

Development of Modern Buddhist Nationalism  
in Contemporary Politics, and its involvement in  
conflict reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

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### **Introduction**

This paper aims to discuss the development of modern ideology of Buddhist nationalism and its contribution to reconciliation in the context of the prolonged civil conflict in Sri Lanka. Being a Sinhala - Buddhist in Sri Lanka, I understand how Buddhism as the major religion affects people's social relations. Buddhism, as a religion, speaks largely about norms like non-violence, compassion, and tolerance, which nurture a human spiritual body. Further, it is a religion effective in conflict resolution, reconciliation as well as capable under the right circumstances, to resolve violent conflicts in a peaceful manner. Yet, one of the anomalies of the Sri Lankan case is that certain Buddhist monks have become politically active personnel involved in local politics. It is debated how the influences of *Sangha* (synonymous to a Buddhist monk or group of monks) cause trouble in the name of Buddhist nationalism. It is evident how the extended and politically strong Buddhist political parties, are now enjoying the upper hand in propagating their own political ideologies in the political setting of Sri Lanka. This movement appears to be the product of some extreme nationalists of society, which favor some political cause over peaceful solutions to the conflict, primarily opposing the ongoing peace process. In my paper, I will briefly discuss the development and the process of Buddhist nationalism following the routes of "ethno-nationalistic" reforms and factions in the island since the independence of the country in 1948. I argue how ethno-nationalist sentiment influences modern Buddhist nationalism and how the existing movement along with politicized religious groups affects reconciliation efforts in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, it is necessary to examine the nature and the behavior of these parties, to analyze how far the religious nationalist ideologies contribute to peaceful conflict resolution.

In order to answer the question, I will look at the theory of religious nationalism, which helps to define important characteristics of Buddhist nationalism. The explanation will

delineate to the reader in which circumstances one can consider the modern Buddhist movement as a nationalistic movement. The explanation further donates a meaning to the so-called phenomenon of "modern Buddhism" in practice and helps to examine its restrictive influence to the ongoing peace process.

### **Background of the Conflict in Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka is a pluralist society of three major ethnic groups; Sinhala, Tamil,<sup>57</sup> and Muslims. The majority group is Sinhalese, making up 74% of the total population (Rupasinghe 2006:16). They speak the language Sinhala and are mainly Buddhists. The country's prolonged conflict can be characterized as a protracted ethno-political conflict between the Tamil rebel group LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the GoSL (Government of Sri Lanka) that has remained militarized for more than two decades (Uyangoda 2006:3). Drawing back to the history of the conflict, the ideological deference of the two major ethnic groups is signified. Drawing back to the history of the conflict, the ideological deference of the two major ethnic groups is signified. Ethnic differentiation is considered one, though not the prime, cause of the existing military struggle. Furthermore, the role and activities of certain pressure groups such as political and religious extremist parties an obstruction to develop a successful agreement between the conflicting parties. Such activities propagate some extremists' ideas that wake people's faith towards nation and nationalism, which eventually hinder negotiations (Rupasinghe (Rupasinghe 2006: 24). In addition to the lack of commitment for a peaceful resolution, disagreements among national parties and the frequent change of national policies have made the situation complicated.

### **What is Religious Nationalism?**

It is worthwhile to look at some features of religious nationalism to understand the

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<sup>57</sup> Sri Lankan Tamils' represent 13% of the total; they are concentrated largely in the Northern and the Eastern provinces. The second Tamil group is 6%, descents of labors brought to the country by the British in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to work on the plantation sector in the central part of the country. And these Indian Tamils are not particularly active in politics.

*Sangha* politics in Sri Lanka. Buddhist monks or *sangha* have now become institutionalized in the local political setting that carries through political parties and mass propaganda. According to Roger Friedland's 'Institutional Approach', "religious nationalism is a particular form of collective representation... those representatives make policies into a religious obligation... they indicate formation of state through religion" (Friedland 2001:137). David Little states that religious nationalism stressed a strong analogy between religious commitment and patriotism, or devotion to the national cause (Little). Looking back at Friedland's view, "religious nationalism is a discourse and social movement which is often understood as an instance of culture's autonomy as a source of identity and critique, an autonomy manifested in the formation of politicized religious groups" (Friedland 2001:140). Religious nationalism therefore becomes a movement, which defend a particular form of group identity, and difference is considered as attributes of persons ... "as an instrument by which religious people secure membership in the political community or recognition in the public sphere" (Friedland 2001:140).

