

# **Sri Lanka: An Ethnocratic State**

## **Preventing Positive Peace**

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### **Abstract**

Although proclaimed a democratic republic, the Sri Lankan state is strongly controlled and ruled by Sinhala Buddhist influence and a deeply engrained belief that the island 'belongs' to the Sinhala Buddhists. It is an ethnocratic state and its mono-ethnic, mono-linguistic and mono-religious stances in a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious island have led to a widening and deepening discrimination against particular ethnic groups, especially the Tamils who have traditionally inhabited the north and east of the island. In a continuing ethno-political conflict, ethnocracy continues to be defended and justified by the state in the name of sovereignty, territorial integrity and national security, and has led to further polarization of the already divided ethnic groups. As a consequence of the ethnocratic nature of the Sri Lankan state, a bloody war erupted between successive governments of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who fought for an independent state for the Tamils. After nearly 38 years the prolonged war came to a brutal end in May 2009 amidst blatant violations of international law. However, the root causes of this conflict, which lie in the ethnocratic nature of the state, have still not been addressed, resulting in the continuation of the ethnic conflict despite the end of the war. This paper focuses on the ethnocratic nature of the Sri Lankan state structure dominated by Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and does not seek to cover all forms of the ethno-political conflict or any intra-ethnic conflicts.

### **Introduction**

Sri Lanka, previously known as Ceylon, is a tropical island nation off the southeastern coast of the Indian subcontinent. Of the co-constituting communities in the island the Sinhalese make up 74.9% of the population, the Tamils make up 15.4% (the traditional inhabitants of the north and east of the island comprise 11.2% while Tamils of relatively recent Indian origin make up 4.2%), and the 'Moors' (Sri Lankan Muslims) make up 9.2%, with other ethnic groups comprising only 0.5% of the total (Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka, 2012).

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The Tamil-speaking people were the majority population in the North and the East prior to the state-sponsored colonization schemes executed with the intention of demographic change. As a result today, the Tamils are the majority population only in the northern part of the island. Concerns exist that their identity and culture are under serious threat with the loss of land and heritage. The Sinhalese, whose mother tongue is Sinhala, are the numerical majority in the island and most of them are Buddhist. They form the majority population across the South. Yet their dominance and power is present throughout the island because of the state's support of this ethnic group through all state structures.

Although proclaimed a democratic republic, the Sri Lankan state is strongly controlled and ruled by Sinhala Buddhist influence, with a deeply engrained belief that the island 'belongs' to the Sinhala Buddhists. '[T]he energies of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism were translated into concrete policies and programs of language, education, employment, peasant resettlement, territorial control of the island and so on...' (Tambiah 1992, p. 58). The modus operandi of the Sri Lankan state apparatus reflects its now extreme form of ethnocracy<sup>1</sup>.

Despite being portrayed as a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country, the constitution of Sri Lanka enacted Sinhala as the official language (Official Language Act 1956, No. 33) in 1956, while Buddhism was granted the foremost place in the constitution in 1972 and again in 1978. The constitution states that 'it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana' (The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka).

A section of extremist Sinhala Buddhists also justifies ethnocratic structures as a response to the imperial ethnocracy that was brought by the British to the island. In an interview, Gnanasara Thero, the General Secretary of a hard-line Buddhist nationalist organisation, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) or Buddhist Power Force was quoted as saying, 'This country belongs to the Sinhalese, and it is the Sinhalese who built up its civilisation, culture and settlements.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Ethnocracy at its simplest means 'government or rule by an ethnic group' or *ethnos*, specified by religion, language, 'race' or other criteria...sometimes contrasted with *democracy* or rule by the *demos* or people' (Anderson 2015).

*Ethnocracy* 'encompasses state regimes and associated political movements and parties which discriminate systematically in favour of some ethnic groups and against others. The ethnocracy may be formal with discrimination enshrined in law (as in Apartheid South Africa), or it may be more informal with apparent or formal equalities masking very unequal realities (as happened in Northern Ireland)' (Goodman 2015).

The white people created all the problems... We are trying to... go back to the country of the Sinhalese' (Haviland 2015).

This mono-ethnic and mono-religious attitude has led to a widening and deepening of discriminatory acts and policies, injustice and pogroms against the Tamils since Sri Lanka's independence. While being formal, arguably enshrined in past and present constitutions, the systematic discrimination by the Sri Lankan state against the Tamil people is also 'informal with apparent or formal equalities masking very unequal realities' (Goodman 2015).

Ethnocratic policies towards Tamils continued in armed conflict, discrimination, oppression, and denial, prevention and deprivation of rights and justice. This ethnocracy was and is defended and justified by the state in the name of sovereignty, territorial integrity and national security, and it has led to increasing polarization of the already divided ethnic groups.

