ICG Report.[41] The All-Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU)[42] also agreed to support – as a temporary gesture – the government's emergency regulations banning face coverings, despite their earlier rulings that wearing the veil was a religious duty.

Many members of the Muslim community have started introspecting the changing nature of Muslim culture and calling for monitoring of foreign influences in religious schools and institutions. While political parties and religious leaders are not associated with the attacks or have any linkages with the violent extremists, they are being blamed for just being silent spectators of the radicalisation that has been witnessed and

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41 Ibid.

42 The All-Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) is a non-political Council of Islamic Religious Scholars with a legacy spanning over a century, representing more than ten thousand Ulama members from across the country.

not making any effort to prevent it.[43] People started losing faith in the Muslim political leaders, which was evident from their electoral performance in the 2020 parliamentary elections and more particularly in the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections. There has been a growing view among Muslim voters, that leaders should stop playing politics in the name of the religion.[44]

Given the political mood in the country, Muslim political parties are perhaps now thinking the time is not apt for the assertion of religious identity. Hence, religious rhetoric is missing at the moment. However, the Muslim parties are trying to take a positive stand on some of the demands from the community. For example, the Muslim leaders for long opposed the one- country-one-law to reform the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA). Some of the Muslim politicians are now supporting Muslim women's demand for reform in MMDA.[45]

Fragmented Muslim Politics

The fragmented nature of Muslim politics has made it difficult for the SLMC or any other party to use Islam as a tool for political purposes effectively. As mentioned above, several political parties have in fact given up the use of religious symbols as they realised that religion might not help them to fulfil their political ambition beyond a certain point. There are several reasons, why Muslims are not a monolith. The following Table shows how the Muslims are dispersed.

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[43] Ameer Ali, "Battle for the Parliament", *Colombo Telegraph,* 29 September 2024, at https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/battle-for-the-parliament/ (Accessed 1 November 2024).

[44] M.Y.M. Siddeek, "Muslim Political Parties and the Upcoming Parliamentary Election", *Colombo Telegraph,* 30 October 2024, at https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/muslim-political-parties-the-upcoming-parliamentary-election/ (Accessed 30 November 2024).

[45] International Crisis Group, No. 40.

Table 3.2: Distribution of Sri Lankan Muslim Population across the Districts and Provinces (As per the Census of Population and Housing 2012)

Districts	Sri Lanka Moors	Malays	Islam (Religion)	Province
Jaffna	2,162	23	2,363	Northern Province 1.69%
Kilinochchi	629	2	700	
Mullaitivu	1,821	11	1,880	
Vavuniya	11,748	8	11,972	
Mannar	16,436	11	16,512	
Trincomalee	158,771	356	159,418	Eastern Province 29.2%
Batticaloa	133,854	28	134,065	
Ampara	281,702	187	281,987	
Badulla	44,716	1351	47,192	Uva Province 2.89%
Moneragala	9,508	63	9,809	
Hambantota	6,629	8164	15,204	Southern Province 4.07%
Matara	25,254	58	25,614	
Galle	38,790	106	39,267	
Kegalle	59,997	184	61,164	Sabaragamuwa Province 4.35%
Ratnapura	22,346	288	24,446	
Nuwara Eliya	17,652	543	21,116	Central Province 13.4%
Kandy	191,570	2444	197,076	
Matale	44,786	392	45,682	
Kalutara	113,320	689	114,556	Western Province 25.4%
Colombo	249,609	14,444	274,087	
Gampaha	97,621	12,720	112,746	
Kurunegala	115,302	1,220	118,305	North Western Province 13.65%
Puttalam	147,546	631	150,404	
Anuradhapura	70,692	161	71,493	North Central 5.18%
Polonnaruwa	30,177	46	30,465	
Sri Lanka	1,892,638	44,130	1,967,523	9.66%

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Government of Sri Lanka, at http://www.statistics.gov.lk/ (Accessed 29 January 2025).

As a result of the community's dispersed nature, all the community members do not face common challenges. They have their own set of local challenges. The issues faced by the Muslims of the northeast are not shared by the people living in other parts of the country. During the armed ethnic conflict, the Muslims in the north and east faced significant political, security and economic challenges. After the end of the armed conflict, some of these challenges might persist, but the absence of war has made them irrelevant for political mobilisation.

The growing islamophobia in the country does pose a common challenge for all the Muslims in Sri Lanka in the post-war period. Yet, SLMC finds it inconvenient to use for political mobilisation, as many Muslims living in Colombo and other parts of the country hold SLMC responsible for the hatred they are receiving from their Sinhala-Buddhist neighbours. Many liberal Muslims condemn the formation of a religious party, and giving representation to the entire community which is not monolithic.

Conclusion

Assertion of religious identity in politics could not bring unity among the divisive groups within the Muslim community. The sectarianism and the continuous process of radicalisation have further widened the differences within the community. The treatment that was meted out post-Easter Sunday attack and during COVID-19 convinced the Muslims about the limitations of the Muslim leaders in the majoritarian government. The voting patterns in the Muslim-dominated areas during the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections indicate that people had not voted on religious grounds and supported the NPP, which promised the creation of a country for everyone in its election manifesto. However, the non-inclusion of any Muslims in the NPP cabinet raised questions – what shape will Muslim politics take in the coming days? Based on past experiences, it can be argued that a ministerial post cannot necessarily uplift a community. However, for the NPP, which is trying to portray the image of running an inclusive government, leaving out a community, may once again instil a sense of marginalisation among the Muslims who felt forsaken in the past, both by the central government as well as by the Muslim political leaders. However, as of now, the Muslim political actors could not successfully use religion as a collective instrument to mobilise political support.

