

21st European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies
Panel 37:

Confrontations in Sri Lankan Politics. Origins and Present Developments

Convener: Professor Dr. Peter Schalk, Uppsala

Nine contributions, ten participants

Abstracts

1. Joseph A. Chandrakanthan PhD, ThD. Biblical & Theological Department University of Toronto.

The Militant Role of Religions in Sri Lanka's Civil War

The interpolation of *Religion and Politics* in Sri Lanka have not been seriously studied or critically evaluated since the two noteworthy publications of Urmila Phadnis and D. E. Simith on this subject. However, in the past sixty years or so, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam at the popular and institutional levels have been more than mere passive spectators in the Sinhala – Tamil national conflict in Sri Lanka. Both overtly and covertly these religions have served as strong and militant catalysts to promote the war. Neither at an inter-religious level or at eth individual institutional level there wee any serious efforts to deescalate the war despite their professed commitment to peace and spiritual tranquility. The total and disastrous failure of the different religious leadership and their willing partnership with those who prosecuted the war has not been critically assessed or addressed by their respective congregations or followers for various reasons not least among them being the fact of nationalist resurgence overriding spiritual values and the quiet justification of religious zealotry as a virtue and value.

This paper will study the historical political cohabitation of religion and politics in Sri Lanka in the pre-colonial and colonial periods and will focus on the post-independence period of religious resurgence. By studying the empirical and institutional function of the four major religions in Sri Lanka this study will seek to make a critical evaluation of some of the statements and declarations made by individual religious organizations, or their respective leaderships as well as some of the common pronouncements made by inter-religious groups that advocated peace and goodwill among their own followers or all citizens. The covert and covert role of all religions at varying depth and degree in condoning the war will also receive a sharper focus.

2. Sandra Destradi, M.A. / Research Fellow, GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies, Hamburg.

Indo-Chinese Competition and its Influence on the War in Sri Lanka: On the Role of External Actors in Wars and Peace Processes

This paper aims to explain the role external actors played in the civil war in Sri Lanka, especially during the so-called Eelam War IV and the period immediately following the military defeat of the LTTE. In particular, the paper will deal with the competition between India and China and its influence on the war and on the prospects for a peace process. In this context, particular attention will be paid to India's foreign policy as the 'regional power' in South Asia. In fact India, which has traditionally been a supporter of the Tamil minority's demand for greater autonomy, while continuing to pay lip service to this principle, in 2007 de facto radically changed its attitude. On the one hand, India significantly contributed to weaken the LTTE network in Tamil Nadu and, on the other, it also expanded its military assistance to the Sri Lankan government in the form of military training and defensive weapons supplies. This paper argues that, besides other factors like the desire to see an end of the civil war ravaging Sri Lanka (enforced by the highly negative attitude towards the LTTE boosted by the Congress-led government's historical memories of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi), the competition between India and China for influence on the island contributed to the escalation of the conflict. President Rajapaksa was able to play the two Asian big powers off against each other and, as a consequence, to gain increased support and additional legitimation for his 'war on terrorism'. In fact, in order not to lose its influence on Sri Lanka to China, India was ready to compromise on the issue of Tamil rights and human rights violations. This became particularly evident when New Delhi supported the Sri Lankan government by voting against a resolution on the investigation of its war crimes at the United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2009.

3. Jude Lal Fernando, ThD, Research Fellow, Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin

**Geo-politics and Ethno-nationalisms. Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland
Theories and Practices**

Two modern day conflicts that revolve around distinct forms of ethno-nationalisms, and that have their roots in the British colonial practice, are the conflicts between Protestant unionism and Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland, and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. In the present phase of globalisation the former has entered into a negotiated settlement and ended to a great extent its armed phase by establishing a shared sovereignty of the nation-states whereas the latter has been made compounded without reaching a political resolution claiming thousands of human lives strengthening further the international outcry of the Tamil Diaspora for an independent state.

