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## **Buddhism and the Legitimation of Power: Democracy, Public Religion and Minorities in Sri Lanka**

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### **Executive Summary**

Buddhism has been associated with the philosophy and practice of compassion, tolerance, pacifism and ahimsa, or the avoidance of violence. The paradox of political and nationalist violence in modern Buddhist polities is particularly acute in Sri Lanka which has historically been viewed in the Theravada Buddhist world and canon as a *Dhamma Dveepa* (Island of the Doctrine), where the purer doctrine was to be preserved and flourish, since in India and Nepal, the birthplace of Buddhism and the Buddha Siddharta Gautama, the religion has had fewer adherents than Hinduism or Islam, and lacked state patronage. Since the Constitution of 1972, Buddhism has had a special place in Sri Lanka and, in recent times, the state, through its overseas diplomatic missions, has consciously projected itself as a Buddhist land and national heritage site, paradoxically, while engaged in one of the South Asian region's most violent armed conflicts.

How do we explain political violence enacted under the sign of a historical religion whose doctrinal substance is ahimsa? This paper suggests that while Buddhist religiosity in Sri Lanka has historically been linked to state power and patronage, the substance and form of public Buddhism has been reconfigured both through the long moment of the colonial encounter with Christianity, as well as, the institution of democracy which has legitimated Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism and the concomitant marginalisation of ethno-religious "others" in the post-colonial nation state in Sri Lanka. These include Tamils, Muslims and Christians, while Hinduism has been spared due to its historical proximity to Buddhism. It was in somewhat disproportionate response to this marginalisation that the various Tamil groups took up arms with the assistance of the Indian state.

A number of theorists have noted that, in the course of the colonial encounter with Christianity, Buddhism went through a revival, even as its practice was purified and took the shape of theistic religion – a phenomenon that has been famously termed "Protestant Buddhism" (Obeyesekere: 1988, Malalgoda). More particularly, it will be argued here that processes of democratisation have given rise to Sinhala majoritarian nationalism. Ironically, the institution of democracy in post/colonial Sri Lanka may be seen to have given rise to the

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phenomenon of the 'tyranny of the majority' that several founding theorists of democracy, such as Locke and de Toqueville worried about, even as it has contoured and legitimised Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Thus too unfold the dialectic of the enlightenment and modernity in Lanka.

*To understand nationalism as an historical reality it is essential to step outside the history that nationalism gives itself.*

*(Sudipta Kaviraj 1992: 1)*

## **Introduction**

How do we explain political violence enacted under the sign of a historical religion whose doctrinal substance is *Ahimsa*? More than any other axial age ‘religion’, Buddhism has been associated with the philosophy and practice of compassion, tolerance, pacifism and *Ahimsa*; or the avoidance of violence.<sup>2</sup> In a dominant Orientalist imaginary, Buddhism was considered a “passive” religion that legitimated the *status quo*, although the principles of *Ahimsa* have inspired political activism and social protest.<sup>3</sup> Theravada Buddhism, associated with the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama developed in India (now contemporary Nepal) around 400 BCE, was also a critique of caste hierarchies and strictures against women, congealed in the socio-religious complex of purity/pollution characteristic of Hinduism. Thus, women in South and Southeast Asia’s Buddhist societies have traditionally enjoyed a higher social status than their counterparts in Hindu and Islamic societies. The best known modern adherent of *Ahimsa* who worked for social and political transformation were Mahatma Gandhi, whose teacher was Jain, and in recent times, Buddhist monks, who have been involved in social movements and political protests in Thailand, Burma and Tibet.

The paradox of political and nationalist violence in modern Buddhist polities is particularly acute in Sri Lanka, a historically multicultural and multi-faith island where four great world religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, a range of indigenous spirit beliefs, and astrology, have coexisted for centuries. Though the island’s Sinhalese majority, who are mostly Buddhist, have been in a bipolar ethno-linguistic conflict with the Tamils who are mainly Hindu in the post-colonial period (1983-2009), most Buddhists pay homage to Hindu deities and Buddhist temples have Hindu shrines. Indeed, religious co-existence and hybridity among Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus in everyday religious practice, has been as much a unifying and bridging factor between these communities, as a dividing one since the rise of post-colonial Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Though the post-colonial conflict on the island is primarily ethno-linguistic, public religion or Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has been used by a range of political actors to marginalise religious minorities.

This paper suggests that Buddhism, which at various moments in the island’s history legitimised power and kingship, has been politicised in distinct ways in the encounter with post-colonial modernity, and particularly in the course of the introduction and consolidation of majoritarian democracy. Sri Lanka is an island of 19 million people with diverse and often overlapping religious adherence. The linguistic majority Sinhalese who number approximately 74 percent of the population are primarily Buddhist (69 percent). The Tamil largely Hindu minority comprises approximately 18 percent of the population. There is also a significant Muslim minority (of Arab and Malay origins), which constitutes about eight percent of the population, while the Eurasian – Christian Burghers – number a little under one percent of the population. Additionally, 7.6 percent of the total population, a majority of who are urban westernised Sinhalese and Tamils are Christians – of all the South Asian countries

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<sup>2</sup> *Sanskrit Ahimsa* is to cause harm or hurt.

<sup>3</sup> Buddhism because it has been re-presented as a non-theistic, rather than mono-theistic or polytheistic religion and was placed outside the Orientalist evolutionary thinking that monotheism was a superior form of religious life.

Sri Lanka has the largest Christian community as a percentage of the population. There are also the forest-dwelling *Vanniattoo* or indigenous communities which have their own spirit religion. Historically, there were Tamil Buddhists in northern Sri Lanka and South India, and the great 3<sup>rd</sup> century epic poems, the *Silpattikaram* and *Mannimaikallai*, are Tamil Buddhist texts.