It is also important to note that non-Buddhist religious groups such as the Christians, including Sinhala-origin Christians, and Muslims have also been targeted and affected by the ethnocratic nature of the Sri Lankan state. The patterns of persecution may have changed with consecutive governments but deep-rooted ethnocentric discrimination remains strong. It is this consistent and widespread ethnocracy in Sri Lankan state affairs that has given birth to the identity conflict in the island. The asymmetric conflict has gone through different stages including oppression, violence and state-sponsored pogroms against the ethnic Tamils. The Sri Lankan state's continued ethnocratic nature resulted in the ethnic conflict developing into a fierce war between successive governments of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). After 38 years, it came to an end in May 2009 amidst grave violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. This paper explores the ethnocratic nature of the Sri Lankan state structure influenced by Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Other forms of the ethno-political conflict or any other intra-ethnic conflicts in the island have not been examined as they are beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Emergence of Ethnocracy in Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka gained independence from the British in 1948. The island was called *Ceylon* for well over 150 years before *Sri Lanka* was 'unilaterally introduced into the vocabulary of international usage in 1972 – an act that took place without the consent of the Tamils' (Wilson 1998, p. v). The Portuguese and the Dutch colonizers had ruled the Tamil and

Sinhala kingdoms separately while the British merged both kingdoms in 1833 under the banner of ‘administrative purposes’ (The Cleghorn Minute 1799 cited in International Federation of Tamils 1992).

The desire for self-government emerged within Tamil circles in the early 1920s. However, it did not pose a serious challenge till the 1970s. In the intervening 50 years Tamil politicians closely engaged with Sinhala political leaders. In fact, in the early 1900s Tamil political leaders proactively worked together with Sinhala politicians to protect and promote Ceylon’s identity and the island’s national interests. Tamil leaders were so committed to the ideology of living in a united country that they were not even in favor of a federal arrangement for the island. Indeed this proposal was first brought forward by prominent Sinhala leader and later Prime Minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake, who in the 1950s was the main instigator of ethnocracy for his own political ends. Tamil efforts to continue united actions were now increasingly ignored by Sinhala political leaders as they attempted to strengthen the dominance of Sinhala hegemony, and this compelled Tamil leaders to shift their ideology from a ‘united country’ focus to a focus based on Tamil identity.

According to Little (1994, p. 4): ‘The newly elected prime minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) he led, achieved power in 1956, with the strong support of Buddhists leaders, by campaigning for the primacy of Sinhala language, culture and religion. The Tamils took offence. Inspired by Gandhi’s campaigns of civil disobedience against the British in India, they mounted a series of Satyagraha (civil disobedience) demonstrations to protest the new policies, only to provoke violent retaliation by the Sinhala.’

Soon after independence, in 1949, one million ‘up-country’ Tamils were disenfranchised and declared as non-citizens. It is important to distinguish between these Tamils, who are of recent Indian origin brought to the island by the British mainly to work on tea plantations, and the Tamils of the North and East who are traditional inhabitants. By disenfranchising the ‘up-country’ Tamils, a Sinhalese electoral majority was established in the up-country areas (Sivanandan 2010). This act of blatant discrimination against the ‘up-country’ Tamils by the state can be seen as foreshadowing the emergence of a wider ethnocracy.

In 1956 the state passed into law the 'Sinhala only' language policy. Ethnocracy, which was deep-rooted as a main component within the Sri Lankan state, was emboldened by S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake and over the years would be utilized by politicians to gain power, playing on the mindset of the Sinhalese who according to Harvard anthropologist Stanley J Thambiah were 'a majority with a minority complex' (Weisman 1987). Bastian (1999, p.7) notes that:

'During the 1950s Sinhala Buddhist revivalism attained a new dominance in national politics. The election of 1956 brought into power a government with a hegemonic Sinhala Buddhist ideology, which the same year passed the Sinhala only Act. This made Sinhala the language of the majority community, the only official language.'

In opposition to the Sinhala only Act, Tamil political leaders from the Federal Party staged a non-violent campaign in 1956. As a response, the first of many state-aided anti-Tamil pogroms<sup>2</sup> took place. In a place called Galoya in the East over 150 Tamils were killed. Subsequent anti-Tamil violence, in May 1958, resulted in a loss of nearly 300-400 lives. Rather than taking action to prevent violence, the Prime Minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake, indirectly encouraged it. It was the Governor-General, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, who declared a state of emergency in order to bring the violence to an end. He even alluded that the violence had not been spontaneous, having announced off the record at a press conference:

'Gentlemen, if any of you have an idea that this was a spontaneous outburst of communalism, you can disabuse your minds of it. This is the work of a Master Mind who has been at the back of people who have planned this carefully and knew exactly what they were doing. It was a time-bomb set about two years ago which has now exploded' (Vittachi 1958, p. 79).