Chapter 4

Political Use of Religion in Sri Lanka: Security and Strategic Ramifications

The political and religious actors justify religious mobilisation as an important mechanism for the advancement and upliftment of their respective communities. Assertion of religious identity in politics is seen as a means to achieve the collective good that fosters social cohesion. However, in practice, politicisation of religion has resulted in far-reaching consequences with severe political, social, security and strategic implications for Sri Lanka.

Political Implications

Political use of religion has turned Sri Lanka into an illiberal democracy. The majoritarian government's policy to give special privileges to the majority community had created a sense of alienation among the minority communities. The Constitution provides the foremost position to Buddhism and mandates states to promote and protect Buddhism. At the same time, the Constitution also provides rights to other religious communities. The political actors in Sri Lanka so far have refused to fulfil the political and ultra-nationalist monks' demand to declare Buddhism as a state religion in the Constitution. However, all efforts are made to protect the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists' interests. In the name of protecting and promoting Buddhism, the Sri Lankan state often ignores the interests and rights of the minority communities under the influence of ultra-nationalist members of the majority community. The marginalisation of the minority community is carried out through constitutional means. Some of the common constitutional laws (mis)used against minorities include the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, No. 56 of 2007 and Emergency Regulations.

The PTA, enacted in 1979, gives Sri Lankan authorities broad powers to search, arrest and detain individuals to curb legitimate terrorism concerns. However, the law has been misused for multiple religious freedom violations.[1] Following the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, around 2,500 people (mostly Muslims) were arrested under the PTA. The Emergency Regulations implemented following the Easter Sunday attack had been used selectively.

The government allegedly confiscates land from religious minorities in the north and east under the auspices of protecting Buddhist cultural sites as mandated by Article 9 of the Constitution.[2] This has created angst among the Hindus in the north and east. Hindus in the north and east often complain about the lack of freedom to access temples in the high-security zones.[3]

The Ministry of Buddha *Sasana* and Religious Affairs issued a circular in 2008 that requires religious communities to register houses of worship[4] with the Ministry and seek advance approval for new construction. While the requirements appear to apply to all religious

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1 Zack Udin, "Religious Freedom Conditions in Sri Lanka", United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, October 2021, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20Sri%20Lanka%20Country%20Update_0.pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

2 Article 9 says, "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha *Sasana*, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e).", The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1978, at https://www.parliament.lk/files/pdf/constitution.pdf (Accessed 28 November 2024).

3 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2025, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2025-04/Sri%20Lanka%202025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf (Accessed 14 June 2025).

4 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2015, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%202015%20(2).pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

groups, reportedly, they are only enforced against Christians and Muslims. Allegedly, the minority communities are often forced to register as NGOs and not religious groups. Subsequently, unregistered houses of worship have been closed. Reportedly, 30 churches were forced to close in 2014.

The institutions like the police, the judiciary, the Ministry of Buddha *Sasana* and Religious Affairs, and the Department of Archaeology have been highly politicised to use them for divisive politics of the Sri Lankan political elites.

Sri Lanka's democracy was distorted with the erosion of democratic norms and values and institutional independence. This in turn has resulted in dynastic and authoritarian politics.

Social Implications

It is evident from the previous chapters that the colonial policy had affected the social structures of Sri Lanka and the social harmony to a great extent. However, increasing political use of religion and assertion of religious identity in the post-independence period had further widened the gaps in society among the religious communities. Assertion of religious identity has reduced the intra-community caste, sectarian and regional differences within the Sinhala-Buddhist community. However, the differences between the majority and minority communities have increased.

Assertion of religious identity by the Muslims has affected their social interactions with other minority communities, including the Tamils and the Christians. Unlike Buddhism, the political use of Islam could not unite the Muslims in Sri Lanka, as the community as a whole has not benefited from it. Formation of the SLMC has, to some extent, benefited the Muslims living in the Eastern Province. But Muslims in the South-West part feel better off by working with the mainstream political parties.

Sinhala-Buddhist political actors, by providing Buddhism a foremost place in the Constitution, have fulfilled the majority community's desire to see that their religion gets back to its the pre-colonial glory. Ultra-nationalist groups, on the other hand, constantly instil fear among the

people by citing various real and perceived threats to Buddhism. The nexus of the political and the religious actors to use Buddhism as a political weapon has successfully instilled a sense of insecurity. This insecurity often manifests itself as distrust and hatred towards minority communities. Consequently, the social fabric and harmony in Sri Lankan society is distorted.

Several non-governmental organisations and civil society members are engaged in inter-faith dialogues to promote unity and engagement among diverse communities. However, overcoming the deep-rooted distrust, insecurity, and prejudices is a challenging task. The opportunists trigger the inherent insecurity and distrust whenever they feel the need to use religion as a weapon for political mobilisation.

Security Implications

Growth of Religious Radicalism

The religious revival movements during the colonial period introduced the element of radicalisation among the Buddhists and the Muslims. Subsequently, the external elements, such as Islamist religious groups and global Jihadi networks, cultivated Islamic radicalisation and violent extremism in the country. The continuous process of radicalisation since the 1950s has increased conservatism among many Muslims. However, under the influence of the global Jihadi network, radicalism has manifested in violent extremism and finally terrorism in 2019 with the Easter Sunday attack. Growing attacks on Muslims in the post-war period and a discriminatory approach towards them have also fuelled radical sentiments among Muslims. According to Neil DeVotta, "Salafi-Wah(h)abi beliefs and Islamophobia within the island have combined to fan extremism among some within the Muslim polity."[5]

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[5] Neil DeVotta, "Buddhist Majoritarianism and Ethnocracy in Sri Lanka", *Sociological Bulletin*, Special Issue: *Religion and Politics in South Asia*, 70 (4), October 2021, pp. 453-466, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48651604 (Accessed 16 June 2025).

