

*Policy Studies 40*

**Sinhalese Buddhist  
Nationalist Ideology:  
Implications for Politics and  
Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka**

*Neil DeVotta*



**East-West Center**

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By Neil DeVotta

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# List of Acronyms

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<b>ASP</b>	Assistant Superintendent of Police
<b>HSZ</b>	High Security Zone
<b>JHU</b>	Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Sinhalese Heritage Party)
<b>JVP</b>	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front)
<b>LTTE</b>	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
<b>MEP</b>	Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (People's United Front)
<b>NGO</b>	nongovernmental organization
<b>P-TOMS</b>	Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure
<b>SLFP</b>	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
<b>SU</b>	Sinhala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage Party)
<b>UNP</b>	United National Party



# Executive Summary

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Buddhism preaches tolerance and pacifism. However, many of its adherents among the majority Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka have resorted to ethnocentrism and militarism. Various arguments have been advanced to explain this paradox, although most objective observers agree that political Buddhism, which emphasizes politics over Buddhist values, and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism stoked ethnocentrism and militarism. This study argues that they have also contributed to a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology that is now fully embedded and institutionalized as state policy. A fundamental tenet of that nationalist 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 superordination, justifies subjugation of minorities, and suggests that those belonging to other ethnoreligious communities live in Sri Lanka only due to Sinhalese Buddhist sufferance.

The study disaggregates the nationalist ideology by evaluating five controversial issues in contemporary Sri Lankan society: (1) the claim that Sri Lanka is a country exclusively for Sinhalese Buddhists; (2) sentiment opposed to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); (3) the separatist struggle waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); (4) the anti-Christian milieu; and (5) population growth and minority emigration. Each contentious issue represents a strand servicing the extant nationalist ideology. Adherents to this ideology insist on expanding and perpetuating Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy within a unitary state; creating laws, rules, and structures that institutionalize such supremacy; and attacking as enemies of the state those who disagree with this agenda.

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and Tamil nationalism are both reactive phenomena: The Buddhists retaliated against colonial maladministra-

tion and discrimination against Buddhism beginning in the late nineteenth century, and thereafter deftly utilized Sinhalese Buddhist mytho-history to mobilize and differentiate themselves from others. Upon independence Sinhalese Buddhist elites instituted discriminatory linguistic, educational, and economic policies. These policies prompted Tamils to rise up against the state and led to a nearly quarter-century civil war between the government and LTTE, which claims dubiously to be the Tamils' sole representative. The LTTE has resorted to terrorist tactics as part of its separatist struggle and its intransigence is one reason Sri Lanka has failed to resolve the ethnic conflict. However, the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology is also a major reason peace has not been achieved. LTTE intransigence and the ethnocentric nature of the Sri Lankan state, which resorts to its own forms of terrorism when fighting the civil war, must both be overcome if the island is to become a liberal democracy.

Not all Buddhists are nationalists, yet the Buddhist nationalist ideology appears to be widely accepted. Increased support for politicians and political parties toeing a pro-Sinhalese Buddhist line, favoring a military solution to the ethnic conflict, and supporting maintenance of the unitary state structure all signify this broad acceptance. That the majoritarian ethos propagated by the nationalist ideology has taken hold is reflected in the decline of secularism, the rise in anti-Christian violence, the cavalier disregard for minorities' human rights, the culture of impunity surrounding the military (which is 98 percent Sinhalese) when dealing with Tamils, attacks against the media and others critical of the government, and the renewed colonization efforts by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists in the Eastern Province.

The present government of President Mahinda Rajapakse is the first to embrace eagerly this insidious mindset, which is partly responsible for the 5,000-plus (mostly Tamils) killed and more than 215,000 newly displaced persons in the last twelve months alone. The government has manipulated the global war on terror to mask its human rights abuses and has targeted innocent Tamil civilians in its military campaigns. The international community has castigated the government for widespread human rights violations, yet not a single member of the military or paramilitaries (including Tamil paramilitaries) has been charged for the numerous kidnappings, rapes, torture, and murders that have accompanied military operations. Most troubling, the Rajapakse government believes in a military solution to the civil war and, consequently, has frowned on devolution of power along provincial lines, which is widely advocated by moderate Tamils, civil society, and the international community.

The institutionalization of the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology means that a political solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is unlikely; meaningful devolution, whereby Sri Lanka's Tamils could coalesce with their ethnic counterparts and gain equality and self-respect, is also not in the offing—irrespective of how the conflict ends or the preferences of the international community. A solution along federal lines is especially unlikely. On the contrary, the Sri Lankan state, especially under the present government, will continue to seek a military solution and perpetuate the extant unitary structure. Irrespective of when the civil war ends, even Tamils who have clamored for autonomy within a united Sri Lanka are bound to be disappointed. The analysis further suggests that other minorities (e.g., Christians and Muslims) also could come under attack as the nationalist ideology becomes further consolidated. The recent well calibrated anti-Christian violence and the intermittent Buddhist-Muslim clashes hint of the dangers ahead. Together, these factors bode ill for the thousands of Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims who have been directly affected by the civil war and for an island that, notwithstanding nearly a quarter century of conflict, has most of the social attributes to become a successful democracy.

The study recommends that the international community advocate and foster the development of a plural state and society in Sri Lanka that can be home to all ethnic and religious communities. It should more forcefully utilize diplomacy, aid, and trade mechanisms to ensure all religious groups in Sri Lanka are dealt with equitably and none is discriminated against. Sri Lanka's impressive Buddhist heritage must be preserved, but this does not have to be at the expense of religious freedom and security for Hindus, Muslims, and Christians of all denominations. While continuing to oppose the terrorist methods employed by the LTTE and the forcible recruitment of children, the international community should also link all military aid to the Sri Lankan government to human rights practices. Furthermore, international human rights monitors should be stationed in Sri Lanka to ensure minorities are protected.



# Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka

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Buddhism is widely regarded as one of the world's more peaceful religions. Although Buddhism, like other religions, historically has been associated with violent episodes, these do not compare with the carnage perpetrated by adherents of the world's other faiths—especially Asia's three monotheistic religions. This relative lack of violence is partly due to the fact that Buddhists have not sought to proselytize vigorously, and Buddhism, like other Indic faiths—Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism—but unlike its monotheistic counterparts, does not emphasize a monopoly on truth. Buddhism's fundamental tenets and attempts by Buddhists over the centuries to live by those tenets are major reasons that the religion and its adherents are viewed as nonviolent. Indeed, globally and in Sri Lanka, individual Buddhists, Buddhist clergy, and Theravada Buddhist kingdoms were among the most accommodating of people of other faiths.

This portrayal, however, contrasts with violent episodes involving Sri Lanka's Buddhists. All agree that Buddhist philosophy eschews violence, yet in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere) some Buddhist monks and especially Buddhist political elites have used *jathaka* tales dealing with Buddha's reincarnated lives and Buddhist mytho-history to celebrate and justify violence. Buddhist monks, for example, conspired and assassinated Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in September 1959. The militarist posture adopted by certain *bhikkhus* (Buddhist monks) over the island's

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***Buddhist leaders...  
exacerbated  
ethnoreligious violence***

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ethnic conflict has caused even the state-owned press to note how frightening it is “to observe the insouciance with which the most revered prelates of the Maha Sangha talk of . . . recourse to arms” (*Sunday Observer* 2000). Analyst Jayadeva Uyangoda has argued that “Sinhalese Buddhism has made no significant contribution to the evolution of a non-violent social ideology. On the contrary, the Sinhalese Buddhist historiographical tradition and ideology inherent in it supports ethnic political violence” (Uyangoda 1996: 129, n. 5). Events that transpired in post-independence Sri Lanka when

Buddhist leaders and Buddhist monks campaigned for policies that exacerbated ethnoreligious violence highlight Uyangoda’s argument.

Beginning around the late nineteenth century, Buddhist rhetoric in Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) took on a blustering tone and promoted intolerance. *Bhikkhus* especially entered the political fray after Sri Lanka’s independence in 1948, a phenomenon that can be called “political Buddhism.” The rhetoric has, among other things, led to the abuse of Buddhism by monks and opportunistic politicians to justify antiminority practices. Nearly a quarter century of ethnic conflict between the predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist state and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has only hardened the antiminority stance among nationalists.

Scholar monk Walpola Rahula best articulated the bases of political Buddhism in a 1946 book entitled *Bhikṣuvage Urumaya* (later translated as *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*), which argued that given their mandate to perform social service, monks could participate in politics and had done so since the time of Buddha. Although historically monks did advise kings, legitimize rulers, and thereby influence policy, H. L. Seneviratne (1999) has vigorously challenged Rahula’s claim. However, many Rahulite *bhikkhus* have resorted to radical politics and have espoused positions antithetical to Buddhist teachings. Significantly, political Buddhism emphasizes politics over Buddhist values (Schalk 2007) because it disregards Sri Lanka’s polyethnic heritage and seeks to institutionalize a Buddhist ethos for the entire country. Criticizing political Buddhism, which resorts to antidemocratic and ethnocentric practices, is not to criticize the Buddhist religion: the former merely highlights how laymen and monks alike have manipulated Buddhism for political ends and contributed toward Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

According to Ernest Gellner, “Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be con-

gruent” (Gellner 1983: 1). Gellner considered nationalism a recent phenomenon related to modernization and industrialization, but a fundamental assumption of political Buddhism is that this harmony between state (political) and nation (national unit) has existed in Sri Lanka since ancient times and that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism has survived in some form for two millennia. Political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism thus feed off each other.

Each nation justifies its sense of nationalism on specific beliefs. The most fundamental belief anchoring Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism is that Sri Lanka has been preserved for Sinhalese Buddhists, and minorities live there only because of Buddhists’ sufferance. This sentiment automatically privileges Buddhists, marginalizes those of other religions, and justifies Sinhalese Buddhist superordination and minority subordination. Although not all Sinhalese Buddhists are nationalists, the sentiment is sufficiently embedded so that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, aided by political Buddhism, has undermined Sinhalese-Tamil relations and attempts at devolution of power, conflict resolution, and dispassionate governance.

Does an overarching explanation exist for political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism? How does Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism manifest itself in contemporary Sri Lanka? Most important, to what extent do political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism impact the quest for a peaceful solution to the island’s bloody ethnic conflict? This study argues that political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism have created the nationalist ideology currently prevalent in government and in the predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist society. Adherents to this nationalist ideology insist on expanding and perpetuating Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy within a unitary state; creating rules, laws, and structures that institutionalize such supremacy; and attacking those who disagree with this agenda. For those who have bought into it, this ideology is sacrosanct and hence nonnegotiable, and consequently all who question or oppose it are considered enemies of the state. Although such dogmatism may promote political participation, especially among the majority community, it undermines civil society and fosters illiberalism. Five prominent issues facing contemporary Sri Lanka—the notion that Sri Lanka is only for Sinhalese Buddhists, sentiment against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the separatist struggle waged by the LTTE, the anti-Christian milieu, and population growth and minority emigration—epitomize this extant nationalist ideology. Each could be considered unique and disparate, but they are best understood as intertwined issues servicing the nationalist ideology.

This study also argues that a political solution to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict rooted in meaningful devolution of power is unlikely in the fore-

seeable future; and structural changes, if instituted at all, would be cosmetic and within a unitary state. A federal arrangement, which the international community strongly supports, is especially unlikely. On the contrary, the state will seek to defeat the LTTE militarily. If it cannot do

so in the near future, it would (especially under the present government) seek to perpetuate a stalemate, believing time is on its side. This means that irrespective of when the civil war ends, even Tamils who have been clamoring for autonomy within a united Sri Lanka are bound to be disappointed. The analysis also suggests that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism will remain potent for the foreseeable future and could target other minorities (e.g., Christians

and Muslims). Together, these factors bode ill for the thousands of Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims who have been directly affected by the civil war and for an island that, notwithstanding nearly a quarter century of conflict, has most of the social attributes necessary to become an economic success story.

The analysis begins with a discussion of the island's ethnoreligious demographics and contested history, for Sri Lanka represents a classic case of how opportunistic elites manipulate a disputable past to influence the present. It proceeds to (1) explain briefly ways in which scholars have sought to categorize political Buddhism and account for ethnic violence in Sri Lanka; (2) elaborate on the causes that have contributed to political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism; (3) argue that political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism have undermined whatever secular legacy once existed; and (4) examine individual issues that, when taken together, represent the extant nationalist ideology. Factors that contribute to this ideology have long been present in Sri Lanka, but they have, especially since the mid-1950s, become institutionalized and embedded. Consequently, a new political milieu exists that all—Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike—must negotiate. Buddhists, their clergy, and politicians are not monolithic (de Silva 1998), yet it appears that the deep-seated nationalist ideology influenced by political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism may be irreversible. In turn, the extent to which Sri Lankans of different religious and ethnic persuasions may coalesce under conditions of equality, self-respect, and peace is uncertain.

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*a political solution...  
rooted in meaningful  
devolution...is unlikely*

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## Ethnic Demographics and Sons of the Soil: Myths of Provenance

According to the last all-island census conducted in 1981, Sri Lanka's population consisted of: Sinhalese (73.95 percent); Sri Lankan Tamils (12.70 percent); Indian Tamils (5.52 percent); Sri Lankan Moors (Muslims) (7.05 percent); Burghers and Eurasians (0.26 percent); and Malays (0.32 percent). The same census indicated that 69.3 percent of the island's population was Buddhist, while 15.48 percent, 7.55 percent, and 7.61 percent were Hindu, Muslim, and Christian, respectively. Approximately 10 percent of Sinhalese and Tamils are Christians, with most being Catholic. The Sinhalese speak Sinhala, and the Tamils and Muslims speak Tamil. The Muslims, however, utilize their religious identity as their primary identity, thus differentiating themselves from the Tamils. Rarely does one run into a Sinhalese who is Hindu or a Tamil who is Buddhist. The Indian Tamils came to the island in the eighteenth century as indentured laborers to work on plantations, just like their predominantly South Indian cousins migrated to Africa and the Caribbean. Although some sympathize with the Sri Lankan Tamils, they are not involved in Sri Lanka's civil war.

Both the Sinhalese and Tamils resort to mytho-history to legitimize "sons of the soil" status, with the Sinhalese claiming their ancestors were the first to arrive on the island from North India. Sinhalese derive this certainty from the *Mahavamsa* (Great Chronicle), first written around the sixth century CE and updated during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and eighteenth centuries to explain Buddhism's ascendance and preeminence in Sri Lanka.

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*the Sinhalese claim...their  
ancestors were the first to  
arrive on the island*

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Ernest Renan has observed that "the nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (Renan 1996: 52). The *Mahavamsa* helps link past and present and enables the Sinhalese Buddhist nation to coalesce as a spiritual principle.

The vast majority of Sinhalese Buddhists have not read the *Mahavamsa*; but the text occupies such a central place in their collective *raison d'être* that they are intimately familiar with it. Indeed, without appreciating the extent to which the island's Buddhists have internalized

and embraced the *Mahavamsa* as sacred and indisputable history, it is impossible to comprehend the passion with which Sinhalese Buddhists relate to Sri Lanka, the impetus for political Buddhism on the island throughout the twentieth century, and the implications for the ethnic conflict and conflict resolution.

According to the *Mahavamsa*, Prince Vijaya and 700 followers landed on the island after the deposed prince was forced into exile from his father's kingdom in the land of the Vangas. Sinhalese believe the land of the Vangas was located somewhere in today's West Bengal and Bangladesh and claim Vijaya as their progenitor.

The *Mahavamsa* says that the daughter of the king of Vanga, as prophesied, was carried away by a lion and forced to cohabit with it. They conceived a boy and a girl. The son, Sinhabahu, eventually killed his leonine father, became king, and married his sister, Sinhasivali. They in turn had twin sons, of whom Vijaya was the eldest. Gananath Obeyesekere (1970: 45) has observed that this origin myth is rooted in bestiality (due to the princess cohabiting with a lion), parricide (due to Sinhabahu killing his father), and incest (due to the siblings marrying); but the story provides a “*mythomoteur*’ or constitutive myth of the [Sinhalese] ethnic polity” (A. Smith 1986: 15) that enables Vijaya’s supposed progeny to call themselves “people of the lion.” It also partly explains the sword-carrying lion on the country’s national flag, which most among Sri Lanka’s minorities disregard because it represents a hegemonic Sinhalese symbol.

The *Mahavamsa* myth also claims Vijaya landed in Sri Lanka the day Lord Buddha died, thus suggesting the island was destined to be a repository for Theravada Buddhism and leading to the widely held Buddhist belief that the country is *Sihadipa* (island of the Sinhalese) and *Dhammadipa* (the island ennobled to preserve and propagate Buddhism). This belief is mainly influenced by the *Mahavamsa*’s claim that Lord Buddha visited Sri Lanka thrice: first in the southeast, where he forced the *Yakshas* (demons) into submission; second in the north, where he similarly forced the *Nagas* (snake beings) into submission; and third in the south and elsewhere to consecrate the island as a sanctuary for Buddhism. The *Mahavamsa* claims that Vijaya arrived in Sri Lanka and Lord Buddha died in 543 BCE, although most scholars place the Buddha’s death between 486 and 483 BCE. The *Mahavamsa* clearly was written to legitimize, cement, and propagate the Buddhist association with Sri Lanka. Yet in the hands of opportunistic elites, it has taken the place of indisputable history. Renan has noted that all ethnic identities are constructed and that “getting its history wrong is part of being a nation” (Hobsbawm 1990: 12). Forgetting and inventing are prerequisites to creating an “imagined community.” The Sinhalese Buddhists are no exception.

Upon landing in Sri Lanka, Vijaya is said to marry a demoness called Kuveni, with whom he has a son and a daughter. Vijaya thereafter drives away Kuveni and the children into the forest, however, and their progeny are said to be today's *Veddās* (Sri Lankan aborigines). Vijaya then marries a princess from Madurai in South India, but what the Vijaya myth today does not emphasize is that this marriage makes the Tamils "not only kin-folk but also cofounders of the nation" (Obeyesekere 2006: 139).