Despite continuing acts of injustice, discrimination and pogroms, the Tamil people continued to advocate for a united Sri Lanka and did not support the notion of an independent state until the first republican constitution was introduced in 1972. In response to the 1972 constitution, which 'removed the safe guards of the previous (British) constitution, gave a pre-eminent position to Buddhism, in addition to the Sinhala language, and most importantly, concentrated power in the Sinhala-dominated legislature' (Bastian 1999, p.7) the Tamil leadership was compelled to articulate their political aspirations for an independent and sovereign Tamil state, *Tamil Eelam*, through democratic means in the form of the *Vaddukkodai Resolution* in 1976. This resolution was seen as a people's mandate when in the

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<sup>2</sup> A pogrom can be defined as a 'deliberately organized—and especially—state-supported killings and the destruction of property of a targeted group'. (Brass 2002)

1977 parliamentary elections the largest Tamil political party, the Tamil United Liberation Front, achieved a land-slide victory in the traditional Tamil regions of the North and East after running its election campaign based on the resolution. As DeVotta argues in his study of Sri Lanka, 'The impetus for separatism in most ethnonational struggles is sparked by ethnocentric practices initiated by the state of dominant ethnic group' (DeVotta 2004, p. 8).

Sinhala extremist politicians, particularly of Buddhist faith, exploited religion to maintain or capture power regardless of their political party background. 'Buddhism and Sinhalese were so closely intertwined that it became impossible to treat either in isolation in the mid-1950s and 1960s.' (De Silva et al. 1988, p. 69) 'Within thirty years after the independence, "the land, the race and the faith" were successfully linked by Buddhists protagonists and most Sinhalese political leaders who had ambitions of winning electoral majorities' (Wilson 1998, p. 53). This pattern continued to be the practice in Sri Lanka including in the current government.

Regardless of party background, politicians from the main political parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) – which were both predominantly Sinhalese – used ethnocracy as their main political strategy to gain power, thus presenting further challenges to the conflict resolution process as 'confidence-building measures' gradually diminished. 'It is the demand for separation on the one hand and the demand for the establishment of Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy on the other that seriously hinder a peaceful settlement of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict' (Deegalle 2006, p. 78).

Sri Lanka's institutionalized ethnocracy constantly and deliberately targeted the Tamil language, land, culture, education, economy, history and identity, while promoting and protecting Sinhala language, land, culture, education, economy, history and identity. For instance, the major Sinhala-Buddhist parties competed and contributed to the mass destruction of Tamil lives and properties including the burning in 1981 of the Jaffna Public Library, which housed over 95,000 books and rare manuscripts and was hailed as one of the largest libraries in South Asia region at the time.

In order to strengthen Sinhala-Buddhist state hegemony and weaken non-Sinhala Buddhists, particularly the Tamils, government structures used the 'divide and rule' strategy capitalizing on the antagonism between the Tamil community and the Muslim community, regionalism

between the Tamils of the North and those of the East, religious conflict between Hindus and Catholics particularly in Mannar, and casteism particularly in Jaffna.

### **Ethnocracy: A Major Political Strategy**

A clear message was conveyed to the Tamils time and again by both major Sinhala political parties as well as other political factions, of its main ideology, influenced by the *Mahavamsa* (a Buddhist text), based on the belief that the island belonged to Sinhala Buddhists. As Spencer asserts: '[A] nationalism based upon the Mahavamsa would have to be a Buddhist nationalism with little space for non-Buddhist identities' (Spencer 1990, p. 6).

Those political parties used chauvinism and racism repeatedly to gain political support of the majority Sinhala Buddhist population, regardless of political party affiliation. Strengthened state structures became a vehicle for this: '[T]he myths of history...already popular and integral to a diversity of cultural practices facilitated their appropriation to often elite political interests and the apparatuses of power of a modern bureaucratic and technologically based state' (Kapferer 2012, p. xxv). 'In 1960, then Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranayake<sup>3</sup> [of the SLFP] promptly encouraged linguistic nationalism and Buddhist supremacy. She insisted that the full implications of the Sinhala Only Act be enforced' (De Silva 1986 cited in Little 1994, pp. 201-202). The first Executive President of Sri Lanka, the late J.R.Jayawardena of the UNP had said in a public speech:

'Seventy percent of our country are Buddhists. Therefore we shall lead our lives according to the sacred words of Buddha...The UNP government aims at building a new society on the foundation of the principles of Buddha *Dharma*. We have a duty to protect the Buddha *sasana* and to pledge that every possible action would be taken to develop it' (Kemper 1991 cited in Little 1994, pp. 173-174).