The organized nature of *Sangha* is quite visible in their political activities. Sri Lanka is known as a "Buddhist State" where *Theravada* Buddhism exists and advocates its norms and rituals. In such a setting, *Sangha* have become the unifying actors between religion and the people. Despite the different organizational and hierarchal structures of *Sangha*<sup>58</sup>, they are considered as the official protectors of Buddhism, the "turner of the wheel of the law" (Bandarage, 2007). In fact, it is found in both *textual* and *syncretistic* Buddhism<sup>59</sup>, the religion either as a philosophy or as a religion profoundly construct in societal relations and

constantly mediated by monks. *Syncretistic* Buddhism institutionally and culturally embraces people's endeavors because it is "the system of beliefs and practices that actually exists in Buddhist societies" (Johnston 2003:78) and one of the most dominant features in it is the "relationship between the king, the *Sangha*, and the people," (Johnston 2003:79) which is considered ultimately as the essence of a "Buddhist State". Thus, it can be argued, the *Sangha*'s assignation in state politics is acceptable and an obvious development. In contrast to the teachings, which exhibit a strong preference for non-violence and monastic withdrawal from everyday life, exists simultaneously a dominant emphasis on the *cakkavatti*<sup>60</sup>, or universal king, as righteous ruler and embodiment of justice happens today is *Sangha* emancipate their religious commitment and patriotism through organized party politics.

#### **Effect of Ethno- Nationalism in Developing Modern Buddhism**

In modern Buddhism, one finds religion bound up with a movement of ethnic nationalism (Johnston 2003:80). It is evident that some constitutional amendments made at the governmental level regarding religious duties of statehood later effected to emanate *ethno – nationalism*<sup>61</sup> in the country. Later argued, that those amendments were largely responsible for developing an ethno-political disagreement, which turned into a military conflict known as "Eelam War". So what are those important political changes? First, the "Indo- Pakistan Citizenship Act" passed in the parliament in 1948, I believe, has made Tamil leaders in the parliament detach from the national government and promote an anti-Sinhala propaganda. This act mainly focused on granting citizenship for Tamil

<sup>58</sup> The *Sangha* in Sri Lanka is divided into three bodies. The largest is the *Siyam Naiyake* the second largest is the *Amarapura Naiyake* and the third is the *Ramanna Naiyake*.

<sup>59</sup> According to H.I. Seneviratne, "Textual Buddhism" refers to the core of Buddhist doctrine as depicted in Buddhist scriptures. And the "Syncretistic Buddhism" is the beliefs and practices in the actual day today relations.

<sup>60</sup> Definition of a king as a given in the *Agganna Sutta* is, "one who makes others happy by righteousness" (dhammena param ranjeti ti raja). Buddhist texts refer to rajas, maharajas and cakkavatti rajas but whatever the title was, a king had to honour, respect, and hold righteousness in high esteem. (Cakkavatti Siha Nada Sutta - Digha Nikaya). Consensus among people gave authority to the king and all the power he had, was that of the people.

<sup>61</sup> Ethnic nationalism is a form of nationalism wherein the "nation" is defined in terms of ethnicity.

laborers, whom largely migrated during British colonial time<sup>62</sup>. Second, the “Sinhala Only Act” passed in the parliament in 1956, focused to encourage the national language in education. Yet, Tamils have perceived the act as a direct discrimination of their language, even though the intention of the government was to reduce the number of English schools and encourage national schools and education systems in the country. The same year was very much significant to Buddhism as it was the 2,500th death anniversary of Lord Buddha. The Buddhist monks, who are supposed to renounce all worldly affairs and devote themselves to spiritualism, became the most articulate spokespersons for the adoption of “Sinhala only” as the official language (Bandarage 2007). Consequently, the social and political atmosphere was surcharged with the emotional issues of language, religion, and Sinhala nationalism. In addition, the division between two ethnic groups began to widen. The language issue led not only to ethnic divide but also to social and religious discord.

Third, the and has grown as a political-social movement resulted with the nation’s first constitution under Prime Minister Mrs. S. Bandaranaike in 1972. The new constitution reaffirmed a position of Sinhala as the only official language and conferred a special status to Buddhism. An important clause in the constitution declared, “It shall be the duty of the state to protect and foster Buddhism<sup>63</sup>”. Fourth, the establishment of the 1978 constitution regards Buddhism as the foremost religion. Chapter II in the constitution explains, “The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the *Buddha Sasana* (Buddhist practices and teachings), while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)<sup>64</sup>.” It is interesting

to note that the new constitution recognized both Sinhala and Tamil as the national languages whereas Sinhala was considered the sole official language. Fifth, the period of late 1980’s resulted in development of radical youth movement, which has significantly influenced in changing the role of Buddhist monks. The movement was led by a left wing political party called “JVP” (*Jantha Vimukthi Peramuna*-People’s Liberation Party) and resulted in political and social insurrections and mob violence in the southern part of the country that has developed radical thought towards *Sangha*. It is argued that the JVP movement has reshaped the Buddhist monk’s image as a “fearless” person who would march to the “battlefield” and lay down his life to rescue and lead the Buddhist nation facing the threat of “terrorism” (Abesekara 2001:5).

