

## **International Seminar: Envisioning New Trajectories for Peace in Sri Lanka**

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### **Session 8: Re-envisioning Sri Lanka – Lessons learned & Challenges and Opportunities**

#### **Ms. Madura Rasaratnam**

Doctoral Candidate with Government Department, London School of Economics

#### **Re-envisioning Sri Lanka's ethno-nationalisms**

Sri Lanka's conflict is often characterised as one of competing ethno-nationalisms. It is argued by some writers that the growth of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism provided the impetus for the growth of an opposed but essentially similar and equally pernicious Tamil ethno-nationalism.<sup>1</sup> In this view both Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms are defined primarily by their alleged ideological claims that privilege exclusive ethnic identities. This definition of Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms often contains an implicit and unfavourable comparison with inclusive liberal norms, which are proposed as providing an alternative political vision for Sri Lanka.

However, this analysis of both Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms places too great an emphasis on ideology and ignores the political and social conditions in which they emerge and grow. A growing school of thought within the study of nationalism has argued that the formulation of grand theories that attempt to categorise and or explain all nationalist movements as forms of an inherently unchanging phenomenon called 'nationalism' should be abandoned. Rather nationalist movements should be understood as contingent events that are related to specific political contexts, interests and groups. In this vein John Breuilly has argued that nationalism should be understood primarily as a form of politics and to repeat his succinct formulation: 'politics is about power. Power, in the modern world, is principally about control of the state.'<sup>2</sup> The state remains central to politics, not merely because of resources that it controls and dispenses but because it retains, even in the current globalised age a unique capacity to transform social conditions – both for better and for worse.

In characterising nationalist movements as forms of politics that are principally directed towards the state, Breuilly does not ignore the role of ideology. However, in his view, nationalist ideology is important not because it directly motivates either nationalist leaders or supporters but because 'it provides a conceptual map which enables people to relate their particular moral and material interests to a broader terrain of action.'<sup>3</sup> Thus, while ideology is not the essential defining or causal feature of nationalist movements, nationalist rhetoric is powerful and effective precisely when it can be related to pre-existing beliefs and genuine political grievances.

Nationalist arguments continue to be resonant in political life because they mobilise the widely held belief in popular sovereignty to demand that the state acts on behalf of the nation. Craig Calhoun suggests that terms such as public good and public interest which frame

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel, Valentine and Thangaraj, Yuvaraj in Daniel, Valentine and Knudsen, John Chr. (eds) 'Mistrusting Refugees' Univ. of California. 1995. p232

<sup>2</sup> J. Breuilly, Nationalism and the State, Manchester University Press, 1993, p1

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p13

democratic debate always refer to some particular 'people' so that, for example, American public interest is about the goods that are appropriate for the American people.<sup>4</sup>

However, this need not necessarily be a council of despair for liberals. While ideas about the people, as a nation held together by something more substantial citizenship rights, seems central to democratic debate, ideas of the people are not fixed and can be more or less inclusive. Using this framework, Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms can be interrogated to elicit their similarities and differences by asking how these antagonistic nationalist visions understand the political community and its relationship to the state, and how they can be related to political context, interests and groups.

Since 1956, the propositions of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism have become dominant in framing what Brubaker calls the 'state bearing nation' – or the nation to which the state properly belongs. In Sri Lanka, a Sinhala Buddhist understanding of the 'public good' and 'public interest' has become progressively institutionalised and continues to frame democratic competition between the main Sinhala parties. The political vision permeating Sinhala nationalist discourse is thus that of a unitary state in which there is a seamless continuity between the public institutions and spaces and the rituals, beliefs, idioms and symbols of a Sinhala Buddhist world. In this vision minorities occupy an acknowledged but distinct position from the Sinhala Buddhist people, to whom the state ultimately belongs.

This conceptual map has its resonance for both political actors and for a non - elite political constituency. It feeds the centralising instincts of political actors who seek to build constituencies either through old - fashioned patron client networks or through a more populist form of clientelism. For non - elite sections of the state it provides a vision of a centralised, beneficent state that acts as a guardian of the people dispensing goods and services for their betterment. For these sections of the population, first mobilised during the 1956 'Sinhala Only' electoral campaign, access to the state's resources are critical in determining an individual's life chances.

Similarly the Janatha Vimukthi Perumana's (JVP) defence of a centralised, majoritarian state resonates with its growing constituency on a number of levels. Not only does it seek to protect and promote the continuity between the public sphere and the Sinhala Buddhist world, it also retains the ideal of the state as a proactive agent relieving social and economic distress. The appeal of this vision for socially, economically and politically marginalized groups is compelling, especially when compared to the offer of a stripped down neo liberal, multicultural state in which the public space will continue to be dominated either by English or, in more paranoid visions, Tamil.

In short, if politics is principally about capturing the state, Sri Lanka's electoral history has shown that it is possible for political actors to win power by directing their appeals largely or even solely to this constituency. Conversely, elections cannot be won without appealing to or accommodating the Sinhala Buddhist project. This set of incentives has produced what economists might call a stable dis-equilibrium in which every attempt by a Sinhala political actor to reach a negotiated settlement with the Tamil polity can be derailed by political opponents mobilising the Sinhala Buddhist project.