As theorists of nationalism from Renan (1882) to Anderson (1983) have noted, most modern nations have invented their purity and antiquity. The invention of modern national identities is usually accomplished by the selective ‘forgetting’ of culturally mixed and hybrid pasts; constructing authentic, pure and stable present ethno-religious histories; and projecting far back in time modern identity categories and classifications that are essentially modern socio-political formations. Sri Lanka has been no exception to this process of modern ethno-national and ethno-religious national identity construction, and Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism has become a potent public political discourse. At different times in the post-colonial period, minority communities have been confronted with state-sponsored public religion, contoured by several powerful urban Buddhist temples, and their political patrons and followers. However, the island’s westernised urban elite and upper middle classes tend to inter-marry across religion, ethnicity and caste, but more often than not within class, and thus the long tradition is one of a cosmopolitan co-existence of diverse and hybrid religious practices, despite periodic localised disputes or conflicts.

Though Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu linguistic communities have historically co-existed and shared a gamut of cultural and religious practices, they have emerged in the postcolonial period as opposed national communities. Nevertheless, Hinduism enjoys a certain *de facto* parity of status with Buddhism, arguable due to their intertwined historical roots and ability to accommodate other deities. While Buddhism in theory is atheistic and Hinduism polytheistic, both religions are in practice polytheistic, entertain a multiplicity of gods and do not have injunctions against “other” deities that the religions of the book (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) entail. The famous multi-religious sacred sites of Katharagama in the south and Mannar in the west of the island are testimony to the co-existence of these two religions in Sri Lanka, in addition to the accommodation of Islam and Christianity. It is then necessary to start any analysis of public religion or religion in politics in Sri Lanka from the ethnographic reality of religious diversity in most urban neighbourhoods, streets or public space. The main festival days of the island’s four major religions are national public holidays. It is also necessary to distinguish between personal religiosity and everyday religious practice, and official or public religion at the outset.

This paper suggests that, while Buddhism has been historically linked at different times and in different kingdoms to state power and patronage in Sri Lanka, the substance and form of modern Sinhala-Buddhism has been (re)configured both through the long moment of the colonial encounter with Christianity and modernity, particularly the introduction and institution of democracy. Ironically, the institution of democracy in the absence of adequate checks and balances has legitimated the rise of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism and the concomitant marginalisation of ethno-religious “others” in the post-colonial nation state in Sri Lanka. These include Tamils, Muslims and Christians, while Hinduism has been spared due to its historical proximity to Buddhism. It was in response to state marginalisation that various Tamil youth groups took up arms in the late 1970s in Sri Lanka. A third incident in the post-colonial politicisation of Buddhism was the armed confrontation between the state and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983-2009, which saw the use of Buddhist symbolism by the state to fight a “just war” and defend Lanka’s militarisation,

territorial integrity and Theravada Buddhism on the island. The Sinhala Buddhist diaspora, particularly in the United States and Australia, was also mobilised to support the state in the confrontation with the LTTE.

This paper suggests that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism may be seen as a modern political response to various local social and global forces, paradoxically enabled by the institution of majoritarian democracy and the growing tyranny of the majority, in the absence of adequate “checks and balances” for the minorities in the post-colonial period. I draw from Hent de Vries’ use of the term “public religion” and “political theology” to refer to the sphere of public religious discourse that is propelled and impelled by political processes as well as global media, economic markets, and foreign policies as much as resistance to it (De Vries: 2006). The notion of public religion opens the space for the political sociology of religion that moves beyond the doctrinal and ethnographic study of everyday forms of religious life to the realm of politics. It is suggested that, in the process of post-colonial nation building, democratisation and development, there has arisen an illiberal democracy in Sri Lanka, wherein Buddhism has been mobilised and captured to legitimise a Sinhalese majoritarian state. This mobilisation and politicisation of Buddhism is however, in no way static, but rather has waxed and waned almost inversely to the conflict with the LTTE in recent times.

This paper then explores some of the dilemmas and paradoxes that public religion epitomises in the context of the rise of Sinhala majoritarian nationalism in the post-colonial period, and the concomitant marginalisation of the island’s diverse “other” ethno-religious groups: the Tamils, the Muslims (the majority of whom are Tamil-speaking), the Christians (including the Eurasian Burghers) and the indigenous forest dwelling *Vanniattoo*. One outcome of the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism was the marginalisation of the minorities, which contributed to the armed confrontation between the state and the LTTE. The LTTE, which was initially set up and funded by India’s intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), fought for a separate state for the Tamil minority in the northeast of the country for almost three decades (late 1970s to 2009). This paper also explores the politicisation of religion and “Buddhisisation” of politics in Sri Lanka, leading to the emergence of the all monk political party – *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU) or the National Heritage Party in 2004, which saw the appearance of yellow robes in Parliament. The JHU subsequently became a coalition member of the government.

Like most countries in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions, Sri Lanka was faced with balancing the expectations of majority and minority communities *vis-à-vis* access to power and resources in the post-colonial period. The island experienced tensions and riots between the majority and minority ethno-religious communities in the post-colonial period. Ceylon, as it was known then, was, however, spared the inter-community violence that the sub-continent experienced in 1947. However, in 1956, riots were triggered in the capital, Colombo, when the state declared Sinhala, the language of the majority, the national language. Subsequently, the militarisation of radical Tamil minority youth groups was to result in South Asia’s bloodiest post-colonial armed conflict waged over a quarter century, from 1983-2009, by the LTTE fighting an increasingly Sinhala nationalist state for a separate state in the Tamil-speaking northeastern regions. The confrontation between the state and the LTTE resulted in the further ethnicisation of public religion and culture. In the context of the rise of Sinhala majoritarianism, the mainly Christian Eurasian communities migrated out of the country, of whom many settled in Australia. The confrontation between the LTTE and the state ended in May 2009 with the destruction of the LTTE, but the question of the minorities and their marginalisation remains to be addressed.

