MARITIME AFFAIRS Copyright © National Maritime Foundation
Vol. 6 No. 2 Winter 2010, pp. 90–107
Print ISSN: 0973-3159, Online ISSN: 1946-6609, DOI: 10.1080/09733159.2010.559787

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
ANAMAYA
National Maritime Foundation

A Cultural Analysis of the Ethno-Political Conflict in Sri Lanka

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It has been 18 months since the cessation of the armed conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the rebel forces of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Although the war has finally come to an end, one cannot conclude that the core issue of Tamil minority rights and cultural autonomy has been resolved. Drawing from the theory of multiculturalism, this paper argues that the Sri Lankan state has interpreted and assessed minority group rights and cultural autonomy as a threat to its national security, thereby securitising the debate on Tamil minority rights, which led to a self-fulfilling prophesy. Moreover, it argues that the end of the civil war presents an opportunity for the state to shift its interpretive logic of minority rights from security to justice in order to address the core issue of cultural autonomy in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

May 2009 marked the end of the armed conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the rebel forces of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The loss of life – of both combatants and civilians – on both sides of the fence in the quarter-century long conflict has been immense. Although the war has finally come to an end, one cannot conclude that the core issue of the conflict has been resolved. The

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military victory over the LTTE should not be equated with resolution on the question of Tamil cultural rights and autonomy.

This paper aims at explaining the origins of the conflict in Sri Lanka, and the dynamics that sustained it. However, adding another contribution to the plethora of excellent accounts of the conflict would be flogging a dead horse.[1] Instead, this paper advances a preliminary cultural perspective on the conflict. It attempts to trace the politicisation of culture in Sri Lanka, and the intrinsic logic that underlined and sustained the conflict. By highlighting the conditions under which the process of identity formation took shape and the specific contours that it lent, this paper argues that the Sri Lankan state has interpreted and assessed group rights and cultural autonomy as a threat to its national security, thereby securitising the debate on Tamil minority rights. Moreover, it argues that the end of the civil war has brought forth an opportunity for the state to rethink claims of minority rights, and unless its interpretive logic shifts from *security* to that of *justice*, the discourse in Sri Lanka will not be able to move beyond the straitjacket of ethno-political conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese.

The first section of the paper presents a theoretical framework for understanding the conflict in Sri Lanka. By drawing on the discourse of multiculturalism and the ''politics of recognition'', a hybridised framework that incorporates social and political theory has been adopted in order to bring forth the complementarity between culture and autonomy.[2] This framework is useful as it highlights the latent inter-connectedness between state and culture, whereby the latter invariably seeps into the former. Thus, some of the fundamental questions that it tries to reflect upon are: the logic for the demand of autonomy in minority nationalism, its relevance to the liberal principles of individual choice, and the role of the state on issues of culture. Therefore, in a way, the arguments presented in this paper attempt to find space within the lager discourse on the interplay of politics and culture, especially in multination states.[3]

While the theoretical framework provides some parameters for analysing ethno-political conflicts and claims for minority rights, the following section adapts it to the specific case of Sri Lanka. At the onset, the political experiment of universal franchise in the 1930s and its impact on the formation of identities in Sri Lanka is brought out. The experience of political mobilisation in the early years had a profound influence on the politics and the political culture of Sri Lanka in its post-independent era. In this regard, the most illustrative case is the elections of 1956, which saw political expedience wrapped in the garb of ethnocultural nationalism. The populist ethnocultural mandate on which

the election was contested laid the foundations for an exclusive ''Sinhala-Buddhist'' state ideology that shaped the politics in Sri Lanka through the 1960s and 1970s.

The third section argues that the discourse of securitisation has been the underlying logic of the Sri Lankan state's assessment of Tamil minority nationalism. Assessing minority claims through the lens of security has enabled the state to repeatedly quash all such demands. However, it should be noted that the securitisation perspective is not unique to Sri Lanka; its occurrence has been noted in western countries as well, especially in conjunction with Islamic fundamentalism and global terror. Moreover, the causal relationship between securitisation and the erosion of democratic institutions is brought out. The final section concludes by recapitulating the main arguments made in the paper and highlights the opportunity that is present in post-war Sri Lanka. Re-interpreting claims of minority rights and cultural autonomy can address the core issues and contribute to a long-lasting political solution to the conflict.