In the name of protecting Buddhism he established ethnocratic polices and also engineered, or at the least was a bystander of, state-sponsored pogroms against the Tamils. Decades later he was quoted in the British Daily Telegraph of 11 July 1983 as saying: 'I am not worried about the opinion of the Tamil people...now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinion...Really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhala people will be happy' (Justice for Genocide 2014, p.13). Within a fortnight of the interview, anti-Tamil pogroms took place resulting in an estimated 3,000 Tamils dead, over 200,000 Tamils displaced, 18,000 Tamil

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<sup>3</sup> Sirimavo Bandaranayake was the widow of former Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake.

homes and 5000 Tamil businesses destroyed, with economic losses totalling \$300 million (Tamil Guardian 2006).

The ethnocentric policies of the UNP, however, were neither limited to J.R.Jayawardena nor his period of leadership alone, but rather were a feature of the entire party. In fact, ethnocentricity influenced the policies not only of the two major political parties but of even so-called leftist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)<sup>4</sup>. As Abeysekera notes, the 'JVP claimed to liberate the Sinhala Buddhist (monks') country and nation. In such a context the discourse, "country or death," became an authorized "Buddhist" practice for the JVP monks seen as the true patriots of the country' (Abeysekera 2001, p. 5) The International Crisis Group made a similar point:

'The Sinhala nationalist project has not been confined to the poorer rural and urban voters from whom the JVP draws support. Its contemporary appeal to urban middle and upper classes can be seen in the rise of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which first came onto the scene in 2000 in the form of the Sinhala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage) Party (SU). If the JVP is the left wing of Sinhala nationalism, the JHU is its right wing' (International Crisis Group 2007, p.14).

Whether based on mutual understanding or opposing views, 'the Sri Lankan elites have promoted a state-sponsored ethno-religious nationalism while, simultaneously, religious actors have tried to take over parts of the political sphere' (Weiberg-Salzman 2014, p, 284). The interrelation between Buddhism and the Sri Lankan state promoted not only Buddhism but also allowed Buddhist monks to influence state politics and the political system. 'The emergence of Buddhism as an indispensable part of the parliamentary system not only conditioned but also was conditioned by the party system, as also their objectives and ideologies' (Sharma 2011, p. 33).

Sri Lanka's Buddhist monks' influence in state affairs started soon after independence. 'The campaign to establish Sinhala as the national official language and to ensure the primacy of Buddhism in the Sri Lanka polity established the bhikkhu as an unmistakably legitimate

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<sup>4</sup> The JVP, (also known as Peoples Liberation Front) emerged as the collective expression of the vernacular educated, radicalized Sinhala youth, hailing from rural peasantry and sub-urban lower middle classes in the mid-1960s as an organized reaction to increasing unemployment, rural poverty and the 'political betrayal' of the first generation of left leaders who collaborated with the SLFP to form coalition governments. Blending Sinhala Buddhist nationalism with Marxist rhetoric to form its ideological base, the JVP staged two failed armed insurrections in 1971 and 1989 to capture state power, only to be crushed brutally by the state armed forces. By mid-1990s, the survivors succeeded in reorganizing the party for the third time, reforming it to become a major mainstream political party focused on parliamentary politics.



opinion leader' (De Silva et al. 1988, p.116). Their actions were spurred by their deep belief that the island belonged to the Sinhala Buddhists. 'The monks spoke out for a "Sinhala Nation", a "Dhamma Kingdom" – a state built upon Buddhist principle "to save the future of our race and religion"' (Weiberg-Salzmann 2014, p. 298).

It is noteworthy that there are a small number of Buddhist monks committed to peace. However, they are neither supported nor promoted by the state. Meanwhile, fundamentalist Buddhist monks continue to strengthen themselves through various means and spread their network beyond Sri Lanka (Francis 2014). So far the Sri Lankan state has not taken any strong measures to control or stop their extremist propaganda but has rather explicitly or covertly acted in support of it.

In addition to the link between Buddhism and the state, the collaboration between monks and politicians accentuated ethnocentric practices, particularly in the Tamil dominated North and East. 'Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka have also played a pivotal role propagating and preserving a unique Sinhalese culture, and the historical relationship between Buddhism and the state has further ensured that the monks maintain influence' (DeVotta & Stone 2008, p.32). Lands in Tamil areas became primary targets of these policies, which started immediately after independence and continue till today. The First Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, D.S.Senanayake, in an address in the 1940s to Sinhala settlers in *Pathaviya* (an area linking the Northern and Eastern provinces) said:

'Today you are brought here and given a plot of land. You have been uprooted from your village. You are like a piece of driftwood in the ocean; but remember that one day the whole country will look up to you. The final battle for the Sinhala people will be fought on the plains of Padaviya. You are men and women who will carry this island's destiny on your shoulders. Those who are attempting to divide this country will have to reckon with you. The country may forget you for a few years, but one day very soon they will look up to you as the last bastion of the Sinhala' (Justice for Genocide 2014, p. 13).