During the years of conflict, Buddhist iconography was used by the state and its military apparatus to legitimate the fighting. Almost 80,000 people are estimated to have died in the war years and over half a million displaced at different times during the armed conflict from 1983 to 2009. The conflict, which ended with the destruction of the LTTE and its leadership, resulted in allegations by international observers that both parties to the conflict, namely, the state and LTTE, had committed ‘war crimes’. The conflict years saw the consolidation of public religion. It was in order to preserve and protect Sri Lanka as a Buddhist isle that monks were instrumental in founding the ultra-nationalist political party, the JNU, in 2004. In the face of perceived threats by ethno-religious minorities, particularly the violence of the LTTE, the JNU laboured to articulate a Buddhist “just war” theory using the notion of “*Dharma Yuddha*” (righteous or just war), drawing from the *Palivamsa* and Buddhist canonical literature, principally the *Mahavamsa*.

This paper then contextualises the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism alongside post-colonial state building, the institution of democracy, and more recently, the armed confrontation between the State and LTTE. The consolidation of majoritarianism is seen partly as an outcome of the introduction of democratic government in the context of diminished checks and balances for minority communities, resulting in the gradual political marginalisation of numerically small cultural groups. The institution of democracy in the absence of safeguards for minorities is seen to have given rise to the phenomenon of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ that several founding theorists of democracy, including Locke, Mill and de Tocqueville (1840) worried about.

### **The Historical Context: Buddhism and the State in Lanka**

Historically, Sri Lanka has been viewed in the Theravada Buddhist world and canon as a *Dhamma Dveepa* (Island of the Doctrine), where the pure doctrine was to be preserved and flourish, since in India and Nepal, which were the birthplaces of Buddhism and the Buddha Sakyamuni, there are fewer adherents than there are Hindus or Muslims, and Buddhism lacks state patronage.<sup>4</sup> Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka by the monk, Mihinda, the son of Emperor Asoka around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa as recorded in the Pali Chronicle, the *Deepavamsa*. During this time, a sapling of the sacred Bodhi tree was brought to Sri Lanka and the first monasteries were established under the sponsorship of the King. The Pali Canon, having previously been preserved as an oral tradition, was first committed to writing in Sri Lanka around 30 BCE.

The island has one of the longest continuous histories of Buddhism, with the *Sangha* or priesthood having existed in a largely unbroken lineage since its introduction in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. During periods of decline, the Sri Lankan monastic lineage was revived through contact with Myanmar and Thailand. In Sri Lanka, since the Constitution of 1972, Buddhism has had a special place and, in recent times, the state, through its overseas diplomatic missions, has consciously projected itself as a Buddhist land and national heritage site, paradoxically, while engaged in one of the South Asian region’s most violent armed conflicts. In its confrontation with the LTTE, the state has also drawn from an emergent Sinhala Buddhist diaspora.

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<sup>4</sup> The language of the Theravada Buddhist Canon is Pali. The *Tipitaka*, the three branches of the teaching of the Buddha (*Vinaya Pittak*, *Sutta Pittaka* and *Abhidamma*) was first fixed in writing in Pali by scribe monks in the island in 100 BCE.

Much ink has been spilled by scholars and commentators within and outside the doctrinal order trying to make sense of acts, events, practices and processes of social and political violence manifest in post-colonial Sri Lanka (Tambiah: 1991, Gombridge, Obeyesekere: 1988, Seneviratne: 1999). One strand of explanation has focused on definitions of “violence” and been concerned to articulate it not in epistemic or figural terms but in the most literal, physical sense given the manner in which the notion of *Dharma Yuddha* has been deployed by certain monks in Sri Lanka (Deegalle: 2006). Others have argued that political Buddhism emphasises political values over Buddhist values and that “Sinhala Buddhist ideology is now embedded and institutionalised” as state policy (DeVotta: 2007). Of course, Buddhism in Sri Lanka is not monolithic and there are various caste-based orders, prominent among them being the *Siyam Maha Nikaya*, *Amarapura* and *Ramanya Nikayas*. The history of Buddhism on the island is also replete with debates among the various *Nikayas* and the *Mahavamsa* or Great Chronicle, which details the contest between the *Maha Vihara* and *Abayagiri Vihara* monks for kingly patronage.

Yet, in another sense, the case of history and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka is unique and distinct. The twinning of Buddhism with the island of Sri Lanka in the Theravada canon and in contemporary public religion derives from the island’s ancient mytho-history, contained in the Pali-vamasa literature, of which the *Mahavamsa* constitutes a more or less continuous history. The *Mahavamsa*, a continuous history written by Buddhist monks of the *Maha Vihara*, details the arrival of the Sinhala Prince Vijaya from north India and founding of the Sinhala kingdom on the island of Sri Lanka, as well as the three flying visits of the Buddha (*Thathagatha*) to the island in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. This canonical Pali text, which is estimated to have been compiled in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, establishes an isomorphism between Buddhism, the Sinhala “jathiya” and the island of Sri Lanka (Gombridge: 2006).<sup>5</sup> The *Mahavamsa* also elaborates a notion of a Buddhist polity that needs to be safeguarded against invading Tamil Kings from South India. The *Mahavamsa* also contains an extended debate regarding the role and obligation of the King to safeguard and preserve the Buddhist kingdom of Sri Lanka against invaders. It also suggests that with regard to dealing with the enemy the ends may justify the means, using the example of the Indian Emperor Asoka who later converted to Buddhism (*Mahavamsa* 5: 264 quoted in Gombridge: 2006).

### **Modernity and Ethno-religious Identity Politics**

A number of scholars have noted that, in the course of the colonial encounter with Christianity, Buddhism went through a revival, even as its practice was purified and took the shape of (theistic) religion – a phenomenon that has been famously termed “Protestant Buddhism” (Gombridge and Obeyesekere: 1988, Malalgoda). Anagarika Dharmapala epitomised this movement of anti-colonial Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and revivalism.