The Vijaya myth is now taught in schools, so that most Sinhalese children consider it indisputable history. As Renan also has observed: "Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory, . . . this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea" (Renan 1996: 52). The Vijaya myth provides much of that, as do other myths and dubious historical episodes that have helped foster a modern Sinhalese Buddhist identity antithetical to the tolerance espoused by Buddhism.

The Sinhalese Buddhist myth that has been most baneful to interethnic harmony is the embellished and dissembled account in the *Mahāvamsa* dealing with King Duthagamani (second century BCE). According to this myth, Duthagamani was the son of a southern ruler who was exceedingly unhappy when Cholas from South India usurped power in Anuradhapura, the island's capital at the time. The young Duthagamani went to battle against the Chola king Elara and killed him. The *Mahāvamsa* makes clear that Elara was among thirty-two rulers Duthagamani waged battle against and that many Buddhist rulers supported Elara. The *Dīpavamsa*, precursor to the *Mahāvamsa*, makes no special mention of a war between Duthagamani and Elara. But nearly a century later the *Mahāvamsa's* author, Mahanama, elaborated at length on the account. The battle may have been a regional affair. Mahanama also may have exaggerated the Duthagamani-Elara episode to overcome "sectarian struggles" within the *sangha* and privilege his order at a time when it was being marginalized (Kulke 2000: 134). Whatever the reasons, Buddhist nationalists, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have emphasized the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities of Duthagamani and Elara, respectively, and have claimed that the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict is two millennia old.

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***Buddhist nationalists...claim...  
that the Sinhalese-Tamil  
conflict is two millennia old***

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A number of details in the Duthagamani myth help solidify Sinhalese Buddhist identity. Duthagamani's army is said to be accompanied by five hundred ascetic Buddhist monks; one of Duthagamani's leading generals is an ex-monk named Theraputtabhaya, who rejoins the *sangha* (Buddhist order) after Elara and his army are defeated; and Duthagamani goes to war carrying a spear containing a relic of the Buddha himself. When Duthagamani laments over the thousands he has killed, the eight *arhats* (Buddha's enlightened disciples) who come to console him say: "Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken unto himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts. But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from the heart, O ruler of men."<sup>1</sup>

The Duthagamani myth thus not only provides a context, no matter how dubious, for thinking that the Sinhalese and Tamils have been nemeses for two millennia, but also justifies dehumanizing non-Sinhalese, if doing so is necessary to preserve, protect, and propagate the *dhamma* (Buddhist doctrine). Furthermore, it legitimizes a just war doctrine, provided that war is waged to protect Buddhism. Together with the Vijaya myth, it introduces the bases for the Sinhalese Buddhist belief that Lord Buddha designated the island of Sri Lanka as a repository for Theravada Buddhism. It claims the Sinhalese were the first humans to inhabit the island (as those who predated the Sinhalese were subhuman) and are thus the true "sons of the soil." Additionally, it institutes the belief that the island's kings were beholden to protect and foster Buddhism. All of these legacies have had ramifications for the trajectory of political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

As noted, nineteenth and twentieth century Buddhist nationalists deftly used the Duthagamani myth to institute Sinhalese Buddhist domination. According to Walpola Rahula, "The entire Sinhalese race was united under the banner of the young Gamini [i.e., Duthagamani]. This was the beginning of nationalism among the Sinhalese. . . . A non-Buddhist was not regarded as a human being. Evidently all Sinhalese without exception were Buddhists" (Rahula 1956: 79). Rahula is no doubt influenced by the Duthagamani myth in dehumanizing non-Buddhists.

Some scholars take umbrage that such myths are utilized to highlight Sinhalese Buddhist identity and political Buddhism (Wickremeratne 2006: 120–23), but politicians, the *sangha*, and their acolytes regurgitate these accounts to justify policy prescriptions, including ethnocentric practices,

and legitimize their standing as good and valiant Sinhalese Buddhists. Some even equate themselves with these mytho-historic heroes. For instance, the military successes against the LTTE under the current Rajapakse government have led to Rajapakse being compared to Duthagamani.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of 2006, a massive cardboard cut-out of Rajapakse was even erected at the junction at Maradana, Colombo, proclaiming, “Our President, Our Leader; He is Next to King Dutugemenu.”

If Sinhalese claim that their Buddhist ancestors were the first to settle the island, some Tamils argue that their Dravidian ancestors, who on a clear day could see Sri Lanka from southern India, were ever-present and that originally all Sri Lankans were Tamils; it was Buddhism and its Pali scriptures that created an “ascriptive cleavage” among the Dravidians and thereby divided the islanders into Sinhalese and Tamils (Ponnambalam 1983: 20). Commonsense suggests that if people from Southeast Asia could have migrated to Australia some 35,000–40,000 years ago, it is unlikely that South Indians did not know about and try to investigate Sri Lanka, which is only twenty-two miles across the shallow Palk Straits (DeVotta 2004b: 25). Indeed, anthropological studies evidence how many people of Dravidian ancestry (even during the past two generations) embraced the Sinhala language and became classified as Sinhalese (Manor 1994: 774; Roberts 1995).

The LTTE’s attempt to be the sole representative of Tamils has led some of its supporters to emphasize the state’s antiminority policies and mask caste, class, and regional differences among Tamils. The Tamil community is diverse (Wickramasinghe 2006: 254–67; DeVotta 2007) and should not be represented in a monolithic fashion. The exploits of the LTTE and its leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, have also become part of Tamils’ mytho-history, especially for those who are part of the global Tamil diaspora.

Myths clearly have been used, especially since the nineteenth century, for politicking purposes and have been deleterious to the fashioning of a peaceful polyethnic society with a common Sri Lankan identity. Sinhalese and Tamil claims and counterclaims notwithstanding, Buddhism thrived in Sri Lanka even as it lost its luster in the rest of

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*Buddhism thrived in Sri Lanka*

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South Asia. Thanks to the creativity of certain outstanding monarchs, the island’s Buddhists crafted a remarkable civilization even as some among them later used their religion to craft an insidious nationalist ideology.

### **Explaining Political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism**

Scholars disagree about the historical periods when Sinhalese Buddhist identity and its attendant nationalism were forged. K. N. O. Dharmadasa argues that this identity had been established by the fifth century CE (Dharmadasa 1992b and 1996). R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, on the other hand, argues that while successive South Indian invasions and the pillaging of Buddhist temples helped consolidate Buddhist identity in precolonial times, it was only during British colonial rule “that the Sinhalese consciousness underwent a radical transformation” (Gunawardana 1990: 70). K. Indrapala (2005) claims that Sinhalese and Tamils developed distinct identities only around the thirteenth century, although miscegenation and acculturation continued. Gananath Obeyesekere suggests it may be impossible to provide a definitive date when such identity and ideology were solidified (Obeyesekere 2006: 161–62, fn. 18). Bruce Kapferer traces the provenance of modern Sinhalese Buddhist ideology to the ontological aspirations of ancient monks and argues that “the ideological distortions of the past” have enabled “the foundation of the ideological distortions of the present” (Kapferer 1988: 82). Others (Kemper 1991; Rogers 1990; Sabaratnam 1997; DeVotta 2004b) also make clear that Sri Lanka’s unique Buddhist history has been reinterpreted and manipulated to suit the needs and aspirations of modern times. Because the requisite imagining had been performed centuries before, modern Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists did not need to recreate a mythohistory when they began calibrating an ideological project to ensure their group’s supremacy.

Some point to this indelible consciousness crafted over 2,000 years to explain how Sri Lanka’s predominantly Buddhist society could have tolerated, and some among its *bhikkhus* justified and encouraged, ethnoreligious violence (B. Smith 1978; Little 1994). Tessa Bartholomeusz (2002) claimed a strong just war doctrine exists within Theravada Buddhism. However, as Premasiri points out, Buddhism emphasizes nonviolence, but “considers conflict as an unavoidable evil in society” (Premasiri 2006: 82). Violence thus has little to do with Buddhism and much to do with the socio-psychological cravings of human society.

Others point to British colonial practices that intensified racial, class, and religious divisions and argue that such divide-and-rule policies and the attendant marginalization of Buddhism are mainly responsible for the extant political Buddhism and violence (Malalgoda 1976; Tambiah 1992). A number of scholars also have suggested that glaring contradictions in Buddhism, especially related to the island’s ethnic conflict, can be

explained by the manner in which Buddhism has sought to negotiate various modernist challenges of the twentieth century (Obeyesekere 1970 and 1995; Seneviratne 1999; Gombrich 1988; Bartholomeusz and de Silva 1998). One author claims that when the LTTE's attempt to divide the island and its attacks against the clergy and temples are taken into consideration, "the anti-Tamil sentiment of some members of the *Sangha* and their approval of war do not actually constitute a betrayal of Buddhism as it has evolved in Sri Lanka" (Tilakaratne 1994, as quoted in de Silva and Bartholomeusz 2001: 11). This, however, fails to explain the rabid anti-Tamil sentiments among some in the *sangha* during the two decades preceding the LTTE's formation. Another author suggests that "given the ideological universality of violence and its ubiquitous presence," the violence seen in Sri Lanka may not be an "aberration, or . . . a uniquely Sri Lankan phenomenon" (Wickremeratne 2006: 126). In short, Sinhalese Buddhists are no different from other groups when it comes to tolerating and perpetrating violence.

India's proximity to Sri Lanka and its 850 million Hindus (over 60 million of whom are Tamils in the southern state of Tamil Nadu), the millions of Muslims in nearby states, and the dominance of Christianity in the West are also said to have caused "a deep seated sense of insecurity" (*The Island* 2006a) among the Sinhalese Buddhists, leading this majority community to suffer from a minority complex and embrace nationalism. From this standpoint, political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism are phenomena based on regional pressures, threats, and insecurities.

Yet others have sought to understand political Buddhism and its subsequent nationalism and violence within the context of fundamentalist movements (Bartholomeuz and de Silva 1988). Fundamentalist movements seek ethnic, religious, and cultural domination using historical or religious texts that delineate certain fundamental beliefs and practices. Thus the bases for Christian, Jewish, and Islamic fundamentalisms are the Bible, Torah (or Pentateuch), and Koran, respectively.

Theravada Buddhism (the Buddhism practiced in Sri Lanka, India, and Burma that is doctrinally closest to Lord Buddha's teachings) is based on the *Tripitakaya*, which comprises the *Vinaya Pitakaya* (Book of Discipline), *Sutra Pitakaya* (Buddha's Discourses), and *Abidhamma Pitakaya* (Philosophical Teachings). The *Tripitakaya*, however, is a religious text that has nothing to offer Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, who instead justify their claims and ideology using the *Mahavamsa*. Sinhalese Buddhists base their colonization myth and notions of *Sihadipa* and *Dhammadipa* on the *Mahavamsa*, because the *Mahavamsa*, while "not a canonical text, . . . nevertheless has canonical authority" (Ibid.: 4).

According to Marty and Appleby (1991: 819–21), fundamentalist movements, divergent cultures notwithstanding, tend to include certain common characteristics: they are dependent on religion for legitimating purposes; they operate with a clear sense of who does and does not belong to the group; they espouse a belief in radical eschatologies; and they dramatize and mythologize their enemies. Buddhist fundamentalism encompasses these traits as well, although not all agree that the fundamentalist label is the best way to describe and understand Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka (Manor 1994: 770–84).

In a seminal article and subsequent related publications, Obeyesekere referred to the cultural and political shifts postindependence Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka was experiencing as “Protestant Buddhism,” given that “many of its norms and organizational forms are historical derivatives from Protestant Christianity” and that “it is a protest against Christianity and its associated Western political dominance prior to independence” (Obeyesekere 1970: 46–47). Although it may be a misnomer to refer to Theravada Buddhism as Protestant Buddhism (Holt 1990), Obeyesekere was seeking to explain the significant ways in which the *sangha* was being challenged by the modern milieu confronting it. The political Buddhism of the *sangha* may indeed be due to such challenges.

The problem for Buddhists is that even as monks have become increasingly involved in politics, the concomitant forces of modernization and their attendant materialistic culture have in turn corrupted the monks. Thus some monks run nursery schools, garages, taxi services, and even operate as investment specialists (Seneviratne 2001: 16). Others discard *vinaya* (monastic) rules and demand that alms given to temples include

chicken (Obeyesekere 2006: 135). Some monks smoke, imbibe alcohol, maintain paramours, take bribes, and resort to homosexual activity with *samaneras* (novices). Many monks refuse to serve in rural areas and to participate in all night *pirith* ceremonies, and some are known to fraternize with village and town thugs. A few have applied for drivers licenses and to become lawyers. One monk recently insisted on being allowed to take an endurance test so he could

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***modernization and...  
materialistic culture...  
corrupted the monks***

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become an Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP), leading *The Island* newspaper to say, “We have had Provincial Council monks, MP monks and now it looks as if we are going to have ASP monks as well” (*The Island* 2007a). Many monks also leave their robes after gaining a university education, thereby further depleting the *sangha*. In short, although the *sangha*

may be no better or worse than the clergy among other established religions, such mercenary and immoral practices threaten an institution that has played a pivotal role for over two millennia in Sri Lanka and perhaps further contributes to political Buddhism.

### **Factors Promoting Political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism**

Buddhism, as traditionally practiced, was dependent on largesse from the state or lay persons to survive. It therefore thrived among generous benefactors from the royalty or rich individuals in society. In Sri Lanka too an interdependent relationship took hold between the Buddhist clergy and those governing the state: the *sangha* supported and thereby provided legitimacy to rulers, and the rulers promoted Buddhist doctrine by providing steady subvention to the *sangha*. This at times led each party to use and abuse the other, but it was an arrangement that, in the main, enabled Buddhism in Sri Lanka to survive and flourish. Indeed, a number of kings in the Kandyan Kingdom, one of the most important Buddhist sites both past and present, were Tamils from India who adopted Buddhism in order to rule effectively. It is clear that they succeeded, because the *sangha* cared more about these kings providing subventions and protecting Buddhist assets than their ethnicity.

### **Colonialism and Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism**

Sri Lanka was divided into three kingdoms when the Portuguese landed in 1505 (a division that those today clamoring for maintaining the unitary state conveniently disregard). The Kingdoms of Jaffna and Kotte in the north and south, respectively, resisted yet succumbed to the colonial powers, while the Kingdom of Kandy, mainly due to the treacherous terrain in the south-central highlands, fought doggedly and maintained its independence.

The Kandyan Kingdom, however, fell to the British, the third and final colonial power to rule the island, in March 1815. The British consequently became the only colonial power to control the entire island. When the British signed the Kandyan Convention, they wisely agreed to support and protect Buddhism, as had previous local rulers. They continued this policy until the late 1840s, when British evangelicals pressured the colonial government to reverse policy (Malalgoda 1976).

The new colonizers thereby not only failed to live up to their treaty obligations, but supported foreign proselytizers' efforts to make the island a bastion of Christianity. These proselytizers vilified Buddhism and Hinduism and were especially critical of Buddhist monks. Such actions, combined with the British practice of divide and rule, whereby they dis-

proportionately provided government employment to minority Tamils and favored Christians over those of other religions, soon caused the majority Buddhists to mobilize.

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, as we currently know it, is consequently a reactive phenomenon. Notwithstanding the ethnocentric twist foisted by the Duthagamani account in the *Mahavamsa*, Sri Lanka's Buddhists had coexisted with their Hindu counterparts for centuries. Buddhists likewise were tolerant of Christian missionaries during the early colonizing era and went so far as to host proselytizers and provide venues for them to preach the gospel. Such hospitality did not elicit gratitude from the foreign Christian proselytizers; instead, they characterized the monks as careless, indifferent, illiterate, and imbeciles. When the monks retaliated, they evidenced that they could beat the missionaries at their own game.

The monks created associations to better organize themselves (e.g., The Society for the Propagation of Buddhism in 1862 in Kotahena), established printing presses (e.g., Lankopakara Press in Galle in 1862), and resorted to public debates to disabuse Buddhists of Christian teachings. Among the numerous debates held to counter the proselytizing Christian missionaries, the ones in Baddegama (1865), Udanwita (1866), and Gampola (1871) received much attention. But the seminal debate took place August 26–28, 1873, in Panadura, a town south of Colombo. The Buddhists were represented by a formidable monk named Migettuvatte Gunananda Thera, who thereafter was considered the leader of the Buddhist Revival. The revival received a boost when Theosophists Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (a former officer for the North in the American Civil War) and Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky visited the island in May 1880 and publicized British mistreatment of Buddhists. Olcott may not be a familiar name in contemporary America, but his organizational skills led to the creation of a number of excellent Buddhist schools—schools that in a short time churned out middle class men and women who were crucial to solidifying Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

#### Anagarika Dharmapala and Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism

The man who was most responsible for influencing radical change—and can thus be called the father of modern Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism—is Anagarika Dharmapala. Born Don David Hewavitarne in 1864 and initially educated at Christian schools, Dharmapala became influenced by

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*the father of modern Sinhalese  
Buddhist nationalism is  
Anagarika Dharmapala*

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the Theosophists. By the time he reached his mid-twenties he had taken on the name Anagarika Dharmapala (the Homeless Guardian of the Doctrine), adopted a vow of celibacy, and devoted his life to the regeneration and propagation of Buddhism. The British considered Dharmapala a homosexual, although they did not publicize what others also suspected; the minorities considered him a racist. Dharmapala was certainly insensitive and hostile toward all things un-Sinhalese and non-Buddhist, but his attitude must be viewed within the context of Buddhism's marginalized and diminished status in pre-independence Sri Lanka.

