

Contemporary Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism in Sri Lanka: The Relevance of a (Neo-) Marxist Interpretation

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Abstract: Post-colonial political societies, where class and caste serve as important analytical categories for understanding nationalism, often reveal a different sort of nationalism than most Western countries. Classical theories of nationalism, however, tend to simplify or overlook such important determinants in the post-colonial world. This paper discusses the class nature of nationalism and nationalist politics in Sri Lanka by applying an alternative Marxist discourse on nationalism. The paper, which is the reflection of a survey of nationalist discourse in Sri Lanka of field research, which was carried out in Sri Lanka, argues that the nature of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism can only be understood when sufficient attention is paid to the class-based nature of politics in Sri Lanka. Only by applying such logic is it possible to unravel the role of nationalism in the country, as a powerful instrument for the political mobilisation of the Sinhalese faction of the ruling class.

Keywords: Nationalism, neo-marxism, class analysis, sinhala-buddhist nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Nationalism has been an undeniable global phenomenon since, at least the 17th century. Since then, the concept of nationalism has been essential for understanding the social and political developments that led to the creation of modern-day 'nation-states'. Important guidelines for the creation of nation-states can be traced back to the Treaty of Westphalia, which (re)drew the territorial boundaries in Western Europe after the so-called Thirty Years' War. In the course of the years that followed, a connected series of politically significant events have been tagged under the term "nationalism". However, it is said that the meaning of this concept has remained quite ambiguous [1]. Among hundreds of theoreticians on nationalism, the prominent scholar Hass unambiguously defines nationalism as a phenomenon "composed of values and claims acceptable to the great bulk of one political community that set it apart from the values and claims of other political communities" [2].

The history of nationalism in Sri Lanka can roughly be traced back to the second half of the 19th century. Since that moment, the discourse on nationalism in Sri Lanka has been conceptualised and influenced by the dominant western understandings of the phenomenon. This resulted in placing a special importance on aspects of culture, nation and the nation-state.¹

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¹According to Seton-Watson, the "State is a legal and political organisation with the power to require obedience and loyalty from its citizens and nation is a community of people, whose members are bound together by a sense of solidarity, a common culture, a national consciousness..." (Quoted in Nesiha D. Tamil Nationalism. Marga Institute: Colombo, 2001, p. 5).

In the literature, the term 'religious nationalism' is widely used to describe politically significant events that took place in Sri Lanka prior to the country's independence. This phase of history is also commonly described as a period of anti-Western nationalism and referred to as 'first generation nationalism'. Following Sri Lankan independence in 1948, the nationalism discourse began to be dominated by the subject of 'ethnic' nationalism. According to Hass, "Ethno nationalism can be best perceived in terms of collective interests of creating (or preserving) the optimal conditions for the existence of the group and maintenance of its identity". In the context of Sri Lanka, the term "ethno-religious nationalism" has become popular in local academic vocabularies since the early 1980s [3]. During this particular period of history its usage has been linked directly to the inter-ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamil ethnic groups.

In the ensuing period, which was characterised by the onset of the inter-ethnic conflict between the majority-run Sinhalese state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (L.T.T.E.), which claimed its status as the sole representative of the minority Sri Lankan Tamils, the discourse on nationalism gradually became more susceptible to extreme political manipulations in the fiercely competitive electoral political arena. This was particularly apparent among the various political factions of the Sinhalese majority. Here fierce competition for state power and state resources was intensified under stagnating economic circumstances.

Although there seems to be a great demand for understanding Sri Lanka's growing conflict environment - especially for the phenomenon of the country's nationalism -, the classical theoretical understanding of nationalism has proven to be unable to elucidate important aspects underlying the causes of the conflict. It has become increasingly apparent that the classical theories of nationalism are devoid of detailed discussions on the agencies of nationalism. They are

thus unable to adequately explain modern day manifestations of nationalism, in which nationalism is no longer an innocent expression of 'love for the nation', but a political instrument of mobilisation for the political gains of certain privileged classes in the society.

This paper argues that in order to understand the nature of nationalism in Sri Lanka in the late 20th and 21st century, especially during the period of intensified ethnic conflict, one needs to look beyond classical interpretations of nationalism. These views, as will be argued, largely ignore the question of agency in nationalism and downplay the related social, cultural, political and economic dynamics of the modern capitalist state formation in the post-colonial era. This paper pays close attention to the interplay between two important variables in the context of Sri Lanka: the country's political power and its society's class interests. The importance of these two variables and their relation to nationalism transpired under an externally injected system of modern democratic representation that overlapped with the country's post-colonial feudal social and institutional remnants.