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<sup>5</sup> Buddhist-scholar monks of the Mahavihara maintained chronicles starting from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. These annals were combined and compiled into a single document in the 5th century CE by the monk Mahanama. A companion volume, the *Culavamsa* (“lesser chronicle”), compiled by Buddhist monks, covers the period from the 6th century to the British takeover of Sri Lanka in 1815. The *Culavamsa* was compiled by a number of authors of different time periods. The combined work, sometimes referred to collectively as the *Mahavamsa*, provides an almost continuous historical record of over two millennia. The historical accuracy of the document, given the time when it was written, is considered authentic, although the material prior to the death of Asoka is not trustworthy and mostly legend. As it often refers to the royal dynasties of India, the *Mahavamsa* is also valuable for historians who wish to date and relate contemporary royal dynasties in the Indian sub-continent. The accounts given in the *Mahavamsa* are also supported by the stone inscriptions, mostly in Sinhala, found in Sri Lanka. In this sense, the *Mahavamsa* differs from the Mahabarath, Ramayana and other epics since it has considerable historiographic value.

Similarly, modern forms of knowledge, representation and governance have created and contoured the making of a bipolar ethno-religious identity conflict in post-colonial Sri Lanka. In the colonial period, essentially linguistic identities and differences among Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking people were racialised and rendered biological differences. Thus, colonial racial science that sought to establish a universal hierarchy of superior and inferior races in order to legitimate white colonial rule, also posited that Sinhala speakers belonged to the Aryan races and Tamil-speakers were Dravidian people while ignoring intermarriage among these communities.

The colonial “scientific” racial coding of cultural and linguistic differences among “native” populations transformed local identities and continues to configure identity conflict in Sri Lanka where Sinhalese and Tamils are often considered to be of two different and mutually exclusive “races” – the Aryan and the Dravidian. As Trautman (1997) has demonstrated, the mistaken twinning of “philology and ethnology”, or the equation of language with race (later ethnicity), established the racial interpretation of the Indian civilisation and, thus, the purported superiority of the Aryan (Indo-European) over the Dravidian linguistic communities. Likewise, selective readings of ancient texts such as the *Mahavamsa* articulated with colonial discourses of race difference, have also contributed to the transhistorical, more or less mutually exclusive and bipolar construction of modern Sinhala and Tamil ethnic identity categories.

The racialisation of the two linguistic communities was the first step in the construction of a bi-polar ethno-religious imagination, enabling the current configuration of identity politics which constructs Sinhalese and Tamils as mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive of the island’s diverse and hybrid communities. The emergence of this bi-polar formulation of ethnicity has entailed the collapse of older, relatively fluid and overlapping forms of religious, cultural and linguistic groups and identity formations in pre-colonial and pre-democratic Sri Lanka into monolithic, race-based collective identities. A bipolar imagination would also mean the national imagination which renders all other linguistic and religious group identities (for example, Muslims and Christians) except the two dominant communities, the Sinhala Buddhists and Hindu Tamils, culturally invisible and politically inconsequential.

The production and consolidation of the modern bipolar imagination has entailed two parallel but distinct processes: 1) the ethnicisation of politics, whereby ethno-religious identity as such has become the dominant fault line of public debate, political action and collective historical consciousness; and 2) the politicisation of groups and individuals, whereby ethno-linguistic and, to a lesser extent, religious markers, become the salient category of identity in the private domain and individual consciousness. The ethno-religious encoding of politics has entailed apparently contradictory processes whereby groups such as the Sinhalese, Tamils and, recently, Muslims have become highly visible in national politics and culture, while other small and/or mixed communities, such as the Burghers, Malays and Sinhala Christians are being rendered invisible through assimilation, marginalisation or outmigration.

It is possible to map how collective identities have been transformed into political conflict groups in the modern political arena, a process which has entailed colonial translation and indigenous inventions of tradition by tracing how colonial and post-colonial forms of democracy and development have produced a bipolar ethno-religious imagination in Sri Lanka. The emergence of the tyranny of the majority has coincided with the introduction and deepening of democratic forms of representative government. This paper also explores how



the technologies of (good) government, constituted as democracy and development begun in the late colonial period and consolidated after independence in 1948, transformed identity politics in Ceylon, while modernity, which was to have stemmed the tide of ancient ethno-religious hatreds in the old world's diverse polities, has disenchantingly unfolded on this island whose national airline still offers a forlorn promise of "paradise".<sup>6</sup> Below we will trace the complex processes of translation and transformation that have made possible the construction of a bipolar ethnic identity politics in colonial and post-colonial Sri Lanka.

Geography too was central to the modern configuration of Sri Lanka as an indivisible territorial unit favoured by ancient gods and modern progress. This imagination was enabled both by systematic mapping and the British unification of the coastal territories, colonised by the Portuguese and later the Dutch from the early 1500s on, with the Kandyan kingdom of the central highlands of Sri Lanka in 1815. The unity of Sri Lanka is then really a recent invention that draws from the *Mahavamsa*. Thus, in recent times, Sinhala Buddhists have fought hard to preserve the ideology of Sri Lanka as an eternally indivisible unit, even as the LTTE fought to break it. In any event the British colonial order played a central role in erasing older lines of conflict and accommodation and instituting new ones. While Kandyan nationalism in the 1920s and Tamil separatism in the 1980s and 1990s have challenged the ideology of the unity of the island, it has remained by and large a central aspect of the modern national imagination of the land of Sri Lanka which is opposed to federalism and the devolution of power to Tamil regions.<sup>7</sup>

Retrospectively then, it is possible to see that the optimism about Sri Lanka's progress and modernisation was posited on a number of constitutive factors: the co-existence of ethno-racial, religious, linguistic, regional, and culturally diverse communities; relative cultural and phenotypal affinities between the two major and entrenched ethno-religious groups, the Sinhalese and Tamils; the island's attenuated caste system; its size and location at the crossroads of major trade routes in the Indian Ocean; its status as the most colonised and westernised nation in Asia; not to mention the "moderate tone" of its nationalist movements; and the multiethnic character of its political elites at independence.<sup>8</sup> All of these ingredients for Sri Lanka's democratic success were configured in a 19th-century colonial imagination of the island and its peoples and have also structured post-independence (ethno) nationalist discourse in Sri Lanka.