Dharmapala claimed that the Sinhalese, who were “the sweet, tender, gentle Aryan children of an ancient, historic race . . . [were now being] sacrificed at the altar of the whiskey-drinking, beef-eating, belly-god of heathenism” (Guruge 1965: 484). He blamed the British for giving “the Aryan Sinhalese poisons of opium and alcohol which are destructive for the continuance of the Sinhalese race” (Ibid.: 530). He encouraged young Buddhists to “believe not the alien who is giving you arrack, whiskey, toddy, sausages” and challenged them to instead “enter into the realms of our King Dutugemunu [or Duthagamani] in spirit and try to identify yourself with the thoughts of that great king who rescued Buddhism and our nationalism from oblivion” (Ibid.: 510). He argued that Buddhism was the only reason “the Sinhalese have not met with the fate of the Tasmanian, the African savage, or the North American Indian” (Ibid.: 207) and proclaimed that “[n]o nation in the world has had a more brilliant history than” the Sinhalese Buddhists (Ibid.: 735). Dharmapala ridiculed Sinhalese Buddhists who adopted British custom and dress: “Fancy the descendents of Vijaya having names like Pereras, Silvas, Almeidas, Diasas, Liveras” (Dharmadasa 1992a: 231). He evidenced that he too had internalized the racist mindset of the colonialists toward Africans by noting, “there is only one other idiotic and loathsome human group in the whole world who indulge in such bovine stupidity. That is the small Kaffir element in Africa who have embraced Christianity. The Sinhalese who follow European ways and those Christianized Kaffirs, both are found behaving in the same manner” (Guruge 1965: 231–32).

Dharmapala oversaw a pro-Sinhalese Buddhist periodical called the *Sinhala Bauddhaya* (Sinhala Buddhist), and he and his followers resorted to undisguised racism to traduce the island's minorities. They may have occasionally equated Sinhalese and Tamil suffering under colonialism, but

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*Dharmapala ridiculed  
Sinhalese Buddhists  
who adopted British  
custom and dress*

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they were consummate Sinhalese Buddhist supremacists. One writer referred to Muslims as “barbarians” vis-à-vis the Aryan Sinhalese (Dharmadasa 1992a: 138). To Dharmapala the Muslims were “alien people . . . [who] by Shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews” (Guruge 1965: 540).

It is difficult to defend Dharmapala against claims of bigotry, although it is also clear that his rhetoric was designed to shame his fellows for embracing all things foreign and, therefore, alien to Sinhalese Buddhist culture. He wanted the Sinhalese to appreciate their ancient, splendid heritage rooted in Buddhism. His harangues were certainly inspired by deliberate British efforts to marginalize Buddhism, but his racist rhetoric also laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of monks and politicians who adeptly manipulated Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism to create an ethnocentric state and thereby propel the island toward civil war.

Dharmapala’s influence on the Sinhalese Buddhists was massive. Thanks to his efforts, thousands cast aside their English names for autochthonous ones, just as he had done; and they adopted the native dress he recommended to replace the Western attire hitherto preferred. People also sought to live by the 200 rules he devised for the laity.

H. L. Seneviratne (1999) has argued that Dharmapala’s agenda comprised both economic and cultural aspects, and that soon after his death in 1933 each was adopted by different groups among the *sangha*. According to Seneviratne, the monks at the Vidyodaya Pirivena subscribed to the moral-economic teachings, emphasized village development and a crime free society, and overall adopted a more pragmatic and progressive stance designed to foster compassion, tolerance, and polyethnic coexistence. The monks associated with the Vidyalankara Pirivena, however, disregarded the moral-economic imperatives in Dharmapala’s teachings and instead merely emphasized anticolonialism, Sinhalese Buddhist cultural renewal, and Buddhist supremacy. Unfortunately for Sri Lanka, the latter won out. The culmination of this victory was the publication of Walpola Rahula’s *Bhiksuvage Urumaya*. The political *bhikkhu* was thus born and has had a baneful influence on the *sangha* and the island’s politics, as discussed below. For Seneviratne, however, Rahula’s political *bhikkhu* is antithetical to the sort of monks Dharmapala clamored to promote, and the dominance of the Rahulites has only corrupted the *sangha* and made monks more materialistic. Even Rahulites are not a monolithic entity and subscribe to variegated opinions (de Silva 1998), but Seneviratne’s point is that we mostly see today a *sangha* that propagates, advocates, and defends Buddhism without following its noble precepts and practices.

### Independence and Religio-Linguistic Nationalism

Although the burgeoning Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and disagreements over representation had led to tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils, their leaders maintained a united front when clamoring for independence from the British, and Sri Lanka became a free state in February 1948. None then could have anticipated the virulence and intolerance Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism would embrace.

The influence of the political *bhikkhus* and the power of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism did not become evident until the revolutionary 1956 election. It was the first election won by a group opposing the United National Party (UNP); the first election that saw a coalition of forces (the so-called Pancha Maha Balavegaya, or Five Great Forces, comprised of teachers, Buddhist monks, farmers, laborers, and *ayurveda* physicians) rally as Sinhalese Buddhists to induce political change; and the first election in which political parties resorted to ethnic outbidding, an insidious practice whereby parties representing the majority community try to outdo each other to provide the best deal for their ethnic kin, usually at the expense of minorities (DeVotta 2004b).

Sinhalese and Tamil leaders had joined forces to clamor for *swabasha* (self-language), whereby both Sinhala and Tamil would replace English as the island's official languages. But S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) realized they could use a Sinhala-only platform to outdo the UNP, and Bandaranaike soon campaigned on the slogan "Sinhala only in twenty-four hours."

The marginalization of Buddhism during colonialism; Britain's divide-and-rule policies that favored the Tamil minority; the subsequent Tamil overrepresentation in the civil service, armed forces, universities, and professional bodies; and the political maturity and patron-client expectations generated from voting had contributed to clamor by Sinhalese Buddhist forces for a Sinhala-only policy. Bandaranaike soon became the leader of this movement. When it became clear that the UNP was not going to prevail over the SLFP by sticking to bilingualism, their party leaders also adopted a Sinhala-only policy. But Bandaranaike and his coalition, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (People's United Front, MEP), enjoyed the monks' support. Indeed, some *bhikkhus* went house to house campaigning for the MEP.

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*Sinhalese and Tamils...  
maintained a united  
front...[in the struggle  
for independence]*

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Clearly linguistic nationalism was the main theme that dominated the 1956 election (Kearney 1967; DeVotta 2004b), but with Sinhala considered the language of Sri Lanka's Buddhists, it was easy for candidates to fuse language and religion for nationalistic purposes. As noted, not all Sinhalese are Buddhists, and tension had existed between the Sinhalese Christian minority and the Sinhalese Buddhist majority; but the quest to

make Sinhala the only official language allowed the Sinhalese to subsume their religious differences and join forces as speakers of a common language. Also in 1956, Buddhists celebrated the Buddha Jayanthi, the 2,500th anniversary of Lord Buddha's death. This enabled Buddhist nationalists to infuse religion

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*linguistic nationalism...  
dominated the 1956 election*

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into the debate on language. With Buddhist monks playing a leading role in forcing the government to institute a Sinhala-only policy, it is not surprising that some like G. P. Malalasekera, who was a leading proponent of the policy, could claim that "[t]he [1956] Ceylon elections were decided on a few very clear-cut issues. The chief of these was the Buddhist issue."<sup>3</sup>

Religion and language are paramount to group identity, and they often promote zero-sum considerations, as was the case in the decision to institute an official language following the 1956 elections. An equal position would have required making both languages national languages, as the *swabasha* movement had initially proposed. But with Sinhalese leaders having committed to a Sinhala-only policy, the stage was set for Tamil nationalism to counter Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike thought he could accommodate the Tamil language after becoming prime minister, but he underestimated the forces with which he had colluded to attain the premiership. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists thus forced him to abrogate agreements reached with moderate Tamils. Buddhist monks played a major role in exerting such pressure, with monks leading protest rallies and hunger strikes against the Tamil language and the Tamil population's legitimate grievances. In September 1959 a Buddhist monk, Talduwe Somarama, shot Bandaranaike at his official residence, and the prime minister died soon thereafter. The SLFP ended up recruiting Bandaranaike's wife, Sirimavo, to lead the party; and she became prime minister, and the world's first ever woman leader, in July 1960.

Given the SLFP's rhetoric during the 1956 election, one could not blame voters for believing the Sinhala-only policy would change their fortunes for the better overnight. Of course, fortunes did not change

overnight, and in trying to expeditiously meet the expectations of those who voted for the SLFP, Mrs. Bandaranaike pursued illiberal policies that sought to pander to her Sinhalese Buddhist constituency—policies that emboldened the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists even as they radicalized Tamil nationalists and disenchanted Tamil youth. Thus, Sinhala-only was introduced to the court systems even in the predominantly Tamil northeast, and Sinhalese civil servants were stationed in Tamil areas to ensure linguistic hegemony; Tamil civil servants were forced to study Sinhala in order to be promoted; well-calibrated policies were introduced to keep the number of Tamils hired into government service extremely low; Tamils were required to score higher on exams to gain entry into the country's universities; quota systems were introduced to increase the number of Sinhalese university students, in particular from rural areas; the government avoided allocating resources to Tamil areas and only invested in the northeast to support transplanted Sinhalese from the south who were promoting the state's colonization designs; and Buddhism was provided the "foremost place" in the island's 1972 constitution, thereby discarding the island's secular status. Indeed, within sixteen years of the 1956 election, Sri Lanka regressed from a vaunted liberal democracy to an illiberal ethnocracy (DeVotta 2004b; 2002a).

The first ever anti-Tamil riots took place a couple of months after the 1956 election. More anti-Tamil riots followed in 1958, 1977, and 1981. The 1983 anti-Tamil riots were a veritable pogrom, with Buddhist monks leading rioters in some instances. The 1983 riots led to the ongoing ethnic conflict, from which a Tamil diaspora of between 800,000 and one million has fled and now helps support the LTTE. Over 70,000 have been killed, and tens of thousands of poor and innocent Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims displaced. What is arguably most tragic is that the 1956 election forced Sri Lanka to adopt a trajectory that disempowered Sinhalese and Tamil moderates and instead empowered extremists. Now the LTTE—which is branded a terrorist organization by the European Union, India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada—is pitted against a radical Sri Lankan state responsible for manifold human rights violations. The extremists feed off each other, but the majoritarian rule that has sustained them has also jettisoned secularism, encouraged jingoistic political parties, and created a nationalist ideology that undermines attempts at conflict resolution.

### **Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism and Secularism**

The ideological basis for a secularist tradition includes colonialism, especially under the British; the Western-educated elites' belief in the virtues

of secularism, exposure to universal franchise, and attempts, together with the British, to ensure the country evolved into a liberal democracy; and the tolerance espoused by the Buddhist religion. Yet if these antecedents buttressed secularism, they also influenced the Buddhist nationalist trek toward communalism. For example, colonialism may have exposed the elites and many others to liberal ideas and ideals, but the colonial influence also deliberately marginalized Buddhism.

For most Westerners, the word secularism denotes “absence of religion” or “neutrality on religion,” and a secular state is considered to be one that eschews religious influence in governance. Thus the Establishment Clause in the U.S. Constitution is used to claim that America was created as a secular state, although this separation has always been contested (Sandel 1998). In fact, although the West touts the values of secularism, Western countries have had to seek various compromises regarding coherence of the religious and the secular. It is therefore hardly surprising that secularism has also been an issue in South Asian states like Sri Lanka, where religion is omnipresent at all levels of interaction. Consequently, in the South Asian context, secularism may be defined as “equal respect for all religions (and for those who choose not to follow any religion)” (Aiyar 2004: 5).<sup>4</sup>

Three main Buddhist *nikayas* (sects), organized along caste lines, exist in Sri Lanka: Siam (comprising the Asgiriya and Malwatte chapters), Amarapura, and Ramanna. The Siam Nikaya is the largest and numbers close to 18,000 monks, while the Amarapura Nikaya has over 11,000 monks. The Ramanna Nikaya only consists of around 7,500 monks. Although each *nikaya* maintains a hierarchy, no clear-cut, indisputable hierarchy exists across the *sangha* (as, for example, one sees in the Catholic Church), and the *sangha* has often been unruly (de Silva and Bartholomeusz 2001: 14).

Consequently, the *mahanayakes* (chief priests) of the *nikayas* command enormous influence, and politicians cave in to their every whim and fancy. The resultant milieu is one in which few major decisions, especially regarding ethnic issues, get made without the Buddhist leaders’ imprimatur. In some instances *mahanayakes* have changed their positions after being provided with Benz cars and millions of rupees in “donations,” although such corruption has not been related to issues promoting secularism.

Sri Lanka’s constitution gives Buddhism the “foremost place” on the island, without making it the state religion. Those defending Buddhism’s special status in Sri Lanka claim that if non-Protestants cannot ascend to the throne in the United Kingdom, the head of state and a third of the

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***Sri Lanka’s constitution gives  
Buddhism the “foremost place”***

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House of Representatives must be Lutherans in Norway, and the proposed European Union constitution can seek to adopt a Christian identity, then giving Buddhism the foremost place in Sri Lanka is very appropriate (*The Island* 2004a).

According to Article 9 of the constitution, “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).” Article 10 provides for “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice,” and Article 14(1)(e) gives the individual the right “to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching,” alone or as part of a group, “in public or in private.” Even the draft constitutions fashioned by the Chandrika Kumaratunga government in the mid-1990s provided Buddhism privileged status, going beyond the 1972 and 1978 (present) constitutions to attempt to organize a Supreme Council comprising the chief priests, who would ensure Buddhism was protected and fostered. In addition, the Kumaratunga constitution proposed a Minister of Buddhist Affairs with cabinet rank and government support for Buddhist education by providing textbooks, building Buddhist educational centers, allocating land for Buddhist activities, and renovating Buddhist temples.

Extremist Buddhist organizations—ably assisted by the nationalist Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka—have long tried to introduce a nineteenth amendment to the constitution and thereby make Buddhism the official state religion. They want to prohibit all those born Buddhist from converting to any other religion while, it seems, allowing those from other religions to convert to Buddhism. These organizations insist that only a Sinhalese Buddhist culture exists (or ought to exist) in Sri Lanka, which suggests that the only valid ethnic identity for a Sri Lankan is a Sinhalese Buddhist identity. Their leaders argue that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist state, and accommodating other religions on an equal footing would make the country a secular state, which they claim they would fight to their deaths to prevent. Ironically, although they all laud Sri Lanka’s democratic status (which is understandable given that the island’s illiberal democracy has consistently enabled their preferences), they insist on a democracy devoid of secularism.

Sri Lanka’s Hindus, Muslims, and Christians have protested occasionally over Buddhism’s special standing, but the political *bhikkhus’* influence has only increased in the past four decades since Buddhism was first provided foremost status. Indeed, any attempt to rearrange the status quo would most likely unleash religious turmoil, which is the last thing an already war weary Sri Lankan society needs. Today Buddhist ceremonies

are afforded a prominent place on radio and television, all major state functions are accompanied by Buddhist rituals, and a Buddhist television channel was inaugurated in July 2007. Hindu, Christian, and Muslim clergy are asked to participate at major national functions, although typically the Buddhist prelates are the most conspicuous and dominate religious proceedings. Even non-state-related events, such as the Sri Lankan cricket team leaving the island to play abroad, are often preceded by the *sangha* dispensing their blessings. That some of these ceremonies are calibrated to conspicuously emphasize Buddhism's indefeasible status, as opposed to being rooted in deep religious belief, is evident by how the cricket team, for example, gets a blessings-filled homecoming only if it has not disgraced itself abroad. It is now standard practice for a newly elected prime minister or president to offer flowers at a Buddhist temple (usually the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy), and in so doing pay obeisance to the *sangha* even while reiterating the state's Buddhist credentials. Indeed, even non-Buddhists nominated to prominent government positions are expected to visit leading Buddhist prelates before assuming office. To do otherwise would be blasphemy before Buddhist eyes and would undermine the official's political or administrative career.

All this notwithstanding, many Buddhists have joined forces with their non-Buddhist counterparts to promote inter-religious cooperation. The Inter-Religious Alliance for National Unity, although not necessarily clamoring for all religions to be treated equally, provides a forum for cooperation and abstains from the antisecularist rhetoric espoused by extremist forces. Other organizations, such as the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality, also wield a positive influence. One may fairly assume that the various local and foreign civil society groups (including various NGOs) are potential allies when promoting a truly secular society. That said, little noise has been made in Sri Lanka over the past three decades for religious equality or anything resembling the U.S. Constitution's Establishment Clause. In any case, the Buddhist clergy and Buddhist politicians view the latter as a Western construct unsuited for Sri Lanka and Buddhism. They do have a point: Buddhism, as noted, has always had patrons, be they rich private individuals or the monarchy. The nature of the religion mandates that not all in society can practice its precepts at the same level. The perpetuation of Buddhism is thus dependent on patronage. The question, however, is whether the source of the patronage ought to be the state (with other religions not provided similar largesse) and whether Buddhist leaders should dictate the state's decisionmaking processes, as at times does Sri Lanka's *sangha*.