This paper employs an alternative approach to better understand nationalism in Sri Lanka's post-colonial setting. To achieve this objective, this paper incorporates the missing elements of the classical theories in a more inclusive whole. This new framework leads to a better understanding of the forms and functions of nationalism in the local politics of Sri Lanka. This paper argues that such an approach will enable the unravelling of the politics of nationalism in the country's political circles, in which the nationalism of the Sinhala-Buddhists remains a powerful instrument for the political mobilisation of the Sinhalese faction of the ruling class.² Against this backdrop, this paper emphasises that nationalism in Sri Lanka supersedes the boundaries of ideology. It is a more complex phenomenon: a blend of ideology, class interests and political power.

This paper starts with an examination of the evolution of the formation of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist discourse and analyses its functions. Special emphasis is placed on the national popular politics which are informed by the rhetoric of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the protracted civil war. This analysis departs from mainstream classical theoretical interpretations of nationalism and adopts a framework along Marxist and Neo-Marxist parameters, which are primarily instrumental and functional in their orientation. The main benefit of applying a Marxist notion of nationalism to the case of Sri Lanka lies in its ability to engage with relevant agencies of contemporary versions of nationalism and expose the various class interests and class conflicts inherent in Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

Orthodox Marxists left a profound gap in the understanding of nationalism. First and foremost, orthodox Marxism occupies a reductionist position that limited nationalism strictly to socio-economic causes. Secondly, orthodox Marxists completely denied the cultural aspects of nationalism and viewed it as a mere superstructure, which is in line with their basic theoretical understanding on all the other issues of their

concern [4]. In response to the above-mentioned gaps in orthodox Marxism, this paper draws its main theoretical insights from the works of neo-Marxists who have stressed the relevance of ideology to the discussion on nationalism, while retaining a focus on historical materialism and the need for class analysis. Theoretical inspiration for this paper comes mainly from the works of 20th century Western neo-Marxists such as Gramsci and Althusser, who attempted to unpack ideology. The main question that these two prominent neo-Marxist scholars tried to answer is "how people imagined their relationship to economy and society" [5]. Althusser's work was dedicated to analysing how ideologies function in society and which apparatuses serve as the sites/mechanisms for their functioning³ [6]. Moreover, his exploration of the ways in which ideology is more pervasive and more material than previously acknowledged [7], seems highly relevant for investigating contemporary Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka.

THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE ON SINHALA-BUDDHIST NATIONALISM

The mainstream literature, which has mostly been written in the aftermath of the country's independence, has analysed the competing nationalisms of Sinhalese-Buddhists and Sri Lankan Tamils as one of the most important causes of the conflict in Sri Lanka. Many have argued that the rise and institutionalisation of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in post-independent Sri Lanka bear much responsibility for today's protracted ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese state and the minority Sri Lankan Tamils [8]. The causes of the institutionalisation of nationalism are often located in ethnic divisions. As many scholars highlight, the emergence of a Sinhala 'consciousness' (i.e. becoming aware that Sinhalese are a distinct group of people) resulted in the founding of Sinhala nationalism. This notion of collective ethnic identity was transformed, during the British colonial period, into 'Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism'. Scholars also stress the fact that the formation of a collective 'Sinhala consciousness' by various leaders of the local community towards the end of the 18th century, subsequently resulted in the denial of the multi-ethnic character of Sri Lankan society. This, they argue, became a major point of tension among the Sinhalese and the Tamil groups [9].

The popular literature on the dominant discourse of nationalism in the Sinhalese community is grounded in the Mahavamsa chronicles, which are among the first written accounts of peoples on the island. The Mahavamsa is a text compiled by Mahanama, who was a Buddhist monk in the 5th century BC. Mahanama and his text are believed to have planted the first seeds of the idea of the 'Sinhalese race'. According to the Mahavamsa chronicles, Prince Vijaya of North India, who was of Aryan descent, was sent to Sihadeepa⁴ by the Chief of Gods (*Sakra*) at the request of Lord Buddha when he was on his deathbed. The mission of Prince

²This paper uses the term 'Sinhala ruling class' based on a Marxist interpretation, in which a ruling class is defined as "those individuals who take part in running the country or who help decide how it should be run" (Ollman B. Marx's Use of "Class". American Journal of Sociology 1968; 73(5): 575).