Sinhala settlement through state-aided colonization schemes with the intention of demographic change has a long history. Soon after the war came to an end the JHU, Sri Lanka's Buddhist nationalist party, in 2009, stated that 'Each road in the liberated areas in the North should be named for the war heroes who sacrificed their lives for the nation's liberty' (Colombopage 2009).

The JHU's ethnocentric ideology is obvious and easily observable. The SLFP and UNP, though, are not always as explicit in their ethnocentric agenda and ideology, and perhaps express their political opinion in more liberal tones. However, deep analysis and observations could reveal that there exist no major differences in the primary objective and intention of the JHU, SLFP and UNP in terms of ethnocentric policies and practices towards Tamils.

The historical and ongoing land-grabbing process in the north and east parts of the island is a clear example of this. These land-grabbing plans need to be understood as the calculated outcome of a state policy. The grabbed land is mainly taken for either militarization or colonization purposes. In principle, both militarization and Sinhalization projects are mutually interconnected; the policy is aimed at eliminating the collective national existence of the Tamils, and intends to ensure that any future Tamil national revival would never materialize (Nirmanusan 2012). This agenda is not only for political gain but also rather for the strengthening of the Sinhala Buddhists dominance and influence, while weakening the Tamil nation and it has continued in the aftermath of the end of the brutal war, during the Rajapaksa administration as well as under the Sirisena-Ranil administration.

The present government also continues to frame the current situation as *post conflict* instead of *post war*. This denial is one of several deliberate attempts to divert local and international attention on fundamental burning issues of accountability for wartime mass atrocities and the political solution to the Tamil national question, as well as an attempt to hide the continuation of ethnocentric policies and practices.

### **Post-Conflict vs Post War; Negative Peace vs Positive Peace**

Despite the proclamation by the Sri Lankan government and its allies that 'peace' exists today within Sri Lanka, in reality it is not a post-conflict peace but an invisible war by other means against the Tamil population. Arguably, one cannot refer to Sri Lanka in 'post-conflict' terms as the root causes of the conflict have still not been addressed appropriately. The 'end of war' does not always mean the 'end of conflict'. Though the LTTE which itself was an outcome of the conflict, was destroyed, a military solution could never have been the answer for a protracted ethno-political conflict which emerged as the consequence of the ethnocentric nature of the Sri Lankan state.

The absence of violence is only a 'negative' peace and there is a danger that it could eventually drive the island once again towards brutal violence. Therefore, it is important to set the trend towards 'positive' peace, through the presence of justice. As long as the structures of ethnocracy continue to be in place, ongoing conflict will inevitably intensify and it will become harder to make the positive peace that could lead to genuine reconciliation and the co-existence of nations in the island. In this context it is imperative to adequately address the ethnocracy that continues to dominate, control and rule the Sri Lankan state.

### **'Good Governance Government' or a New Era of Ethnocracy?**

During the reign of the Rajapaksa administration, which lasted from 2005 to 2015, heavy military occupation of Tamil regions, state-sponsored colonization, continued acts of abduction, enforced disappearances, arrests, detention, torture and rape, with re-arrests and re-abuse, were common occurrences. This added to the state of fear, uncertainty and vulnerability affecting the entire Tamil society. Despite accusations of having committed direct acts of genocide<sup>5</sup> (Haigh 2014), the Rajapaksa regime intensified its structural and cultural war against the Tamil nation, while continuing to deny its own wrongdoing.

Continued denials created widespread anger throughout the island among the Tamil people, and established a unifying mindset against the Rajapaksa regime. This manifested itself in the Presidential election which took place on 8 January 2015. The 'anti-Rajapaksa vote' amongst the Tamils, the branding amongst the Sinhalese of the Rajapaksas as a corrupt and nepotistic family, and a bout of attacks on Muslim businesses and mosques by Sinhala extremist Buddhists created a common enemy and unified the anti-Rajapaksa factor which ensured a surprising regime change in Sri Lanka.

Though no mutual trust existed between the polarized nations throughout the protracted ethno-political conflict, the prominent leaders of the new Sirisena government gave hopes of a return to normalcy (eg. demilitarization), to the Tamils prior to the election and immediately following the regime change. Therefore, as contributors to the regime change, sections of the Tamil community also expected in return meaningful changes for them as well.