The *sangha* remains the most important force opposing secularism in Sri Lanka: hardly one prominent monk in the entire country is willing to

call for all religions to be treated equally. This reluctance is partly due to the fact that they all believe Sri Lanka was the destined repository for Theravada Buddhism and that the preferential status for Buddhism has now been institutionalized. Not only have many Buddhist monks facilitated and encouraged communalism, especially in the postindependence era, but many have threatened to further undermine secularism and interethnic coexistence. Some have demanded that *bhikkhus* be allowed to serve as election observers. They also demand a consultative role (read veto) over any attempt to draft a new constitution. Although monks, like all others in society, are entitled to voice their opinions on such matters, the demands made by the radical *bhikkhus* would make them constitutional engineers—a role they are usually unsuited for, if only because their narrow religious education typically precludes the requisite training in political theory, political science, and international affairs, areas in which a constitutional expert could be expected to have some specialization.<sup>5</sup>

Some extremist monks, like their lay colleagues, also argue that federalism (or devolution of power) would eventually dismember the island and that a unitary state that ensures Buddhism's dominant status is *sine qua non*s for propagating Theravada Buddhism. Fears concerning a fractious and disunited *sangha* may be associated with many monks' aversion to devolution (de Silva 2006), although the separatist conflict has certainly encouraged a militarist and uncompromising attitude among Sri Lanka's Buddhist clergy (Premasiri 2006: 79). Thus, for instance, when asked in an interview if "fighting" (i.e., waging war) was justifiable from the standpoint of the *dhamma*, Walpola Rahula replied: "Why not? Take King Kosala a disciple of the Buddha. He did fearlessly fight terrorism in his Empire. The solution has to be the solution of the majority of the people" (Peiris 1996).

Monks justify Buddhism's privileged status by arguing that Hindus control India, Muslims the Middle East, and Christians the West, whereas Buddhists have only tiny Sri Lanka. The National Sangha Council also has encouraged the armed forces to disobey civilian leadership if the main political parties pursue negotiations with the LTTE. Indeed, some monks have threatened to go house to house to prevent devolution from being instituted, and some have even defrocked themselves to serve in the army as foot soldiers. With President Rajapakse equating service to the *sangha* with service in the military (Bandara 2007), it would not be surprising if more monks took to the gun. These political *bhikkhus*

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*some monks...even defrocked themselves to serve in the army*

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hold rallies, go on hunger strikes, block the road to parliament, and threaten all sorts of instability if the government hints that it will ignore their preferences. These actions hardly promote interethnic accommodation and secularism.

As evidenced above, Sri Lanka's major political parties have manipulated the monks—seeking their imprimatur to legitimize political platforms but trying to counter their influence upon winning office—and some frustrated *bhikkhus* have tried to play a more direct role in politics. At the same time, new parties fully subscribing to the nationalist ideology have attained prominence, and the UNP and, especially, the SLFP have adopted hard-line positions. Three political parties have played prominent roles in furthering and consolidating the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology. Their politicking and relative success, addressed below, partly suggest why a political solution to the ethnic conflict has eluded Sri Lanka.

### **Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Political Parties**

In postindependence Sri Lanka, numerous extremist Sinhalese organizations have mobilized against the devolution of power to the Tamils. These groups support political Buddhism even as they manipulate Buddhism. They most certainly are among the protagonists promoting the nationalist ideology. The three most prominent political parties in this regard are the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front—JVP), the Sinhala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage Party—SU), and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Sinhalese Heritage Party—JHU).

#### **Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna**

The JVP first came to prominence when it sought to topple the second Sirimavo Bandaranaike government in 1971. The military, with Indian assistance, crushed the insurrection, leading to over 10,000 deaths. The JVP joined the mainstream in the late 1970s but was among the three parties President J. R. Jayewardene banned after the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. Jayewardene falsely claimed that the JVP was part of a “Naxalite conspiracy” responsible for the anti-Tamil violence. His real motive was to cover up the carnage the United National Party's thugs and racist politicians had perpetrated during the insurrection.

The JVP initially sympathized with the Tamils' plight and even argued that its cadres and Tamil rebels were fighting against the same oppressive regime, but the party changed its position and embraced nationalistic rhetoric when doing so suited its purposes. The JVP turned especially nationalistic after the July 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord was signed. The accord was exceedingly unpopular in the mostly Sinhalese south, and the banned JVP

vilified the Indian presence and conducted a murderous campaign seeking to topple the government. J. R. Jayewardene promised to crush the JVP, although it was the beleaguered government of President Ranasinghe Premadasa that ultimately retaliated ferociously against the group by unleashing paramilitary forces that systematically carried out thousands of extrajudicial assassinations. By the time the rebellion was completely crushed in January 1990, over 20,000 youths were killed or disappeared.

The JVP reentered mainstream politics in 1994 and is presently a leading nationalist party. It opposes attempts to accommodate the minorities and is hostile toward devolution or a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict. Consequently, the JVP rails against any ceasefire agreement between the government and LTTE, demands that the civil war be prosecuted more forcefully until the rebels have laid down their arms and renounced separatism, and campaigns against the Norwegians who are operating as peace brokers. Having joined the SLFP in January 2004 to form the United People's Freedom Alliance coalition, the JVP left the alliance in June 2005 when President Kumaratunga agreed to the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure with the LTTE.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the party has warned that any concessions made to the LTTE based on the group's Interim Self-Governing Authority proposals (LTTE demands put forward in 2003 as an alternative to a separate state) would lead to another youth uprising like those of 1971 and 1988–90.

The JVP has done well since it reentered mainstream politics. It won ten seats in the October 2000 parliamentary elections and sixteen seats in the December 2001 elections. The party performed best in the April 2004 parliamentary elections, which it entered as part of the United People's Freedom Alliance, and won thirty-nine seats. The JVP is unlikely to repeat such success by participating alone, and this realization will have an impact on how the party continues to adapt to democratic politics.

The JVP has infiltrated the armed forces and commands strong support among the military's rank and file, so much so that in some camps a majority of soldiers may have voted for the JVP in the last parliamentary elections.<sup>7</sup> The JVP has launched fundraising and poster campaigns to support the war; party members have at times accompanied soldiers to the battle field; and party leaders have visited military camps to deliver morale-boosting speeches even though the JVP is not part of the present government. Indeed, in a few years the JVP may be in a position to use friendly elements within the military to conduct a coup d'état. This is especially likely if the LTTE would prove victorious in battles that embarrassed the military and government.

### Sinhala Urumaya and Its Successor, Jathika Hela Urumaya

Sinhala Urumaya (SU) was organized in April 2000 under the pretence that the economic and political fortunes of the Sinhalese people were endangered. Party founders argued that while the Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, and Muslims all had political parties along ethnic lines, the Sinhalese alone did not. Party leaders claimed they were thus forced to organize “to prevent the ultimate betrayal of the Sinhalese people” and promised to ensure that the “aspirations of the majority Sinhalese . . . [will] take precedence over . . . minorities such as the Tamils” (*The Island* 2000).

The SU is not only nationalist; it is patently racist. The party has asked Sinhalese Buddhists to boycott Muslim and Tamil stores, twisted history to encourage violence against minorities (e.g., recasting the anti-Muslim riots of 1915 as an anti-Sinhalese affair), and claimed (during the October 2000 parliamentary elections) that if elected it would commandeer minority-owned businesses and transfer them to the Sinhalese. During the December 2001 parliamentary elections, the party also claimed that if elected it would force all those under

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### *The [Sinhala Urumaya]... twisted history*

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eighteen years of age to join the Buddhist clergy, leading some to wonder if Sri Lanka was witnessing the birth pangs of a Sinhalese “Buddhist-Taliban” (*Sunday Times* 2004a).

The SU, which many predicted would do well during the October 2000 parliamentary elections, especially in the southern regions, captured only 1.47 percent of the national vote. The group fared even worse in the December 2001 parliamentary elections, capturing only 0.57 percent of the vote and not winning a single seat in parliament. The SU did not contest the April 2004 elections; it instead helped create the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), comprised solely of Buddhist monks, which stunned the electorate when it captured nine votes in parliament that year.

A Christian pastor sat in the State Council in the early 1930s, but only in 1943 did the first Buddhist monk contest unsuccessfully for the Colombo Municipal Council. Only in 1957 did a *bhikkhu* win election to a village council in Matara, a city about 100 miles south of Colombo. A number of monks were thereafter elected to village councils. In 1977, a monk unsuccessfully contested a parliamentary seat for the first time (Deegalle 2006: 234–35). The 2001 general elections, however, enabled Baddegama Samitha, a *bhikkhu* from the leftist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Lanka Equal Society Party), to enter parliament from the Galle District in Southern Province for the first time. In this light, the JHU’s performance must be considered revolutionary.

The JHU was organized just two months prior to the elections and barely a week before the deadline for candidates to file their nominations. The party fielded 286 monks. It promoted itself neither as Marxist nor right wing but as one that would ensure good governance within a righteous state (*dharmarajya*). The JHU's elected monks asked not to be called members of parliament but "advisors" to the masses, and argued that their main goal was to create a block in parliament to protect and propagate Buddhist interests. Many Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have embraced the slogan *jathika chinthanaya* (national consciousness). The JHU shares their belief that, given the island's 2,500-year-old civilization, the people should embrace its roots and seek to reinstitute cultural nationalism. Indeed, the term *chinthanaya* has now become a slogan for Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy and, not accidentally, President Rajapakse's election manifesto was advertised as the *Mahinda chinthanaya*, indicating that he seeks to satisfy Sinhalese Buddhists.

The JHU has called for a ban on cattle slaughter, encouraged the government to work with the Karuna faction that broke away from the LTTE, crafted legislation to prohibit Sri Lankans from converting to Christianity, proposed that the government close down garment factories that employ thousands of mostly young rural Sinhalese women, sought to justify Sinhalese Buddhist civilians taking the law into their hands if the government fails to protect them against the LTTE, encouraged the government to arm thousands more Sinhalese home guards so they could protect border villages from the LTTE, demanded that the Norwegians be removed as peace facilitators, sought the de-merger of the Northern Province from the Eastern Province, and insisted on a military solution to the civil war. Although a few Buddhist monks have defrocked themselves and joined the military, peace advocates generally castigate those in the JHU (and JVP) for not making any personal sacrifices when advocating war. As the *Sunday Leader* (2005a) noted in reference to the JHU, the monks, "yellow robes and all, have preferred to play the role of Ayatollahs, sending other mothers' sons off to war, while they sit back and enjoy the *dban* [alms]." The only JHU demand the Rajapakse government has met so far is support for the Karuna faction and pursuit of a military solution to the ethnic conflict. With its monks craving the limelight and harboring political ambitions, the JHU is a divided entity. It, in a real sense, reflects the nonhierarchical *sangha*.

What explains the JHU's rise? The sudden death of the enormously popular Gangodawila Soma Thera, a telegenic monk who was partly responsible for anti-Christian violence in 2003–04, no doubt influenced many monks to engage in politics on a more competitive level, and the

JHU may be part of his legacy. A few monks would like to be successors to Gangodawila Soma, and the JHU provides a platform for them to seek that status. Frustration with mainstream politicians and the sense that typical politicians manipulate and use *bhikkhus* also may have played a role in the JHU's formation. As venerable JHU leader Uduwe Dhammaloka noted, "They [mainstream politicians] come to power with the help of Buddhists, and then they become anti-Buddhists. They don't care about us" (quoted in Biswas 2004). The monks have run the gamut participating in politics for over fifty years; all that was left to do was contest elections directly, and the JHU is a natural extension of such political Buddhism. Furthermore, it appears that the rise in Christian evangelical groups and the fear this has unleashed among Buddhist nationalists about "unethical" conversions also played a role in the JHU's creation.

Many Buddhists are uncomfortable that monks participate so conspicuously in politics, and a 2002 Presidential Commission report recommended that *bhikkhus* not be allowed to contest elections and engage in politics. For those who favor a more secular Sri Lanka, the monks' election to parliament only "lowered the world's opinion of our nation, reducing us to the status of Ayatollah-driven clown 'democracies' like Iran" (*Sunday Leader* 2004). Some secularists, out of anger and frustration, have even referred to the Jathika Hela Urumaya as the *Jathika Hela Karumaya* (National Sinhalese Curse). The vast majority of Buddhists oppose *bhikkhus* seeking political office because they fear it would

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***The vast majority of  
Buddhists oppose [monks]  
seeking political office***

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compromise the *sangha*. Such fears were realized when JHU monks were attacked during the election campaign and assaulted in the well of parliament by some of their colleagues. As *The Island* (2004b) noted, "Buddhist monks who are venerated" were "jeered, abused and had even books thrown at them" during their very first appearance as parliamentarians.

The JVP and JHU ardently support a military solution to the conflict and harbor almost no concern for the plight of innocent Tamil civilians.<sup>8</sup> This attitude was most prominently displayed when they resorted to the "Go Go" (*Yamu, Yamu*) poster campaign, which urged the military to march to the rebels' headquarters in Kilinochchi (after the military had reached the Mavilaru anicut, which the LTTE had taken over and deprived farmers of access to water). Moreover, the parties adopt the same positions regarding devolution and the fostering and propagation of Buddhism. However, they also compete for the same voter base. Consequently, JVP

supporters and politicians were most responsible for the harassment and violence against the JHU monks in 2004.

Although most Buddhists disapprove of monks running for political office, since the mid-1950s the radicals among the *bhikkhus* have avidly lent their imprimatur to political candidates who have sought to marginalize the minorities and create an ethnocracy in Sri Lanka.<sup>9</sup> President Premadasa's regime helped consolidate the monks' ability to organize across the caste divide by creating a Supreme Advisory Council in 1990 (Bartholomeusz and de Silva 1998; Seneviratne 1999; Abeysekara 2002), and, arguably, the monks are now a more potent force than they were in the 1950s. However, given the degree to which the JHU has hitherto compromised itself, the party is unlikely to fare better in future elections. Irrespective of its future success, the party's monks will continue to play an influential role in the effort to expand the extant Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology.

### **The Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology**

In recent times Sri Lanka has experienced numerous controversial incidents impacting various constituencies that have combined to make the country look intolerant and ungovernable. Although these incidents may at first glance appear disconnected, the involvement of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists is a common element in each. Some Buddhists sympathize with the nationalists' position on particular issues (e.g., defeating the LTTE), but it appears that most Sinhalese Buddhists do not support the nationalists in all their activities. This is perhaps why the UNP and SLFP garner the most votes during presidential and parliamentary elections. That notwithstanding, of late the electorate appears increasingly to favor Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists. This is evidenced by the increasing support for a military solution to the conflict, decreasing support for devolution of power to the provincial level or through federalism, the increasing influence of the JVP and JHU in the Rajapakse government, and the government's conspicuous antiminority policies. The new trajectory in Sri Lankan politics is best understood within the context of the now-institutionalized nationalist ideology. The five prominent issues that service that nationalist ideology are addressed below. When combined with the LTTE's intransigence, reference to ideology explains why conflict resolution in Sri Lanka has been intractable and why a settlement to the civil war based on meaningful devolution is unlikely.

#### **Sri Lanka for Sinhalese Buddhists**

As noted previously, most Buddhist nationalists sincerely believe that Buddha designated Sri Lanka the repository of Theravada Buddhism and that the island therefore belongs to Sinhalese Buddhists. As one nationalist

noted in a letter to a newspaper, “Rome is sacred to the Catholics, so is Jerusalem to the Jews and so is Mecca to the Muslims. The tiny island in the Indian Ocean . . . where the Sinhalese lived for over 25 centuries . . . is the hallowed land of Sinhala Buddhists.”<sup>10</sup> For such writers and their fellow nationalists, the claim that Sri Lanka is the land of the Sinhalese Buddhists is indisputable because the *Mahavamsa* says just that. An associated argument holds that all non-Buddhists live in Sri Lanka thanks to the majority community’s benevolence. Thus, cabinet minister Gamini Dissanayake, in a speech

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***For...nationalists...Sri  
Lanka is the land of  
the Sinhalese Buddhists***

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to Tamil estate workers on September 5, 1983—only a month after the most infamous anti-Tamil riots—said:

Who attacked you? Sinhalese. Who protected you? Sinhalese. It is we who can attack and protect you. They are bringing an army from India. It will take 14 hours to come from India. In 14 minutes, the blood of every Tamil in the country can be sacrificed to the land by us. It is not written on anyone’s forehead that he is an Indian or a Jaffna Tamil, a Batticaloa Tamil or upcountry Tamil, Hindu Tamil or Christian Tamil. All are Tamils.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, Dissanayake was considered smart, talented, efficient, suave, articulate, and modern, to the point where many considered him a potential president long before he launched his presidential campaign in the early 1990s. That such an individual could resort to these vile threats says much about the supremacist mindset that has seared the psyches of even progressive Sinhalese Buddhists.

This viewpoint is further strengthened by the fact that for Sinhalese Buddhists notions of state and nation are easily conflated. As the historian K. M. de Silva has noted, “In the Sinhala language, the words for nation, race and people are practically synonymous, and a multiethnic and multi-communal nation or state is incomprehensible to the popular mind. The emphasis on Sri Lanka as the land of the Sinhala Buddhists carried an emotional popular appeal, compared with which the concept of a multiethnic polity was a meaningless abstraction” (K. M. de Silva 1986: 35). Although some Sinhalese Christians may get offended when Sinhalese and Buddhism are used interchangeably, Sinhalese Buddhists find such interchangeability unproblematic. Thus, most Sinhalese Buddhists would not find the following claim by Cyril Mathew, the Minister of Industries who egged on rioters during the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, to be controversial:

The link between the Sinhala race and Buddhism is so close and inseparable that it had led to the maxim, “There is no Buddhism without the Sinhalese and no Sinhalese without Buddhism.” This is an undeniable fact.

The literature of the Sinhalese is Buddhist literature. The history of the Sinhalese is the history of Buddhism. The language of the Sinhalese is enriched by the doctrine of the Buddha. The era of the Sinhalese is the Buddha era. The culture of the Sinhalese is Buddhist culture. The flag of the Sinhalese is the Sinhala Buddhist flag.<sup>12</sup>

Walpola Rahula made the same point in an interview with the *Sunday Times* newspaper:

Get this straight and quote me. Sri Lanka is a Buddhist Sinhala country. Let no one make a mistake. Seventy percent of the country consists of Buddhists and Sinhala people. Also make this clear that Sri Lanka is the only Buddhist Sinhala country in the world. If we don't live here, are the LTTE and some of the Tamil Parties asking us to jump in to the sea?

I got angry with [former Sri Lankan president] Premadasa because he chose to call Sri Lanka a multi-national and multi-religious state. No. It is a Buddhist Sinhala State. . . . (quoted in Peiris 1996).