#### **Sangha in Politics**

Modern Buddhist nationalism is not a core product of contemporary politics, yet it is a gradual formation of political, social, and ideological changes of the so-called ethno – nationalistic movement running since the independence of the country. The political, constitutional and social changes, which took place from time to time, created a suitable platform, which could hold religious nationalistic ideas. Further the idea carried by certain politicized religious parties, confirms the notion that Sri Lanka belongs to Sinhalese and it is vital in Sinhalese interests to protect Buddhism<sup>65</sup> opens a critical debate in the political setting. The notion “Sri Lanka belongs to Sinhalese” in a way promoted modern Buddhist nationalistic ideas. When examining the history, the idea is found in sixth century chronicle known as *Mahawamsa*, and it considered a large moral obligation of all Buddhists to protect *Dharma Deepa* (synonymous to religious land, which is currently in Sri Lanka).

<sup>62</sup> After the act passed, many Tamil laborers have to flee from the country as they were not granted the citizenship and were rejected of giving the citizenship and still were asked to work in the plantation. Even though some Tamil leaders claimed for Tamil – laborers rights, the government in power were failed to act according to the basis of equal rights.

<sup>63</sup> First national constitution, identified as The Constitution of the Republic of Sri Lanka, adopted in 1972 May 22<sup>nd</sup>. Chapter II of the constitution refers the status of Buddhism.

<sup>64</sup> 1978 Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Chapter II explains the status of Buddhism.

<sup>65</sup> According to *Mahawamsa* (the great Chronicle), Sri Lanka is a sacred land, because Buddha chose the island of Lanka for the Sinhala people to live in and select the people to protect the Buddha’s teachings, the *Dhamma*.

The idea that Sinhala people should protect the Buddhist land has overlooked the traditional duties of *Sangha*. In fact, what happened was the idea empowered Buddhist monks to engage in local politics in the name of the duty to protect the country. In the year 2001, the first Buddhist monk was elected to the legislative body in Sri Lanka. The monks have long been active in Sri Lanka's polarized politics, but for the first time they have joined the governing coalition with their own political party, called the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (National Heritage) nine seats in Sri Lanka's 225-member parliament (Sengupta 2007). There are three main parties, which hold the main responsibility of *Sangha* involvement in local politics. First and foremost is the *Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya* (National *Sangha* Assembly-NSA), which consists of a large number of monks. Second is the *Sinhala Urumaya* (Sinhala Heritage) and third is the all-monk political party known as *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU-National Sinhala Heritage), a combination of both parties mentioned above. Even though the numerical strength of JHU is considerably low, it holds an influential part in the Sinhala electorate. In fact, it is important to note that all of Sri Lanka's major political parties have Buddhist nationalist groups or networks attached to them, which may be mobilized when needed (Frydenlund 2005).

#### ***Sangha's* Contribution to Reconciliation**

The emergence of the Buddhist clergy politics can be considered as an undermining factor in current day Sri Lanka especially when dealing with the ongoing peace process. It is argued that the Buddhist monk's attitude in general, is vital in changing the public opinion at large. The firm standpoint of JHU for a "unitary state" is an obstacle to successful negotiations between the GoSL and the LTTE. The secretary of the JHU, Venerable Uduwe Dhammaloka *Thera* says: "We totally reject the present peace process as we believe it will only lead to the division of this country. We also reject the facilitation of Norway because it is partial towards the LTTE (Sengupta 2007)."

The JHU policy is that administrative structures and powers should not be decentralized within a unitary state. For

them a mechanism like federalism is very inappropriate for Sri Lanka. Venerable Kotapola Amara keethi *thera*, the chairperson of JHU says: "Ever since I was a novice monk, getting into politics has never crossed my mind. In Sri Lanka, even the subject is distasteful. None of us wanted to get involved this way, but since ancient times when the nation has faced difficulties – the monks have stepped forward to help find solution (Sengupta 2007)."