The process of stabilisation which ethno-religious categories underwent towards the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in colonial Sri Lanka echoes similar processes in Britain and in many

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<sup>6</sup> This view derives its strength from explicit and implicit comparison with the secular liberal nationalisms of the "old established nations of Western Europe" (Hobsbawm, E., 1990), meaning primarily, Britain and France. These nations are regarded in much of the literature on comparative nationalism to have left "ethnicity" far behind on the road to modern nation formation. In the last decade, however, this liberal history of nationalism, which privileges Europe as the birthplace of open, liberal and non-ethnic nationalism, has been challenged by the rise of anti-immigrant, new right movements in Britain, France and Germany, among others.

<sup>7</sup> That the Kandyan National Assembly (KNA) put forward a demand for the creation of a federal state in Ceylon with regional autonomy for the Kandyans is often forgotten. In 1925, the KNA demanded that "the Kandyan race must be separately represented in Council and that our entity as a separate and distinct community be recognised".

<sup>8</sup> Most liberal accounts of the present conflict in the country begin with descriptions of the country's diversity and mention the fact that the first General Election under universal adult suffrage was held only two years after Britain in 1931 – a hallmark of British faith in the native population's civility. See De Silva's authoritative account *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multiethnic Societies: Sri Lanka 1880-1985* in this connection.

parts of the colonial world as race theory achieved scientific credence. But while the shifting structure of the colonial census says little about the local categories for marking difference, it points to instability and ambiguities of ethnic identity categories which so often appear natural and primordial. It also points to the productive ambiguities and confluences of meaning that the translation of exogenous categories like “race” created in the colonies. In Ceylon there was no equivalent term among any of the local languages for the European concept of “race”. The Sinhala term for race “jathi/jathiya” connotes various types of linguistic, religious and cultural differences. The term “jathiya” was and still is used to connote “race”, “ethnic” and “nation”, not to mention caste. The translation of “race” to “jathi” enabled and enables a certain categorical slippage which permits mapping religious, linguistic and cultural differences along a single over-arching frame of race. In other words, the term “jathi” collapses non-equivalent types of difference. Religious, linguistic, cultural, and phenotypal markers coalesce in the contemporary concept of ethnicity via racial categories. The connotational slippages encapsulated in the term “jathi” mask the fact that race serves as an anchor for otherwise disparate classificatory frames, that is, linguistic, religious, caste classification, in an over-arching hierarchical and unipolar system of and for understanding differences.

The processes of translation and transformation that began in colonial times put in place the cognitive structures of the present configuration of identity politics in Sri Lanka where Sinhala-Buddhists and Tamils have emerged as singular ethnic groups. For in the post-colonial period communal, or what are now termed ethno-racial or national identities were mapped on to conceptions of race, thereby changing existing identity configurations. What is clear is that linguistic and religious categories have been consolidated along an ethno-racial fault line in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Thus, despite the fact that Hindus and Buddhists share many common religious practices, they are viewed as belonging to different “religions”. Race has served as a root metaphor which congeals linguistic, religious and cultural markers in the formation of modern Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil (ethnic) identities. The non-equivalency of the two identity formations, one which emphasises religion and language (Sinhala-Buddhist), and the other linguistic differences (Tamil), is indicative of this process of constructing difference. The shifting categories of the colonial census then demonstrate the point that identity formations are historically fluid. At different moments they congeal and collapse different types of salient identity markers, be they linguistic, religious, ethnic, gendered, caste or class-based.

### **Instituting Democracy and the Rise of the “Tyranny of the Majority”**

The four decades after independence in 1948 saw various experiments at social engineering and economic restructuring in the new nation in an attempt to modernise and deepen democracy. In practice, democracy and development meant that the Sinhala majority increasingly dominated an increasingly centralised welfare state, while, intentionally and sometimes inadvertently, chipping away at the economic and political privileges that some ethnic minorities had come to enjoy in certain spheres of national life under British rule. I refer to the Burghers of Eurasian descent and the elite segments of the Tamil community, who held a disproportionately high number of positions in the colonial civil service and administration at independence.

Religious revivalism had constituted a central aspect of the consolidation of a pan-Sinhala-Buddhist ethnicity during the struggle for independence from the British.<sup>9</sup> A tradition of modern social and political Buddhism was explicitly articulated by the monk Walpola Rahula who advocated politics for Buddhist monks during the run-up to independence from the British in 1948. In the *Heritage of the Bhikku*, originally published in Sinhala in 1942, Rahula encouraged and justified the political activism of Buddhist monastics who would otherwise eschew worldly action and follow the path of “world renunciation” traditionally prescribed for Theravada monks. As Deegalle notes, “the degree of involvement of Buddhist monks in Sri Lankan politics has gradually increased, marking clear phases of radical development” (2006: 233).

The redress of social and economic inequality was squarely on the agenda for post-colonial nation-building in both the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) – the two political parties which dominated post-independence Sri Lankan electoral politics in much the same way that the Conservatives and Labour have done in Britain. The Marxist-Maoist youth-led *Janatha Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP) insurrection of 1971 was read by the country’s political elites as both a reminder and warning of the consequences of economic inequalities still to be addressed. The response to the perceived threat of southern youth unrest was a series of not very well-coordinated liberal and socialist policies focussed on the Sinhalese. And there was good reason for doing so. Under the Donoughmore Constitution, with the provision for territorial representation, the Sinhalese, particularly the ones from the low country, had been placed in an unassailable majority in the State Council. Thus, despite the fact that the Sinhalese were fragmented into sub-groups, they constituted an entrenched majority. Additionally, long-standing cleavages between the Kandyans and the low country Sinhala elites had been more or less bridged by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike’s formation of the *Sinhala Maha Sabha*, which opened the way for the emergence of a pan-Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism which effectively ensured the cultural subordination of all other communities.