The emergence of the Tamil nationalist project is tied to electoral campaigns and political agitations of the Federal Party. Prior to this era, electoral politics in the Tamil areas was fractured and defined by highly localised patron client networks, which led to a large proportion of candidates contesting as independents. This changed when the Federal Party set up offices across the Tamil areas in the North - east and conducted Satyagraha style agitations

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<sup>4</sup> Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference*, Blackwell, p239.

that tentatively unified previously disparate populations in Jaffna, Vavuniya, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Unlike the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that mobilised a pre-existing constituency on the basis of 'Sinhala Only,' the Federal Party's activities were integral to creating early visions of a territorially rooted Tamil political identity. It mobilised the upwardly mobile middle classes who found themselves increasingly marginalized from access to the state's resources. The vision of Tamil political autonomy would resonate with a desire for unrestricted access to the state's goods and services. A territorially rooted Tamil identity was fostered and propagated by a political party that was dependent for its growth on territorially defined constituencies.

Notably, while there had been a Tamil cultural and religious revivalist movement in the mid to late nineteenth century, this did not become politically significant for a number of reasons. First these activities were quite disparate and did not share a common vision of the glorious Tamil past that movement sought to revive. Some focussed on the ancient, pre Hindu Sangam texts in the attempt to claim a classical status for the Tamil language, others revived classical south Indian dance and music, which had a much more pan Indian than specifically Tamil character. Still others were engaged in what has been labelled the neo Shaivite revival, exemplified perhaps by the figure of Arumugam Navalar. Whilst the Sangam texts revived and celebrated a non Hindu Tamil past, the neo Shaivaites sought a return to religious orthodoxy and claimed for Tamil a divine rather than classical status.

However, and significantly for the purposes of political mobilisation, none of these projects reached very far down or across the population, remaining, as they were, fairly elite concerns. Not only did the Tamil revival lack a text such as the Mahavamsa that could provide a unifying vision, it was also short of an institution comparable to the Sangha that could reach down into the population and spread the message to the non-elite sections.

The political vision that was consolidated during the Federal Party's electoral dominance between 1956 and 1976 was that of a territorially rooted Tamil people united by an experience of discrimination and an uncertain future. The Federal Party's legitimacy rested not on a promotion of and adherence to a culturally elaborated code of Tamilness, but on its ability to deliver specific political goods, in the form of progress towards autonomy. It could hardly be otherwise for a party that was led by, SJV Chelvanayagam, a man who was from a minority within a minority: an Anglican with a largely Catholic Christian community, in turn a minority within a largely Hindu Tamil population. It is significant that Chelvanayagam continues to be referred to this day as Tantai Chelvam or father of the nation.

Mass politicisation of the Tamil polity, reaching sectors of the population excluded or not reached by the Federal Party's electoral politics, can be timed with the appearance of militancy amongst the Tamil youth. The alphabet soup of militant groups that appeared during the mid to late 1970's and early 1980's did not need to rehearse the arguments for political autonomy; they simply embodied a different means to achieve this goal. The LTTE is a continuation of this logic. When mobilising support for its project amongst its target audience, the LTTE does not present itself as guardian or emblem of an elaborated or ancient Tamil culture. At most it adheres to generally observed conservative norms and refrains from launching a full frontal assault on beliefs and practises that sustain caste and gender hierarchies.

The central claim the LTTE makes is that it is the only organisation capable of realising the vision of Tamil self - governance. To this end, its legitimacy rests on its ability to deliver concrete (political, material and military) gains to the Tamils. To large sections of the Tamil population who have been systematically marginalized by the Sri Lankan state and denied the possibility of dignified political participation that recognises and values their cultural identity, the LTTE's project has meaning and appeal. For many in the Tamil diaspora, even those who have successfully integrated into their respective countries, this vision of Tamil political

autonomy provides a link to their cultural identity and, with that, an enriched sense of political agency.

Contrary to many perceptions, the structural and ideological features of both Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil nationalism separately offer points of engagement for the project of realising a peaceful and just future. The apparently potent appeal of Sinhala Buddhist rhetoric amongst the southern electorate can be addressed by considering the mechanisms that block socially aspirant groups from positions of power, status and wealth; in particular, unequal access to the English language and the wealth of employment opportunities this creates. Similarly, the Tamil nationalist narrative also provides space for a certain amount of flexibility. The LTTE has not explicitly made an independent Tamil state its central political demand for over five years.<sup>5</sup> The final political vision of the Tamil nationalist project is under-elaborated and this provides the principle agent of this narrative, the LTTE, much room for manoeuvre. A solution that offers the LTTE and therefore the Tamil nationalist project substantive autonomy can be interpreted as success within this vision.

In conclusion, any attempt to re-envision Sri Lanka must take account of the day-to-day political contexts and interests that sustain Tamil and Sinhala nationalist movements. Nationalist sentiment is not something that floats around in the ether infecting susceptible and alienated minds, as its critics are too often wont to argue. Nationalist categories are inherent in modern political life but they can be more or less inclusive, more or less liberal. In order to transform these antagonistic visions, however, one must first pay serious attention to the real political needs and desires that underpin them.

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<sup>5</sup> When the LTTE has referred to an independent state, it has done so obliquely suggesting for example that it will pursue external self-determination, in the eventuality the demand for internal self-determination is denied. In media interviews, LTTE officials pointedly refuse to be drawn on the independence demand.