³One of the main conceptual contributions of Althusser to the theory of the state and to western (neo-) Marxism is the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). Gramsci focused on the concept of hegemony. See: Althusser L. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: New Left Books, 1972 and Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International, 1971. Both these concepts are useful in unpacking ideology and nationalist ideology.

⁴Sihadeepa is the name given in Mahavamsa to refer to Sri Lanka. In Sinhalese language, Sihadeepa means lion island

Vijaya and the 700 other people he had brought to the island was aimed at spreading his descendents all across Sihaladeepa. This endeavour was thought to safeguard the pure form of Buddhism during the 5,000 years after Lord Buddha's death [10].

The result of this saga led to a number of written accounts from the hands of both political actors and local academics. Most of these works were influenced by various political motives and eventually have successfully managed to promote a notion of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism among the ordinary Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. There is, as a consequence of the continuous attention given to the legend, now an overwhelmingly strong belief among the majority Sinhalese that Buddhism will survive as long as Vijaya's descendents are alive. The Sinhalese people - the allegedly pure descendents of Prince Vijaya - are therefore to be protected, since they are by nature the 'chosen people' that are assigned with the special task of securing the pure form of Buddhism for a period of 5,000 years on the island.

Even among local academics there is no agreement on the specifics of the Mahavamsa. Despite the many controversies over the mythical contents of the Sinhala-Buddhist tradition, the legend has become quite popular and even accepted as a fact in the south of the country,⁵ where the majority of Sinhala-Buddhists live [11]. As a result, the ethnic-religious nationalism of the Sinhala-Buddhists has become a hotbed for debate among many Sinhala politicians, who openly use ethnic outbidding⁶ in their political strategy [12]. Some scholars, however, have argued that voters in the southern part of Sri Lanka cast their vote on the basis of a multitude of motivations that are not necessarily embedded in ideologies or subjectivisms. Some of their motivations are traced back, for instance, to family traditions, caste, class, kinship ties and, perhaps most interestingly, political networks. Explanations based on political networks refer to the obtainment of material rewards in return for the support to a political group or party [13]. Notwithstanding the importance of such motivations, the overwhelming acceptance of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology, together with the associated socio-economic and political circumstances, has allowed the ruling classes to establish the Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony⁷ in Sri Lanka's contemporary politics and its state of affairs. In Althusserian terms, this occurred through Ideological as well as Repressive State Apparatuses (ISA and RSA).⁸

MAINSTREAM VS. NEO-MARXIST INTERPRETATIONS OF SINHALA-BUDDHIST NATIONALISM

The discussion of the construction of the dominant and popular discourse on nationalism in the previous section leads to the conclusion that this discourse is based essentially on idealist and cultural factors. This observation is not

unique to Sri Lanka, but applies to many other parts of the world as well. The popularisation of cultural and ideological views on the nationalism in Sri Lanka is a result of the application of classical Western theories of nationalism by local bourgeois scholars. The mythical and cultural interpretations of important historical events, the roots of ethnic Sinhalese identity formation, and the cultural distinction between Sinhala-Buddhists and Tamils have all served as primary focus areas in their analyses. The result is that mainstream discourses on nationalism predominantly focus on ethnicity and religion as the most critical elements of analysis.

The negligence of class relations and class conflicts, which are the driving forces of the country's social landscape, can be quite dangerous and misleading. The fact that nationalism in Sri Lanka has been fuelling a major ethnic conflict and a protracted civil war, in which close to a hundred thousand people already lost their lives, makes a class-based approach to nationalism ever more important.

The biased theoretical interpretation of nationalism in Sri Lanka has been the result of an excessive focus on western audiences. This trend has particularly become notable since the events of Black July in 1983.⁹ Since the end of the Cold War, moreover, neo-liberal interpretations have dominated the Western literature on conflicts in the developing world. Such neo-liberal interpretations focus on ethnicity and inter-ethnic resource competition as the major driving forces behind contemporary forms of conflicts and deny the importance of class. The subject of class, which is often associated with the Marxist tradition, seemed subsequently to have disappeared from academia. The focus on subjective and ideological factors in interpretations of nationalism in Sri Lanka has led to the failure to recognise important other contextually relevant, non-ideological variables.

This paper argues that nationalism in Sri Lanka cannot be understood without taking the social base seriously. The two phases of nationalism in Sri Lanka – the first generation of nationalism that originated during British colonial rule and the second generation of nationalism that came into being in the post-independence period, against the backdrop of fears for rising Tamil nationalism – makes clear that class relations have played a decisive role in conceiving and realising Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka. A focus on class, class relations and class actions in the discussions on nationalism in Sri Lanka enables the identification of agency behind nationalism, as these factors point to the vested interests of classes that employ forms of nationalism in local political affairs.