What were the geo-political dynamics of the colonial practice and their relationship with the formation of ethno-nationalisms - that gave rise to these two conflicts - and how have these dynamics changed in the present process of globalisation in resolving one and compounding another? Why did Northern Ireland get relatively resolved and not Sri Lanka? What is the impact of the relationship between geo-political dynamics and ethno-nationalism in helping to resolve one conflict and not the other? In other words, in the present phase of globalisation, in what way the role played by the British, Irish and American governments, and the European Union help reduce the polarisation between two forms of ethno-nationalism in Northern Ireland and in what way the role played by the British, American, Indian governments and the EU has contributed to the polarisation of ethno-nationalisms in Sri Lanka. In short, what is the impact of the geo-political dynamics of the present day processes of globalisation on the two situations?

In discussing this question could we envisage an ethic of nation-building and globalisation in resolving the Sri Lankan conflict as we enter into a historical phase where 'localisation' and 'globalisation' are inseparable from each other? In doing so what are the lessons that can be learnt or unlearnt from the Irish peace processes?

This paper makes an attempt to explore answers to the above questions mainly focussing on the geo-political dynamics of international relations that shape the roots, persistence and resolution of these ethno-nationalist conflicts. To this end it is important that we take into account in our analysis the actual political and cultural practices of the key players in these conflicts. However, theoretically, a question arises in this discussion regarding frameworks of analysis of our understanding of ethno-nationalisms, geo-politics and their correlation within a given conflict. Such theoretical understandings will be tested by the evidence of actual practice of the key players of the conflicts, both local and international.

In these two cases, understanding the politics of interpretation of nationhood and nation-state (which the movement of ethno-nationalism aims to achieve) - within the emerging network of global relationships - can help us to realise how these situations are both interrelated and distinct at the same time. Such an understanding can pave the way to broaden the academic and activist scope of conflict analysis and resolution and can contribute to develop an ethic of nation-building and globalisation.

4. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, PhD. Institution of Indology and Tibetology, Munich.
Sumati Rajesh, PhD. Department of Anthropology, Chennai.

Impact of the Sri Lankan Conundrum on Politics in Tamilnadu

The civil war in Sri Lanka is officially over, at least according to the pronouncements of the government. Still, security checks and travel restrictions continue to be in force, and up to 150000 Tamils at least are still languishing in internment camps without prospects of returning to their villages, contrary to promises of the government earlier in 2009.

In the last days of the war an increasing number of refugees from Sri Lanka turned up in India, and even after the end of the war, a trickle of refugees continues into Tamilnadu. They augment the number of Tamil refugees who have been staying in India since more than twenty years.

The paper will outline the present situation in Sri Lanka and enquire into its impact on politics in Tamilnadu. Since the 50s, popular interest for the fate of Tamils has been lively, waxing and waning, however, on the political level. During the 80s, support for the Tamil cause was high even among politicians, but after the assassination of Rajeev Gandhi in 1991, sympathies for the Tamil militants declined considerably. A substratum of sympathy and empathy for the fate of the Tamil civilians endured. This translated into politics only periodically, however.

In the elections 2009, the fate of the Tamils in Sri Lanka was high on the election campaign of nearly all parties in Tamilnadu, but in the end, interest petered out, and the elections were won by the party that had earlier been accused of disinterest for the war. Only at the end of 2009 interest flared again, when the treatment of the Tamils by the Sri Lankan government began to become known in the state.

The paper will look into the public and political relevance of the status of the Tamils in Sri Lanka for political developments in Tamilnadu. Is it a topic vital to politics, or is just, as Sankaran Krishna has claimed, a useful whipping boy being pulled out whenever other topics do not offer and thus, in essence irrelevant for Tamilnadu?

This enquiry will connect the question to the relevance of Sri Lanka and the civil war there for Indian domestic and foreign politics in general. In addition, some case studies, interviews and visual material will be presented on refugees from Sri Lanka who have arrived in Tamilnadu only within the last year and after the official conclusion of the war to put the situation in the country in perspective.

5. Zuzana Hrdlickova, Ph.D. Institute of Ethnology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

The Impact of the Sri lankan Conflict on the Social Status of Women

It is estimated that the armed conflict in Sri Lanka has now claimed between 80,000 and 100,000 lives¹. Social and family life has been severely disrupted by the war both in the North-East and in the South of the island, affecting social interaction systems and gender norms of men and women. According to many Sri Lankans, behaviours and attitudes of men and women have changed significantly during the past thirty years.