Such thinking is so ingrained among nationalists that it is quite common to hear people say if the Tamils cannot live in a society dominated by Sinhalese Buddhists they should go back to India. Even some in the Buddhist clergy hold such views (Weerakoon 2004: 377, fn. 10).

Not surprisingly, some in various Sinhalese Buddhist organizations insist that the one valid ethnic identity for a Sri Lankan is a Sinhalese Buddhist identity. They are no different from the extremist Hindu forces in India who want to see a *Hindutva* (Hinduness) agenda instituted so that all Indians, irrespective of their religious beliefs, would embrace a Hindu ethos. Globalization, and especially the spread of religious extremism since the end of the Cold War, have enabled extremists in one country to copy the tactics and demands made by extremists in other countries, even if they belong to different religions. Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have certainly been influenced by their counterparts in India's “saffron movement.”

Some among the nationalists have also demanded a ban on private tuition classes held on Sunday so youth can instead attend religious classes in temples; yet others have suggested controlling the noise created by

loudspeakers used for prayer and the manner in which animals are slaughtered (both of which would especially affect Muslims); and nationalists have, furthermore, tried to erect Buddha statues in non-Buddhist areas to reinforce the notion that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist state, even as they have encouraged laws to control other religions' symbols along the island's highways. A 2002 report published by Sri Lanka's Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission partly demanded that all schools, irrespective of their religious affiliation, fashion "a Buddhist environment for Buddhist children" to assist in "their personality development." It went on to demand that all Christian prayer meetings conducted in houses and buildings other than churches be halted and that the Ministry of the Buddha Sasana be allowed to approve visas for those entering the island for missionary work.

The internet has enabled groups to network and promote their agendas, and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists too have mobilized to share ideas and lend support to each other. Writers usually encourage a military solution to the conflict; they vilify individuals, NGOs, and foreign governments that may protest the Sri Lankan government's disproportionate prosecution of the civil war; and they resort to propaganda that praises the actions of their Sinhalese Buddhist fellows while traducing Tamils. One contributor even recommended a policy of genocide against the island's Tamils, as that "will solve the terrorist problem for good" (Kannangara 2006).

Associated with the belief that Sri Lanka is a nation exclusively for Sinhalese Buddhists is the notion that the Sinhalese are superior vis-à-vis Tamils and Westerners and that historically both groups have been responsible for repressing the Sinhalese, to the point even of colluding during the colonial period. Such conspiracy theories partly help the nationalists explain how, the superiority of their ethnic group notwithstanding, predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist Sri Lanka was vandalized by South Indian regimes and thereafter colonized for nearly 450 years by European powers. Sri Lanka's impressive civilization under its ancient kings is thus valorized and Western accomplishments ridiculed. In short, all things Sinhalese are more virtuous and noble than anything promoted elsewhere. For example, notwithstanding the troubling slide in educational standards in Sri Lanka's universities, those educated abroad are vilified for having been corrupted by Western values and interests that are antithetical to what is supposedly espoused by the sons of the soil (and in this critique only the Sinhalese Buddhists qualify for such lofty status).

The above rhetoric and sentiments are justified by the belief system that claims Sri Lanka is *Sihadipa* and *Dhammadipa*. This belief system is

the most important strand of the now embedded nationalist ideology, for all else follows from it.

### **Nongovernmental Organizations and Western Conspiracy against Sinhalese Buddhists**

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists maintain a virulent anti-NGO sentiment, primarily because NGOs promote the peace process and oppose a military solution to the civil war. With the nationalists bent on defeating the LTTE militarily, all those who support a peaceful settlement automatically are branded terrorist sympathizers, parasites, and traitors (DeVotta 2004a; 2005). Norway has acted as a facilitator between the combatants, and its efforts to treat dispassionately the LTTE as an equal negotiating partner especially has led to vilification of the country and its diplomats. This black-guarding of Norwegians, foreigners, and locals associated with NGOs who call for conflict resolution is another facet of the extant Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology.

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists generally believe that NGOs are influenced by notions of imperialism, are lackeys of those advocating neocolonialism, and are part of a Western conspiracy sympathetic toward LTTE attempts to dismember Sri Lanka. In short, the nationalists see the NGO community as a fifth column for the LTTE and consider “the acronym ‘NGOs’ . . . one of the dirtiest four-letter words in the political vocabulary” (Mahindapala 2006). Thus the JHU’s leader and member of parliament, Ellawela Medananda Thera, has said that “those NGOs and government servants who have requested the surrender of a part of our country are traitors” and “should be set on fire and burnt” (*Daily Mirror* 2006). As one publication ranted, the foreign-funded NGO community resorts to “an anti-Sinhala bias,” given that they are “proponents of an American funded evil Western conspiracy that has every single one of the NGOlogists (this is one of the more endearing terms that those who work in NGOs have been called in recent times) well and truly bagged in its kitty” (*Lanka Academic* 2005).

Among Westerners, the Norwegians especially have borne the brunt of the nationalists’ ire because they are considered biased toward the LTTE. They have thus been called “salmon eating busybodies,” and one contributor to a nationalist website claimed that “the affairs of a Buddhist

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*Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists maintain a virulent anti-NGO sentiment*

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nation should not be in the hands of the ex-Nazi racist Lutheran Vikings and their running dogs the foreign funded NGOs” (*Lanka Web* 2004). Indeed, it is puzzling why the Norwegians have not walked away from trying to facilitate peace, given how they have been excoriated by all levels of Sinhalese society. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have accused the Norwegians of “not only . . . being deliberately blind and deaf, but figuratively ‘dumb’ at best or perverse and dishonest at worst” because they are “propagandists of, or apologists for, the LTTE” and have “left no room for doubt that they are not, and never have been, a balanced, genuine or honest facilitator” (Gunasekera and Dayasri 2006).

Some NGO officials have only themselves to blame given their less-than-honest practices. For instance, immediately following the December 26, 2004, tsunami a number of NGOs, both local and foreign, were set up with no proper coordination, expertise, and oversight; and quite clearly some among them inadvertently or deliberately violated their mandates. Some groups provided further fodder to their critics by using the tsunami crisis to try and import duty free computers, video phones, and other expensive electronic items for personal use. Seeking to avoid rampant government corruption, the vast majority of foreign funds sent to Sri Lanka for tsunami-related programs were channeled via NGOs; consequently, these groups had ample opportunity for misallocating and wasting funds. The fact remains that the local and foreign-funded NGO community mobilized most efficiently to assist those impacted by the tsunami, so much so that one newspaper noted, “their patriotism in this hour of trial has been compared to that shown at Dunkirk” (*Sunday Leader* 2005b). For many, however, the tsunami was a godsend for NGOs living off poor Sri Lankans’ misery, and hence one account noted sarcastically: “When the ascetic Siddhartha attained enlightenment, the first thing he did was to spend a week gazing upon the Esatu Bo Tree that had given him shade during the long years of contemplation. We call it *animisa lochana poojawa*. It was an act of gratitude. Similarly, on December 26 there is something that all NGOs, especially International NGOs, should do. They should all go to the nearest beach and spend a few hours casting their thankful eyes at the sea” (Cooray 2005).

The Buddhist nationalists and the media that support them laud the NGO community whenever it sides against the LTTE, but they take an opposite position whenever NGOs blame the government and security forces for human rights violations or a hard-line attitude toward the peace process.<sup>13</sup> The JVP, for instance, has encouraged its supporters to spit on NGO personnel and accused NGOs of undermining the coun-

try's sovereignty. Most foreign states encourage a federal structure for Sri Lanka as a way out of the civil war, and the JVP and JHU are particularly opposed to such a solution. This is the primary reason for their hostility toward NGOs. The JVP consequently has called for NGOs to be investigated, and the new Rajapakse government has initiated steps to do just that. The government wants to bar all UN agencies and NGOs not connected with the Red Cross from operating in LTTE-controlled areas, and it has taken measures to require all NGOs working in the so-called uncleared areas to register with the Defense Ministry. It even wants all NGOs that decide to terminate operations to turn over their utensils and supplies temporarily to the government so as to prevent these materials from falling into LTTE hands.

A standard operating practice for Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists is to automatically castigate anyone accusing the government or security forces of human rights violations as unpatriotic or pro-LTTE, and the NGO community and intergovernmental representatives typically take the brunt of their criticisms. Tarnishing and blackguarding the messenger is thus a standard strategy to cover up government malfeasance. Thus, in November 2006, after Alan Rock, the UN Advisor for Children and Armed Conflict, accused the country's security forces of colluding with the breakaway Karuna faction, named Tamileela Makkal Viduthalaip Pulikal (Tamileela People's Liberation Tigers), to kidnap children to fight against the LTTE, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists led by Buddhist monks conducted protest marches claiming Mr. Rock was an LTTE supporter.<sup>14</sup>

The belief that a conspiracy exists between NGOs and Western governments to tarnish the image of Sri Lanka and its armed forces, favor the LTTE, and thereby also undermine the island's sovereignty is deep-seated. For instance, after the military pushed back the LTTE in early September 2006 and captured Sampur, a strategic area in the Eastern Province, a nationalist newspaper said: "It is the duty of the hurrah boys and the intellectual pimps in NGO garb drumming up support for the LTTE and the international community to prevail upon him [LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran] to come to terms with reality and depart from the path of violence" (*The Island* 2006b).

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists and the country's military also resent the NGO presence in the northeast because it prevents them from acting in a heavy-handed fashion against the Tamil community. Many Tamil civilians in the northeast depend on the NGO community for sustenance, but they also see NGOs as a buffer against a vindictive military that operates with impunity. For instance, in the recent past government forces and

their anti-LTTE Tamil paramilitary allies have been accused of extorting, raping, torturing, kidnapping, and killing dozens of Tamils, especially in the northeast, and no one has been arrested and prosecuted for such

actions. With the LTTE (often forcibly) training the young and old within their territories to fight, the armed forces and current government feel justified not differentiating between LTTE cadres and civilians when waging war. The state's indiscriminate attacks have led the international community to protest. It is in the military's interest to bar NGOs from investigating such incidents, and

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*Many Tamil civilians...  
see NGOs as a buffer*

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the armed forces, with the government's connivance, have worked to make the NGO presence in these violence-ridden areas difficult and minimal. The military, which is 98 percent Sinhalese, has adopted a hostile attitude toward NGOs working among Tamils. Assassinations have been carried out—as when sixteen Tamil and one Muslim aid workers for the French NGO Action Against Hunger were executed in their office in Mutur in the Eastern Province.<sup>15</sup> Although arguably the worst ever attack against an

NGO anywhere in the world, it is but one in a series of events where the state and nationalist forces have targeted the NGO community working in the northeast. NGO workers are documenting and confirming such crimes, and the military and the nationalists are attempting to stop them. The anti-NGO stance that is a strand of the current Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology must be viewed in this light.

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*the state and nationalist  
forces have targeted the  
NGO community*

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### **Terrorism by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam**

Creation myths framing the two ethnicities as millennia-long antagonists, the British attempt to marginalize Buddhism and favor minority Tamils and Christians over Buddhists, and the realization that democratic politics could be used to institute their preferences allowed Buddhist nationalists to introduce anti-Tamil policies in the postindependence era. But the LTTE's attempt to create a separate Tamil state has especially exercised the nationalists, and their opposition to the LTTE is a major facet of the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology (although nearly all Muslims and many Tamils also now loathe the LTTE for various reasons). The nationalists differ from the general public in their attitude toward the LTTE: the

population at large is more amenable to peace via dialogue and compromise than the nationalists, who are against any form of peace talks and insist on military victory.

The overarching ideology of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists is hostile toward Tamils, but now they can mask that disapproval by directing their wrath at the LTTE.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, extremists commonly seek to put a positive spin on their ideologies, arguing in favor of what they are trying to defend as opposed to focusing on what they loathe. White supremacists, for example, emphasize being pro-white, not anti-black or anti-Jewish. Likewise, India's *Hindutva* forces do not claim to be anti-Muslim; they are simply pro-Hindu. Sri Lanka's Buddhist nationalists too now eschew being anti-Tamil; they merely claim to be pro-Sinhalese Buddhist. Whatever they oppose is justified by this pro-Sinhalese Buddhist stance. They thus perpetuate their anti-Tamil and antiminority agenda even while resorting to a more acceptable rhetoric. The upshot is that only the rhetoric has changed; seeking to further consolidate a supremacist Sinhalese Buddhist state remains their primary goal.

They consequently embrace the refrain that Sri Lanka does not have an ethnic problem; it merely has a terrorist problem. In doing so, they portray the LTTE as the main reason for the civil war, thereby deftly avoiding the civil war's root causes, which have to do with the quest for Sinhalese Buddhist domination. The global war on terror waged by the United States and others has made the nationalists' focus on terrorism effective, and emphasizing it has enabled the present government to deflect questions concerning its gross human rights violations against Tamil civilians.

Tamil nationalism is a reactive phenomenon (Kearney 1967; Tambiah 1986; Harris 1990; Swamy 1995; Wilson 2000; DeVotta 2004b; Sahadevan and DeVotta 2006). The Tigers too were made, not born. Both Tamil nationalism and the subsequent phenomenon of the LTTE were products of ethnocentric policies embraced by successive Sri Lankan governments. As Nigel Harris has aptly observed,

Successive [Sinhalese] governments were more preoccupied with securing their own base among the Sinhalese . . . at virtually any cost—or rather, in the political auction, preventing themselves being pushed out by their rivals. If the Tamils had not existed, Colombo would have had to invent them. And, in an important sense, it did. It was Colombo that forced the inhabitants of the north to become different, to cease to be Sri Lankan and become exclusively Tamil (Harris 1990: 221).

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism acted as midwife during this process by lending legitimacy to the ethnocentric elements. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists categorically refuse to consider that the problem facing the island may be the nature of the Sri Lankan state, because the present state is one that has been crafted according to their preferences.

The nationalist ideology dictates that the LTTE are intransigent, incorrigible, and not to be trusted; the military must therefore eradicate the organization if Sri Lanka's territorial integrity is to be safeguarded. The position is understandable, given the LTTE's quest to divide the island and the nationalists' determination to preserve the island's present unitary status. Since November 2005, when the present Rajapakse government took office, many also have come to ardently believe that the Sri Lankan security forces can militarily defeat the LTTE. They also believe that the vast majority of Tamils sympathize with the LTTE and that it is futile to try and differentiate between innocent Tamil civilians and LTTE cadres. The massive human rights violations that have been perpetrated especially in the island's northeast must be analyzed within this context.

Tamil nationalism and the LTTE may be reactive phenomena, but Sinhalese Buddhist antipathy for the LTTE and the determination to preserve the island's unitary status have been solidified thanks to LTTE attacks on some of Buddhism's most sacred symbols. For instance, in May 1985 the LTTE attacked monks and worshippers in Anuradhapura around the Shri Maha Bodhi, one of the most sacred sites in all of Buddhism, killing 146 people; in June 1987 Tamil rebels murdered 33 young Buddhist clergy and their mentor, Hegoda Indrasara Thera, at Arantalawa (Amparai); and in January 1998 they bombed the Temple of the Tooth (another of Buddhism's most sacred sites, which houses a tooth relic of Lord Buddha). Although some monks in Sri Lanka are criticized for indiscretions, all Buddhists highly respect the institution of the *sangha* and hence treat even wayward monks with grudging respect. Because the *sangha* is one of Buddhism's triple gems (or three sacred refuges)—the other two being the Buddha and *dhamma*—the desire to seek refuge in the *sangha* (*sangang saranang gachchami*) is an everyday invocation among Buddhists. Buddhists commonly refer to a controversial monk by saying they have no regard for him but respect the robe (*sivura*) he wears, given that the saffron robe represents both the Buddha and *sangha*. Even young trainees (*samaneras*) not even in their teens sit at a higher elevation among lay persons and remain sitting even when before the country's president and prime minister.

Thus, an attack on a monk is not a mere attack on an individual but on an entire institution considered most responsible for preserving

Sinhalese Buddhist society. The monks enabled the Sinhala script, painting, sculpture, architecture, meditation, and the propagation of Sinhalese Buddhist sociocultural values (Phadnis 1976: 40). Historians claim that no society has lasted more than three generations that did not associate its *raison d'être* to religion, and clearly the main, if not only, reason Sinhalese culture has survived so long is due to Buddhism. The LTTE may not have understood all this when it attacked Buddhist institutions; or perhaps the LTTE understands this all too well and was hoping its attacks would unleash a Sinhalese Buddhist backlash against Tamils, which then could have been used for propaganda purposes.

Given its policy of not tolerating dissent and its desire to be the Tamils' sole representative, the LTTE has killed numerous Tamil intellectuals and politicians. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists highlight such assassinations to emphasize the depraved nature of the LTTE; they also demand revenge for LTTE assassinations of a number of Sri Lankan leaders, including President Ranasinghe Premadasa in May 1993. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists argue that to deal with the LTTE after such attacks on Buddhism and the country's politicians is traitorous and would only reward terrorism.

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists typically claim that Tamils exaggerate their grievances against the state; they argue that anti-Tamil riots, especially the 1983 riots, were set off by a few Sinhalese thugs and individuals within the governing UNP regime and that anti-Buddhist elements, both local and foreign, conspire to use the riots to tarnish the image of Buddhism; they defend the military's malpractices in the northeast no matter how much evidence points to soldiers' culpability; and they malign all who call for peace talks with the LTTE. Nationalists also justify excessive and indiscriminate force against Tamil civilians by pointing to Indian actions in Kashmir, U.S. actions in Iraq, and Israeli actions in Lebanon and the Palestinian occupied territories. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists also claim that the military cannot be blamed for the deaths of innocent Tamils because innocent people always get killed during war (as even acknowledged by the United States with its reference to "collateral damage"). They further point to the LTTE massacres of Sinhalese villagers over the years to justify the military's indiscriminate use of force in the northeast; and refer to the Tigers forcing Muslims and Sinhalese out of the Northern Province and eastern areas such as Batticaloa to make the case

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*Sinhalese culture has  
survived so long...  
due to Buddhism*

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that the LTTE has resorted to ethnic cleansing. Privately, some say the Sinhalese should do likewise.

