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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's trajectories of state-building and politics remain interesting topics in scholarly research and public discussion, sometimes but not always for the right reasons. For decades, Sri Lanka has attracted attention as a general topic of interest in a fairly narrow scholarly set of circles, mainly with a focus on Asian studies, area studies and Indian Ocean studies. The country has also been an interesting case study for academic research on subjects ranging from politics, state-building, democracy and post-conflict peacebuilding. The primary lens across the political science studies on the country, however, has come to be that of ethnic conflict. The popularity of the category of 'ethnic conflict' in the post–Cold War period was not unique to Sri Lanka[1] (Sadowski 1998), but a global phenomenon, much of it thanks to the popularity of the 'new wars' thesis[2] and the West's promotion of liberal peace[3] in pursuit of a new 'global interventionary order' by effectively promoting and instrumentally using the non-governmental organisations, at an industrial scale (Richmond 2020).

The country's most spectacular achievements seem firmly stuck in the rapidly retreating past. Once celebrated as a model democracy in the former British Empire, after independence Sri Lanka was lauded for its impressive achievement in terms of human development indicators. Compared to its neighbours, its social welfare policies were seen as a model of social democracy. Among such jubilatory observations, there were periodic incidents of communal violence, even before the idyll was shattered by the onset of civil war in 1983.

Since the island's civil war began officially in 1983, fighting between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) has led to the country being recast as no longer 'Paradise' but as 'Paradise Lost'. In much of academic literature, the public media and private portrayals of the country, discourses have become negative, dramatising the grim overtones and persistence of inter-ethnic enmities. A powerful Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, recurring cycles of inter-ethnic violence and corruption at the level of Sri Lanka's political and economic elites are all ingredients in the new mix. These are all dominant themes in recent accounts of the condition of Sri Lanka's state, society and politics. The intensity of the discussion, whether among serious scholars or in a public gathering or in a family discussion, can result in heated debates. Polarisation can be worsened, risking making enemies of colleagues, friends and even family members.

For any long-term observer of Sri Lanka's trajectories of state-building and politics, it is not difficult to notice that too often these fierce debates and discussions around identity politics and violence tend to confuse the trees for the woods and fail to see the forest. Heated scholarly debate is not unique to Sri Lanka, being a characteristic of much South Asian scholarship, where many scholars are either unable or unwilling to let go of their political background, and embrace identity politics as if it were part of their professional and civic responsibility as citizens, quite consciously becoming ethno-intellectuals (Ludden 2002: 4).

Regardless of whether the discursive communities are locally rooted, hybrid or international, what is often missing in their debates and discussions are the way complex linkages between politics, economy and societal transformation have influenced the story of state-building in the country (Venugopal 2018). These linkages often have their roots and dynamics beyond the immediate local and national economic and political environment, at the regional and the global level. Given how rapidly such dynamics unfold, their complex local manifestations for politics and society mean that researchers on Sri Lanka hardly have the luxury of taking time to reflect on events and connect the dots before completing their analysis.

With this monograph my intention is to fill in this gap of necessary reflection, to connect at least some of the dots, including some that extend well beyond Sri Lanka itself. My hope in this way is to prevent another exercise of chasing geese. Instead, I wish to understand 'the way things are' and 'how they got this way'. To frame and explain Sri Lanka's trajectory of state-building and nationalist politics, the civil war itself is treated as more marginal than is usually the case, since despite the attractions of warfare for

many observers, civil war and ethnic conflict are in many ways quite marginal to the wider general story of post-colonial state-building in Sri Lanka. By not adopting ethnic conflict and violence as my primary frame of investigation, I make a consistent effort to paint a bigger picture and tell a longer and more complex story of how Sri Lanka came to be what it is today.