My paper presents outcomes of my PhD research and focuses on developments around Tamil female gender norms, looking at the ways the gender role of Tamil women in Sri Lanka has changed and looking for answers why these changes have taken place. The information is based on two and half-years of field research in Sri Lanka conducted in the North - East and Colombo between 2005 and 2008.

The issue of shifting status of Tamil women in Sri Lankan society is very complex. It has multiple layers including: theoretical concepts such as caste and chastity, and their daily

¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/05/20/2576543.htm> - May 20, 2009;
<http://www.reuters.com/article/newsMaps/idUSTRE54S16520090529> - May 29, 2009

manifestations, set within consequences of conflict such as displacement, death, sexual violence and the destruction of community infrastructure.

One of the fundamental pillars of Tamil society is the caste system, which determines marital patterns. However, thousands of people have been displaced for many years, living in IDP camps with very little privacy and ability to set up boundaries, impacting on inter-caste relations and marriages.

For gender norm of Tamil females the all-important theoretical concept is female chastity or *kaṭṭu*. Its manifestations on the practical level have changed due to war - what was unacceptable thirty years ago is happening more often now.

For example, in 1970s most Tamil women were expected to occupy mainly the domestic sphere. However, deaths and disappearances of thousands of (predominantly) men have forced Tamil women on a massive scale to take on a new role within their society as breadwinners. On the other hand the lack of men has entrenched certain marital customs, such as dowry payments.

Another manifestation of *kaṭṭu* is the social rejection of rape survivors. Many women were subject to sexual violence during the war. Hence, I also look at the reaction of society towards discourse of rape, attitudes towards the rapist and the survivor.

One of the major factors causing change during war time was the existence of the LTTE and its novel concepts partially relying on Tamil tradition while also pushing forward certain ‘modernizing’ aspects. The female combatants- the Tamil Tigresses, were renowned for their resilience and for crossing the societal boundaries of their gender. Now many of them are demobilized and their future depends on whether society decides to accept them or reject them.

Besides violence and displacement, war also brought a number of international agencies to Sri Lanka that have introduced an ‘equal opportunities’ paradigm, employing both Tamil men and women.

My paper systematically maps changes and new phenomena in Sri Lankan Tamil society related to gender roles and women.

6. Madlen Krüger. MA. Ruhr-University Bochum.

Relations between Buddhism and Politics in the Contemporary Sri Lankan Political Sphere. The Case of the National Sinhala Heritage Party (JHU).

This paper presents one aspect of my research project about the Jathika Hela Urumaya-movement in Sri Lanka. The JHU or “National Sinhala Heritage Party” is a new political party, which is led by Buddhist monks.

The entry of Buddhist monks into national elections in April 2004 represented a “radical departure” from the practices of the so- called Theravāda-Buddhism.

In no other Theravāda Buddhist society have monks enjoyed constituted political authority or ever organized themselves systematically to take control of the political realm.

While it is generally held, by the majority of the Sinhalese, that in earlier times monks acted as advisors to political rulers and thereby wielded considerable influence, never before had monks sought to enter the political sphere competing with the laity in the struggle for power. According to the Sinhalese concept, a monk can take the role of a “worldly” leader or, from a common Sinhalese term, as “the guardian deity of the nation,” in case the Sinhalese people and their Buddhist culture is threatened. In this case, the Sri Lankan clergy have a responsibility to assume leadership, as „inscribed“ in the religio-historic chronicle of the Mahāvamsa.