Although critics of (neo-) Marxism claim that there is no coherent (neo-) Marxist theory on nationalism, and that there are only Marxist parameters to analyse the national question [14], this paper suggests that even such parameters prove to be extremely important for shedding a very different light on the debate on nationalism in Sri Lanka. A neo-Marxist approach is especially considered to be helpful in uncovering actors' underlying motivations, identifying agency in nationalism, and exposing the hidden purposes of nationalism in

⁵In everyday understanding in Sri Lanka, the south refers to all administrative provinces except the northern province that is largely inhabited by the Sri Lankan Tamils

⁶Ethnic outbidding refers to an auction-like process in which Sri Lankan politicians strive to outdo one another by playing on their majority communities' fears and ambitions.

⁷Hegemony is defined as a political, intellectual and moral leadership over allied groups and the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consensus of those over whom it rules. Cited in Mouffe C. Gramsci and Marxist Theory. London: Routledge, 1979, p.10.

⁸See note 4 above.

⁹Black July is considered as the start of the conflict, as large scale inter-communal riots broke out between the Sinhalese and Tamils and paved the way for a protracted civil war on the island. In many accounts, it is also asserted that this event was covertly sponsored by the UNP regime that was in power at the time.

the country's domestic politics. As to the latter aspect, this paper argues that the masses are being manipulated for the gains of a powerful few: the ruling class.

Sri Lanka is of course not the only country with problems of political legitimacy and accountability. A quick look at the African continent shows that it is similarly struggling to realise and maintain a mode of post-colonial democratic politics. Its effort to end brutal civil wars also sheds light on the role of class agencies and class interests that are popularly expressed as nationalism. It can be similarly observed that the post-colonial capitalist classes, who undertook the "business of ruling", are now fighting among each other over conflicting class interests. They often do this by deliberately giving these conflicts a nationalist, ideological character. Berberoglu rightly points out that the bourgeoisie/classical theories of nationalism based on "subjective, idealist conceptions of nationalism are informed by an ethno-cultural analysis that is devoid of class" and thus seem less helpful in understanding the class forces and class relations connected to a strong material base beneath the popular nationalist ideologies [15].

It is not only the pursuing of narrow class interests of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that is relevant for the discussion on nationalism in Sri Lanka, but also the understanding that the centralised political system is created by a ruling class that primarily consists of local and colonial bourgeoisie. This latter reality has successfully prepared the ground for the emergence of what is now infamously called a "dynastic democracy".¹⁰ Its members attempt to further advance their class and clan interests by acquiring political power and using nationalist sentiments that are first and foremost drawn from ideological and cultural factors.

CLASS ANALYSIS OF COLONIAL FORMS OF SINHALA-BUDDHIST NATIONALISM¹¹

The history of colonial Sri Lanka provides ample evidence to suggest that the nationalist ideology is strictly confined to the bourgeoisie. The reasons for linking the nationalist ideology with the traditional local bourgeoisie can be found by analysing the changes that took place in the country's overall social and economic context during its colonisation. The threats to the privileged economic and social positions of the traditional local bourgeoisie, resulting from the capitalist economic transformation during British colonial rule, are fundamental in this regard [16]. British colonial rulers understood the importance of dismantling pre-colonial feudal economic and social structures for the realisation of the colonial capitalist interests on the island. The economic base of the traditional local bourgeois class was threatened by the British colonisers. This economic change of direction not only had negative consequences for the previously privileged economic lives of the traditional local bourgeoisie, but also displaced local power relationships and traditional patronage networks that had primarily been built on feudal economic conditions prevailing in pre-colonial Sri Lanka.

The advent of the capitalist economic structure and the subsequent unified administrative structures, introduced by the British colonial rulers, provoked the traditional local bourgeois class to launch a massive attack against the British colonisers. This anti-colonial attack was strategically crafted on the basis of the cultural differences between the local inhabitants and the foreign colonisers.

These developments, which were the direct results of colonial interventions, gave rise to the first signs of 'nationalism' on the island. It was neither ideological nor cultural factors that spurred the idea of nationalism in Sri Lanka. Instead, it were the threatened class interests, the class positions, the displaced class-power relations and the material context that gave rise to the first phase of nationalism during British colonial rule. The 'class consciousness' of the local bourgeoisie, which felt a threat to its class privileges, led to the birth of nationalism in Sri Lanka. It was the class interest of the traditional local bourgeoisie that eventually translated into a strategic language of national interest and anti-colonial nationalism. This new manifestation of nationalism, which was crafted by the local bourgeoisie that wished to pursue its narrow class-based interests in a staged expression of anti-colonial struggle, was subsequently able to provide the leadership necessary to mobilise the non-bourgeois classes against the British colonial rulers.