In this way my aim is to contribute to the fast-unfolding scholarly and policy discussions about the 'dramatic' post-war developments in Sri Lanka since 2009, reflecting on the background to contemporary dynastic politics, the militarised state, and authoritarian and populist trends, all of which are very much in the headlines. Departing from the majority of scholarly and policy-related works of the past 30 years, inter-ethnic relations and ethnic conflict are not the only or even primary prism through which the many decades of post-colonial state-building of Sri Lanka and politics (of state-building) are understood in this book. Here I echo recent work that invites one to look beyond the familiar tropes in Sri Lanka's political developments along the narratives of colonial divide and rule politics, the rise of ethno-nationalist lobbies, structural discriminations and majoritarian democracy (Pieris 2019). I assign greater importance than is usual to intra-ethnic conflictual, competitive and collaborative relations among Sinhalese elites. I find that vertical ethnic relationships across classes are key to painting a more nuanced picture of how Sri Lankan politics has come to be expressed overwhelmingly in 'ethno-religious' terms. My approach is guided by an understanding that identity and large-group identity formation are relational processes, equally influenced by vertical class and horizontal inter-group relations. My inquiry into state-building thus rests on a longer-term historical analysis of intra-group dynamics, class relations and the slow construction of an ethno-religious form of identity politics.

The main questions I ask in this book are as follows:

- What are the key hegemony-building processes identified in Sri Lanka's state-building project?
- How do the dynamics of Sinhalese politics and the broader political and economic context over time influence these processes of hegemony-building and reproduction of elite dominance?
- What have been the key tensions between hegemony-building and state-building in Sri Lanka since independence?
- How have these tensions affected prospects for specifically democratic state-building?

In this book I have had to cover a wide range of topics, from the politics of anti-colonial nationalism, to class relations within the Sinhalese majority and among elites, to capitalist transformation, intra-elite competition, subaltern politics, political party development, state reforms, administrative reforms, state bureaucracy, patronage politics, economic liberalisation, the civil war, peace processes, dynastic politics, post-war reconstruction, militarisation, human rights and relations with the global economy. The central claim will be that *the state-building process of Sri Lanka has been a struggle for establishing the hegemony of the right*. This type of politics rejects individual and social equality, opposes social integration of marginalised groups into the nation, both fosters and appeals to popular xenophobic tendencies, and engages in political projects to achieve hegemony. In this political project of the Sinhala-Buddhist right, Sinhalese political elites and the broader Sinhalese community have played a decisive role.

This book relied on several sources, mainly semi-structured interviews with experts, whom I considered rich sources of information. These interviews were conducted in Sri Lanka and in person, most during the first quarter of 2009, as the war was at its height and coming to an end. Therefore, these interviews stand as rare testimonies to what was happening during this very specific time period in Sri Lanka's recent history. They were also helpful to gain deeper and honest insights into sensitive topics, which were not possible to document due to the dangers they could bring upon some of my interviewees. However, given their everyday engagement with local realities, the personal-political narratives they shared with me became an invaluable set of resources. In some cases, interviewees even considered the interview(s) therapeutic.[4] Some interviewees had first-hand experience working within specific political regimes and had close relationships with some significant political leaders, even knowing them in a personal capacity. This meant they were often able to share 'insider accounts', including information mostly hitherto undocumented. In this way, interviews threw a different light on most written accounts of key political events. I treat these interviews as 'hidden transcripts', in the same way that James Scott suggests (Scott 1990).[5] Although a majority of the interviewees opted to have these interviews in English, frequently they switched to everyday vernacular in Sinhala and Tamil, using specific culturally rooted expressions and metaphors to express deeper feelings they felt unable to express in English.

I also relied on observations during my visit to Sri Lanka in early 2009, at a time when interviewees' emotions were running high given the highly