In March 2004, things changed. Monks of the “Jathika Hela Urumaya” (“National Sinhala Heritage Party”), an organisation which had been established rather hastily, appeared before the election authorities and handed in nomination papers to contest in the April 2004 elections. As a result, they hold nine seats in the new parliament. The most remarkable feature of the JHU is their official denial of seeking power. Instead, they claim that they are making a sacrifice, and going on a journey, or rather a pilgrimage, to achieve a “dharmarajya” – a righteous state-, and a “bauddha rajyaya” – a buddhist state -, after which they will return to their natural vocation of ministry and personal spiritual development. In making this claim, they have skillfully used a cluster of symbols, metaphors and terms derived from the vocabulary of Buddhism. For example, they use an existing political party, the Sinhala Urumaya, as a „raft“ to lawfully enter the electoral competition, utilizing to the full the associations of that metaphor in Buddhist literature, which include commitment, and detachment. As their party symbol they have selected the conch, a symbol associated with victory and auspiciousness in Hindu-influenced Buddhist royal ritual. Their election campaign was not made of rallies like those of other political parties, but of „Buddhist seminars“. Their electoral campaign itself was termed a “paramita”, appropriating the widely known Buddhist term that denotes the perfections achieved by the Buddha in his previous births as the Bodhisattva. They called their election campaign a “paramita perahara” – a religious procession that progresses undistracted towards the achievement of a “dharmarajya”. Their effort was termed an “adhistana puja” – offering of determination.

The JHU monks describe themselves as apolitical and it is obvious that they are using a religious terminology to demarcate themselves from a political sphere.

It is widely accepted among the Sinhalese that they serve as the custodians for true Buddhism. The question of what constitutes authentic Buddhism has always been debated.

Such public debates, in which an urban middle class regularly engaged, became the venues for defining and contesting the notion of true Buddhism. The JHU monks have become the centre for renewed debates over the proper roles and conduct for Buddhist monks. Within these debates the JHU-monks have to authorize political engagement by religious terms. They have to purify the parliament along moral Buddhist lines or to disrobe. This means either to become secular members of the parliament or to sacralize the political sphere.

7. Nadarajah Sriskandarajah, professor, SLU, Uppsala.

Politics of Environmentalism – an Opportunity for Reconciliation in Sri Lanka?

This paper takes as its point of departure the observation that despite the preponderance of writings on the politics and economy of the conflict in Sri Lanka, there has been a distinct lack of scholarly work that linked the conflict and ecology of the land. It also notes the glaring disparity between the South of Sri Lanka and the North East in the numbers of non-government agencies dealing with environmental concerns, and how there had been no voices heard from these agencies about the adverse consequences on the natural environment of the war that was being executed in Sri Lanka over the past three decades.

A 2008 study by the author noted how the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which ran a de facto administration of the North-East beginning in the 1990s, renewed and re-established the link between the people and the land through explicit administrative units responsible for environmental management, land use planning and economic development. The ceasefire period of 2002-05 then saw a strengthening of the de facto administration with the main departments gaining greater access to the public, national and international agencies, guests and volunteers. One aspect of this latter phase was the consideration of the environment as an overarching concern of all branches involved in development efforts, which was manifest in the establishment of a Commission for Environmental Governance in July 2005. Environmental awareness among citizens in the North-East was one area that benefited as a result of this renewed interaction with the outside world.

The LTTE's approach to forest resources of the North-East is a case in point. Until 2006 the Forest Resources Protection Division, created in 1994 as part of the de facto administration of the LTTE, was responsible for the systematic management of the existing forest resources and replanting of trees in areas cleared as part of the military operations. Today, six months after the end of the final phase of the war, the extent of the destruction caused to the forest resources and wildlife in a significant extent of the land, through the massive deployment of military and associated heavy weaponry, remains unassessed let alone addressed. Access to much of the areas concerned is denied for security reasons. The responsible agencies have not spoken about the environment, nor is it certain that the citizens in the South are aware of the extent of the destruction and its impact on the ecology and society of the whole island. New efforts in the name of redevelopment, being negotiated by the government, often involving international agencies and investors bring an additional complication when it comes to decisions regarding utilisation of natural resources in contested areas.

Using the case of the Sri Lanka's war-ravaged North-East, this paper will examine the links between environmental protection and socio-political stability. It will argue for the transformative potential of enhanced awareness among all citizens about the environment, and the opportunity it may offer towards reconciliation through shared understanding of human-nature relationships. As the search for an elusive political settlement continues in Sri Lanka, this paper suggests that political ecology and environmental justice are two hitherto neglected themes that may help to critique the situation in Sri Lanka and to offer alternatives to better environmental futures.