I

Analytical Framework

Prior to charting the trajectory of Tamil minority nationalism in Sri Lanka, some remarks regarding the analytical framework are warranted. The last four decades have highlighted the inadequacy of modernisation theory in accounting for and addressing the issue of cultural pluralism and sub-national movements. Theorists of modernisation argued that a commitment to cultural maintenance reflected ''an illiberal preference for ascriptive group identity over individual choice – a preference which is incompatible with the modern ideal of autonomy''.[4] Instead, national identities were supposed to fade in importance, to be replaced by a supra-national cosmopolitan identity, or a constitutional identity. However, that has not been the case. The universal phenomenon of minority nationalism attests to that. As Walker Connor notes, national minorities exists in:

> *''Africa (for example, Ethiopia), Asia (Sri Lanka), Eastern Europe (Romania), Western Europe (France), North America (Guatemala), South America (Guyana), and Ocenia (New Zealand). The list includes countries that are old (United*

> *Kingdom) as well as new (Bangladesh), large (Indonesia) as well as small (Fiji), rich (Canada) as well as poor (Pakistan), authoritarian (Sudan) as well as democratic (Belgium), Marxist-Leninist (China) as well as militantly anti-Marxist (Turkey). The list also includes countries which are Buddhist (Burma), Christian (Spain), Moslem (Iran), Hindu (India), and Judaic (Israel)".*[5]

What all these national minorities have in common is their difference in practices, views and ways of life from their respective wider societies. The fundamental characteristic of all these movements is the resistance towards the dominant culture's homogenising and assimilationist tendencies based on the belief that "there is only one correct, true or normal way to understand and structure the areas of life".[6] In their own different ways, national minorities demand that the society recognise the legitimation of their differences, especially those that they believe constitute their identities.

Liberalism, Culture, and Autonomy

The persistence of minority nationalism world over cannot simply be attributed to its illiberal nature, as modernisation would claim. Rather, as Kymlicka has argued, it is an affirmation of the modern liberal ideal of autonomy because the "national culture provides the most important context within which people develop and exercise their autonomy".[7] Autonomy, in this sense, is the ability to choose amongst various options, and culture not only provides these options, but also makes them intelligible by giving meaning to them. Understanding the meaning of social practices and institutions that we participate in requires an understanding of a shared vocabulary of traditions and conventions.[8] The language and history that constitutes the shared vocabulary gives significance to a course of action or an activity. In other words, culture not only provides options, but also "the spectacles through which we identify experiences as valuable".[9] Thus, Kymlicka notes that for meaningful individual choice to be possible, access to a "societal culture"[10] and understanding the history and language of that culture are vital.

People seek individual autonomy to experience the full range of opportunities, while at the same time holding on to their cultural group identity since the latter provides the context for those choices. The continued prevalence of minority nationalism demonstrates that the coexistence of the ideas of autonomy and cultural membership are not antithetical to the modern liberal project, but rather validate it.

It argues that human beings are culturally embedded and that their identity is shaped by and integrally tied to their culture. Thus, culture cannot be abstracted away and confined to the private sphere, as it permeates into all areas of life, including the political.

One of the most important determinants of a culture's survival is whether its language is a language of government – whether its language is used in public schooling, courts, legislatures and so on.[11] In fact, the language of public schooling in some ways guarantees the passing on of the language and its associated traditions and conventions to the next generation. On the contrary, it becomes extremely difficult for a language, and its culture, to survive unless it is used in public life. Any language that is not a public language becomes so marginalised that it only exists among a small elite, or in a ritualised form. The fate of a culture hinges on the government's decisions regarding the language of public schools and public service in the country.

However, it is also argued that despite the claims of the liberal state, it cannot abstract away all cultural differences and exist as an entity *sans* culture. The state itself needs some conception of good life to structure its institutions and shape its laws and policies, which it unwittingly borrows from the dominant culture.[12] Thus, the state is inevitably involved in recognising and producing particular ethnocultural groups. In the absence of autonomy, or certain guaranteed freedoms, the impossibility of the liberal state's cultural neutrality leads the state and its public policy to discriminate against national minorities, and is antithetical to their flourishing or even survival.