Since the logic of numbers, given the prevailing electoral system, the Sinhala vote was preeminent, the UNP and the SLFP upped the stakes in the anti-“other” game in order to woo the Sinhala electorate. The two parties sought Sinhala votes and favour through a set of social engineering policies whereby the ethnic minorities were sometimes intentionally, and often inadvertently, the losers. The result was the growing political and cultural tyranny of the Sinhala majority, and the breakdown of the contract between ethnic minorities and a state increasingly dominated by the majority Sinhalese.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible to trace the several incidents which mark the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, the marginalisation of minorities and the concomitant politicisation and militarisation of the Tamils in this period:

1. Passage of the Act in 1956 that made Sinhala, the language of the majority community, the only official language of the country. This Act effectively ended the two-language formula which was accepted at one time by the Sri Lankan polity. At this point, the Federal Party’s call for a semi-autonomous Tamil state was met by

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<sup>9</sup> Much work has been done on the politicisation of religion in Sri Lanka. Hinduism, under the agitation of Arumuga Navalar, and the politicisation of Buddhism with the support of the theosophists under Colonel Olcott, Anagarika Dharmapala, and monks such as Migutuwatte Gunananda and Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala in opposition to Christian conversion during the colonial period.

<sup>10</sup> The process of the breakdown of the contract between the state and minorities has been well documented by numerous writers on ethnicity and conflict in Sri Lanka, notably, Bastiampillai, Russell and Wilson.

Sinhalese mob violence. The anti-Tamil riots of 1956 and 1958 further polarised the country along ethnic lines.

2. The disenfranchisement of a majority of Indian Tamil plantation labourers who arrived in Sri Lanka during the 1830s, a case that is discussed below.<sup>11</sup>
3. Enactment of the first republican Constitution in 1972 which ended the dominion status of Sri Lanka. The constitution created a political structure that ensured the superiority of the legislature, with little regard for the demands of minorities in a Sinhala-dominated parliament. It removed previous minority safeguards and gave pre-eminence to Buddhism, the main religion of the majority Sinhalese. The Federal Party, which was the main political party of the Tamils, did not participate in the framing of the new Constitution.
4. The widespread riots of 1983 when Tamil homes and businesses were attacked, following the killing of 13 soldiers by the LTTE in the north, and the escalation of Tamil youth resistance to the Sri Lanka Army in the Tamil-dominated northern Jaffna Peninsula in the form of armed conflict, which paralleled in many ways the anti-state Sinhala JVP insurrection in the south. The armed conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state has been fought with periodic intermission through the late 1980s and 1990s. During the war, the LTTE practised ethnic cleansing of Sinhalese and Muslims in the northern and eastern sectors of the island, which it claimed as Tamil homelands, while state violence has mirrored the separatist violence. The armed conflict has displaced between 1.5 million and half a million people at various times, mostly Tamils and Tamil-speaking civilians who have been caught in the crossfire. The displacement of populations and the war resulted in the creation of a new ethno-national border marked by army camps and refugee camps, which separates the north and eastern sectors from the rest of the country and signifies the *de facto* existence of a separate nation in the northern peninsula.
5. The rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and its entrenchment within the post-colonial state affected minority communities differently. Segments of the moderate Tamil elites dug their heels in for a political battle that culminated in a demand for a separate state in the north of Sri Lanka where Tamils constitute a majority. On the other hand, the youth of lesser Tamil castes in the north, who felt marginalised by the Colombo-based high caste Tamil leadership, were increasingly radicalised and subsequently militarised by India's intelligence agency – RAW. The outcome of that process has been the LTTE's brand of fanatic nationalism epitomised in the cult of martyrdom and suicide bombing. Coomaraswamy has summed up the process of transformation of the Tamil political imagination in the post-colonial period quite accurately when she stated that "the vision of a minority operating in a pluralistic society was gradually transformed into a vision of a separate historical polity, with a territorial base and distinctive manifestations of race, religion and language" (1984: 178).

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<sup>11</sup> This action by the Sinhala-dominated government gave cause to Tamil elite parties to organise against Sinhala hegemony. Yet, differences between the Tamils of Indian origins and the Sri Lanka Tamils remained a political reality. In fact, the leadership of the plantation Tamils has supported successively chauvinistic Sinhala nationalist government, for its own political ends and remains more or less autonomous from the Sri Lanka Tamil political leadership.

At the same time, the professional and skilled Tamil middle classes, like the Burgher or Eurasian populations, emigrated. The declining numbers of the Christian Burghers, most of whom found homes in Britain or the Old Commonwealth after 1948, is indicative of the fact that it was not just ethnic minority Tamils who felt marginalised by the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the post-colonial nation-state.

Yet, it must be said that in the early days after independence, there were attempts at cooperation between Sinhala and Tamil political leadership. As several commentators have noted, 1948 to 1956 was a period of “responsive cooperation”, when Tamil political parties participated in the government and sought legislative redress for inequalities (Warnapala). The second phase of “non-violent non-cooperation”, which ran from 1956 to 1977, began soon after the passage of the Sinhala Only Act, despite the fact that this was probably the single most damaging piece of legislation to the Tamil psyche. Not only did the Sinhala Only Act have significant economic implications in terms of diminished educational and employment opportunities for the Tamil minority, it also created an isomorphism between the Tamils and the English vis-à-vis the island. They were both foreign implants, and in the final analysis, the Tamils, like the departed Europeans and their hybrid Burgher descendents, had no historical roots, entitlement, or rights, on the (is)land of Sri Lanka.

The cultural hegemony of post-colonial public religion has been one of the greatest irritants to linguistic and religious minorities. Minority cultures have become invisible in a national culture increasingly dominated by a highly politicised and organised Sinhala-Buddhist polity. The politicisation of Buddhist culture is a significant aspect of the consolidation of the bipolar ethno-racial-religious imagination in colonial and post-colonial Ceylon. This religious-cultural revival began during the mid nineteenth-century when Christian missionisation was intensified. I have not dealt with this issue here since the role of religious revivalism in the making of the conflict in Sri Lanka is well documented in the literature on ethnicity and conflict in Sri Lanka (Bond: 2006, Obeyesekere, Tambiah: 1992).