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<sup>5</sup> The Peoples' Tribunal on Sri Lanka found that the 'state of Sri Lanka is guilty of the crime of genocide against Eelam Tamils and that the consequences of the genocide continue to the present day with ongoing acts of genocide against Eelam Tamils' (Permanent Peoples' Tribunal 2013).

However, except for whitewashing and satisfying a section of the international community, no significant political developments have yet taken place to create normalcy in the lives of the Tamil people. Instead '[O]ver the past six years, the process of Sinhalization has intensified with an aggressive government-led effort that systematically replaces Tamil culture and history with victory monuments dedicated to Sinhalese hegemony and Buddhist religion on the ruins of the Tamil homeland' (The Oakland Institute 2015, p. 3). In addition, there have been no signs of any genuine commitment from the current government, as with previous governments, to address the root causes of the conflict in order to resolve the national question through a genuine negotiated political settlement. Also, there has been neither acknowledgement nor political will to deal with the Tamil people's search for justice and accountability for wartime atrocities. Rather, the new government has continued in 'denial mode' like its predecessor. In fact, the new government has been waging the war through other means such as Sinhala Buddhist colonization and militarization, seriously affecting the collective psychology of the Tamil nation, and this has proven to be a major impediment for genuine reconciliation and lasting peace between the nations in the island.

The UN Secretary-General's internal review panel on UN action in Sri Lanka (November 2012) stated that '[b]ased on an internal review panel report, over 70,000 people are unaccounted for' (Report of the Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel on United Nations Action in Sri Lanka November 2012). According to the Bishop of Mannar (a district in the North), Catholic Diocese, Rt. Rev. Dr. Rayappu Joseph, in post-war Sri Lanka over 146,679 people in the Vanni (where the final phase of the war took place) have been unaccounted for (Perera 2011). With family members wanting to know the fate of their loved ones, while Tamils aspirations and grievances are intentionally ignored by the state, it is difficult to create an environment to move forward.

Upon gaining power the new government gave an impression they were to reverse former President Rajapaksa's policies, and some were reversed, though, except for a few symbolic moves, none were to the benefit of the ethnic Tamil population. In contrast the new government continued the Rajapaksa government's policies against the Tamils though sometimes using different tactics and strategies, which were still ethnocratic in nature.

Within Sri Lanka, the Tamil community has endured genocide in the form of four decades of war, military repression and terrorization of the civilian population in the North-East.

Constant and intentional massacres, destruction of property by consecutive Sri Lankan governments, denial of violation of international humanitarian law and international human rights law and flawed domestic investigations and probes on human rights violations and mass atrocities led the democratically elected Northern Provincial Council (NPC) to pass a resolution in February 2015 declaring that the successive Sri Lankan governments have carried out a systematic campaign of genocide against the Tamil nation in the island. Clearly expressing the Tamil people's long wait for justice, and their feeling of victimization which continues to increase, the resolution reads:

'This resolution provides an overview of the evidence demonstrating successive Sri Lankan governments' genocide against Tamils, and respectfully requests the ongoing United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL) to investigate the claim of genocide and recommend appropriate investigations and prosecutions by the International Criminal Court.' (Sri Lankan Northern Provincial Council Resolution 2015)

While deep concerns of the victims and survivors remain unanswered, the new government is instead increasingly engaging in serious ill-planned moves through ethnocentric practices.

In May 2015, the new government also appointed Maj. Gen. Jagath Dias who led the Army's 57th Division, which has been accused of serious violation of international humanitarian law and international human rights law (TRIAL International) as the new Chief of Staff of the Sri Lankan armed forces. This act has come under criticism at a national and international level. Brad Adams, Asia Director of Human Rights Watch has stated:

'Sri Lanka's new government has promised genuine accountability for wartime abuses, but naming the general of an abusive unit the army chief of staff is a slap in the face for victims. Members of the UN Human Rights Council expecting genuine accountability in Sri Lanka need to closely scrutinize the government's actions' (Human Rights Watch 2015).

The new government also nominated former Army Commander Gen. Jagath Jayasuriya, another accused of war crimes, as Sri Lanka's ambassador to Brazil (Ferdinando 2015).

Another development disturbing for the war victims and survivors is the promotion by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena of former army commander General Sarath Fonseka to the rank of Field Marshal in March 2015. Sarath Fonseka was the Sri Lankan army commander when major violations of the Geneva Conventions took place during the final stages of the war. The US ambassador in Colombo at the time, Patricia Butenis, said one of

the reasons there was such little progress towards a genuine Sri Lankan inquiry into the killings was that President Rajapaksa and the former army commander, Sarath Fonseka, were largely responsible. Butenis noted:

‘There are no examples we know of a regime undertaking wholesale investigations of its own troops or senior officials for war crimes while that regime or government remained in power...In Sri Lanka this is further complicated by the fact that responsibility for many alleged crimes rests with the country’s senior civilian and military leadership, including President Rajapaksa and his brothers and opposition candidate General Fonseka’ (Borger 2010).