contentious political environment at that time. The government forces were preparing for a 'final military assault' on the LTTE forces, and these military battleground events were complicated further by strategically planned provincial council elections, organised by the ruling regime in the hope of capitalising politically on the government's 'strong' military action in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.[6] These observations I made amidst these events were useful for reflecting on how emotions expressed by interviewees could relate to their unspoken fears and suspicions, to a sense of frustration and to hyper-vigilance within the local highly polarised environment. On certain topics, they appeared to look for a quick escape and their bodily expressions of power and powerlessness. The election campaigns of the time were dominated by themes of war and military victory on the battlefield. It was hardly possible to distinguish between war victories and election victories at that time. On closer observation, election campaigns, televised debates, and cultural and political rituals revolved around the notion of battlefield victories in war as part and parcel of elections victories, and vice versa. Both were viewed as equally imperative by the ruling regime. I also took two additional short field visits to Colombo in the aftermath of the war, first in 2010 and then in 2011. In the jubilatory environment that followed the end of the war in the south of Sri Lanka, collective celebrations of the recent military victories were a frequent sight. In addition to the aforementioned, this book also benefitted from many published literature on the social, economic and political history of Sri Lanka, written from a number of disciplinary areas, in social and economic history, sociology, cultural and social anthropology, political science, economics, administrative science, cultural and conflict studies and studies of colonialism, and also 'grey literature', and locally and internationally published official reports in English and Sinhala.

I analysed all these materials using a critical lens, aiming not only to evaluate but also to identify ideas about transforming social reality by explicitly recognising the possibilities and capacities people have to change their material and social circumstances (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). Further, the critical lens was helpful to read and make sense of the written work and to remain focused on issues of power and asymmetrical power relations among various forces in society. Unlike the relatively obvious dimensions of power, exploring the deeply grounded hegemonic relationship that constitutes the state-in-society relations of Sri Lanka requires taking a critical approach to digging deeper into the manipulated consciousness of society. My approach also helped develop a deeper level of understanding of the significance

of various kinds of political engagement and be more attentive to possible alternative, less conventional explanations of such political engagements. By combining critical with narrative approach, I wanted to pay attention to each respondent's unique story, their own analysis, the sequencing of narrative episodes, the reference to linguistic and cultural symbols, and bring out the authenticity of each narrative (Reisman 1993: 2). The narrative approach also helped me uncover 'what was meant beyond what was said' and thus explore respondents' close personal experiences and perceptions on state-building and Sri Lankan politics. Most importantly, combined narrative and critical approaches helped to reveal how the respondents made sense of events and actions in their own lives, through metaphors, ambiguous emotions, body language, jokes and other elements in the interview. All these are part of how each person expressed their worldview. In this way I was able to identify four main narrative themes: (*a*) nationalism, (*b*) patronage politics, (*c*) state reforms and (*d*) war and peace. These themes are presented in this book as the four main chapters, with due attention to relevant sub-themes under each heading.

I then fed these four narratives into a larger framework, a heuristic device partially modelled on Gabriel Almond's political system model and his functional approach to politics (Almond and Coleman 1960; Almond and Powell 1966; Almond et al. 2004; Almond and Sidney 2007). In his framework, Almond distinguishes between input (in my inquiry: ideology, material struggles) and output functions (in this inquiry: consent and coercion) within a given political system. These in turn are distinguished from end goals (in my inquiry: state-building cum hegemony-building) that actors strive to achieve. Having first identified these disparate elements, I then sought to anchor them in a coherent framework. By identifying overlaps and connections between various components relevant to my inquiry, each chapter examines elements and relationships that help to gauge the broader picture of Sri Lankan elite state-building and hegemonic politics. Overall, hegemony-building was found to be the oil that runs the political machinery of the state. Using this framework, I was able to place both the internal and external structures, processes and the historical and contemporary specificities each in their appropriate place within the broader story of Sri Lankan state-building.[7]

I categorised each of the four processes, dividing them into consent- and coercion-oriented elements, which is more an analytical than empirical distinction. In practice, coercive and consensual elements are often presented

simultaneously in all four processes of nationalism, political patronage, state reforms and war and peace. In each of the four hegemony-building processes, I have also identified key actors and alliances, those dominating, supporting and challenging such processes as they evolve, persist and are dynamically transformed. While in Almond's original framework, political processes are divided between the formal and informal (Almond and Powell 1966: 17), this particular distinction was not taken on in this study, since in Sri Lankan politics formal and informal processes are so completely enmeshed as to be almost indistinguishable.