This illustrates the symbiotic relationship between the claims for cultural recognition by the national minorities and their demand for autonomy. While culture provides us with choices and gives them meaning, it is autonomy that is required to sustain that culture. If all public institutions are run in another language, minorities face the danger of marginalisation from major economic, political, and academic institutions of the society. In an attempt to avoid such marginalisation, national minorities seek certain rights and powers that are needed to maintain their own culture – to create their own economic, political and education institutions in their own language.[13] Thus, the idea of autonomy is central to minority claims. The appeal for justice that underpins minority nationalism argues that in multination states, ''each constituent nation has an equally valid claim to the language rights and self-government powers necessary to maintain itself as a distinct societal culture''.[14]

The aforementioned analytical framework, which originates in the liberal principle of individual autonomy but goes further by incorporating ethnocultural group identity as well, provides a hybridised conceptual framework by drawing on social theories of culture on one hand and liberal political theory on the other for the analysis of sub-national movements. The interplay of culture and politics, where each seeps into the other and thereby distorting their respective contours, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the conflict by accounting for both the real as well as transcendental factors that sustain such movements.[15] The following section attempts to reconstruct the dynamics of Tamil minority nationalism in Sri Lanka within the abovementioned conceptual parameters, and analyses the state response to minority claims.

II

Tamil Minority Nationalism in Sri Lanka

The debate on minority nationalism has been at the forefront of political discussions in Sri Lanka since its independence in 1948, and the quarter century of civil war is a testament to its burning intensity. However, to ascertain how the Sri Lankan state interprets and responds to minority claims, it is important to shed some light on the process of initial identity formation in the country.

The colonial constitution of 1923–24 gave only four per cent of the Sri Lankan population the right to vote.[16] However, by 1931 Sri Lanka became the first Asian colony to receive universal adult franchise under the Donoughmore Constitution. The astronomical jump in franchise was partly possible because unlike its northern neighbour, Sri Lanka did not have an anti-colonial, nationalist movement against the British. The Donoughmore Commission, from which the Constitution took its name, visited the ''model colony''[17] in 1931 with prospects of introducing certain political reforms, or experiments, in the country. The environment was conducive as there was barely any substantive opposition against the colonial government. The Ceylon National Congress (CNC) was a feeble shadow of its northern namesake, dominated by small Anglicised elite. It was a restricted sphere of politics. In fact at the time of the Donoughmore Commission of 1931, the influential section of the CNC did not even endorse responsible government as the next stage in the political

evolution of Sri Lanka. They claimed that the country and its people were not ready to engage in politics.

Absence of a mass nationalist movement meant that the CNC had not developed a nationalist thought for the country. Society at large was predominantly rural and steeped in traditional modes of interactions, which was largely within their respective communities. The elections based on universal adult franchise were instrumental in politicising these cultural markers. As Jonathan Spencer puts it, it set in place the ''patterns of a vertical political mobilisation within ethnic communities and obviated the need for any broad horizontal mobilisation based on common opposition to the colonial presence''.[18] What it means is that an opposition to colonialism would have necessitated horizontal mobilisation, cutting across ethnic borders, in order to present a united front. As opposed to Indian nationalism of 1930s, which had acquired a conception of what the nation should be based on the movement's definite social and economic content, Sri Lanka lacked a ''single common sense'' that could bridge all the various cleavages in society based on language, religion, and ethnicity.[19] Thus, politicisation occurred as a result of electoral politics, but it was restricted within the columns of ethnic communities.

The Anglicised political elite had very little in common with the predominantly rural masses. The different ethnic communities – the Sinhalese and the Tamil – interacted with each other only in the restricted market sphere. For each of these communities, their ''imagination of the nation''[20] stretched as far as linguistic and religious identity. Therefore, with the introduction of universal suffrage, local politicians had to hastily adjust to a new form of mass politics. Leaders such as Bandaranaike had to shed their Christian and Anglicised upbringing, and presented themselves as ''Donoughmore Buddhists''.[21] The method of mobilisation that followed fits aptly with Tom Nairn's description of the moment when the bourgeoisie suddenly discovered the need to ''invite the masses into history'' with an invitation written ''in a language they understood''.[22] The only linguistic currency that the majority population understood was Sinhala culture and Buddhism.