So what is the solution? And how do the parties lead for that solution? In my opinion, convince the conflicting parties to stop confrontation is vital during process of any peace talks. In fact, it is important to make them trust each other to go ahead in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. Yet, the practices and the ideas of JHU will not help the GoSL convince LTTE to stop violence at any point or to develop trust among them for a negotiated settlement. In recent months, the government, with the monks' support, has been pressing a military campaign against Tamil rebels, scoring a string of victories, particularly on the contested and strategic eastern coast. A parliamentarian monk, Venerable Rathana *thera* says: "without a military solution this can not be defeated. (Sengupta 2007)."

It is a question whether JHU *Sangha* intentionally encourage for a military solution. The debate is taken into account by other *Sangha* and people who regardless of religion, live in the country. It is difficult to understand what kind of Buddhism encourages violence, torture, and intolerance. If JHU monks follow or at least intend to follow the simplest and the basic rules in Buddhism, then they will not see "military solution" as an option to bring LTTE to the negotiation table. The longer the conflict remains the larger the number of innocent civilians dies and suffers on the island, which ultimately oppose non-violence means in Buddhist practices. The conflict itself has been ruining the island for many decades and the solution is not reprisal.

Moreover, JHU opinion on "Norway's role as a facilitator" is also questionable. They do not consider Norway as a neutral party to facilitate in the peace process and deny its attempt as a contribution to peacebuilding

in Sri Lanka. Instead, JHU declares the role of facilitation as some kind of a postcolonial invasion to the island (Frydenlund 2005), which will ultimately destroy Buddhism and the Sinhala nation. It is clear when looking at the following statement.

“In Sri Lanka we have faced foreign invasions,” said the Venerable Athuraliye Rathana *thera*, the voluble monk who leads JHU party in Parliament. Further added, “We have been not just preaching. We have been fighting... (Sengupta 2007).” And Venerable Udawatte Nanda *thera* says: Norwegians come to our country everyday as if they are our guardians and rulers. They discuss various matters with the tigers and make all attempts to convince the leaders in the south (the GoSL and rest of the community stay in the island, except from the LTTE controlling areas) to accept the viewpoint of Tigers (Frydenlund 2005:16).”

In my study I see that JHU acts in multiple ways to propagate their ideology. Here I conclude three. First, their opinion leads for a unitary state model that opposes any kind of power devolution. Second, considering the LTTE as extremely violent terrorists, subsequently oppose face-to-face talks and dealings with LTTE, which will leave no prospects for peace talks. And third, the consideration of Norway as a pro-LTTE country magnifies a negative image on international facilitation.

What actually does this *Sangha* led nationalist ideologies propose for a better solution? On the one hand, the acts and behaviors do not intend to follow the teachings of Lord Buddha. It is considered that religious leaders depart from the rational – actor model of decision making and call into play spiritual tools such as spiritual authority to bring conflicting parties back together ( Johnston 2003:16-17). Teachings of Buddhism advocate non-violence in thought and speech, the cultivation of compassion towards all and ultimately the transcendence of the dichotomy of self vs. other which matters for reconciliation at large. It is disappointing that JHU monks and their movement in part of modern Buddhist nationalism so far have failed to contribute to peace in Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, JHU has not been successful in its role for “clean politics”. Instead, what is evident is a mass propaganda for a “Sinhala- Buddhist nation” that systematically destroys co-existence of ethnic groups. This will obviously deny the core meaning of reconciliation that develops trust and empathy, equal justice and especially general willingness to accept collective responsibility (Reconciliation after Violent Conflict, 2007).

### Conclusion

*Sangha* or Buddhist monks attached to political parties play an imminent role in modern Buddhist nationalist movement in Sri Lanka. It is clear how strong and powerful those political ideologies are in changing the overall societal political view in finding a solution for the country's prolonged conflict. The Sinhalese population gave the Buddhist orders influence as molders of public opinion, and *Sangha* as key actors remained prominent at rallies and demonstrations promoting ethnic Sinhalese issues. Interestingly enough, a large popular will involuntarily fall into monks actions offers an unwritten consent to do whatsoever the politicized religious agendas' desire to implement. Although the modern Buddhist nationalistic movements are still numerically small, it still exerts influence. The movement will lead the state to a deep religion question, which will be hard to eliminate in the future. Furthermore, it will effect to the stagnation of peace and development in the country. Therefore, it is important to change the opinion of *Sangha* about the peace process, by not letting the peace process fail but to make it happen through a pragmatic approach. Yet, the state leaders and decision makers have time to use the existing *Sangha* politics in part of modern Buddhism as an influence force for reconciliation, by improving the flexibility for a transcendent attempt for peace.

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