THE BACKGROUND: POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHY

At present, the total population of Sri Lanka is approximately 21 million. Ethnicity is one of the major categories of identity. Although these ethnic identities were present throughout history, with the introduction of official censuses by the British colonial rule in the late 18th century, as elsewhere in the British Empire, divisions that had been fluid became hardened and an awareness arose of identities as antagonistic and immutable among the various communities, redefined through the colonial administrative apparatus (De Silva 1981).

The majority ethnic group is Sinhalese, constituting 74.9 per cent of the total population, whereas the Sri Lankan Tamils constitute 11.2 per cent. In addition to these two main ethnic groups, Indian Tamils constitute 4.1 per cent, Sri Lankan Moor (Muslims) 9.3 per cent and others 0.5 per cent (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2020).[8] The Sinhalese ethnic group is also divided along an upcountry and low-country distinction based on the regions of the country from which Sinhalese originate. Meanwhile, there is a significant cultural difference between Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil people. While Sri Lankan Tamils claim to have their origins within the island, the Indian Tamils were brought to the island as workers during the British colonial era for casual and agricultural labour, for instance, to work on road construction and in plantations. Given the main locations of the tea plantations, in the hilly areas in the central province, it is here that the Tamil community of Indian descent is mainly concentrated.

Among Sinhalese and Tamils, two separate caste systems are practised. Compared to the caste system in neighbouring India, the caste systems in Sri Lanka are practised in a considerably less rigid manner (Rogers

2004). The Sinhalese caste system consists of a few caste groups, in which Goyigama (cultivator caste) occupies the top tier of the caste hierarchy (Jiggins 1979: 36–37); Goyigama members constitute more than 50 per cent of the total Sinhalese population. However, the members of the Goyigama caste originating from up-country areas claim superiority over those from the lower-country regions. This is because up-country Goyigama believe themselves to be descendants of the pre-colonial Kandyan aristocracy. Although these differences appear subtle, in electoral politics and in everyday affairs – for instance, when seeking a marriage partner or seeking political nomination in elections – such caste differences still play a role (Jiggins 1978: 7, 15). In addition to the Goyigama caste, there are also sub-castes that trace their origins to specific regions and a set of traditional occupations. Among these sub-castes are Karava (fisherfolk), Salagama (cinnamon peelers) and Durawa (coconut cultivators and toddy tappers).[9] In the history of political party development, especially in the founding of the two main rival Sinhalese-led political parties – the United Nations Party and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party – such caste distinctions have played a major role in political mobilisation in later years, resulting in tensions and inter-family rivalries that influence Sri Lanka's national political life, as it were, behind the scenes (Roberts 1982). Both historically and in contemporary Sri Lanka, caste-based mobilisation and state-building have a complex set of interdependencies (see Chapter 3).

Among the Sri Lankan Tamils, there are caste differences between those living in northern Sri Lanka and those in the eastern parts of the country (Thiranagama 2018: 365). In both regions, the Vellala caste of farmers occupies the highest rank in the Tamil hierarchy (Thiranagama 2018: 371). Although during the civil war, there were forms of politically orchestrated unity that cut across caste in both northern and eastern Tamil areas (Thiranagama 2011), underlying caste tensions remain, as does domination of eastern Tamils by northern Tamils. This is an intra-ethnic source of tensions in political relations within minority parties and within the organisational structure of the LTTE.

The Muslim population in Sri Lanka is believed to have arrived on the island during medieval times; their origins are usually traced to trading in spices, ivory and gems (Ali 2001: 1). For most Sri Lankan Muslims, their mother tongue is Tamil, a language they share with the Tamil community 'proper'. Nevertheless, most Muslims are also fluent in Sinhalese. This community includes two sects also present elsewhere in the Muslim