It is apparent that the limits of national imagination were marked by ethnocultural boundaries. Against such a backdrop, the elections of Sri Lanka in 1956 can be seen as a watershed moment in the political history of the country. It was the first parliamentary election in the independent era. The United National Party (UNP) – successor to the CNC – had been the Sri Lankan legatees of the British

when power was handed over in 1948. The first general election of the independent era in 1956 brought to the political arena an opposition to the incumbent UNP in the form of the recently formed Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), under the leadership of former UNP leader S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. The origins of the oddly hyphenated ''Sinhala-Buddhist'' nationalism, which came to dominate the state discourse over the next five decades, can be seen evolving and taking a more concrete shape.

Sinhala-Buddhist Identity Formation

The SLFP won power on an uncompromising nationalist platform. Its central plank was the promise – known as ''Sinhala Only'' – to establish Sinhala as the official language of the state. It was argued that the retention of English as *lingua franca* excluded a vast majority of the rural population from active involvement in public affairs.[23] However, the debate over state language goes back to the *swabasha* movement of 1920s. The movement, which included both the communities – Sinhalese and Tamils – had been pressing for the government to replace English as the official language with Sinhalese and Tamil.[24] It was largely a protest against the privileges of the English-educated elite and its monopoly over all-important positions in public life and in the bureaucracy. It was the English language and its concomitant system of education that made the vast majority of vernacular-educated population feel envious and marginalised.

Supporting the linguistic policy of Bandaranaike was the potent force of political Buddhism. Buddhist revivalist groups had been active since late 19th century. As a result of colonialism, British evangelicals had been actively proselytising since the 1840s. In contradiction to the previously signed agreements, fierce proselytising by the missionaries often included vilification of Buddhism, and was extremely critical of Buddhist monks. In a reactionary move, the latter half of the 19th century saw the Buddhist *Sangh* organise itself, establish printing presses and engage with the populace through public debates.[25] However, the man responsible for bringing about a radical shift at the turn of the century was Anagarika Dharmapala. By the time he was in his twenties, he had taken a vow of celibacy and devoted his life to the regeneration and propagation of Buddhism.[26] Dharmapala blamed the British for the moral degeneration of the community, and encouraged young Buddhists to identify themselves with the King Duthagamani who rescued Buddhism and its

associated nationalism from oblivion.[27] Duthagamini had fought the Chola kings who had occupied the religious centre of Anuradhapuram, and restored the position of Buddhism in the island. Notwithstanding the competing claims of its authenticity, the reference to the incident is illuminating since it historicised and put into context the struggle of Buddhism and its associated Sinhala culture.

Moreover, to mark the occasion of *Buddha Jayanti* and to commemorate 2500 years of Buddhism, an influential treatise published in Sinhala and English in 1953 advanced the thesis that ''the history of Sri Lanka is the history of the Sinhalese race . . . [and] Buddhism is the golden thread running through the history of the Race and the Land''.[28] Thus, the nationalist narrative that was developing was given a fresh lease of life by the ''Sinhala Only'' policy of the SLFP's electoral stance. It was able to bring together the linguistic agitation of the *swabhasha* movement, albeit stripped of its original two-language policy, and the growing phenomenon of political Buddhism that sought prominence in the societal culture. The inclusion of the latter allowed the injection of a certain sense of insecurity among the Sinhalese population, on which the logic of political Buddhism was founded. Implicit in its argument was a feeling that Buddhism, and thereby the entire Sinhala culture, was in danger. Unless the state accorded Sinhala-Buddhism a position of pre-eminence in the state, it would face a similar fate as that in its land of origin.

