Majoritarian Politics in Sri Lanka:

THE ROOTS OF PLURALISM BREAKDOWN

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The Tamil minority in Sri Lanka had a relatively privileged position during British colonial rule, with the result that the Sinhalese majority entered independence in an economically disadvantaged position. Understandably, Sinhalese Sri Lankans sought to use their new-found powers of majority to improve their position. But rather than pursue majority affirmative action, as the Malays in Malaysia did, or attempt to craft a new sense of shared nationhood as in Singapore, the postcolonial state passed a set of language and citizenship laws that denied Tamil rights and conflated Sinhalese identity and the Buddhist faith with Sri Lankan nationhood.

In turn, the Tamils perceived these measures not as legitimate attempts to redress inherited inequalities, but as a systematic attempt by the Sinhalese majority to marginalize the Tamils within the educational and economic sectors and to claim the state for themselves. This was the overarching basis for the island's protracted and bloody civil war that lasted from 1983 to 2009.

The Sri Lankan case offers an opportunity to examine some options open to majority populations disadvantaged under colonial rule. In Sri Lanka, the desire to do something to redress majority disadvantages was both inevitable and legitimate, but repressing the Tamils in the process was not the only nor indeed the inevitable response. What other potential choices existed at the time? What were the options for the postcolonial state to redress the Sinhalese disadvantage without marginalizing the Tamils? Why were these options not chosen? What were the crucial pivot points that pushed Sri Lanka towards exclusion and then civil war, rather than towards some form of inclusive citizenship? And to what extent did ideas of nationhood and nation building play a role in driving these decisions?

In commissioning the Sri Lanka case, the Global Centre for Pluralism has sought to understand the critical pivot points between inclusionary and exclusionary conceptions of citizenship and national identity. Policies related to education, language, citizenship, economic development and so on can

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have both positive and negative impacts on the recognition and accommodation of diversity. If post- independence Sri Lanka offers a specific case of how not to address inherited inequalities, an examination of its responses may help other societies prone to majoritarianism avoid the same pitfalls.

CASE NARRATIVE

At independence in 1948, Sri Lanka seemed to be a "model colony". The drive for independence had brought none of the instability and violence seen in neighbouring India. Under colonialism the minority Tamils had enjoyed privileged access to education and the resulting jobs in public administration, at the expense of the Sinhalese and Buddhist majority. Nonetheless, at independence, both Tamil and Sinhalese elites placed great trust in D.S. Senanayake, who became the first Prime Minister in an informal elite pact. This Sinhalese leader fostered camaraderie across ethnic lines, causing observers to believe that Sri Lanka was well on the road to modern statehood. But the constitution drafted by the Soulbury Commission provided no formal protection for the Tamil minority; this omission proved a major error of institutional design. No "hardware" for pluralism was built in, thereby leaving few institutional safeguards to protect against anti-pluralist forms of political discourses and identities (the "software").

When Senanayake died unexpectedly in 1952, ethnocentric politics rooted in linguistic and ethnic nationalism rapidly emerged. A first pivot away from pluralism came when Indian Tamils were denied citizenship within a year of independence. Caste-conscious Sri Lankan Tamils supported the

disenfranchisement of Indian Tamils. An early manifestation of ethnocentrism, this exclusion created a precedent that emboldened Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists, who afterwards repeatedly resorted to sectarianism and majoritarianism, both motivated by political and electoral concerns, resulting in exclusion and disempowerment of the island's minorities.

In commissioning the Sri Lanka case, the Centre has sought to understand the pivot points between exclusionary and inclusionary conceptions of citizenship and national identity. An examination of its responses to inherited inequalities may help other societies transitioning from minority rule to majority governance avoid the same pitfalls.

Religion has been one major line of cleavage in Sri Lanka. A key Buddhist religious text, the Mahavamsa (Great Chronicle), tells a mytho-historical story about Lord Buddha choosing the island to preserve and propagate his teachings, thereby making Sri Lanka simultaneously sinhadipa (island of the Sinhalese) and dhammadipa (island containing Buddha's teachings). This Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology has been deployed to justify majority domination and minority subordination, and it was also the basis for Buddhism receiving special status in the constitution. Buddhist clergy command significant influence in the island's political affairs, and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists insist on Sri Lanka being a unitary rather than federal or devolved state that provides predominantly Tamil

regions meaningful autonomy. Sinhalese Buddhist political entrepreneurs and Buddhist leaders project themselves as defenders of sinhadipa and dhammadipa, which in turn has created a form of politics that devalues religious pluralism.