In an interview in 2008, Sarath Fonseka said:

‘I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese but there are minority communities and we treat them like our people...We being the majority of the country, 75%, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things’ (Bell 2008).

Prior to the parliamentary election in August 2015, the incumbent UNP-led United National Front for Good Governance stated that in their ‘good governance’ government, defeated candidates would not be appointed as Ministers. However, despite contesting the 2010 presidential election, and subsequently being defeated, this very same government this year (2016) appointed Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka as the Minister of Regional Development (President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Official Website, 2016). The incumbent government that gave hopes of demilitarization of the north and east of the island failed to build on the expectations and trust of the Tamils. Rather, they intensified the Buddhization of the Tamil dominated areas in the North and East. The political appointments are also interconnected with the Sinhala Buddhist colonization process.

In terms of the economy, state development projects have been more favourable to the Sinhalese, adding to the sense of discrimination amongst the Tamils. The underdevelopment of Tamil-dominated regions is an indication not only of the war-devastated Tamil economy but also the state’s lack of genuine interest to rebuild or develop these areas. State ‘development’ projects rather than benefiting Tamils have been used by the state as a strategy to enhance the Sinhalization process by settling Sinhalese in the traditionally Tamil regions. In the post-war context these activities have been further accelerated, with the military too being involved in development activities (The Oakland Institute 2015, pp. 5). An increasing

number of military-run businesses in Tamil areas, from tourism to agriculture, compete with local Tamil vendors. The state's confiscation of fertile land and sea regions in Tamil areas for 'security' purposes has caused further deprivation of the Tamil economy. This has been exacerbated by the emergence of military-run businesses profiting from confiscated property. The government has also used 'securitized development' to portray themselves as engaging in peace-building and reconciliation processes, and curb international criticisms (TamilNet 2016).

Infrastructure such as bridges and highways in post-war Tamil regions have been strategic in connecting Sinhala settlements, facilitating easy and efficient transport for state-aided Sinhala settlers and the occupying Sri Lankan armed forces, rather than assisting the local Tamil communities or improving their economy. The government administration has also allowed the re-naming of historical places and streets with Sinhala names in Tamil dominated areas (Northern Provincial Council, November 2015).

### **Cultural Genocide and Religious Discrimination**

The present government, though proclaiming itself a 'good governance' government committed to restoring democracy, continues to refresh Sri Lanka's ethnocratic policies and practices. Currently a new constitution-making process is in progress after many local and international actors urged a constructive constitutional reform in order to create lasting peace in the island given that past and present constitutions have strengthened the ethnic conflict. However, according to media reports, the national question has not yet been addressed appropriately in the ongoing constitution-making process and once again the Sri Lankan President rather than urging for a secular constitution has ensured no removal of the Buddhism clause from the constitution (Tamil Guardian 2016). At a Buddhist religious festival in Kandy in August this year (2016), President Maithripala Sirisena declared Buddhism as Sri Lanka's biggest wealth (Tamil Guardian 2016).

While Tamils and a section of the international community continue to call for demilitarization of the North, prominent monks in Sri Lanka have urged for the military to remain in the North and East. In Tamil areas Buddhist monks in partnership with the Sri Lankan army are constructing new Buddhist temples in the North and East, a region where Buddhists are a relative minority. After the new government came to power in January 2015,

Buddhist monks in the occupied Tamil areas have built memorial stones for fallen Sri Lankan armed forces (TamilNet 2015). Speaking at the parliament in November 2014, Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian for Batticaloa, Seenithamby Yogeswaran said that at the end of the year in 2012 there were 10,349 Buddhist temples in the Northern and Eastern provinces, while at the end of the year 2013 the figure had increased to 10,812 deducing that in 2013 alone 463 Buddhist temples were built in the predominantly Tamil areas (TamilNet 2014).

In the first half of this year (2016) alone the Sri Lankan government has planned to construct 14 new Buddhist temples in one divisional secretariat in Trincomalee district in the Eastern Province (British Broadcasting Corporation Tamil Service 2016). On 16 May 2005, a Buddhist statue was constructed overnight at the Trincomalee bus stand leading to a tensions and subsequent violence between Tamil and Sinhala communities resulting in death and injury. Another 67-foot Buddha statute is in the process of being built in the Tamil dominated Jaffna district, which is considered as the cultural capital of Tamils and not a Buddhist region. According to independent journalists on the ground, Jaffna Fisheries Federation alleged Rs 3.2million allocated for a fishing market in Manalkaadu has been given to build the Buddha statue upon request by the Chief Monk of the Naiyeenatheevu Buddhist Temple (@Garikaalan 2015).