A closer analysis of the class backgrounds of the leadership, during the first phase of nationalism in Sri Lanka, can be useful in further elaborating on the above argument. The best example that could serve this purpose is the class background of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), who was the leading figure in the early nationalist history of Sri Lanka and is commonly regarded as the founding father of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology. There is no doubt that Dharmapala drew inspiration from his father, a furniture dealer and a member of the traditional local bourgeois class. Dharmapala's father started his life as a clerk and later came to believe in the mobilisation of Buddhists, a rigid work ethos, the development of the country, reform of institutions, and the application of science to modernise the economy. He also believed in the seemingly contradictory combination of creating an industrialised society and pursuing development of trade, on the one hand, and maintaining the virtues of traditional society and its class and caste structures (including the subordination of women), on the other [17]. This formula can be interpreted as an attempt of a member of the traditional local bourgeoisie to advance his class-based interests without losing his social privileges.

Anagarika Dharmapala followed in his father's footsteps. His early nationalist thoughts were inspired by similar ideas on the protection of the country's local cultures and traditions from Western colonial rulers. His thoughts on nationalism were, in other words, firmly rooted in the idea of preserving the traditional social order. The emphasis on traditions and societal orders - in which castes, classes and gender discriminations became culturally institutionalised - can be interpreted as a method to retain the privileges of the traditional local bourgeoisie (which he belonged to) in a feudal social order.

Although Dharmapala had, like his father, received his education at a Christian missionary school during the colonial period, he was obsessed with Buddhism. This radical

¹⁰Term borrowed from Jayawardena, quoted in Phillips R. Nationalism, Self-determination and Sri Lanka's ethnic groups in Sri Lanka: Global Challenges and National Crises. In: Phillips R, Ed. Proceedings of the Hector Abeywardhana felicitation Symposium. Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue and SSA, 2001.

¹¹In this paper, the discussion is limited to the British colonial period, because it was only under British rule that the entire country was subject to colonisation.

theological position is an effect of the class interest of the traditional local bourgeoisie, whose position was challenged by the spread of Western Christianity and the rise of the new Anglo-Saxon colonial capitalist classes on the island. De Silva Wijeyratne has pointed out that in classical Theravada polities, such as that of Sri Lanka, the *Sangha*¹² have traditionally been able to develop an institutional relationship with society and actively transform the social order [18]. Before the arrival of the British colonisers this description perfectly fitted the situation on the island. The discovery of objects, dating to the pre-colonial period, seems to indicate that the Buddhist priestly order enjoyed a considerable level of power in society and was able to control its affairs [19]. These findings also make clear that the nature of this social order allowed the upper class of society, who served as chief contributors (*Dayakas*), to play a major role together with the *Sangha*. The latter, in fact, were dependent on state patronage and the offerings made by the local upper classes to help regulate secular and religious affairs. This mutually beneficial relationship seemed to have influenced early nationalist ideologies and was later re-employed by Dharmapala. His focus on Buddhism seems to have functioned as a way to safeguard traditional power hierarchies in Sri Lanka's society. This works on both the secular and theological front through an incorporation of the Buddhist religious views in secular affairs.

The entry and the swift spread of Christianity in Sri Lanka, which was primarily a result of colonial sponsored missionary activities, was a threat to the form of social organisation that provided the *Sangha* and the traditional local bourgeoisie privileged positions in the upper hierarchy of the traditional social order [20]. According to the same accounts that described the social cosmology of pre- and colonial Sri Lanka, there is enough evidence to suggest that Dharmapala initially took a strong religious stance and later refined it to create a more vigorous Sinhala identity that enabled the formation of a comprehensive form of a collective, nationalist ideology [21]. This event was not a mere coincidence, but rather a calculated political strategy to safeguard and advance the class interests of the local bourgeoisie. The romanticisation of the ideas expressed by Dharmapala and the reinvention of these ideas in the post-colonial political discourses, which concentrated on the civil war between the Sinhalese state and the L.T.T.E., gave rise to a strong sense of Sinhala-Buddhist identity since the 1980s.