The emergence of radical Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movements in response to the escalating violence of the LTTE and its ethnic out-bidding (including the forced expulsion of 100,000 Muslims from the northern Jaffna Peninsula by the LTTE), may be tracked through three initiatives: the activism that led to the banning of Harvard Anthropologist, Stanley Tambiah’s book “Buddhism Betrayed?” (1992), which traced the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism; the entry of nine Buddhist monks as “professional politicians” into parliament in 2004; and the Anti-Conversion Bill of 2006. The Bill was aimed at new Christian evangelical movements, rather than the established Anglican and Catholic Churches. Nevertheless, at this time, there were anonymous attacks on Christian Churches.

### **The Dark Side of Democracy: Majority, Minority and Public Religion**

In the absence of appropriate checks and balances, democracy in practice may perpetuate blindness to numerically insignificant groups and the ‘tyranny of the majority’. Ironically, the institution of democracy in post-colonial Sri Lanka may be seen to have given rise to the phenomenon of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ that several founding theorists of democracy, such as Locke and de Tocqueville worried about, even as it has contoured and legitimised Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

Democracy and development, skewed towards the Sinhala majority, was also the result of the evolution of post-colonial politics towards a centralised state which articulated its mission as

the engineering of equality between the more and less privileged classes. In practice, state centralisation meant two things: on the one hand, the concentration of state power in the juridical and institutional sense, and on the other, the gradual marginalisation of ethnic minorities which led to the politicisation of the Ceylon Tamils. Since 1987, there have been attempts to adjust the situation by disaggregating power from the centralised Sinhala-dominated state which has “controlled development and the distribution of resources” (Bastian: 1995) through Provincial Councils. These attempts have, however, fallen short of meeting the demands of the Tamils.

Attempts at engineering social and economic equality also forged a practice which might be found in other post-colonial situations. As Jane Russell has commented, “so-called modern notions of mass education, the rule of law, unionisation, social welfare, nationalisation and state economic control of utilities, mass communication, the party system and parliamentary democracy had been accepted with an almost amazing alacrity” in Sri Lanka. Yet, mechanisms used by liberal states to engineer equality of opportunity for minorities were systematically utilised by successive Sri Lankan governments to shore up the dominance of the Sinhala Buddhist majority. “Positive discrimination” in British parlance or “affirmative action” in North American terms, programmes which aim to correct the socio-economic marginalisation of immigrants and minorities were used to the advantage of the ethnic majority. It is this phenomenon which has led many commentators on politics in post-colonial Sri Lanka to remark on the minority complex of the majority peoples – the Sinhalese – and the simultaneous entrenchment of majoritarianism.

This complex might be partly explained in Marxist terms as the result of uneven development and inequality of opportunities which remained at independence. Yet, if at independence, the Sinhalese, relative to Sri Lanka Tamils and Burghers (Eurasians), were disproportionately represented in administrative positions and were economically under-privileged in the post-colonial period, they have continued to perceive themselves as a minority despite the fact that they have systematically consolidated the dominance of the political, cultural and economic spheres.

To explain the persistent minority complex of the majority and the concomitant scape-goating of minorities, we must look to the displacements within the complex of post-colonial public religion or Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. The acts and events that mark the marginalisation of minorities in post-independence Sri Lanka condensed other anxieties, principally, the deep inequalities that structure the majority Sinhala community as well as the cultural insecurity that characterises Sinhala nationalism articulated against colonial Christianity, and more recently evangelical Christian movements. For, throughout the language debate as to whether or not Tamil should be made a national language alongside Sinhala in the 1950s, English remained the language of true political and cultural power on the island. Hence, the term *kaduwa* (sword) is used in popular Sinhala parlance to denote the deep social cleavages brought about by the access or lack of access to the English language.

In speaking about displacement as a cause of the marginalisation of minorities by the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in post-colonial Sri Lanka, I seek to emphasise the fact that Sri Lanka’s bipolar, Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict is more the outcome of attempts to engineer social class and linguistic equality in the period than a conspiracy by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists. There was a haphazard quality about the progress of minority marginalisation that became more institutionalised. For while the disenfranchisement of the estate Tamils and quotas for university admission aimed at reducing the number of Tamil students might be

seen as explicitly anti-Tamil measures, it seems fair to say that the highly contested settlement of Sinhala peasants in lands that had historically been Tamil-controlled during large development and colonisation schemes in the northern and eastern province was more ethnicity-blind than Machiavellian in intent.

Yet, in the context of self-conscious Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist claims that the colonisation was a return to, and resurrection of, the ancient Sinhala agricultural civilisation of the Anuradhapura period when the great Sinhala kings waged war against Tamils, the land colonisation was highly provocative to the minority Tamils. In addition, it is ironically by mirroring Sinhala nationalist displacements and fantasies that the ultra-Tamil nationalist LTTE shifted the terms of the Sinhala debate as to the role of minorities in Sri Lanka where Tamil moderates could not. Today, most Sinhala nationalists who argued against making Tamil a national language in 1958 concede that Tamil should have been made a national language, and even countenance the possibility of a federal state where considerable powers are devolved to the minorities.

The social-composition of the *Sangha*, the majority of whom tend to be drawn from rural and impoverished social groups, contributed to a sense that Sinhala Buddhists who are both a political and numerical majority in Sri Lanka have been and are a minority. The sense is that Sinhala Buddhists are a unique and endangered minority in relation to 65 million Tamils living across the Palk Straits in Tamil Nadu. There was also the sense that Sri Lanka is a uniquely Buddhist land in a region dominated by Hinduism and Islam, which has further strengthened the minority-consciousness of the vocal upwardly mobile monks who seek education in the urban universities and who are the most militant. Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has thus been articulated in the language of historical victimhood to legitimate majoritarianism.