The moderate Muslim political leaders were aware of the activities of the radical elements, but unfortunately, did not make any serious effort to prevent such activities. Some Muslims in Sri Lanka believe that the first Muslim political party, SLMC, is indirectly responsible for encouraging radicalisation among the Muslims in the Eastern Province. It is argued that "the SLMC's political slogans in the 1990s based on Islam gave hope to Eastern Muslims to seek a kind of politics based on Islamic values and expectations" and "encouraged them to explore further violent ways to meet their aspirations".[6] The SLMC supporters, however, deny this and argue that the formation of the party prevented many Muslim youths from taking up arms.

Buddhist radicalism gets its ideological inspiration from the leader of the Buddhist revival movement, Anagarika Dharmapala, who promoted Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism and hostility towards other ethnic and religious groups. The concept of political monks and militant monks was known in Sri Lanka, but the activities of radical monks became prominent since 2012 with the formation of the BBS. Political patronage and the culture of impunity have emboldened the radical monks to continue their anti-Muslim, anti-Christian and anti-Hindu activities.

Communal Violence

Religion-based political violence is rampant in Sri Lanka. Politics based on Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism caused an armed ethnic conflict. During 26 years of war, violence was part of daily life in various parts of the island. Both the government and the LTTE forces targeted places of worship of various religious communities, and attacks took place during religious holidays and festivals. However, the chapter is highlighting

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[6] A.R.M. Imtiyaz and Amjad Mohamed Saleem, "Some Critical Notes on Sri Lankan Muslim Religious Identity Formation, Conservatism, and Violent Extremism", *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* 58 (3), 2023, pp. 438–451, at https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211069651 (Accessed 16 June 2025).

religion-based violence, which is not directly connected to the armed ethnic conflict. The first Hindu-Muslim riot took place in 1915 due to the divide-and-rule policy of the British. Post-independence, there were several communal and sectarian riots documented in Sri Lanka, including the Muslim-Sinhala riot in Puttalam in 1976, Mawanella riot between Muslims and Sinhala, 2002 Beruwala riot between the Wahhabi and Sufi sects of Muslims, the anti-Christian riots during 2000-2005, the anti-Muslim riots from 2012-14, 2018 and 2019.

Attacks on Christians were at their peak in 2003. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), there were about 400 incidents against Christian institutions or persons between 2000 and 2005.[7] Though the number of attacks on Christians has declined, they still continue. Anti-Muslim riots have been going on since mid-1970s, but violent attacks and counter-attacks on communities have increased since the formation of violent extremist groups like the BBS in 2012. Ultra-nationalist Buddhist radical groups conduct targeted attacks on minority communities, particularly Muslims and Christians. While Hindus do not face the same level of violent persecution as the other two minority communities, in the post-Eelam War period, they constantly face intimidation and harassment.[8] In addition to violence among different communities, sectarian attacks within the Muslim community are also common. There are cases of attack on Sufis and Ahmediyas as well. Before the Easter Sunday attack, NTJ's involvement in sectarian riots was reported several times.

The radical groups usually conduct these attacks. However, due to political reasons and politicisation of the institutions, prompt action against the perpetrators is not taken. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief noted that, "with regard to acts of

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[7] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2009, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/2009%20Annual%20Report.pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

[8] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, No. 3.

religious violence or intolerance by non-state actors, the Sri Lankan government's obligation to promptly investigate and prosecute all perpetrators has not been satisfactorily fulfilled.'"[9] Due to politicisation, many times, intelligence inputs are ignored. The perpetrators who were involved in violent attacks from 2012 onwards went scot-free. Lack of action against the perpetrators has created a culture of impunity.[10] Successive governments, despite their promises, failed to end this culture of impunity. As a result, violence is increasing in the country. Reportedly, religion-based violence has come down in 2023/24, as the political use of religion has decreased.

Presence of an Armed Group

Though the news of the attack by a Sri Lanka-based Islamist group came as a shock to the world in April 2019, there have been media reports of the presence of Islamist armed groups since the 1980s. The issue of the presence of the armed Islamist group in Sri Lanka was first raised by the LTTE to justify its attacks on the Muslims. At that time, there was no evidence that the Muslim youths with arms had any connection with the Islamists. President R. Premadasa initiated a policy to supply arms to Muslim youth so that they could defend the community against the LTTE in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The step was taken after 143 Muslim worshippers were massacred at the main mosque in Kattankudy in the 1990s.[11]

The International Crisis Group (ICG) had reported the existence of Muslim armed groups in 2007. As per the ICG, there were armed

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9 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2006, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/USCIRF_2006_AnnualReport.pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

10 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, No. 3.

11 "Few Jihadis among Armed Muslims in Sri Lanka", *The New Indian Express*, 16 May 2012, at https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2009/Jul/07/few-jihadis-among-armed-muslims-in-sri-lanka-65730.html (Accessed 1 November 2024).

groups in Mutur, with different ones controlling the key economic areas of the town, the jetty and the market. An "Osama group" was also reported to have existed, although it disappeared after the death of its leader. A similar group was reportedly operating in Kalmunai, although in early 2007, local politicians suggested it was no longer functioning. None of these groups was large or very powerful; they mostly focused on minor criminal activities as well as some attacks on the LTTE.[12]

In 2012, it was reported that state intelligence agencies had identified 18 Muslim militant leaders who were wanted for various crimes. They were believed to be instrumental in recruiting Muslim youth for an armed rebellion and other crimes in the east.[13] Such reports were published in the media in 2015, too. Reportedly, Muslim community members themselves informed the authorities about the Jihadi activities of the NTJ. However, the authorities ignored such reports. The NTJ could not influence a large section of Sri Lankan Muslims and Muslim politics, but by its nefarious terrorist activities, it affected the entire community posing the most serious national security challenge by carrying out the terrorist attacks in 2019.