Although the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists' hatred for the LTTE is understandable, the solutions they advocate are conducive to maintaining a supremacist Sinhalese Buddhist polity, not a polyethnic society where all can coalesce in unity and with self-respect. Yet these supremacist solutions too are understandable, as their demands are consistent with the overarching nationalist ideology that now dominates Sri Lanka's political landscape.

### **The Christian Threat against Buddhism**

The Buddhist revival that took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century was inspired by Christian proselytizers. The anti-Christian violence experienced in Sri Lanka during the past few years too was inspired partly by evangelical proselytizing. Whether a specific cause of this odious phenomenon exists is unclear; however, opportunistic religious and political elites ably assisted by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have sought to promote a Buddhist-Christian divide and benefit from the mayhem. Additionally, such anti-Christian sentiment clearly is another strand of the extant nationalist ideology.

The very first riot in modern Sri Lankan history was not between Sinhalese and Tamils but between Buddhists and Catholics. The so-called Kotahena riot of 1883 was quickly put down by the British authorities, but it highlighted the growing religious divide between the two communities, especially at a time when Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was on the upswing. This burgeoning Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, however, was subsumed by Sinhala linguistic nationalism, which enabled all Sinhalese, irrespective of their religious beliefs, to mobilize to make their language the island's sole national language. It also has enabled Sinhalese Christians to oppose the LTTE as passionately as do Sinhalese Buddhists. Indeed, some of the most prominent generals in the Sri Lankan military have been Christians. The Sinhala language has succeeded so well in unifying Sinhalese Buddhists and Christians that the predominantly Sinhalese Catholic clergy in the south often refuse to speak out against military atrocities perpetrated on Tamil Catholics in the northeast; and the Sinhalese Catholic leadership in Colombo is known to treat complaints and grievances against the state by their northeast Tamil counterpart with indifference.<sup>17</sup> Also, while interethnic Sinhalese-Tamil marriages have declined over the past quarter century, Sinhalese Christians and Buddhists marry each other frequently. The most recent anti-Christian violence (which has, in the main, been intraethnic violence) threatens to undermine this Sinhalese unity: The message emanating from the nationalists suggests that the only worthy Sinhalese are Buddhist Sinhalese.

The recent attacks on Christians began in 2000. Such anti-Christian incidents are common in India and Pakistan, but not in Sri Lanka, and the violence consequently caught many by surprise. Buddhist priests and influential organizations like the Center for Buddhism International, the Buddhist Dharmavijaya Foundation, and the Center for Buddhist Action have claimed that various evangelical groups from the United States and South Korea, such as Campus Crusade for Christ and Christian Literary Crusade, are abusing the Companies Act of 1982 (which missionary groups have used to register as corporations) to convert Buddhists and Hindus. The Buddhist organizations fan the public's fears by claiming that just as South Korea was made a majority Christian country following World War II, Sri Lanka too will soon become a majority Christian island if the Christian organizations are allowed free reign in the country. Their fears were apparently taken seriously, given the manner in which Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, including nationalist parties like the JVP and JHU, politicized the so-called unethical conversions issue and supported or conducted anti-Christian violence.

According to the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, fourteen attacks occurred against Christian churches in 2000, while only thirteen such incidents took place in 2001 and 2002. But the number of attacks rose to 146 in 2003 and 2004. Other accounts have placed the number of attacks during 2003 and 2004 at over 200.

Notably, the violence took place when the LTTE and government were not at war, suggesting that the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist project needs to rely on an adversary—be it the LTTE, supposedly unscrupulous Western missionaries, or Muslims.<sup>18</sup> That aside, two events can be said to have especially contributed to the anti-Christian violence: the death of monk Gangodawila Soma and post-tsunami proselytizing.

A telegenic and telefluent monk, Gangodawila Soma was partly responsible for the anti-Christian violence of 2003 and 2004. The monk, who harbored presidential ambitions, initially built a following by advising people on mundane matters but gradually took on controversial issues, including the ethnic conflict, supposedly pro-LTTE nongovernmental organizations, and unethical conversions. Gangodawila Soma repeatedly asserted that two types of terrorism confronted Sri Lanka: LTTE terrorism and missionary terrorism. In doing so, he resorted to chauvinistic rhetoric and made the missionaries look just as villainous as the LTTE. Not surprisingly, especially in the last year of his life, his fans began attacking Christian churches just as a previous generation had attacked Tamil homes and businesses. When Gangodawila Soma passed away in December 2003 while in Russia, his followers and political opportunists claimed his death

was part of a Christian conspiracy to undermine Buddhism. Although the autopsy proved the monk's demise was due to a diabetic-related heart attack, they resorted to a poster campaign claiming he had been murdered. When the JHU's Ellawala Medhanannanda Thera spoke at Gangodawila Soma Thera's funeral, he reiterated that the monk did not die naturally, but was killed (*apawath una nevei, apawath kala*). Within a month of the cremation, fifty-four places of worship had been attacked, which helps to explain the higher number of attacks for 2003 and 2004. By some accounts, over 140 places of worship were forced to close down within four months of the monk's death.

Even though Gangodawila Soma passed away on December 12, 2003, Buddhist nationalists tried to postpone his cremation until Christmas so as to dampen the nativity celebrations. The funeral was ultimately held on December 24. When a musical event headlined by the popular Indian movie star Shah Rukh Khan was scheduled for December 11, 2004, JHU monks resorted to hunger strikes and demanded the event be banned, claiming it was disrespectful to hold such events when the country was observing the first anniversary of Gangodawila Soma's death. Hand grenades were thrown during the event, nearly killing the Indian performers and leading to the deaths of two fans. That Christmas, just as in the previous year, Catholics in certain areas were warned not to go to midnight mass and not to light firecrackers, a popular tradition observed on Christmas and New Year's Eve. Throughout this period, the threats were accompanied by intermittent poster campaigns, with the posters often printed out in maroon, the color of the Jathika Hela Urumaya and its predecessor, the Sinhala Urumaya.

Extremist Buddhist clergy led the anti-Christian violence in some areas (U.S. Department of State 2004), and the perpetrators were supremely confident they could act with impunity. For instance, when a woman complained to the police about the attack on her place of worship, she was told: "You are a Christian. You have no right to speak [for] this is a Buddhist country" (Weerasooriya 2004). Apologists for the nationalists claimed that the church attacks "were self inflicted by certain Evangelical pastors," who thereafter accused Sinhalese

Buddhists for the nefarious actions.<sup>19</sup>

The anti-Christian violence was also encouraged by JHU and JVP members, who claim that Christian missionaries resort to bribery and

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led the anti-Christian  
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materialistic inducements to unethically convert poverty-stricken Buddhists and Hindus. The number of Christian evangelicals supported through various Western churches—mostly American—operating in Sri Lanka indisputably has increased. What is debatable, however, is whether any of these missionaries resort to bribery when trying to convert people to their denominations. Indeed, in many areas, most converts to new denominations used to be Catholics. This fact has not prevented Buddhist extremists, however, from attacking Catholic churches. In some instances, Catholic churches that have existed for decades have been attacked even though Catholic clergy do not proselytize openly and are circumspect about converting Buddhists and Hindus.

Two recent bills introduced in parliament, the Prohibitions of Forcible Conversions to Religions Bill (proposed by the JHU) and the Protection of Religious Freedom (also known as the Anti-Conversion Bill or Government Bill and ardently supported by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka), demonstrate clearly that the issue of conversion is being used by political parties to outmaneuver each other, but the vast majority of Buddhists on the island appear to support such legislation. The country's Supreme Court has ruled that all except one clause in the former bill are unconstitutional, but even passage of the Anti-Conversion Bill could lead to sentences ranging from five to seven years in prison and fines between 100,000–500,000 rupees.

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court has long been a conservative entity that has rarely ruled against the state's preferences. Not surprisingly—its ruling on the Prohibitions of Forcible Conversions to Religions Bill notwithstanding—the Court also has ruled that the right to practice one's religion does not include the right to propagate that religion. It has, consequently, denied Christian service organizations the right to incorporate, claiming that doing so would undermine the foremost place guaranteed to Buddhism under the country's constitution. In short, the Court has ruled that no Christian organization may be incorporated if part of its mission includes proselytizing and that it is illegal for a church to combine religious instruction and charity. Yet, the incorporation of 178 Buddhist and Muslim organizations that combine religious instruction and charity has been approved (Jansz 2004).

These so-called anti-conversion bills seek to prohibit unethical conversions based on “allurement,” “force,” and “fraudulent means.” Yet given the way these terms are defined within the bills, any conversion can be easily deemed unethical, and persons associated with the conversions prosecuted. The standard refrain among Buddhist monks and nationalists is that although Buddhism too is a proselytizing faith, Christian evangel-

ical organizations accost and impose themselves on people, but Buddhist temples only cater to those who express interest. That noted, the bills as currently written violate clauses in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, the American Convention on Human Rights, and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

The anti-Christian hysteria led to numerous troubling incidents, and they collectively signify how the nationalist ideology espoused by extremist Sinhalese Buddhists can be utilized to target Christians. Anti-Christian

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***anti-Christian hysteria  
has led...to a number of  
ridiculous accusations***

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violence in the recent past has included “beatings, arson, acts of sacrilege, death threats, violent disruption of worship, stoning, abuse, unlawful restraint, and even interference with funerals” (Ekanayaka 2004). In one instance dealing with the latter, a *bhikkhu* refused the family of a long-standing convert to Christianity the right of burial and forcibly carried out the last rights according to

Buddhist rituals (Weerasooriya 2004). This anti-Christian hysteria has led also to a number of ridiculous accusations, such as the following sent in to a newspaper:

To add to the list of anti-conversion tactics mentioned—after a period of expert brainwashing, an image of the Buddha is dashed on the floor, and the erstwhile Buddhist children and . . . adults are made to spit or do worse on the shattered pieces, while chanting, “See, he cannot save himself.”

The children are told that Satan in other countries has horns and hooves, but in Sri Lanka he is robed in yellow and they should run away at [the] sight of him. They are made to sing that the road leading to the Buddhist temple is the one that leads to hell. The list is long and outrageous. Men are dressed like Buddhist monks and paid to misbehave with liquor and women in public. Monks are enticed to go abroad “for higher studies,” [but] after . . . [their] conversion they have to disrobe and spread the word of Christ (*The Island* 2004c).

The December 26, 2004, tsunami and the manner in which some evangelicals sought to use the tragedy to attract people to their faiths also upset Buddhists and contributed to anti-Christian sentiment. Relief organ-

izations associated with Christian sects have been especially conspicuous following the tsunami, the more prominent among them including World Vision, Antioch Community Church, Samaritan's Purse, World Relief, Humedica, Gospel for Asia, and Caritae. Even Muslim leaders in the deep south have expressed fears over Christian proselytizing and have visited Muslim homes in areas like Hambantota to ensure their flocks have not been ensnared by the foreign missionary dragnet.

Many Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have an ambivalent relationship with the West: they admire its lifestyle and affluence even as they loathe its promiscuousness and general latitudinarianism; they envy its economic and military power even as they decry its hypocritical foreign policies. They thus toast the West whenever it praises Sri Lanka and traduce the West whenever it criticizes Sri Lanka. With Christianity identified with the West and many nationalists believing in a vast foreign conspiracy to undermine Buddhism, the strongest anti-West sentiments seem to accompany the anti-Christian violence. All of this has led to ironic situations in which, for instance, nationalists excoriate the West even as they try to send their children to study there or they themselves try to migrate there.

Anti-Christian sentiment in Sri Lanka is nothing new: the recent wave of anti-Christian violence is not influenced solely by proselytizing missionaries. New proselytizing Christian groups have been operating places of worship since the late 1970s, and Assembly of God and Jehovah's Witnesses pastors and missionaries were conspicuous in their activities before that. Beginning in 1978, Mormon missionaries too began proselytizing and even providing free English classes through one of Colombo's Rotary clubs as a way to attract converts. The post-tsunami missionary activities also do not explain the recent anti-Christian hostility, given that churches began to be attacked at the turn of the century—nearly four years before the tsunami hit. Thus the church attacks amidst renewed hostility toward all Christians are better explained as part of the overarching nationalist ideology.

### The Numbers Game and Civil War

The Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology further dictates that war is good even if it is not winnable, because war causes Tamils to flee the north-east and vitiates the LTTE's attempt to create *eelam* (Tamil State). For similar reasons, nationalist forces want the Northern and Eastern Provinces de-merged.<sup>20</sup> They were dealt a victory in October 2006 when the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the 1987 merger was invalid.<sup>21</sup>

Buddhist nationalists especially eye the Eastern Province because the historical record disputes that the east was part of a Tamil homeland and

because they also believe the province can be easily made a majority Sinhalese area. The colonization policies successive governments have pursued since independence have been engineered by insisting “that such colonization is a Sinhalese entitlement on historical grounds, in which the resources of the state are dedicated to one community with no comparable benefits to others” (Peebles 1990: 52). This approach has allowed Sinhalese especially from the southwest to be transplanted to the east. Such colonization has altered radically the area’s ethnic demographics, proving that the nationalists’ aspirations are based on well-tested strategy.

The nationalists also know that the LTTE’s quest for *eelam* would be dealt a major setback if the Eastern Province were administratively demerged from the Northern Province and if the Sinhalese were to become the largest ethnic group in the east. Prior to the civil war some nationalists, such as the Buddhist monk Madihe Pannaseeha, even demanded that the government deploy permanent military detachments to ensure Sinhalese colonization of the Northern Province as well (Pannaseeha 1979: 16–18). The government has managed to realize these aspirations through the so-called High Security Zones (HSZs) that the military has set up throughout the northeast: many encompass some of the best real estate and most fertile land in the region. Significantly, in almost all cases the military has refused to allow displaced Tamils to return to these HSZ areas even after fighting has ceased.<sup>22</sup> Also notable, many Tamils relate the HSZs to government-sponsored colonization and believe they will not be allowed to resettle these areas even after the civil war ends.

In seeking to consolidate the east for Sinhalese, the government also has targeted Muslim areas, especially the predominantly Muslim District of Ampara. There, the Rajapakse government has issued directives to place certain lands under the state’s custody and has transferred some Muslim areas under predominantly Sinhalese divisions. Most ominously, the Rajapakse government chose a new flag for the Ampara District depicting a lion similar to that on the national flag and widely associated with Sinhalese Buddhists.

The LTTE has not allowed the government to hold censuses in the northeast—both in areas they control and areas administered by the state—making it impossible to determine the country’s Tamil population precisely. The Census Department estimates that Jaffna was the only district in the country to experience negative population growth from 1981 to 2001. While the twenty-four other districts saw a rise in population density per square kilometer, the numbers in Jaffna dropped from 795 in 1981 to 528 in 2001. Indeed, some estimates place the current Sri Lankan Tamil population between 8 and 9 percent, a decline that challenges the

LTTE's quest for a separate state and also debunks the argument that Sinhalese Buddhists may soon lose their majority status because the minorities are multiplying at a faster rate. This fallacious and fantastic claim is similar to that made by India's radical Hindus vis-à-vis that country's Muslims (DeVotta 2002b).

Indeed, the percentage of Sinhalese and Buddhists has increased due to the ethnic conflict and the subsequent exodus of thousands of Tamils from the island, coupled with the state's discriminatory policies toward its Indian Tamils, which caused thousands more among the third and fourth generation born in Sri Lanka to be forcibly resettled in India—so that the island's Indian Tamil population dropped from 11.73 percent in 1946 to 5.52 percent in 1981. For

example, in 1911 the Sinhalese and Buddhists accounted for 66.1 percent and 60 percent, respectively (Denham 1912: 196, 245), which means that by 1981 the Sinhalese percentage had increased by 8 percent and Buddhists had increased by an equally impressive

9 percent. This obsession with population figures gets the least publicity; yet it is an important part of the nationalist mindset because it is associated with security, majoritarianism, and domination. Thus a prominent monk noted, "When 74% of the population [Sinhalese] is united what can 26% [minorities] do" (quoted in Tambiah 1992: 124).

This notwithstanding, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have called for a military solution to the island's ethnic conflict partly because they believe the LTTE will not give up on its goal of *eelam* but also because they think continued war will lead more Tamils to leave the country and thereby further strengthen the Sinhalese population. Many nationalists therefore support bombing campaigns in the northeast and encourage sanctions on trade and essential items. The ensuing food shortages combined with forcible recruitment into the LTTE have caused many Tamils in so-called uncleared areas to flee to South India and to government-controlled areas. Buddhist nationalists use these refugees to advertise the LTTE's depravity. Some also feign sympathy for the destitute Tamils while hoping more would cross over to government-controlled areas. Their long-term goal is to combine such Tamil displacement with Sinhalese emplacement and thereby permanently alter the demography in the northeast. China has proven in Tibet and Xinjiang Province that ethnic flooding can tame separatist aspirations. A similar scenario has unfolded in Quebec, where an influx of immigrants has undermined

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*the percentage of Sinhalese  
and Buddhists has increased*

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attempts by the Parti Quebecois to drum up support for secession. These episodes must surely encourage some among Sri Lanka's nationalists. As one Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist (now a retired government servant) noted: "People in the south complain that the city of Colombo is now more Tamil than places in the north [due to Tamils having migrated for economic and security reasons]. I say let's move all the Tamils south, because we can control them here and then take over the north and east."<sup>23</sup>

The nationalists seem to be succeeding, so much so that formerly Tamil towns in the Eastern Province have taken on Sinhalized names: Pankulam to Pankulama; Mudalikulam to Morawewa; Vilankulam to Diwulwewa; Kumaresan Kadavai to Gomarankadawela; Kallaru to Kallara; and Thambalagamam to Thambalagamuwa. One commentator

argues that there is now a new Pancha Maha Balavegaya, or Five Great Forces (the old one being the coalition that brought S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and the MEP to power in 1956) supporting such colonization, and it comprises bureaucrats, politicians, businessmen, Buddhist clergy, and the military (Jeyaraj 2006). The recent fighting between the government and the LTTE has caused

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over 200,000 Tamils to be displaced in the east; and thousands more have fled to Tamil Nadu in India since January 2005. The return and resettlement of these refugees in their former abodes is not guaranteed, as it would not suit the nationalists' designs.

