

AN UNEASY HEGEMONY

Sri Lanka has been regarded as a model democracy among former British colonies. It is lauded for its impressive achievement in terms of human development indicators. However, Sri Lanka's modern history can also be read as a tragic story of inter-ethnic inequalities and tensions, resulting in years of violent conflicts. Two long spells of anti-state youth uprisings were followed by nearly three decades of civil war, and most recently a renewed upsurge of events are examples of the ongoing uneasy project of state-building. This book discusses that state-building in Sri Lanka is centred on the struggle for hegemony amidst a kind of politics that rejects individual and group equality, opposes the social integration of marginalised groups and appeals to narrow, fearful and xenophobic tendencies among the majority population and minorities alike. It answers the pressing questions of: How do the dynamics of intra-Sinhalese class relations and Sinhalese politics influence the trajectories of post-colonial state-building? What tensions emerge over time between Sinhalese hegemony-building and the wider state-building? How do these tensions manifest in majority and minority relationships?

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AN UNEASY HEGEMONY

POLITICS OF STATE-BUILDING AND
STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE IN SRI LANKA

SHYAMIKA JAYASUNDARA-SMITS



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To Amma and Thaattba

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PREFACE

Sri Lanka has always been a fascinating case study due to its gradual transformation from a model democracy to a case of perpetual political violence. The aim of this book is to present a nuanced account of Sri Lanka's trajectory of politics of state-building by situating it in the intersections of state-building and hegemony-building. The book delves into a number of social categories and relations, mainly class, caste and gender, beyond the usual analyses centred on ethnic and inter-religious identity conflicts. It discusses four key state-building processes that came to be converged with Sinhala right-wing hegemony-building processes that were invented and nurtured by the majority Sinhalese elites who occupied state power throughout the post-colonial period. Paying close attention helps analyse how these processes have come about and have been utilised and adapted according to the prevailing global and national ideological and material conditions at a given historical moment. The book aims to re-problematise Sri Lanka's trajectory of state-building by redrawing attention to class relations, specifically intra-ethnic class relations of the majority Sinhala-Buddhist community as a perpetual source of violence. The primacy given to a class-based analysis of the roots and manifestations of social and political violence is aimed at a deeper and multi-level analysis, weaving historical–contemporary, material–ideational and global–national–local elements into one coherent and complex whole.

The book is written from a critical, reflective and interpretivist perspective. It is situated within critical approaches to politics and the state, specifically influenced by the Gramscian concept of hegemony. This is central to the analysis, which shows how ideological hegemony was pursued by the ruling class through the use of various ways of combining coercion with consent.

These strategies for securing hegemony were often resisted and contested by countervailing social and political forces, ultimately manifested as a series of violent encounters, protests and forms of opposition. The book has its origins in the author's PhD thesis, defended in 2013. It benefits from in-depth field interviews conducted as part of doctoral work, and subsequently up to 2020, across Sri Lanka, with a wide range of actors, including high-profile political actors, civil servants, civil society actors, non-state armed groups and ordinary citizens from the north to the south. Many interviews were conducted under extraordinary conditions, at the height of civil war in the first quarter of 2009 and then in its immediate aftermath. This makes the interviews a rare form of public testimony as to how public servants, political elites, intellectuals, practitioners and citizens reflected on the roots of Sri Lanka's violent political conflicts and thought about prospects for a peaceful transition to democracy. However, this research is mindful of the fact that, given the circumstances the interviews were conducted in (here referring to the imminent victory of the government forces against the LTTE), apart from being manipulated, the fear of consequences for not subscribing to the prevailing political discourse at the time of interviews might have also played a major role in expressing such hard-line views. This book greatly benefitted from the author's continued scholarly and applied research and practice in Sri Lanka on the post-war political dynamics and social transformations, and from graduate-level teaching in conflict, peace and conflict transformation.

Competing elements of the Sinhalese political elite have dominated the trajectory of Sri Lankan state-building since independence. The Sinhala-Buddhist hegemonic right-wing political project has become more dominant over time and bears the heaviest political and moral responsibility for the political violence both past and present. This study places their political designs for overall hegemony within broader, past and ongoing regional and global geo-strategic and geo-economic contestations for domination and legitimacy in representing and controlling Sri Lanka's economy and politics. The main challenge in the book remains to show that the premise of inequality and social injustice, which underpins the right-wing political ideologies of elites, is not shared by all Sinhalese, let alone by all Sri Lankans. Although alternative progressive political projects are often co-opted, this is not always the case, even within the Sinhala-Buddhist communities. Making these distinctions between broad, fluid identities and the project of political hegemony of specific classes and elites is vital amidst the current rapid and global resurgence of populist and authoritarian politics. The struggles of Sri Lankan social justice movements

undoubtedly have appeal and relevance beyond Sri Lanka, just as much as the strivings of elites for economic and political hegemony. Last but not least, this book cautiously explores inter-linked local, national and global roots of right-wing, exclusionary and fundamentalist politics in the neo-liberal and post-liberal era.

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the aspirations of the Sri Lankan youth while you were locked up in a prison cell for taking part in the first anti-state youth uprising. To me, nothing comes closer than this image to capture the essence of this book.

Last but not least, I want to express my gratitude to my husband, Marcel, and daughter, Selah. Their unconditional love and patience helped me to get on with this book project, especially during the darkest days since losing my mother. I very much hope one day my daughter will be inspired to learn more about Sri Lanka's horse-trading high politics, which I bet she will not find as fun as riding real horses.

ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
APRC	All Party Representative Committee
BBS	Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force)
CIABOC	Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption
CNC	Ceylon National Congress
COPE	Committee of Public Enterprises
CP	Communist Party
CPA	Centre for Policy Alternatives
CWC	Ceylon Workers Congress
DDC	District Development Councils
DUNF	Democratic United National Front
EPDP	Eelam People’s Democratic Party
GOSL	Government of Sri Lanka
GST	goods and services tax
ICES	International Centre for Ethnic Studies
IDEA	Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
ISGA	Interim Self-Government Administration
JHU	Jathika Hela Urumaya

JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LLRC	Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission
LMSL	Lanka Marine Services Limited
LSSP	Lanka Sama Samaja Party
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MEP	Mahajana Eksath Peramuna
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	member of parliament
NFF	National Freedom Front
NIPU	National Integration Project Unit
NPC	National Peace Council
NPM	New Public Management
NUA	National Unity Alliance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	People’s Alliance
PCs	Provincial Councils
PEs	Public Enterprises
PR	Proportional Representation
PSC	Public Service Commission
PSIP	Public Sector Investment Programme
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
P-TOMS	Post-Tsunami Joint Operational Management Structure
R	Respondent
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLIC	Sri Lanka Insurance Company
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
SLMM	Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission
SSA	Social Scientists’ Association
TMVP	Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front

ABBREVIATIONS

xxiii

UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNF	United National Front
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UPFA	United People’s Freedom Alliance
UNP	United National Party
VAT	value added tax
WB	World Bank