Threat to Regional Security

The presence of radical, violent extremists and armed groups poses serious threats not only to the national security of Sri Lanka but also to the entire region. As radicalisation increased in society, external elements established linkages with the radical groups and the violent extremists. Reportedly, there was a strong connection between the 969 movement of Myanmar and the Bodu Bala Sena of Sri Lanka. The 969 movement is a Buddhist nationalist organisation in Myanmar, known for its violent activities against Muslims. The leaders of the two organisations publicly

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[12] International Crisis Group, "Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire", *Asia Report*, No.134, 29 May 2007, at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/32062/134 (Accessed 1 November 2024).

[13] "Few Jihadis among Armed Muslims in Sri Lanka", No. 11.

declared their partnership to defend Buddhism in Asia from the Muslims. The two extremist groups signed an agreement in 2014 to network and build capacity to stabilise Buddhism.[14] The agreement aimed at "countering the growing incursions and challenges from the Islamists faced by the Buddhists in both countries, and also in the South and Southeast Asian region."[15] Many in Sri Lanka believe that due to the anti-Muslim approach of the BBS, it can be used by international criminal elements with an Islamophobic agenda.

There were media speculations about possible funding from Norway to the BBS to fulfil its Islamophobic agenda. Such speculations were made in the context of the visit of the BBS members to Norway in 2011, just before the BBS was formed. Reportedly, the visit was sponsored by the Norwegian Embassy. The Norwegian Ambassador subsequently visited the BBS office. Though both BBS and the Norwegian Embassy deny the allegation, both sides have accepted that the monks visited Norway on a trip sponsored by the Embassy for a conference.[16]

The global Jihadi groups have set up linkages with the local Muslim extremist groups in Sri Lanka. There are Sri Lankans who joined the Islamic State (IS). In 2016, ISIS declared Sri Lanka part of a Caliphate. In its map of Khorasan, Sri Lanka was identified as one of its provinces.[17] The NTJ and Jamathei Millathu Ibrahim (JMI) have links

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[14] Krishan Francis, "Burma's Wirathu and Sri Lankan Nationalist Monks Sign Agreement", *The Irrawaddy,* 1 October 2014, at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmas-wirathu-sri-lankan-nationalist-monks-sign-agreement.html (Accessed 14 June 2025).

[15] "Full Text: Wirathu And Gnanasara Sign Agreement", *Colombo Telegraph,* 1 October 2014, at https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/full-text-wirathu-and-gnanasara-sign-agreement/ (Accessed 14 June 2025).

[16] "Genesis of Bodu Bala Sena", *Viva Lanka,* 22 April 2013, at https://www.vivalanka.com/newspage/443179ai-genesis-bodu-bala-sena (Accessed 14 June 2025).

[17] Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday Massacre: Lessons for the International Community,* Penguin Random House, Singapore, 2023.

with the IS, and some members of these groups were trained in Syria. The NTJ also had a connection with the Thowheed Jamath of Tamil Nadu, which is led by former members of the proscribed terrorist group, the Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI).[18]

The connection between extremist organisations across the border is a matter of concern for regional security. According to media reports, India's National Investigation Agency thwarted a massive terror plot against India by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) coordinated from Sri Lankan territory in 2015.[19] Even though the Sri Lankan armed forces have defeated one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in the world – the LTTE – in 2009, the Easter Sunday attack in 2019 has exposed Sri Lanka's lack of capability to prevent such terror attacks. Institutional decay due to politicisation and corruption have crippled the governance and security system in the country. In such a vulnerable situation, increasing radicalisation and violent extremism in the country can emerge as a potential launch pad for terror activities across the region.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

In the context of the civil war, violence against civilians based on ethnicity has occurred throughout the country. As both sides in the conflict fail to take steps to prevent or stop incidents of communal violence and violation of human rights, the issue has become internationalised. Moreover, post-2000, Sri Lanka has come under scrutiny of various countries and international bodies for religious intolerance and religion-based violence. The focus of the international

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[18] R. Hariharan, "Lanka's Anti-Muslim Violence", Gateway House, 15 July 2014, at https://www.gatewayhouse.in/lankas-anti-muslim-violence/ (Accessed 1 November 2024).

[19] "26/11-Like Attack by ISI Agents Based in Sri Lanka Thwarted – Report", *Ada Derana,* 4 April 2015, at https://www.adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=30372 (Accessed 29 January 2025).

community is the religious violence committed by the majority community against the minority and the government's inability to address the issue of religious intolerance. The government's inability to prevent sectarian violence within the religious minority communities is also observed, but often gets overlooked. Various government policies were criticised for targeting the minority communities by the international community, including the UN, and Amnesty International, among others. Pressure to correct the religious freedom index mainly comes from the most important economic partners of Sri Lanka –the US, the EU, and the OIC countries.

The US

The USCIRF began monitoring developments in Sri Lanka after several attacks were reported on religious minorities, particularly the Christian community, by the Buddhist nationalists and a bill was introduced on the prohibition of conversion by the JHU in 2004, and again in 2005 and 2009.[20] In September 2005, the JHU put forward a proposed amendment to the Constitution that would make Buddhism the official religion of Sri Lanka. Article 9.1 of the proposed Amendment stated that, "The Official Religion of the Republic is Buddhism. Other forms of religions and worship may be practised in peace and harmony with the Buddha *Sasana*." According to the USCIRF, "the establishment of one religious community as a country's official religion is permitted under international standards for freedom of religion or belief, and thus is not, in and of itself, problematic." However, two other Articles – Article 9.4 and Article 9.5 in the proposed Amendment were found to be problematic by the USCIRF. Article 9.4 of the proposed bill required that the inhabitants of Sri Lanka "professing Buddhism are bound to bring up their children in the same", and Article 9.5 stated that it is prohibited to convert "a Buddhist into other forms of worship or to spread other forms of worship among the Buddhists." According to the USCIRF, the proposed Amendments were in clear violation of international standards with regard to freedom of religion or belief.[21]

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20 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, No. 7.