Complicating the matter was the colonial legacy that favoured the English-educated Tamils who were somewhat over-represented, relative to their population, in the large state sector of employment.[29] Hence, the linguistic policy of the 1956 elections had an ominous implication for the Tamil population of the island. The new language policy not only signalled the majority's linguistic hegemony in the newly independent state, but also a drastic shift in job opportunities in favour of the Sinhalese speakers. However, political Buddhism and its adherents were quick to capitalise on the Tamil population's hitherto favoured status in colonial Sri Lanka. The rhetoric of historical injustices was utilised to demonstrate the harsh and unfair treatment that had been meted out to the ''genuine inhabitants of the land'' by keeping their numbers low in state sector employment. It was argued that such injustices would continue unless the government stepped in. By pointing to the state of Tamilnadu in India, the argument was made that while the Tamil population had in fact a homeland of their own, Sri Lanka was to be the land of the Sinhala people.

1956 Elections

As noted earlier, the lack of horizontal mobilisation cutting across ethnic communities was most apparent during the elections of 1956. While the Tamil political parties of the north formed a ''zone of opposition'' to the exclusionary vision of Sinhala-Buddhist rhetoric, a ''zone of competition'' developed in the Sinhala-dominated south.[30] In the south, the competitive nature of mass politics assumed the form of ''ethnic outbidding: the auction-like process whereby Sinhalese politicians strive to outdo one another by playing on their majority community's fear and ambitions''.[31] A telling example would be the metamorphosis of Bandaranaike's stance regarding the official language issue. During a State Council debate in 1944 on making Sinhalese the official language of the country, Bandaranaike has stated that it would be ungenerous on the part of the Sinhalese to not give recognition to the Tamil language. However during the elections of 1956, his stance changed completely in order to gain politically, and the linguistic issue became a matter of ''life and death [for the Sinhalese people]''.[32]

The elections of 1956 saw the convergence and interaction of forces of linguistic nationalism and political Buddhism on one hand, and the ''agonistic nature of competitive democracy'',[33] which produced ethnic outbidding, on the other. But more importantly, as a result of their fusion, the discourse on culture and minority rights got securitised in independent Sri Lanka. The survival and continuance of the Sinhala culture, and its ''divine tryst'' with Buddhism, was perceived to be under threat.[34] Within an electorate that saw itself only as Sinhala-Buddhist, the slogan of ''Sinhala Only'' tapped into the anxieties and apprehensions of the community by portraying an existential threat towards its culture. Its underlying logic, as well as that of political Buddhism, was that the future of the Sinhala culture and its associated way of life cannot be guaranteed unless the state undertakes concrete measures to ensure its pre-eminence. The often-mentioned political psychology of Sri Lanka, whereby the majority community suffers from a minority complex, can be seen as emanating from the securitisation of culture. In fact, one of the first to exploit the fear of the alien in modern political discourse of Sri Lanka in the 1920s was the trade union activist, A.E. Gonneshinha, who eventually scapegoated Indian labourers in the debates on citizenship in the newly independent county.[35] By securitising the debate on culture, the state not only managed to effectively exclude a sizeable Tamil

population from the public sphere, but also put a serious question mark on their cultural survival.

While the rhetoric of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was used to garner votes by appealing to the majority community's sense of insecurity, Bandaranaike underestimated the forces with which he had colluded to attain premiership. His efforts to reconcile with the Tamil minority after the elections of 1956 were vehemently opposed by the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists. The Bandaranaike-Chelvanayanakam (B-C) pact of 1956 aimed at a three- point proposal: ''reasonable'' use of the Tamil language, limited devolution of power to regional councils, and constitutional amendments to guarantee the fundamental rights of the minorities.[36] However, the new prime minister had to abrogate the agreement as opposition parties rallied Sinhala Buddhist opinion against it. The Mahajan Eksath Peramuna (People's United Front, MEP), a political movement of Buddhist monks that had backed the SLFP in its electoral bid, lent strength by opposing then B-C pact. The reaction of the Buddhist *Sangha* was probably the strongest against any form of reconciliation with the Tamil community, which was perceived on behalf of the government as capitulating to minority demands. In fact, its fervent nationalist stance ultimately led to the assassination of Bandaranaike in September 1959 by a Buddhist monk.