A Buddhist temple is under construction in the premises of a historical Hindu temple in Iranaimadu, Kilinochi district (Northern Province). The NPC adopted a resolution to stop the construction of the Buddhist temple inside the Hindu temple premises and for the removal of the Buddhist statue. However, Sri Lankan minister Swaminathan said that Buddhists *Viharas* (temples) already built or currently being built by the military in the North post-2009 could not be removed. 'We can't touch on these *Viharas* as they are religiously sensitive to Soldiers' (@Garikaalan 2015). It is noteworthy that after the occupation of the Tamil areas, the Sri Lankan military have also planted *peepal* trees<sup>6</sup> in many places, later following up with erecting Buddhist statues and temples under those trees.

While the government has failed to allocate sufficient funds to rebuild Hindu temples destroyed due to war, the construction of several hundred Buddhists temples and statues have

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<sup>6</sup> The peepal tree, also known as the sacred fig, is very closely interlinked with Buddhism and arguably a Buddhist temple will always have a peepal tree.



been spearheaded throughout the predominant Tamil occupied lands, in areas including main junctions of the highways and towns, historical Hindu places and strategic locations in the Tamil areas and bordering villages. Not only is the Sri Lankan military constructing new Buddha statues and temples but they are doing so after destroying Hindu temples in certain places. The author of this paper obtained from on-the-ground sources details of Hindu temples either damaged or destroyed partly or fully numbering 912 in the northern part of the island alone.

The activities of the current regime are best illustrated by the key points declared at a rally held by Tamils in Jaffna in September 2016. Seen as the largest since the war came to an end in May 2009, the rally titled *Ezhuka Thamizh* (which translates in Tamil to “*Tamils! Rise up!*”), declared twelve key points including the below two which mainly focus on Sinhala Buddhist colonization and militarization:

1. ‘Sinhala colonies, Buddhist temples and Buddha statues are being aggressively constructed with military sponsorship and the tacit approval of the government of “Good Governance”, with the sole purpose of Sinhala- Buddhisization of the North- Eastern Tamil homeland, alteration of the demography of the North and East and the bifurcation of Tamil speaking areas. This rally demands that the government immediately halt all efforts to alter the demography of the North and East through Sinhala- Buddhisization and settler colonialism.’
2. ‘Seven years after the end of the war, the North and East remains heavily militarized. Not only has this occupying military appropriated thousands of acres of land in the North and East, but it continues to appropriate more land, even under this regime. Further, the Army substantially disrupts the civilian economy by engaging in tourism, agriculture, and other businesses. The security forces continue to intervene in the day to day civilian administration of the North and East. This has resulted in the Tamil nation having to depend on the Army to sustain its nascent economy. Further, the social fabric of the Tamil nation continues to be eroded by heavy militarization and deep surveillance of the North and East, and has disrupted the Tamil people from collectively exercising their freedom of assembly to demand that their political aspirations be heard. Sexual violence perpetrated against women and children has placed the most vulnerable of community at the mercy of the occupying forces. This rally demands that the occupying forces immediately leave the North and East and that a genuine and fully fledged civilian administration is enabled in the North and East.’ (Tamil Guardian 2016)

Continuing ethnocentric policies and practices have increased the polarization between the ethnic communities in the island, and inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations are still at

crossroads as a result of ongoing ethnocratic politics, even seven years after the war came to an end.

## Conclusion

Ethnocracy has been an enduring, central and now deeply rooted feature of Sri Lankan state affairs for over 60 years. It has led to an ongoing ethno-political conflict against the Tamils, including a war which lasted 38 years. The war came to an end seven years ago. Almost two years ago a new government took power. After its surprising victory in the January 2015 presidential election, the incumbent regime portrayed itself as a 'good governance' government and announced restoring democracy to be one of their main tasks. However, there have been no significant developments with regard to the halting of ethnocratic policies and practices. Rather, very little has improved and this government has in many respects continued to strengthen the ethnocratic policies and practices. For instance the state-aided Sinhala Buddhist colonization has intensified in the predominantly Tamil areas in the North and East and further weakened the already rare opportunities for genuine reconciliation and positive peace in the island. If positive peace is to prevail in the island of Sri Lanka, it is crucial to accept and eliminate the ethnocratic policies and practices in Sri Lankan state affairs without further delay.

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