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists are unhappy that the city of Colombo is almost 65 percent Tamil-speaking, mainly due to Tamils in the northeast having moved south to avoid war but also due to the city's large Muslim population. Most high-rise flats built in Colombo (where property values compare to prices in major Western cities) have been purchased by diaspora Tamils for relatives in Sri Lanka or by wealthy Tamils doing business in the south. Many Sinhalese nationalists are also piqued that, notwithstanding the destruction of hundreds of Tamil businesses in the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, the community has bounced back to lead thriving establishments. The recent rise in abductions, extortions, and murders of Tamil businessmen has led many Tamils to leave the island or close shop,<sup>24</sup> which suits the overall designs of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists.

The calibrated policy among nationalists also extends to erecting Buddha statues in predominantly Tamil or Muslim areas in the Eastern Province, a practice also associated with their goal of eventually pushing

the minorities out. The JHU, JVP, and numerous Buddhist organizations use home security guards and criminal elements with ties to certain segments of the military to support these actions. Indeed, in many instances it is the security guards and criminal gangs that have operated as foot soldiers erecting Buddha statues.

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists erect Buddha statues knowing the military will thereafter step in and prevent them being demolished.<sup>25</sup> Often the statues get placed on public property so they do not violate private property laws; thereafter a court case is filed against removing the statue, with the petitioners knowing full well the snail's pace at which cases typically proceed through the country's politicized court system. The statues clearly are not erected to satisfy people's religious needs; rather, they are planted to signify that the country belongs to the Buddhists. Indeed, in some instances Buddha statues have been planted close to mosques or Muslim areas with no Sinhalese living in the vicinity. Buddha statues are also erected to reassert claims that the Eastern Province is not part of a Tamil homeland.

The preference among nationalists to see Tamils leave the northeast is related to their call for Sinhalese Buddhists to have more children. In nationalists' minds, Sinhalese Buddhist fertility is connected to the unitary state: the more Buddhists there are, the easier it becomes to colonize non-Buddhist areas and prevent devolution of power to and autonomy for Tamils. One of the leading proponents of this strategy is Prime Minister Wickramanayaka, who has claimed that certain foreign powers are colluding with local groups to ensure the Sinhalese become a minority. He has argued that "the declining population is a serious threat to the country's unitary status" (Jayasinghe 2006). Extremist nationalist monks have also urged Buddhists to have more children, with the late Gangodawila Soma Thera encouraging Buddhists to avoid contraceptives and out-breed the supposedly more philoprogenitive minorities. The island's Muslims tend to be the minority most targeted in this regard, although explicit accusations are usually made in private. But Gangodawila Soma once accused Muslims and Hindus of conspiring to make Buddhists a minority community (Balachandran 1999).

Sri Lanka's annual population growth rate from 1975 to 2004 was 1.3 percent, the lowest in South Asia, and the projected growth rate for 2004–2015 is 0.7 percent per year. The estimated 240,000 annual abortions on the island (compared with 360,000 births) (Jayasekera 2007; see also *The Island* 2007b) contribute to low population growth, although nationalists prefer not to address abortion because it tarnishes the Sinhalese Buddhist image.<sup>26</sup> The prime minister and other Sinhalese

Buddhist nationalists consider the low birth rate among Buddhists a chief reason for the supposedly low number of *bhikkhus* and the difficulty recruiting soldiers into the military. Wickramanayaka also claims that family planning has contributed to these shortfalls and encourages Sinhalese Buddhists to disregard the “Small is Beautiful” programs instituted in the 1970s.<sup>27</sup> The prime minister, who is also Minister of the Buddha Sasana, has even placed advertisements in newspapers encouraging Buddhists to join the *sangha* and recruited lay persons to pay for the novices’ upkeep. Such efforts have mainly ended in failure. The shortage of *bhikkhus* may have more to do with a materialistic *sangha* desiring greater comforts; many among the nearly 37,000 monks try to avoid serving in villages because they prefer the better endowed temples in urban areas. As noted above, many also leave after they receive a university education. Together, this has left numerous rural temples without monks (*viharadhipathis*).

The nationalists are obviously concerned that the population density in the south is 599 persons per square kilometer but only 167 persons per square kilometer in the northeast (*Sunday Times* 2004b). Despite the relatively rampant development that has taken place in the south (especially when compared to the northeast’s blight), the nationalists monomaniacally compare the south with the northeast and focus on population growth merely to perpetuate Sinhalese Buddhist domination. Sri Lanka’s government seems to share their concern: a 2004 circular announced that the eighty-four-day maternity leave allowed government employees for their first two children will now apply without a limit. Since nearly 95 percent of all government servants are Sinhalese, little danger exists that such a program would overly benefit ethnic minorities.

## Conclusion

Students of Sri Lanka’s politics are familiar with the controversial issues documented above. These apparently disparate issues must be considered conjointly to appreciate why a political solution that satisfies Tamils’ fundamental grievances is not in the offing.

The monograph also makes clear that political Buddhism has strengthened in the past half century; so much so that the demands, fears, and aspirations it has inspired have led to a nationalist ideology now embraced by many mainstream Buddhists. This ideology is partly justified using mytho-history, thanks to texts such as the *Mahavamsa*. In addition, however, the ideology compromises the moral, ethical, and peaceful values of Buddhism and undermines democratic governance.

In a troubling development, the present government of President Mahinda Rajapakse is the first to operate comfortably within this ideolog-

ical mindset. On the war front, Rajapakse and his ministers seek to enforce a “southern strategy” against the LTTE and their suspected sympathizers that uses indiscriminate force in utter disregard of Tamils’ human rights. Such a strategy has defined President Rajapakse’s short tenure in office, which has seen over 5,000 killed and over 215,000 displaced persons in just the past year.<sup>28</sup> Yet Rajapakse has remained popular in the south, and according to a February 2007 poll, nearly 60 percent of Sinhalese support a military solution to the ethnic conflict (Center for Policy Alternatives 2007).

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Notwithstanding increasing support in international law for the Doctrine of Ingerance, which claims that the international community has an obligation to intervene in states violating their citizens’ human rights, countries like Sudan and Sri Lanka highlight the difficulty of actually doing so. The LTTE was easily branded a terrorist group; but the international community is unsure how to deal with “the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse [that] also uses terrorism” (*The Economist* 2007).

Many among Rajapakse’s advisors and die-hard supporters consider themselves true sons of the soil and dismiss the Sinhalese Buddhist credentials even of past presidents J. R. Jayewardene and Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga because they had anglicized (and hence pseudo-Buddhist) backgrounds and their ancestors colluded with the colonizers. That noted, as a son of the nationalist south, Mahinda Rajapakse could perhaps sell the Buddhists a compromise deal on the peace process. However, he would first need to jettison the nationalist ideology he subscribes to. Thus far he appears unwilling (or unable) to do so. This was especially clear when the government introduced proposals for devolution on April 30, 2007. Rather than expanding on the recommendations made during the 1990s that focused on federalism at the provincial level, the Rajapakse proposals call for creating thirty districts from the extant twenty-five districts and devolving power to these miniaturized units. Overall, the Rajapakse proposals encourage centralization (and continuance of the unitary state structure) under the guise of a dubious devolutionary system.

The LTTE’s intransigence is rightly cited to explain why successive peace processes have failed. However, as this monograph details, political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism also have precluded a comprehensive peace from taking root. Indeed, political Buddhism and

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism predate the LTTE and therefore could be considered more culpable, especially given that Tamil nationalism and the subsequent LTTE separatist struggle and resort to terrorist methods developed in reaction to the ethnocentrism championed by political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

The LTTE is not in a position to realize *eelam*, and Sri Lanka will not be divided. Most Tamils today merely want peace with dignity and self-respect, and many soured on the LTTE long ago. Recent allegations that the LTTE accepted money from the Rajapakse camp to prevent Tamils from voting in the November 2005 presidential elections have further sullied the organization's image.<sup>29</sup> The international community too would not tolerate a state created by a group widely considered terrorist. As this monograph suggests, however, irrespective of when the civil war ends, Sri Lanka's Tamils and other minorities may have no choice but to continue to live as subordinated citizens in a state dominated by political Buddhism and the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology. Taming or vanquishing the LTTE may be a prerequisite for peace, but those who support eradicating the LTTE as a prerequisite for federalism or expansive devolution fail to understand the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist agenda (and may be inadvertently assisting that agenda). Consequently, the international community's entreaties notwithstanding, Sri Lanka is unlikely to institute in the foreseeable future any devolution that satisfies basic Tamil aspirations.

Political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism have played leading roles in Sri Lanka, especially since the 1956 elections. The only exception was the short period following S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's assassination, when the country debated *bhikkhus'* involvement in politics. Buddhist monks will continue to play a pivotal role in Sri Lankan politics unless drastic changes take place within the *sangha*. So will Buddhist nationalists, whose influence has now reached new heights. Once the LTTE's separatist struggle is neutralized, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists may even renew campaigns against Christians and Muslims, for their ideology is fundamentally antiminority and requires agitprop to mobilize and survive. An anti-Muslim milieu could cause Middle Eastern states, which employ nearly one million Sri Lankans, to react more forcefully than did Western states to the recent anti-Christian violence. That potential scenario highlights the influence the international community can exert in Sri Lanka's affairs.

It behooves the international community to maintain pressure on both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. The international community should continue to oppose the LTTE's fundraising efforts and forcible

recruitment of children, which enable the group to wage war; and when dealing with the Sri Lankan government it should link all military aid to human rights practices. Given the culture of impunity surrounding the country's security forces, international human rights monitors should also be stationed in Sri Lanka to make sure minorities are protected. Furthermore, the international community should more forcefully utilize diplomacy, aid, and trade mechanisms to ensure all religious groups in Sri Lanka are treated equitably and none is discriminated against. Sri Lanka's impressive Buddhist heritage must be preserved, but not at the expense of the religious freedoms and security due to Hindus, Muslims, and Christians of all denominations.

Ultimately, no positive change to the current violent milieu will be possible unless Sinhalese Buddhists, who form a clear majority, compromise along ethnic, political, and religious grounds. Yet, as indicated in this monograph, compromise is unlikely in the near future. The attendant illiberalism is not simply affecting ethnic and religious minorities, because illiberalism cannot be compartmentalized so as to only target a particular community; it eventually spreads like a cancer to impact all. Unbridled Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism consequently figures to promote more instability for all concerned.

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***no positive change...will be possible unless Sinhalese Buddhists...compromise***

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# Endnotes

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1. *Mahavamsa* XXV: 108–12, as quoted in Bartholomeusz 2002: 56.
2. On August 2, 2006, thousands of Buddhists began flocking to temples throughout the south claiming that Buddha statues were emanating rays (*Buddhu ras*). The prominent political *bhikkhu* Ellawala Medananda Thera claimed these rays signaled that Sri Lanka was being blessed through President Mahinda Rajapakse, who was a modern day Duthagamani. And a government minister recently referred to the president's brother, Basil, as "chief minister of King Dutugemunu." Such statements indicate how Sinhalese Buddhist mytho-history is easily transferable to the contemporary political scene. See *Sunday Times* (Colombo), "JVP Puts Forward Demands," August 6, 2006; *Sunday Leader* (Colombo), "How the Plan to Make Basil National Organiser Backfired," January 28, 2007.
3. Extracted from a letter written by Malalasekera to the *New York Times*, "Voting in Ceylon," May 6, 1956.
4. As Aiyar further notes, a secular state is one that concerns "itself not with religion but with protection of all, equal opportunity for all, equitable benefits for all. No religious community should be singled out for favours; no religious community should be subjected to any disability or disadvantage" (Ibid: 6).
5. This, however, has not prevented Buddhist politicians from pandering to the monks' dictates. For instance, during the October 2000 parliamentary elections, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe claimed his party would not endorse any legislation on devolution without the monks' imprimatur; and Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka sought to outbid him by saying his People's Alliance coalition "will seek the views of the Mahanayake Theras on each and every paragraph of the draft constitution, so that they could correct us where we have gone wrong." Quoted in *The Island* (Colombo), "New Draft Constitution Only After Consulting Mahanayake Theras—PM," August 13, 2000.

6. The P-TOMS agreement would have enabled the government and LTTE to utilize funds the international community had set aside for developing tsunami affected areas. The government, however, avoided implementing the agreement when Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists opposed it tooth and nail. The Supreme Court eventually ruled the agreement was unconstitutional, but the P-TOMS is among other agreements successive Sri Lankan governments have reached with Tamils only to abrogate them later under pressure from Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists.
7. Author's interview with a senior officer in the Sri Lanka Air Force, August 2006.
8. For instance, members of these parties visiting military personnel in Jaffna claimed that the problems there could be solved easily by resorting to bombing: "There's no problem. You can bomb the place and solve the problem in 24 hours. It is no big deal" because "they are all *demalu* [Tamils]." Bombing LTTE-controlled areas indiscriminately has become a hallmark of the Mahinda Rajapakse government. Quoted in *Sunday Leader* (Colombo), "How the PNM Wants to Deal With the *Demalu*," July 30, 2006.
9. An ethnocracy ensues when the dominant ethnic group eschews accommodation, conciliation, and compromise with the state's minorities and instead seeks to institutionalize its preferences so that it alone controls the levers of power.
10. Quoted in Bartholomeusz 2002: 20.
11. See "Indictment Against Sri Lanka," *Tamilnation.org*, at [www.tamilnation.org/indictment/genocide83/gen26.htm](http://www.tamilnation.org/indictment/genocide83/gen26.htm). Accessed on November 17, 2006.
12. From a 1982 leaflet, parts of which are reproduced in "Sinhala Buddhist Chauvinism—The Record Speaks," at [www.tamilnation.org/tamilelam/fundamentalism/index.htm](http://www.tamilnation.org/tamilelam/fundamentalism/index.htm). Accessed on September 12, 2006.
13. Even the United Nations, which has repeatedly condemned the LTTE, gets lambasted if and when it says anything negative about the government. Thus *The Island* newspaper claimed that "tiger tails [are] concealed under the coat tails of UN bigwigs in Colombo. They are pimping for the pro-terror NGO circuit and conspiring against a UN member state." See "Of that 'Impatient and Fast-Talking Woman,'" January 18, 2007. Also see DeVotta 2005.
14. The charges against elements of the military have also been documented in Human Rights Watch, *Complicit in Crime: State Collusion in Abductions and Child Recruitment by the Karuna Group*, January 2007, Vol. 19, No. 1(C), at <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/srilanka0107/srilanka0107sumandrecs.pdf>. Accessed February 25, 2007. Indeed, during the author's interviews conducted in Batticaloa in July 2006 a number of citizens substantiated what Alan Rock and Human Rights Watch subsequently publicized. The charges are serious, given that hitherto it was the LTTE that were repeatedly condemned for forcibly recruiting children to fight the Sri Lankan government. See Human Rights Watch, *Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka*, November 2004, Vol. 16, No. 13 (C), at <http://hrw.org/reports/2004/srilanka1104/srilanka1104.pdf>. Accessed on December 14, 2005.
15. The government has strongly denied military involvement, but the head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (comprised of Scandinavians) and local and foreign human rights organizations have all accused the armed forces of the executions. For a concise account of the executions, see Somini Sengupta, "A Year After Massacre of

Aid Workers, Sri Lanka Still Asks Who, When and Why?" *New York Times*, June 24, 2007.