Although S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's premiership lasted only three years, it significantly altered the political topography of Sri Lanka and established a securitised discourse of culture and minority rights, which seeped well into the political culture of the country. After his death, his widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike took over the party mantle, and became the world's first ever woman leader in 1960. Since the SLFP had come to power with a strong Sinhala-Buddhist mandate, Mrs Bandaranaike pursued policies that simply responded to the Sinhala-Buddhist constituency. Sinhala-only was introduced to the court systems, even in the Tamil majority areas of the north-east; Tamil civil servants were forced to learn Sinhala in order to secure promotions; well-calibrated policies were introduced to keep the number of Tamils hired into the government device extremely low; quota system was introduced to increase the number of Sinhalese students in universities, while Tamils were required to score higher than their Sinhalese counterparts in order to gain entry into the same universities; the state followed a systematic policy of altering the demography of Tamil majority areas by encouraging southern Sinhalese to settle there; and Buddhism was provided the ''foremost place'' in Sri Lanka's 1972 constitution.[37]

Hence, DeVotta writes that "within sixteen years of the 1956 elections, Sri Lanka regressed from a vaunted liberal democracy to an illiberal ethnocracy".[38]

III

Securitisation and Minority Rights

The securitisation of the discourse of "societal culture" in Sri Lanka has led to the state interpreting and assessing minority claims through the prism of security. Since the introduction of universal franchise in the 1930s, coupled with the compulsions of electoral politics as highlighted in the election of 1956, governments and political parties have favoured the dominant culture of Sinhala-Buddhism. In an effort to justify its favouritism, arguments of historical injustices and marginalisation of the majority Sinhalese population have been evoked. As a result, Tamil minority claims against the assimilationist project of the dominant culture has been viewed by the state as opposition that threatens the state. Demands of autonomy and a measure of self-government, which are essential for maintaining the continuity of one's culture and language, are seen as potential threats to the territorial integrity of the state, if autonomy leads to secessionism. Indeed, this had been the logic for the state to repeatedly quash all kinds of minority claims.

The systematic denial of cultural rights to the Tamil minority population led them on a path of radicalisation. From the mid-1970s one notices a momentous shift in the Tamil minority claims; from demands for structural changes and constitutional reforms of the previous decades to an assertion of the right to self-determination on the basis of a Tamil state in Sri Lanka.[39] Moreover, by the end of the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, Tamil assertion of self-determination took on a violent angle. A strong sense of disenchantment had pervaded the Tamil populace regarding the impotency of constitutionalism in addressing their demands. As a result, this period witnessed the emergence of new players on to the political stage that claimed to represent the Sri Lankan Tamil population; the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the LTTE were some of these new groups that represented a marked divergence from the politics of the earlier Federal Party that claimed to represent the interests of the Tamils. From the mid 1980s till the end of the conflict between the GoSL and the LTTE, the narrative of violence and retaliation, with innocent lives lost

on both sides needs no reiteration. In other words, the logic of securitisation which viewed minority claims as a threat to national security ultimately turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The classification of certain developments as security risks enables the state to slot them in a specific area, and provides special rights to the latter in using whatever means necessary to block it, or eradicate such a ''threat'' completely. Since the first task of the state is to secure its existence, issues that are drafted within a framework of security make all other questions irrelevant. In such scenarios, the space for moral arguments and democratic debate shrinks drastically. It is no surprise then, that security of the state often obviates democratic debate and negotiation. Thus, the securitisation of minority nationalism is detrimental to not just the minorities, but to democracy at large. By evoking historical injustices of the minority towards the majority, or past experiences to highlight irredentist and secessionist tendencies of minorities, the dominant culture and its leaders justify the denial of democratic freedoms to its minorities. This often results in a demonising narrative of a disloyal minority – the ''other'' – that allows a paralysing fear to seep into the political culture of the state. The perverted rationale thus implies that freedom's progress is antithetical to the interests of the state. What remains then is simply a shell of liberal democracy, as the Sri Lanka example evidences.