Interpretative Problems in the Formation Process of a Provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam

After the military defeat of the LTTE many supporters within the Tamil Resistance Movement realised that the military way to achieve a separate state has failed and that more than 21 000 LTTE fighters' death cannot be honoured by sending more young women and men to the battles against the Government Forces. Only by trying other means to achieve the three "T" (*teciyam, tayakam, tannatciyurimai*) for which they died can the ultimate aim be achieved. These means are mainly diplomacy and lobbying to exercise pressure on the Lankan Governments and make it accept/note the right of self-determination of Tamil speakers. These means, developed and applied in the Diaspora, cannot be stopped with the force of arms by the Lankan Government. The Movement's co-operation with the international community implies an acceptance of the rules of communication in inter-state relations which excludes the use of violence and totalitarianism of opinion-formation in a civil society. These two fundamental values have been taken up as pillars by a new organisation in the Diaspora called *Provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Ealam (PTGTE)*.

In the process of formation of this Government interpretative problems have arisen. How to interpret "Government", "provisional", "transnational" and the three "T" which also are the ideological foundation of this transnational Government? How to balance the concept of continuity back to the LTTE with the concept of discontinuity through the promotion of a non-armed and democratic struggle? Should the tiger flag be used in public appearances of this transnational Government? Another sensitive theme is how the Vattukottai resolution from 1976 should now be interpreted. It is one of the fundamental texts of the Tamil Resistance Movement. Should it be completely suspended, reinterpreted from promoting external to internal self-determination, or be cemented in its present form as a document promoting external self-determination? Is the past a burden or an access?

The paper will reflect the discussions, the pros- and contras for polarising positions that have been promoted by different voices between the Advisory Committee (AC) and the Tamil Resistance Movement, the AC and the critics from the Sri Lankan Government, and the AC and other Governments. The PTGTE-to-be is in a dynamic process of transition. Therefore, no final standpoints can be recorded.

9. Chaminda Weerawardhana, PhD Candidate, Queen's University, Belfast

Rising *Extrême droite*, ethnic polarization, calls for unison and political confrontations: reflections on the post-2009 Sri Lankan experience

The primary objective of this presentation is to explore political repercussions of a military approach to an essentially political problem – the secessionist ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka. The very 'island status' of Sri Lanka does not place it on a position where the international community would support any form of secessionism and separatism in the island (Guelke 2001). Despite strong sociocultural, ethno-religious and linguistic ties of the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka with the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu,

New Delhi has firmly opposed the creation of a separate 'statelet' on their southern doorstep. In the face of repeated failures of peace negotiations and the ultimate failure of Norwegian facilitators in their effort to hold balanced and interactive negotiations, the popular mandate swung in the direction of ethnic polarization, as the 2004 General Elections and 2005 Presidential Election amply demonstrated.

In the aftermath of the month of May 2009, Sri Lanka entered a post-war logic, which, as many a scholar including Saravanamuttu (2009) has explained, by no means implies a 'post-conflict' situation. The following questions, deemed the most pressing issues affecting Sri Lankan politics in the 2009-2010 quarter, will receive particular emphasis in the proposed presentation:

Ethnic polarization from within: the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the phenomenon of military leaders entering active politics and its consequences on ethnic relations, coupled with the overall challenges of harnessing a veritable spirit of unity and mutual respect among ethnic groups.

Implications from afar: the role of the Sri Lankan diaspora, notably the Tamil diaspora in the post-2009 context, which by and large equals a post-LTTE context. It has been widely noted that the new resolution of Tamil activists across the globe is to adopt 'political' measures in addressing their concerns. This is coupled by the concept of a trans-national government of Tamil Eelam. In the post-2009 context, what possible strategies could guide the Tamil Diaspora (and the Sri Lankan government) in interacting constructively with each other? This question is deemed a worthwhile one, as the future of Sri Lanka's ethnic relations and her political future as a whole substantially depends on it.

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