Language has been another key source of cleavage. English was adopted as the island's official language following independence, despite the very low number of English speakers. Even before independence, a swabasha (self-language) movement called for both Sinhala and Tamil to replace English, a policy of linguistic parity that might have precluded much of the ethnic conflict that eventually took root. Instead the counter movement and pivotal decision to make Sinhala the only official language contributed to the growth of Tamil separatism and eventually to civil war.

Political parties and their electioneering have served as primary levers of exclusion. For example, in the 1952 election, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) campaigned on a platform promoting linguistic parity but switched to a policy of Sinhala-only during the 1956 election. When the opposition United National Party realized that linguistic parity would cost it the election, it too switched to Sinhala-only. The divisive rhetoric gave rise to the Official Language Act of 1956, making Sinhala the sole official language. Thereafter, a process of political outbidding began with political parties competing to empower the Sinhalese and marginalize the Tamils for electoral gain.

Despite some attempts by elites from both communities to forge better relations—including by devolving language recognition and some powers to provincial governments—institutional and electoral

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designs in the 1960s and 1970s favoured the majority and encouraged opportunist party politics privileging Sinhalese interests. Making Sinhala the sole official language, for example, not only challenged the right of Tamils to celebrate their culture, but also hampered their economic and social progress, especially in education and employment.

The ethnocentric policies of the governments of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1960-65 and 1970-77) especially goaded Tamils towards separatist mobilization. While Tamils did benefit from President J. R. Jayewardene's post-1977 liberalization and structural adjustment policies, this led to jealous Sinhalese counterparts promoting anti-Tamil sentiment. Such sentiment contributed to the July 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, which was sparked when the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) killed 13 soldiers. This pogrom is considered the beginning of Sri Lanka's 27 year civil war.

The ethnocentric policies successive governments institutionalized and the resultant civil war pushed Sri Lanka away from liberal democracy. Instead

of reversing this trend, the Mahinda Rajapaksa government used the LTTE's defeat in 2009 to further its dynastic and authoritarian designs. This happened even as the Sinhalese-dominated army operated as an agent of economic development, which in the northeast displaced Tamil business owners and entrepreneurs, and the government refused to return Tamil lands taken over during the war. Rajapaksa's defeat in January 2015 has improved Tamils' condition and reversed the island's authoritarian trajectory. But a tendency toward majoritarianism in Sri Lankan politics has left many obstacles to pluralism so that Tamils and other minorities are far from achieving full inclusion.

THROUGH A PLURALISM LENS

Sources of Inclusion and Exclusion

The Global Centre for Pluralism asked each author in the Change Case Series to reflect on the sources of inclusion and exclusion through a pluralism lens—that is, using the Centre's "drivers of pluralism" framework. Some highlights from the full Sri Lanka change case are included here.

Livelihoods and Wellbeing

- Under colonial rule, the Tamil minority enjoyed privileged access to education and government employment. Subsequent policies sought to limit these advantages and to improve the prospects of the majority Sinhalese.
- Making Sinhala the sole official language limited the access of Tamils to the public sector, thereby hampering their economic and social progress.
- Sinhalese business owners fanned ethnic conflict in the hope of undermining the competition from Tamil businesses.

Law, Politics and Recognition

- Absence of constitutional and legal protections for minorities allowed opportunist political parties, seduced by majoritarianism, to systematically limit Tamils' rights.
- The institutional and electoral systems favour the majority, thereby making it politically rewarding for political parties to promote Sinhalese interests at the expense of the minorities.
- Calls for devolution or federalism have been rejected in the name of national unity. The13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1987 set up a provincial council system, but devolution of powers was bitterly opposed by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists.

Citizens, Civil Society and Identity

- The mytho-historical accounts contained in the Buddhist Great Chronicle have been used to justify majority domination.
- Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology is used to justify giving Buddhism special constitutional status, and maintaining Sri Lanka as a unitary state.
- Caste-based divisions between Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils resulted in missed opportunities for unified action against Sinhalese-Buddhist majoritarian exclusion.

CONCLUSION

Post-independence Sri Lankan political parties and governments responded to long-standing inequalities with exclusionary linguistic and employment policies. Initial elite pacts and political parties open to inclusive practices quickly gave way to the electoral pay-off of Sinhalese nationalism. The lack of constitutional protections for Tamils, coupled with no institutional mechanism for limiting majoritarian rule, meant that political parties adopted electoral strategies that appealed to the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. While the opportunity to foster pluralism has improved under the present government, majoritarianism remains institutionalized in Sri Lankan political culture. It therefore remains to be seen whether the sort of pluralism befitting a liberal democracy will take root on the island.

CASE AUTHOR

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The Global Centre for Pluralism is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at **pluralism.ca**