21 Ibid.

The USCIRF, since then, has been continuously monitoring developments in Sri Lanka. The USCIRF, in its Reports, has been consistently expressing its concerns on the Sri Lankan government's lack of effort to protect the religious rights of the minority community.

The USCIRF on several occasions recommended the US Government to press the Sri Lankan government to allow for a transparent and independent investigation into the alleged 2009 war crimes, as it relates to targeted attacks on religious minorities; ensure that a portion of humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka is used to help protect religious or ethnic minorities, who have been or are likely targets of religiously motivated violence; train local government officials, police officers and judges on international religious freedom standards and on how to investigate and to fairly adjudicate violent attacks when they occur; and urge government officials to frequently and publically denounce religiously motivated harassment and violence.[22] Since 2023, for the third consecutive year, the USCIRF has recommended the US Government to include Sri Lanka on the "Special Watch List" for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The USCIRF has urged the US Government to incorporate religious freedom concerns into the United States-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue.[23]

Based on the USCIRF's recommendations, though the US Government did not take any strong measures, US Embassy officials regularly urged senior government officials and political leaders of Sri Lanka to defend religious freedom for all. The issue of PTA also came up in such discussions. The US expressed concern over the Sri Lankan government's forced and mandatory policy of cremating deceased COVID-19 victims and the detention of Muslims in connection with

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[22] The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report: 15th Anniversary Retrospective: "Renewing the Commitment", 2014, at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202014%20Annual%20Report%20PDF.pdf (Accessed 29 January 2025).

[23] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, No. 3.

the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. US pressure has not been very effective. Nevertheless, presumably, the USCIRF's reporting has deterred the Sri Lankan government from passing the JHU-proposed anti-conversion bill.

OIC Countries

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has 57 member states with a collective population of more than 2 billion people. Sri Lanka's relations with the OIC and the Islamic world have been "longstanding." After the moral panic response of the Sri Lankan government in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attack, bilateral relations with some of the Middle Eastern and OIC countries were affected. Following the 2019 Easter Sunday attack, Sri Lanka banned the Qatar Charity.[24] The Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) of the OIC condemned Sri Lanka's banning of the burqa, the PTA and its regulation, namely 'De-radicalisation from holding violent extremist religious ideology', which allows the creation of 'Reintegration Centres' to arbitrarily detain Muslims and subject them to torture and other human rights violation without any legal oversight with impunity, and the compulsory cremation for COVID-19 Muslim victims.[25] The OIC raised the forced cremation issue at the 46th UNHRC in February 2021 after the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration rejected repeated requests

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[24] During the economic crisis, it removed the ban. P.K. Balachandran, "Economic Crisis Forces Sri Lanka to Shed Fears and Move Closer to US, Middle East", *The Diplomat,* 6 July 2022, at https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/economic-crisis-forces-sri-lanka-to-shed-fears-and-move-closer-to-us-middle-east/ (Accessed 1 December 2024).

[25] "Muslim Countries Strongly Condemn Sri Lanka's Draconian Laws and HR Violations", *JDS,* 30 April 2021, at http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/news-features/human-rights/1015-muslim-countries-strongly-condemn-sri-lankas-draconian-laws-and-hr-violations (Accessed 1 December 2024); Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, "OIC Concerned over Sri Lanka Insisting on Cremation for Muslim Coronavirus Victims", 10 December 2020, at https://oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=25033&t_ref=15273&lan=en (Accessed 1 December 2024).

by local and global Islamic bodies. The policy was reversed later, but the move hit diplomatic ties with Middle Eastern and OIC nations, which are the highest source of employment for Sri Lankan expatriates.

Reportedly, the Sri Lankan government sought loans worth US $ 3.6 billion for the purchase of fuel with a five-year grace period and 15-year repayment period from Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates during the economic crisis in 2021. All these countries rejected Sri Lanka's repeated requests for credit lines to buy oil and loans.[26] Later, as the government changed its forced cremation policy and reached out to the Middle Eastern countries for assistance during the economic crisis, the relationship was restored.[27]

EU

The EU is a major market for apparel, fisheries and high-technology products such as transformers (accounting for 50 per cent of Sri Lanka's exports to the EU in 2019). Thanks to the EU Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), exports to Sri Lanka's second-largest export market have increased to EUR 2.3 billion. Given the contribution of the GSP+ to the Sri Lankan economy, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution in June 2021 calling on the EU Commission and the EEAS to use the GSP+ to leverage for advancement on Sri Lanka's human rights obligations and demand the repeal or replacement of the PTA to carefully assess whether there is sufficient reason, as a last

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[26] "Sri Lanka PM Seeks Support of Islamic Nations to Revive Pandemic-Hit Economy", *Economynext,* 2 December 2021, at https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-pm-seeks-support-of-islamic-nations-to-revive-pandemic-hit-economy-88424/ (Accessed 16 June 2025). "Sri Lanka Foreign Minister Requests UAE Assistance Regarding Purchase of Oil:", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism, 24 September 2021, at https://mfa.gov.lk/en/sl-fm-uae/ (Accessed 16 June 2025).

[27] "Palestine Issue Helps Sri Lanka to Regain Reputation among OIC After Cremation Criticism", *Economynext,* 9 May 2024, at https://economynext.com/palestine-issue-helps-sri-lanka-to-regain-reputation-among-oic-after-cremation-criticism-162184/ (Accessed 1 December 2024).

resort, to initiate a procedure for the temporary withdrawal of Sri Lanka's GSP+ status and the benefits that come with it.