world – Shia and Sunni. Most Sri Lankan Muslims are Sunni and are concentrated in the Eastern Province. In addition, there is a concentration of Shia Muslims in the North and Eastern Provinces and in the Kandyan Hill areas. In 1990, an expulsion of around 72,000 Muslims from north-eastern Sri Lanka by the LTTE resulted in the mass displacement of a large part of this northern Muslim population, many of whom resettled in other parts of the country, and especially in the North Western Province (Imtiyaz and Iqbal 2011: 380). According to McGilvray, this incident further exacerbated the Muslim and Tamil divide, a development that was received favourably by Sinhala nationalists who wished no political alliance formation between Tamil nationalists and Muslims (2010: 53). Despite occasional outbursts of violent communal incidents, before the end of the civil war in 2009, Muslims had relatively cordial relationships with the majority Sinhalese. In the post-war period, however, this relationship has become strained under the governments of the two Rajapaksa brothers (DeVotta 2019b). Sadly, in the post-war period under both Rajapaksa regimes, the Sri Lankan Muslim community was being targeted as the new enemy of the Sinhalese hegemony-building project (Holt 2016: 5). Until 2009, no apparent major clashes took place among the Muslims; a violent encounter between a Sufi sheik and a reformist congregation sparked some fears among the majority Sinhalese of Islamic militancy and jihadism in Sri Lanka (McGilvray 2010: 57). Despite such incidents, Muslim political elites have played a visible role in both national and regional politics since at least the early 1990s and are especially active in the Eastern Province. As for Sinhalese and Tamil political representation, most of the Muslim community is organised and represented through a few political parties primarily founded on a common Islamic identity. However, there are also key Muslim political figures and a substantial proportion of their Muslim followers who are members and supporters of the main Sinhalese political parties.

In religious terms, 70.1 per cent of Sri Lankans are estimated to be Buddhist. Almost all Sri Lankan Buddhists are followers of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, an orthodox school of Buddhism ('doctrine of the elders') with its literary traditions in the Pali language (Pieris 2006: 336). Some of the key beliefs of the Theravada followers are spirituality, the enlightenment of the individual, self-discipline and pure thought and deed. The Sangha, the main Buddhist priestly order in Sri Lanka, plays a dominant and important role in the everyday life of its followers and in national politics as well. Next to the Buddhists,[10] about 12.6 per cent of Sri Lankans are estimated to be

Hindus, 9.7 per cent follow Islam and 7.6 per cent are Christian and Roman Catholic (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2020). While the majority of Tamils are Hindu, there is also a relatively small Tamil Christian community.

As per the latest figures, the rural population constituted 77.4 per cent of the total population, whereas the urban and estate population represented 18.2 and 4.4 per cent, respectively (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2020). The geographical distribution and concentration of communities along ethnic and religious lines have a significant impact on political and electoral dynamics in Sri Lanka. Around 90 per cent of all Sinhalese are concentrated in the southern, western, central and north central parts of the country (Pieris 2006: 342) (see Appendix 1 for the map of Sri Lanka). However, since the 1930s, state-sponsored peasant colonisation projects in the eastern part of the country have dramatically altered the ethnic composition of these areas. The result is that today there are almost equal numbers of Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese in the Eastern Province (Department of Census and Statistics 2007: 16). From time to time, various politically motivated demographic changes to electoral boundaries have been introduced by the ruling Sinhalese political parties, and the eastern part of the country is especially susceptible to communal tensions, particularly around the time of elections. In the recent past there have been some violent clashes between Sinhalese and other communities in Trincomalee district, the capital of the Eastern Province.

The majority of Sri Lankan Tamils live in the northern and eastern parts of the country, although there are small pockets of Tamil people living in other parts of the country too, for example, in the capital, Colombo, where there is a significant percentage of Tamil inhabitants. As per the 2012 official census and statistics, about 31.5 per cent of the population in Colombo are Tamils (Department of Census and Statistics 2012). According to some reports, there has been a significant reduction in the proportion of Muslims in the Eastern Province, mainly due to war-induced mass displacement towards the southern parts of the island. Meanwhile, several waves of trade-related migration of Muslims to various parts of the country have taken place (Pieris 2006: 342). As far as provincial distribution of the overall population is concerned, the Western Province records the biggest share. The Southern Province is the next most populous, followed by the North Western Province. In these three provinces alone, the Sinhalese represent the highest percentage of the population (Department of Census and Statistics 2012).

There is hardly any data available on the class composition of the population along the notions of relations of production. One way of tracing