Post-colonial Sinhala Buddhist nationalism also has its roots in regional and national level class and caste politics (Jayawardene, K.), particularly the elite patronage of influential temples such as that of the Kelaniya Temple, whose Chief Priest Buddharakkhita was found guilty of conspiracy in the assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike in 1959. The processes of democratisation, inter- and intra-social group competition to access strategic resources and political power, in the absence of “checks and balances” to limit majoritarian nationalism resulted in the marginalisation of minorities. This phenomenon is exemplified in the rhetoric and practice of Sri Lanka monks’ party, the JHU, which represents a minority of Buddhists but has entered politics and re-shaped public religion in Sri Lanka. The party was launched with lay people from the secular Sinhala Urumay party in 2004 and contested elections in April 2004. It won six percent of the popular vote and, for the first time, Buddhist monks took nine seats in Parliament. The JHU is also affiliated with the National Movement Against Terrorism, Society for Peace, Unity and Human Rights for Sri Lanka, North-East Sinhala Organisation and other local and international Sinhala nationalist groups. Its main ideological project is the elimination of the LTTE, which has been fighting for a separate state for the Tamil minority in the island. The JHU is a coalition member of the government and its leader is the Minister for the Environment.

Finally, the threat posed by the LTTE’s violence strengthened public religion and political Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The iconography of the state’s confrontation with the LTTE was replete with images of the *Sangha* and great Buddhist Kings who fought to defend and protect the island. An almost life-size image of the President, flanked by a military commander, and led by a Buddhist monk, which was visible when entering the city of

Colombo from the international airport, during the last months of the conflict in May 2009, was one of the symbols of the “just war”. Simultaneously, it is arguable that the JHU’s “just war” rhetoric which draws from the *Mahavamsa* story of the defeat of the Tamil King Elara by the valiant King Duttugemunu, has also been inspired by and articulated alongside the global “war on terror” resulting in the form of a public religion that mobilises and rearticulates the symbols, words and texts of the faith with a contemporary meta-narrative of globalisation – ‘the war on terror’. The JHU monks argued that the island has historically been the land of the Buddha and the country’s ‘territorial sovereignty’ and ‘national security’, (essentially Westphalian concepts that underwrite the modern nation-state system), must hence be ensured to protect and preserve the religion, particularly against the LTTE fighting for a separate state for the Tamil minority in the northeast of the country. Thus too unfolds the dialectic of the enlightenment and modernity in Sri Lanka.

## **Conclusion**

Two contradictory processes have been evident in post-colonial politics, which has seen the consolidation of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the form of public religion in Sri Lanka. On the one hand, there has been an ‘ethnicity blindness’ and a failure to acknowledge the multicultural nature of the country at the level of the state and policy paralleled by the politicisation of ethno-religious identity. Simultaneously, there was an erasure of small minority and mixed communities, which was paralleled by the consolidation of a bipolar confrontation of “Sinhala-Buddhist” and “Tamil” ethnicities as more or less mutually exclusive and homogenous groups.

While the LTTE, which claimed to be fighting for the rights of Tamils who are a majority in the northeast of Sri Lanka was comprehensively defeated in May 2009, terrorism or conflict between the national majority and minority communities may return years or decades later unless the root cause of conflict, which is the marginalisation of the ethno-religious minorities by the majoritarian state, is addressed. For a sustainable peace in the long-term, the highly centralised post-colonial state would need to devolve power to the northeast regions and share political power with the minorities. The substance of power sharing with the Tamil and Muslim minorities in the northeast is contained in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution which was effected when India intervened in Sri Lanka in 1987 to ensure a peace settlement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution established Provincial Councils as a means to de-centralise power and enable self-governance in the regions. However, it was never properly implemented in the north and east due to the secessionist struggle.

There are two models of post-conflict reconciliation. One is reconciliation based on addressing the root causes of the conflict and the second is a more pragmatic model of reconstruction and development *sans* address of the thorny issues of human rights violations and war crimes by both parties to the conflict, or the devolution of political power to ensure greater autonomy for the regions. In the near-term, the Sri Lankan government appears to favour the latter model of reconstruction and development of the conflict-affected areas without redress of the political grievances and demands of the minority communities living in the north and east for greater devolution of power to the provinces. This may largely be due to the fact that some ultra-Sinhala nationalist coalition members of the ruling UPF, including the JHU, are against the devolution of power or power-sharing with the Tamil minority, but this could change after the presidential and general elections are held in 2010.



The All Party Representatives Committee (APRC), which was convened in 2006 to develop a framework for a political solution after consultation with all political parties, has recommended a new Constitution and pruning of Presidential powers. The APRC process was meant to go beyond the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and fix deficiencies in it. The report recommends the maximum devolution of power to the provinces within a unitary state. The APRC report recommends that the provinces would have the power to formulate legislation for the provinces without interference from the centre. There would be a clear division of powers between the centre and the provinces by doing away with the concurrent list, as it was one of the obstacles to the implementation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution which ensured the establishment of the provincial council system. However, land, police and security would not be devolved subjects.

It is widely believed that the general elections in 2010 would enable the SLFP, the principle party of the ruling UPF government, to drop its ultra-nationalist coalition members and move towards the implementation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and, thereby, offer a political solution to the Tamil and Muslim demands for self-government in the north and east by devolution of power to all regions. The current ruling coalition comprises the ultra-nationalist JVP and the JHU, formally a Buddhist monks' party. Both of these coalition partners are opposed to the devolution of power to the north and east and a political settlement with the minorities. It is hoped and anticipated that the 2010 general election would enable President Rajapakse to address the issue of the political solution to the conflict if its reliance on these two parties is diminished.

As long as the LTTE controlled significant parts of the northeast, the central government feared that the groups would use the devolution of power to consolidate a separate state. Hence, the provincial council system was never properly implemented in the north and east. However, now that the LTTE no longer exists as an organisation on the ground, one of the obstacles to the devolution of power has been removed. The principle stumbling block at this time is the ultra-Sinhala nationalist coalition parties of the government. The principle opposition, the UNP, has stated that it would support the devolution of power to the provinces as a means of power-sharing with the Tamil and Muslim minorities in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

At the same time, now that the conflict with the LTTE is over, the government would need to reaffirm that Sri Lanka is a Multicultural and Multi-religious polity and a Commission on ethno-religious equality should be set up. Finally, the challenge remains that of power sharing with the minorities in the northeast of the island, while balancing the economic, social and cultural rights and expectations of all communities to ensure equitable human development.

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