According to a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Sri Lanka could face losses of 36.7 per cent of its exports to the EU and up to US$ 1.23 billion if it loses its (GSP+) trade benefits with the EU.[28] The study indicated that losing GSP+ could result in a 10 per cent decline in exports of transformers. The wearing apparel sector was also identified as an industry that could be among the hardest hit, with tariffs potentially rising by nearly 10 percentage points, despite the sector not fully utilising GSP+. This fall of exports would also have major consequences for employment, especially for Sri Lanka's formal manufacturing sector where approximately 4.99 per cent of the industrial workforce would be vulnerable to adverse labour market conditions due to reduced demand from the EU. This includes 13.47 per cent of workers in the wearing apparel sector, who could potentially lose their jobs, according to the IPS study.[29] Based on the number of jobs linked to imports by the EU-28, the study estimated that the reduced imports under Most Favoured Nation (MFN) tariffs could make a total of 73,574 workers vulnerable, out of which 65.65 per cent will be women and low- or medium-skilled workers.[30]

Some of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists consider the reaction of the NGOs and international bodies funded by Western countries and the Muslim countries as a hindrance to the Sri Lankan government's counter-terrorism measures. However, given Sri Lanka's economic dependency on these countries, the government cannot ignore their reactions and concerns. After the EU passed the Resolution on the PTA, the Sri Lankan government pardoned 16 people convicted under the PTA. The Sri Lankan Parliament has also amended the PTA in the aftermath

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[28] Asanka Wijesinghe, Rashmi Anupama and Chaya Dissanayake, *Who Stands to Lose? The Effects of GSP+ Withdrawal on Sri Lanka's Export and Labour Force,* Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, March 2025.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

of threats from the EU. The amendment did not make any difference in improving minority rights. Nonetheless, action in Parliament on the long-pending issue showed that the government had been pressured by the EU Resolution.

CONCLUSION

The use of religion in politics has long served as a potent tool for political and religious actors to advance their agendas. Yet, despite promises of collective upliftment, such strategies have rarely translated into tangible benefits for the broader population. The politicisation of religion carries profound and far-reaching consequences—social fragmentation, institutional erosion, and the rise of illiberal democracy, majoritarianism, and authoritarianism. This has often led to ethno-religious tensions, communal violence, and political and economic instability.

Internal fractures created by religiously charged politics open the door to external interference. Non-state actors may exploit these divisions to further their extremist agendas, while foreign powers with strategic interests in Sri Lanka can leverage domestic unrest to assert influence. In such volatile conditions, religious mobilisation ceases to be a political asset and instead deepens existing crises. When divisive rhetoric is deployed without the cushion of economic security or social cohesion, it risks triggering backlash[31] and leads to systemic collapse. Such perilous interplay was evident during the *Aragalaya* movement of 2022, where public outrage against entrenched political dysfunction and economic hardship exposed the limits—and dangers—of identity-driven governance.

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[31] "Palestine Issue Helps Sri Lanka to Regain Reputation Among OIC After Cremation Criticism", No. 27.

Conclusion

Religion has long played an important role in Sri Lankan politics, but its prominence has intensified markedly in the post-colonial era. Its heightened assertion in contemporary period stems from the incomplete nation-building process that followed the departure of colonial powers. British colonial policies—especially those concerning religion and political reform—left deep structural imprints on the country. Their legacy continues to shape Sri Lanka's political landscape, with enduring consequences for social cohesion and governance. The British policy of separating state and religion affected the privileges and state patronage that Buddhism and the Buddhist *Sangha* enjoyed in the pre-colonial period. This created a disgruntled section within the Sinhala-Buddhist community that sought to restore the lost privileges and status of Buddhism. At the same time, the British policy of social, political and economic reform created another section that supported a secular state policy. At the time of independence, although the secularist viewpoint won the day and in the first eight years of independence adopted a secular constitution, the push for Sinhala-Buddhist viewpoint of restoring and maintaining Buddhist supremacy in the country, continued. Efforts of the Buddhist monks and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists since the colonial period have entrenched the sentiment of Buddhist supremacy among the Sinhala-Buddhist community. This created a conducive atmosphere for the political and religious actors to come together to use religion for political purposes since 1956. Electoral competition between the mainstream Sinhala-Buddhist political parties, since 1960 onwards, is no longer based on Sri Lankan nationalism versus Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism; competition is based on who can best champion the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. This has turned Sri Lankan democracy into an illiberal democracy. Within this illiberal system, minority communities are trying hard to protect their rights. The Muslim minority community has asserted its religious identity; however, countrywide political mobilisation of Islam has not been successful.

Since 1956, except for a few occasions, religion has been used as divisive tool in politics. President Chandrika Kumaratunga, during 1994-2000, the National Unity Government during 2015-2019, and the NPP government in 2024, came to power with the promise of inclusive politics. However, they could not distance themselves from Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. They explained their inclusive politics using the religious symbol of Buddhist philosophy of equality, love and compassion, while rejecting the supremacist and exclusive agenda propagated by the nationalist and political monks.

After Buddhism attained the foremost position in the Constitution, it would have been politically suicidal for politicians from the majority community not to use religious symbols in politics. There are several reasons why Sinhala-Buddhist political actors use religious symbols in politics: (i) The majority community has internalised the sentiment that Sri Lanka is a land of Buddhists and Buddhism needs to be protected and promoted by the state; (ii) The political monks constantly highlight the existential threats to Buddhism and link them to the sovereignty and integrity of Sri Lanka; (iii) Even though the threats are mostly based on perceptions and often exaggerated, the political monks cite specific incidents to substantiate and spread their fear and insecurity among the common people. In a system based on majoritarianism, Sinhala-Buddhist political actors consider it politically important to use religious symbols in politics for electoral success.

Sinhala-Buddhist political elites, while giving primacy to religious sentiments of the majority community, have not yet caved in to the political monks' supremacist agenda by declaring Buddhism as a state religion. However, Buddhism is given the foremost position, while other religions are also provided constitutional rights. The Sri Lankan Constitution has made it mandatory for the state to promote and protect Buddhist interests. Though this provision by itself does not discriminate against the other community and cause rift between the majority and the minority community, it provides ample scope to the political and religious actors to misuse it for divisive politics. These constitutional provisions also indirectly facilitate establishing Buddhist supremacy whenever political elites want to. Political elites with an authoritarian tendency have undermined the religious, cultural and political rights of the minority communities on the pretext of promoting and protecting

Buddhism. The same political actors on the other hand, refused to bring any amendment in the Constitution to declare Buddhism as a state religion.