Securitisation of discourses can thus be seen as the link that shapes the relationship between democracy and political security; the latter supersedes democracy in securitised frameworks. In the light of the new global phenomenon of ''war against terrorism'', securitisation has become ever so pervasive. As governments around the world struggle to tackle the rising wave of terrorism, states have primarily responded by enacting tougher terrorism laws, which have often attacked the foundations of democracy by subverting democratic rights. The use of extreme measures, such as detention without trial and gagging orders on freedom of speech and expression, may have short-term impact, but ''may prove counter-productive for democracies engaged in long-term governance building''.[40]

Britain's tussle of negotiating with the opposing forces of political security and democratic rights is a telling example of how the former creeps over the latter under conditions of duress.[41] In the 20th century, the two World Wars broadly reflect the extent of state power based on the necessities of war in Britain. The Emergency Powers (Defence) Act 1939 allowed the enactment of laws on almost all aspects of life and commercial activities in the country by the executive. During the heyday of Irish nationalism, and

more recently in the wake of Islamic fundamentalism, British governments have had no difficulty in enacting draconian laws which often bypass concerns about civil liberties with arguments about the threat to the state and the need to uphold public order. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, the UK Parliament adopted the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, which provided the government special powers of detention and questioning of suspected foreign terror suspects.[42] Moreover, the government's intention to derogate from the various articles of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) since they were contradictory to the 2001 Act clearly shows the precedence of security over issues of civil liberties and human rights.[43] Thus, McEldowney notes that the habit of making laws and unbridled executive powers during wartimes may ''ultimately change the culture of the government itself''.[44]

The securitisation of minority nationalism in Sri Lanka and the state's response to the radicalised Tamil secessionist demands starting from the 1970s has followed a trajectory that is similar to that of Britain's experience. Decades of high-pitched battles between the security forces of the government and the rebel cadres of LTTE, interspersed with sporadic suicide bombings, has had a profound impact on the political culture of the country. By arguing the need for a strong government to face up to the challenge posed by the LTTE, the government in Sri Lanka has been able to accumulate wide-ranging powers, often against the grain of democratic and liberal values. Although the country has been a victim of ''terrorism'', the term is often used to securitise other forms of non-security related opposition. In order to suppress opposition to the state from political groups or organisations, the government has repeatedly treated these claims as ''public order'' issue that apparently threaten the internal security of the state.[45] The long list of journalists and intellectuals who have been killed, abducted, arrested, assaulted and threatened in connection with voicing their opinion against the government attests to the grim reality.[46]

IV

Conclusion

To conclude, let me recapitulate some of the main arguments made in this paper. I have argued that in Sri Lanka, the process of politicised identity formation began in 1930s with the introduction of universal franchise. In the absence of an anti-colonial,

nationalist movement that could have produced a cross-cultural identity, political mobilisation took place within the respective Sinhala and Tamil communities. The extent of the polarised identities and their razor-sharp edges became apparent during the elections of 1956.

Electoral expediency along with a melange of factors – *swabhasha* movement, political Buddhism, and the over-representation of the island's Tamils in state employment under colonial administration – dictated that the elections of 1956 would be fought on an ethno-national platform. In order to justify a narrow conception of the Sri Lankan society based on an exclusive Sinhala-Buddhist identity, and as well as a consequence of it, the discourse of minority rights and the debate on the societal culture of Sri Lanka became securitised and came to be viewed as a zero-sum game. Securitisation of the debate led the state to view minority claims for autonomy and cultural recognition as a matter of national security that had the potential to threaten the integrity of the state. In the subsequent years and decades, this interpretation enabled the state to customarily quash all demands for cultural autonomy and led to the radicalisation of the Tamil community. The violence that erupted in the 1970s and continued for the next quarter century that indeed threatened the integrity of the state turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Moreover, the conflict in Sri Lanka has been reconstructed within the hybridised conceptual framework, where the discourse of culture that had been hitherto considered to be outside the liberal framework, has been incorporated. By doing so, it brings out the close symbiotic relationship between culture and individual autonomy; that people's membership in their own societal culture enables meaningful individual choice and supports a self-identity. However, it is important to recall that the state invariably favours a particular societal culture over others and the absence of any measure of cultural autonomy proves to be detrimental to the flourishing, or even survivability of minority cultures. Thus, central to the debate on culture is the question of autonomy.