16. Buddhist nationalists are not averse to collaborating with Tamil politicians, provided the latter do not seek to rebel against the nationalist ideology. This explains the nationalists' support for anti-LTTE Tamil parties and paramilitaries and for Tamils like the late foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. It is instructive that Kadirgamar almost never acknowledged the human rights violations committed against Tamils, even though he rarely missed an opportunity to promote his being Tamil, through which he sought to burnish the government's image.
17. The present Colombo archbishop's apparent disregard for the plight of his northeast flock, coupled with his condescending attitude toward northeast Tamil priests, has led some Tamils to privately complain that he is more Sinhalese than Catholic. Part of this hostility toward northeast Catholic priests is because some among the latter have supported and sympathized with the LTTE.
18. Indeed, the civil war masks the extant racism among many Sinhalese Buddhists toward the island's Muslims. The language radical Sinhalese Buddhists use to vilify Muslims can be so derogatory that it sometimes goes beyond the rhetoric used against the LTTE. Such uninhibited racism bodes ill for the island's Muslims, and the fallout is likely to be ugly, especially after the civil war has ended.
19. See, for instance, the article by the Yahoo Web Community of Sinhalyo, Buddhist News Network, that appeared in the *The Island* (Colombo), "Sri Lanka Buddhists under Siege," August 5, 2004.
20. The two provinces were merged as part of the July 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord and by the 13th Amendment to the constitution that same year.
21. The country's Supreme Court in 1987 responded to petitions filed against the merger and determined by a 5–4 vote that two bills in parliament dealing with the merger did not need to be approved at a referendum. The Court in 2006, however, responded to petitioners from the Eastern Province who argued that their fundamental democratic rights were being violated because they were denied the opportunity to elect a Provincial Council to represent them.
22. Two HSZs were created in May 2007 in Muttur East and Sampur, areas the military captured from the LTTE in August and September 2006. Even though commercial activity is permitted in both HSZs, nearly 20,000 Tamils have been barred from reoccupying their homes.
23. Author's interview, Dehiwala, August 6, 2006.
24. It is instructive that after P. Radhakrishnan, the deputy vocational and technical training minister, met with Mahinda Rajapakse on behalf of affected Tamils and provided the president "the telephone numbers of several extortionists, along with an appeal for immediate intervention" he found himself "summoned by the police to explain how he got the telephone numbers" (Handunnetti 2007: 19). Also see D. B. S. Jeyaraj, "An Overview of the Enforced Disappearances Phenomenon," *Sunday Leader* (Colombo), April 15, 2007.
25. Buddhist nationalists have also learned from prosettlement forces in Israel. As one Sinhalese Buddhist activist promoting Sinhalese settlement in the Eastern Province said: "If the Israeli army can protect and promote Jewish settlements on Palestinian

- territory, our Sinhalese Buddhist security forces can protect Lord Buddha's statues anywhere in Sri Lanka." Author's interview, Colombo, December 21, 2005.
26. Women from all religions resort to abortion, but Sinhalese Buddhist women comprise nearly 70% of the female population and happen to be the group most affected (*The Island* 2007b).
  27. *BBC News Online*, "Sri Lankans Urged to Multiply for War," June 19, 2001, at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/english/world/south\\_asia/newsid\\_1396000/1396590.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1396000/1396590.stm). Accessed June 19, 2001.
  28. Between June 2006 and March 2007, over 800 extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, and disappearances took place throughout the country, with over 100 kidnappings taking place in Colombo (often in broad daylight). According to the Special Presidential Commission on Disappearances, 430 civilians were killed and 2,020 people abducted (of which 1,134 were eventually released) between September 14, 2006 and February 25, 2007, alone. Influential Tamils who were kidnapped have been released "after their families appealed to the highest echelons of the state." Somini Sengupta, "Kidnappings Return to Haunt Long Ethnic War in Sri Lanka," *New York Times*, November 7, 2006. Also see U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Sri Lanka: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2006*, March 6, 2007, at [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78875.htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78875.htm). Accessed March 10, 2007.
  29. The vast majority of Tamils vote for Tamil parties or the UNP. By preventing Tamils especially in the northeast from voting, the LTTE helped Mahinda Rajapakse win the presidential contest.

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# **Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia**

## **Project Information**



## Project Rationale, Purpose, and Outline

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### *Rationale*

*Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia* is part of a larger East-West Center project on state building and governance in Asia that investigates political legitimacy of governments, the relationship of the military to the state, the development of political and civil societies and their roles in democratic development, the role of military force in state formation, and the dynamics and management of internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes. An earlier project investigating internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes focused on conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in China (Tibet and Xinjiang), Indonesia (Aceh and Papua), and southern Philippines (the Moro Muslims). Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, that highly successful project was completed in March 2005. The present project, which began in July 2005, investigates the causes and consequences of internal conflicts arising from state- and nation-building processes in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, Nepal, northeast India, and Sri Lanka, and explores strategies and solutions for their peaceful management and eventual settlement.

Internal conflicts have been a prominent feature of the Asian political landscape since 1945. Asia has witnessed numerous civil wars, armed insurgencies, coups d'état, regional rebellions, and revolutions. Many have been protracted; several have far-reaching domestic and international consequences. The civil war in Pakistan led to the break up of that country in 1971; separatist struggles challenge the political and territorial integrity of China, India, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka; political uprisings in Thailand (1973 and 1991), the Philippines (1986), South Korea (1986), Taiwan (1991) Bangladesh (1991), and Indonesia (1998) resulted in dramatic political change in those countries. Although the political uprisings in Burma (1988) and China (1989) were sup-

pressed, the political systems in those countries, as well as in Vietnam, continue to confront problems of legitimacy that could become acute; and radical Islam poses serious challenges to stability in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The Thai military ousted the democratically-elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. In all, millions of people have been killed in the internal conflicts, and tens of millions have been displaced. Moreover, the involvement of external powers in a competitive manner (especially during the Cold War) in several of these conflicts had negative consequences for domestic and regional security.

Internal conflicts in Asia can be traced to contestations over political legitimacy (the title to rule), national identity, state building, and distributive justice—that are often interconnected. With the bankruptcy of the socialist model and transitions to democracy in several countries, the number of internal conflicts over political legitimacy has declined in Asia. However, the legitimacy of certain governments continues to be contested from time to time, and the remaining communist and authoritarian systems are likely to confront challenges to their legitimacy in due course. Internal conflicts also arise from the process of constructing modern nation-states, and the unequal distribution of material and status benefits. Although many Asian states have made considerable progress in constructing national communities and viable states, several countries, including some major ones, still confront serious problems that have degenerated into violent conflict. By affecting the political and territorial integrity of the state as well as the physical, cultural, economic, and political security of individuals and groups, these conflicts have great potential to affect domestic and international stability.

### *Purpose*

*Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia* examines internal conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, northeast India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Except for Nepal, these states are not in danger of collapse. However, they do face serious challenges at the regional and local levels which, if not addressed, can negatively affect the vitality of the national state in these countries. Specifically, the project has a threefold purpose: (1) to develop an in-depth understanding of the domestic, transnational, and international dynamics of internal conflicts in these countries in the context of nation- and state-building strategies; (2) to examine how such

conflicts have affected the vitality of the state; and (3) to explore strategies and solutions for the peaceful management and eventual settlement of these conflicts.

### *Design*

A study group has been organized for each of the five conflicts investigated in the study. With a principal researcher for each, the study groups comprise practitioners and scholars from the respective Asian countries, including the region or province that is the focus of the conflict, as well as from Australia, Britain, Belgium, Sweden, and the United States. The participants list that follows shows the composition of the study groups.

All five study groups met jointly for the first time in Washington, D.C., on October 30–November 3, 2005. Over a period of five days, participants engaged in intensive discussion of a wide range of issues pertaining to the conflicts investigated in the project. In addition to identifying key issues for research and publication, the meeting facilitated the development of cross-country perspectives and interaction among scholars who had not previously worked together. Based on discussion at the meeting, twenty-five policy papers were commissioned.

The study groups met separately in the summer of 2006 for the second set of meetings, which were organized in collaboration with respected policy-oriented think tanks in each host country. The Burma and southern Thailand study group meetings were held in Bangkok July 10–11 and July 12–13, respectively. These meetings were cosponsored by The Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University. The Nepal study group was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, July 17–19, and was cosponsored by the Social Science Baha. The northeast India study group met in New Delhi, India, August 9–10. This meeting was cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Research. The Sri Lanka meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 14–16, and cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Alternatives. In each of these meetings, scholars and practitioners reviewed and critiqued papers produced for the meetings and made suggestions for revision.

### *Publications*

This project will result in twenty to twenty-five policy papers providing a detailed examination of particular aspects of each conflict. Subject to satisfactory peer review, these 18,000- to 24,000-word essays will be pub-

lished in the East-West Center Washington *Policy Studies* series, and will be circulated widely to key personnel and institutions in the policy and intellectual communities and the media in the respective Asian countries, the United States, and other relevant countries. Some studies will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Working Papers* series.

### *Public Forums*

To engage the informed public and to disseminate the findings of the project to a wide audience, public forums have been organized in conjunction with study group meetings.

Five public forums were organized in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the first study group meeting. The first forum, cosponsored by The Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, discussed the conflict in southern Thailand. The second, cosponsored by The Sigur Center for Asian Studies of The George Washington University, discussed the conflict in Burma. The conflicts in Nepal were the focus of the third forum, which was cosponsored by the Asia Program at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The fourth public meeting, cosponsored by the Foreign Policy Studies program at The Brookings Institution, discussed the conflicts in northeast India. The fifth forum, cosponsored by the South Asia Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, focused on the conflict in Sri Lanka.

### *Funding Support*

The Carnegie Corporation of New York is once again providing generous funding support for the project.

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## Background of Sri Lanka's Conflicts

Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, after almost 450 years of colonial rule under the Portuguese, Dutch, and British. This history—and the country's proximity to India—helped produce a polyethnic, multireligious population consisting of Buddhists (69%), Hindus (15%), Muslims (8%), and Christians (8%). Britain's colonial policies and practices helped create fissures, especially between the majority Sinhala and the minority Tamils. Post-independence Sinhalese elites made use of this division both to pursue anti-Tamil policies that benefited their community and to build a Sinhalese Buddhist nation-state that marginalized minorities. Tamil elites, in the main, initially demanded a federal solution whereby the predominantly Tamil northeast, considered part of the Tamil homeland, could enjoy autonomy from the Sinhalese-dominated south. When such demands were disregarded, the moderate Tamil elites lost out to extremist youth, who by the early 1970s began clamoring for a separate state.

The state's discriminatory policies led to anti-Tamil riots in 1956, followed by deadlier riots in 1958, 1978, 1981, and 1983. The 1983 riot was especially gruesome and caused thousands of Tamils to flee to India and Western countries as refugees, producing a vibrant Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. This diaspora plays a major role in financing the Tamil separatist struggle now waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). By eliminating other Tamil guerrilla organizations, the LTTE claims to be the Tamils' sole representative. The LTTE's practices of forcibly recruiting child soldiers and resorting to suicide bombings have caused a number of states and political entities—including India, the United States, Canada, Australia, and the European Union—to proscribe it as a terrorist organization.

The civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE has killed more than 70,000 people. Most agree that a political solution to the conflict is necessary, yet the two main protagonists have cast aside four attempts to reach a peace agreement. The most recent peace process began in February 2002, when the United National Front coalition government, headed by Ranil Wickremesinghe, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the LTTE. War was avoided until June 2006, when the LTTE's intransigence and the newly elected government's uncompromising policies led to renewed conflict. Overall, the peace processes have failed mainly due to the conflicting parties' unwillingness to reconcile the LTTE's maximalist demands and various Sri Lankan gov-

ernments' minimalist responses. Intransigent positions have also made it impossible to collaborate constructively in the wake of the devastating December 2002 tsunami.

Many argue that the LTTE has never jettisoned the quest to create a separate state and has simply used the peace processes to rearm and regroup. The LTTE says that it could agree to a federal arrangement, yet its proposals for conflict resolution are more confederal than federal in nature. It is also clear that successive Sri Lankan governments have been unable to craft a political arrangement that would allow the island's Tamils to live with dignity and self-respect. Most Sinhalese oppose federalism. They fear it would eventually lead to the country's dismemberment. In addition, radical Sinhalese and Buddhist nationalists insist that Sri Lanka be maintained as a unitary state. These radicals have adopted hostile attitudes and policies toward parliamentarians, civil society activists, diplomats, clergy, and NGOs advocating devolution or federalism as a solution to the civil war.

The LTTE, which controls large areas of territory in the Northern and Eastern provinces, suffered a split in March 2004 when its eastern commander broke away and began collaborating with elements in the military. This has weakened the LTTE, and the group has since lost strategic territory in the Eastern Province. The large Muslim population in the Eastern Province also undermines the LTTE's goal of creating a separate state for the island's Tamils. The Muslim dimension introduces a new element, further complicating the peace process and a future settlement.

In November 2005, Mahinda Rajapakse was elected president with the support of Sinhalese nationalists who demand a military solution to the ethnic conflict. Although Rajapakse has yet to follow through on all the pro-nationalist promises he made in his election manifesto, his administration and the military have been emboldened by the recent war gains in the Eastern Province. The Rajapakse government has consequently adopted a military strategy of massive retaliation against the LTTE at the expense of a political strategy that promotes conflict resolution. This has contributed to gross human rights abuses and increased the misery of the Tamils, especially those living in LTTE-controlled areas.

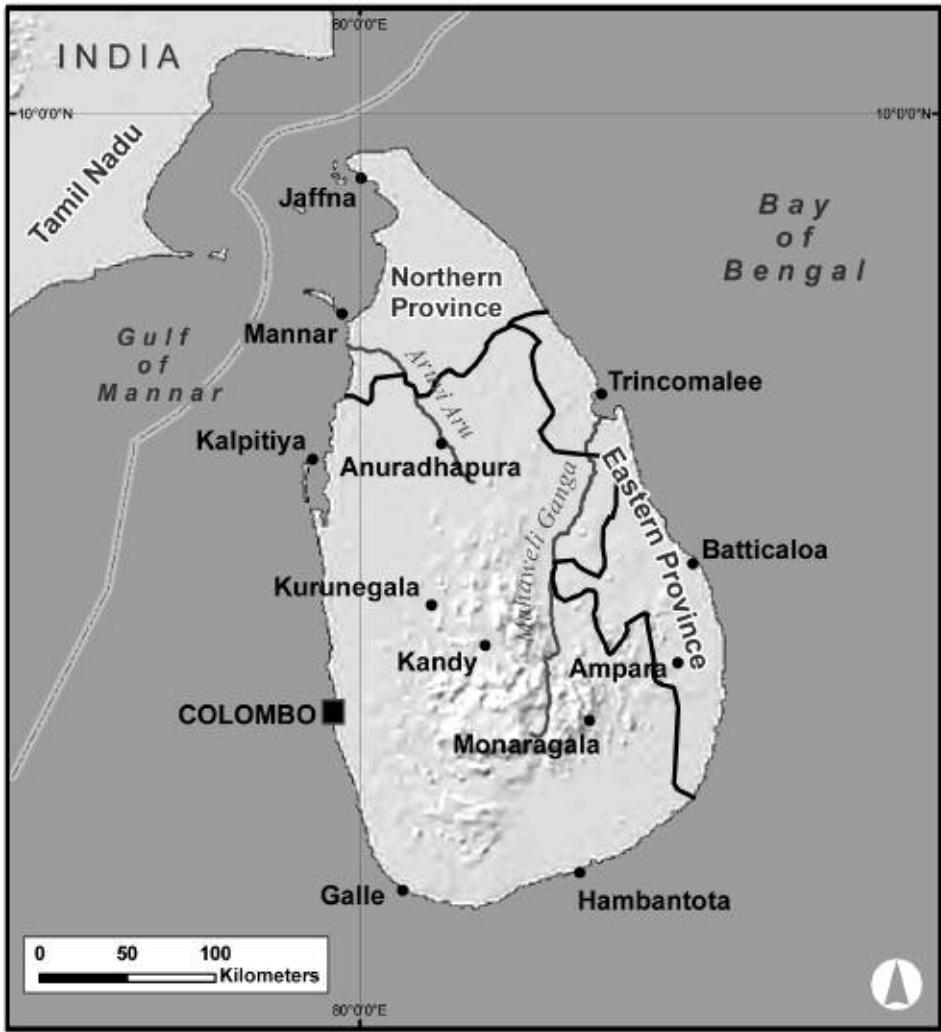
The LTTE's rise has also complicated India-Sri Lanka relations. India supported the Tamil rebels in the early 1980s, when Sri Lanka disregarded India's regional preferences and sought to draw close to the United States and other Western interests. This led to the Indo-Lanka Peace

Accord of 1987 and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) stationed in the northeast. For various reasons, the IPKF and LTTE ended up fighting each other in what became India's longest war. India proscribed the LTTE in 1992 because the group had assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi the previous year. But having done so, India is now unable to play a direct role in conflict resolution. Complicating matters further for India are Tamil Nadu's more than 60 million Tamils, who sympathize with their beleaguered cousins across the Palk Strait.

Sri Lanka has paid a massive price for civil war. At the time of independence, Sri Lanka's high literacy rate, experience with universal franchise, and relatively high socio-economic indices led many to predict that it was the most likely of the newly independent states to become a peaceful, liberal democracy. Ethnically divisive policies and subsequent civil war have undermined that promise, although this island the size of West Virginia still has vast potential, provided peace can be achieved between its two principal ethnic communities.



# Map of Sri Lanka



- Capital Cities
- Cities and Towns
- ~ Provincial Boundaries
- ~ Exclusive Economic Zone

*Note: Map boundaries and locations are approximate. Geographic features and their names do not imply official endorsement or recognition by the UN.*



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### **Policy Studies 37**

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A Reassessment  
John T. Sidel, London School of Economics and  
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# ***Policy Studies***

A publication of the East-West Center Washington

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## About this Issue

This study argues that political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism have contributed to a nationalist ideology that has been used to expand and perpetuate Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy within a unitary Sri Lankan state; create laws, rules, and structures that institutionalize such supremacy; and attack those who disagree with this agenda as enemies of the state. The nationalist ideology is influenced by Sinhalese Buddhist mytho-history that was deployed by monks and politicians in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to assert that Sri Lanka is the designated sanctuary for Theravada Buddhism, belongs to Sinhalese Buddhists, and Tamils and others live there only due to Sinhalese Buddhist suffering. This ideology has enabled majority superordination, minority subordination, and a separatist war waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The study suggests both LTTE terrorism and the ethnocentric nature of the Sri Lankan state, which resorts to its own forms of terrorism when fighting the civil war, need to be overcome if the island is to become a liberal democracy.

The present government of President Mahinda Rajapakse is the first to fully embrace the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology, suggesting that a political solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is unlikely. Meaningful devolution of power, whereby Tamils could coalesce with their ethnic counterparts amidst equality and self-respect, is not in the offing. A solution along federal lines is especially unlikely. Instead, continued war and even attacks on Christians and Muslims seem to be in store for Sri Lanka as the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology is further consolidated. The study recommends that the international community adopt a more proactive stance in promoting a plural state and society in Sri Lanka. In addition to countering the terrorist methods employed by the LTTE, the international community should initiate and support measures to protect fundamental civil liberties and human rights of Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious minority communities.

## About the Author

Neil DeVotta is Associate Professor of Political Science at Hartwick College and Visiting Associate Professor in the Departments of Asian Studies and Government at the University of Texas at Austin during 2007–08. He can be contacted at [devottan@hartwick.edu](mailto:devottan@hartwick.edu).

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