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka has asserted that religion should have a standalone identity in politics. Since the colonial period, efforts have been made to construct a separate religious identity. The process of constructing the religious identity had increased sectarianism among the Muslims in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Muslim political actors have been unsuccessful in uniting the entire community by using religious symbols, due to sectarianism and regional differences. The SLMC achieved political success through religious mobilisation at a provincial level, but not at the national level. At the national level, Islam itself is not a unifying factor for the Sri Lankan Muslims. There is a lack of enthusiasm for choosing one Muslim political party as the sole representative of the community. Given the lack of support from the entire Muslim community, the political leaders of the community are using the Muslim symbols "pragmatically", as rightly pointed out by Andreas Johansson. Experiencing the unviability of a party based on religious identity, some of the parties removed the word Muslim from their nomenclature.

The involvement of Muslim religious actors in Sri Lankan politics is limited. The Mosques or the religious leaders guide and advise the Muslim voters at the local level during the election, but they are not as politically active as the political monks. The Muslim religious groups and organisations help the political actors during the election campaign based on their sectarian affiliation. The political ambitions of the Muslim political parties/leaders and the Muslim radical extremist groups like NTJ are different. While the Muslim political parties or leaders and the majority of the community, want their political and other rights within the Sri Lankan political system and Constitution, the violent extremist groups promote *Sharia* law and Jihadi politics. Due to fundamental political differences in ideology, there is a distinct difference between the political ambition of the violent extremists and Muslim political parties.

There are also differences in political interests among the Muslims living in different provinces. Muslims in the southwest prefer to vote for

mainstream national political parties instead of the Muslim parties which are mostly popular in the Eastern Province, as there is a belief that backing an Islam-based party would lead to further marginalisation of the community. The current electoral and political system also provides limited scope for electoral success for a geographically dispersed community, for religious mobilisation. There are many Muslims in Sri Lanka, particularly the rich urban businessmen who benefit by following the strategy of religious detachment.

Neither the Sinhala-Buddhist nor the Muslim identity in Sri Lanka is primordial. With the changes of government, political and administrative system, the social structure has changed over the period and with that, the identities were constructed. Due to caste/sectarian, class, political, and regional differences, the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims are not cohesive and homogeneous communities. Yet, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is a binding factor for the Sinhala-Buddhist community. Not everyone among the Sinhala-Buddhists may agree with the ultra-nationalistic chauvinism of the radical groups, but the protection and preservation of Buddhism is a common concern. There may be differences within the community on the means of promoting and protecting Buddhism, but there is a common consensus that Buddhism needs to be protected and preserved. Therefore, it becomes easy for the Sinhalese-Buddhist political actors and religious actors to mobilise public support by creating the narrative that Buddhism is in danger. Even though many within the community do not accept the political or the radical monks, they could attract tacit support whenever Buddhism was threatened. In other words, a common threat perception that Buddhism is under threat becomes a rallying point for the Sinhala-Buddhist community. Sometimes, the threat is constructed or exaggerated by the religious actors to mobilise political support. In such a situation, there may not be overwhelming support, but evidence of a real threat can make mobilisation easy.

The threat perception of the Sri Lankan Muslims varies depending on their area of inhabitation. It is interesting to note that in the post-Eelam War period, radical monks, backed by political elites, deliberately target Muslims. As mentioned in other chapter, post-Easter Sunday attack, the entire Muslim community faced the brunt of the heinous crime committed by the NTJ as a "moral panic" response of the state. The

Muslims as a community had to face discrimination and hatred. Yet, political mobilisation against the majority community or the government, based on religion at the national level, was not seen. Instead, the community took a conscious decision to cooperate with the government and raised their voice against terrorism. This was because, the aim of the perpetrators behind the terrorist attack was not to uplift the Muslims of Sri Lanka, but to implement a global Jihadi agenda. The majority of the Muslim community is of the view that a religion-based political mobilisation will alienate the Muslims, more particularly at a time when Islamophobia is common all over the world, including Sri Lanka.

Therefore, simply being a homogeneous community in terms of religion may not make political mobilisation easy. There has to be a common threat perception among the religious and political actors and the community that needs to be mobilised.

The second prerequisite of a conducive atmosphere for the political mobilisation of religion identified in the hypotheses includes the state's approach to the religion that is being mobilised. Post-independence, the first political mobilisation of Buddhism occurred during the 1956 elections against the secular nationalism of the D.S. Senanayake government. Subsequently, the ruling party or the particular ruling elite faced political repercussions for even the slightest deviation from Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Opposition political parties mobilised popular support against the ruling party based on Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Even political monks entered parliamentary politics through religious mobilisation on the narrative that the two mainstream political parties-UNP and the SLFP- deviated from Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism by supporting the devolution package proposal for the Tamils.

Even though the religious rights of the minority communities are guaranteed and protected by Sri Lankan Constitution, in practice their religious and cultural rights are undermined by the state on the pretext of promoting and protecting Buddhism as mandated in the Constitution. Generally, it is believed that the discriminatory attitude of the state towards the religion of a minority community leads the minority leader to mobilise community support against the authority. The first Muslim political party, the SLMC, was formed based on this argument. However, there was a lack of interest among the Muslims

for religious mobilisation after the Easter Sunday attack, and the COVID-related discriminatory policy against the Muslims. The non-viability of the formation of a Muslim party based on religious identity experienced since 2000, perhaps, discouraged the Muslim political elites to go for the political mobilisation of Islam after the Easter Sunday attack's "moral panic response". This shows that the state's approach towards the religion that is being mobilised is not an independent variable. This variable is dependent on the common threat perception of the religious group that is being mobilised.