The end of the war between the GoSL and the LTTE in 2009 has signalled a new opportunity to re-envision the issue of minority Tamil rights in Sri Lanka. By way of devolving certain cultural rights, the Tamil community can be made a stakeholder in the wider political sphere. However, for it to materialise, the debate on cultural rights and autonomy must move beyond the logic of securitisation. Moreover, the cessation of violence in Sri Lanka also indicates the poverty of the securitisation logic; with the last of the LTTE strongholds being decimated, the county no longer faces any threats to its

territorial integrity. Thus, the moment is ripe in Sri Lanka for substituting the securitised lens for interpreting minority nationalism with the idea of justice. It is the moral belief that all cultures are equal and hence have an equally valid claim to language rights and self-government powers that is necessary for maintaining, as well as allowing it to flourish as a distinct culture. Furthermore, if steps are not taken in the direction of addressing the core issue of minority cultural rights, the resurgent threat of militant minority nationalism and secessionism will continue to loom large. It may once again lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the securitisation of a non-security issue ultimately creates a security risk. Finally, by shifting the debate beyond the straitjacket of security and replacing it with a theory of justice, it would not only aid the state to construct an inclusive civic identity for its entire citizenry, but also strengthen the strained pillars of democracy in Sri Lanka.

Notes

1. See Sumanasiri Liyanage *et al.*, eds. *Intra-State Conflicts and Inter-State Relations: Perspectives on India-Sri Lanka Relations* (Colombo: South Asia Peace Institute, 2009); K.M. DeSilva, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1998); Sumantra Bose, *Contested Lands* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
2. See Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) and Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For a comprehensive discussion of the disciplinary debate in political and social theory, see Stephen May, Tariq Modood and Judith Squires, eds., *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Minority Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1–26.
3. See Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*; I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations* (London: Sage, 1997).
4. Will Kymlicka, ''Modernity and national identity'', in *Ethnic Challenge to the Modern Nation State*, eds. Ben-Ami *et al.* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), p. 21.
5. Walker Connor ''National self-determination and tomorrow's political map'', in *Citizenship, Diversity and Pluralism*, eds. Alan Cairns *et al.* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), pp. 163–64.
6. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, p. 1.
7. Will Kymlicka, ''Justice and security in the accommodation of minority nationalism'', in *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Minority Rights*, eds. Stephen May *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 12.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
9. R. Dworkin (1985), quoted in Kymlicka, ''Modernity and national identity'', p. 22.
10. Societal culture refers to a common language and social institutions, rather than common religious beliefs and family customs. Thus, societal cultures within modern liberal democracies are inevitably pluralistic, involving different religions such as Christians, Hindus, and Muslims; urban professionals and rural farmers; homosexuals as well as heterosexuals. See Kymlicka, ''Modernity and national identity'', p. 12.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–17.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
14. Kymlicka, ''Justice and security in the accommodation of minority nationalism'', p. 147.
15. Subrata Mitra, ''Rational politics of cultural nationalism: Sub-national movements in South Asia in comparative perspective'', *British Journal of Political Science*, 25, no. 1 (2005): 61.
16. K.M. DeSilva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 379.
17. *Ibid.* p. 5.
18. Jonathan Spencer, ''A nationalism without politics? The illiberal consequences of liberal institutions in Sri Lanka'', *Third World Quarterly*, 29, no. 3 (2008): 613.
19. Kaviraj mentions a ''single common sense'' as an identity that would be the guiding force in independent India, transcending loyalties based on region, religion, and community. See Sudipto Kaviraj, ''On the structure of nationalist discourse'', in *State and Nation in the Context of Social Change*, ed. T.V. Sathyamurthy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).
20. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
21. Spencer, ''A nationalism without politics?'', p. 614.
22. T. Nairn (1981), cited in *Ibid.*
23. ICG Asia Group Report 141, November 7, 2007, p. 5, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri_lanka___sinhala_nationalism_and_the_elusive_southern_consensus.ashx.
24. See DeSilva, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, pp. 46–47.
25. Neil DeVotta, ''Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology: Implications for politics and conflict resolution in Sri Lanka'', Policy Studies 40 (Washington, DC: East-West Centre, 2007), p. 14.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Bose, *Contested Lands*, p. 16.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
30. Spencer, ''A nationalism without politics?'', p. 614.