The assertion of religion has transformed Sri Lanka into an illiberal democracy and a deeply divided society. Communal violence, growing radicalisation and violent extremism have threatened Sri Lanka's security situation. Islamic radicalisation and violent extremism in Sri Lanka are not necessarily the direct outcome of the state's discriminatory approach to Muslims; this may be one of the contributory factors. The roots of conservatism and radicalism in Sri Lankan society can be traced back to the Islamic revival movement during the colonial period, when the process of constructing the Muslim identity began. Since then, the process of constructing a pure form of Islam has been going on. External elements have played a significant role in the radicalisation of Muslim society. Discrimination from the Tamil community and the majority community have facilitated the external Jihadi elements in further instigating radicalisation and violent extremism. Collaboration between the cross-national violent militant groups endangered not only Sri Lanka's national security but regional security too. The Muslim political leaders may not have directly contributed to the growth of radicalisation and violent extremism, but their silence and lack of effort to prevent them provided indirect support for the growth of Islamic radicalisation. It is important to note that hatred and discrimination experienced by the Muslims in Sri Lanka after the Easter Sunday attack hurt the community to the core, particularly the mandatory cremation policy of the COVID-19 victims. The majority of the Muslim community decided to act responsibly in such situations. But such feelings of alienation and marginalisation may potentially lead a section of the community to join hands with the Islamist extremists.

Radicalisation among the Buddhists too is inspired by the Buddhist revival movement. Political monks have been active in Sri Lankan politics

since the pre-independence period; however, militant monks came into to be active since 2000, but became prominent in Sri Lankan politics since the end of the Eelam War due to political patronage. As Islamophobia gained currency all over the world, militant monks in Sri Lanka received external support for their anti-Muslim activities from foreign militant groups and state actors with an Islamophobic agenda. The militant monks also had the support of the Sinhala-Buddhist business community, who viewed the Muslim businessmen as their competition.

Political elites, however, do not always feel encouraged to support the radical and militant elements even if their assistance is availed during elections. There are occasions when under international pressure, political actors have distanced themselves from the radical or ultra-nationalist Buddhist supremacist agenda. Yet, there is violent extremism in the country because of the political elites' lack of interest in ending the culture of impunity. Keeping the political future in mind, political actors are unwilling to "regulate the religious space".[1]

The concern with the radical and violent extremist groups is that they can grow without political patronage, if ideological and financial and material support continues to pour in from external sources. The NTJ leader, the mastermind of the Easter Sunday attack, did not have political patronage or much support from the local community members. Yet it carried out its activity with external support. Therefore, political actors maintaining distance from the radical groups will not help, unless serious efforts are taken to prevent and counter violent extremism. In this regard, the Sri Lankan state takes a selective approach targeting the minority communities only, leading to a sense of alienation among the discriminated and the marginalised.

Sri Lanka has come under the radar of the international community for religious intolerance and violation of minority rights. Western

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[1] "Divided Political Leadership led to Easter Sunday IS attacks: Prof. Gunaratna", *Daily FT,* 13 June 2019, at https://www.ft.lk/opinion/Divided-political-leadership-led-to-Easter-Sunday-IS-attacks—Prof—Gunaratna/14-679897?text=Divided (Accessed 16 June 2025).

countries, including the U.S. and the EU, and the Middle Eastern countries, have put pressure on Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's relations with the OIC countries suffered due to the discriminatory policies followed by the Sri Lankan state against the Muslims after the Easter Sunday attack. It shows that the politicisation of religion in Sri Lanka can be used by the international community as a tool for influence on Sri Lanka. International pressure has prevented Sri Lanka on a couple of occasions from enacting laws which were discriminatory towards the minorities. Nonetheless, international pressure has not deterred the Sri Lankan political actors from using religion as a political weapon. In the absence of data and research, it is difficult to ascertain whether any external forces have directly provided material and ideological support to the contemporary Sri Lankan political actors for the politicisation of religion like the one received by the radical and violent extremist groups.

Across societies, religion has often been used as a convenient tool for political ascendancy. However, there is no guarantee that such manipulation of religion can sustain power in the absence of economic stability and security for the people. For example, the reliance of Rajapaksa brothers on divisive identity politics ultimately failed to secure their hold on political power, as they were unable to shield ordinary citizens from the devastating economic collapse of 2022, which reshaped the political landscape in Sri Lanka. Its sweeping impact—cutting across religion, class, caste, and gender—left little room for communal identity-based politics. In this climate of shared hardship, 'political mobilisation' in the name of religion lost its potency. Neither Buddhist nor Muslim political actors found fertile ground for religious assertion, and notably, communal rhetoric was absent from the platforms of all major candidates in the 2024 Presidential election.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, elected under the banner of the National People's Power (NPP), has since championed a vision of inclusive Sri Lankan nationalism—distinct from the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that has long dominated political discourse. Whether this broader inclusive national identity will retain its appeal and currency remains uncertain, especially given how deeply Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has been internalised by the majority community. Even if a catholic and all-encompassing Sri Lankan nationalism gains traction, religion is unlikely to retreat from the political sphere entirely. The

constitutional primacy of Buddhism remains firmly entrenched, and its influence on governance is expected to persist. In such a context, religion is likely to continue as a potent political force in the politics of Sri Lanka.

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The monograph presents an in-depth analysis of the role of religion in Sri Lankan politics and its impact on the country in the social, political, security, and foreign policy domains. It focuses on the politics of the Sinhala-Buddhist and Muslim communities, as they have explicitly utilised their religions for political purposes in the post-independence period. To comprehend the role of religion in contemporary Sri Lankan politics, the monograph traces the evolution of the country's social and political structures, as well as the relationship between the state and religion, under various political systems and administrations from the ancient period till date. The historical and current political developments are analysed by applying the integrative theory in the context of religion and politics in Sri Lanka.

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