Most conventional accounts of Sri Lankan nationalism provide only a limited understanding of its actual roots as they fail to deal with the threats to the class interests of the traditional local bourgeoisie that resulted from the social-economic and cultural changes brought about by the British colonialists [22]. These accounts are, in other words, unable to provide substantial convincing arguments to describe why Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist discourse is often dominated by cultural and ideological interpretations. These crucial omissions in classical analyses have led to the portrayal of early forms of nationalism as the outcome of the struggle between the British colonial rulers and the local people [23]. The homogeneous categorisation and labelling of 'locals' overlooks the differences between the various classes, caste and ethnic groups. Such analyses, for this reason, often end up offering

sweeping generalisations of the interests of local people. This reductionist understanding, which *a priori* seems to rule out the relevance of other analytical categories (e.g. class and caste), has homogenised the character of the 'locals' and, as a result, interprets nationalism in a flawed manner.

The evolution of nationalism in Sri Lanka shows that the principal members of the bourgeoisie, at least temporarily, overcame their deeply embedded class, caste and ethnic differences to enable the mobilisation of a large number of people against British colonisation. At the very beginning of the nationalist movement, the Tamil bourgeois classes united with their Sinhalese counterparts in the anti-British nationalist struggle. Their participation in an inter-ethnic class alliance was, however, short-lived as a result of the fact that both groups had and pursued distinctively different class interests. The literature written by Tamil scholars on the early stages of Tamil nationalism provides extensive elaborations on this aspect.

It was not ethnicity that led to inter-ethnic bourgeois class solidarity against the British rulers, but the common class interest that both groups shared. Their temporary unification enabled the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeois communities to devise political strategies to mobilise non-bourgeois classes against the British rulers by focusing on popular ideas of cultural and religious revivalism.

This cultural and religious solidarity, established and maintained by the bourgeois classes across the ethnic divide, can be regarded as a successful attempt to achieve two important objectives that eventually served the class interests of the bourgeoisie. The first objective was the defeat of the colonial rulers in the country through highlighting the differences between the united local peoples and the British colonisers. The second objective was the forging of solidarity among the local population, which had initially been sharply divided over issues of caste, class and ethnicity. This new unity, in turn, helped the bourgeoisie to build legitimised leadership over the masses. These two objectives are inherently connected to class relations and material interests, which were pursued through the construction of a nationalist ideology and secured with the help of political positions of power that were occupied by the members of the bourgeois classes. These developments helped the latter elites to transform and modernise Sri Lanka's polity.

The reality in Sri Lanka shows however, that these objectives have only partially been realised. Many sources suggest, for example, that Sri Lanka's independence was not a direct consequence of the nationalist movement, but rather the result of the British wish to leave the Indian sub-continent. The desire to leave the island was spurred by the great number of challenges the colonial forces expected to face, as a result of the massive Indian nationalist movement. There is furthermore, a substantial literature that has asserted that Sri Lanka never had a vibrant or mass-scale nationalist movement such as in the case of India [24].

The nationalist movement in Sri Lanka was a lethargic movement which was largely operated by the country's upper classes. Initially, this movement consisted of two parts: a political reform movement supported by the bourgeoisie and a cultural revivalist movement of certain segments of the bourgeois class with the participation of the petty bourgeois-

¹²The Buddhist priestly order

sie. Swaris argues that the combination of these two movements and their transformation into a nationalist movement were essential for the members of the bourgeoisie who only demanded political reforms. By this time, the bourgeois part of the reform movement was seen as a collaborator of the British imperialists and alien to their own people [25]. For this reason, synthesizing these two movements became ever more important for them. In terms of class, this merged nationalist movement can be seen as a strategic deal reached between the members of the bourgeoisie who occupied the leadership of these two separate movements. This implies that the nationalist movement was mainly an instrument, constructed and employed by the local and colonial bourgeoisie, to realign disorganised class relations and power positions that originally had put them in a disadvantaged position as a result of colonial rule.

Post-colonial Sri Lankan history provides much evidence for the argument that class is a determining analytical component for understanding the phenomenon of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Post-colonial political and economic developments in Sri Lanka suggest that the renewed phase of Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-religious nationalist ideology was meant primarily to counter rising Tamil nationalism, promoted by the Tamil bourgeoisie. The latter broke away from the local bourgeoisie, in response to the breaking of promises made by the Sinhalese bourgeoisie on matters related to the sharing of political power in the post-independent era.

The literature written on nationalism in Sri Lanka during the post-colonial period largely downplays the importance of class relations (as well as caste) and their underlying material imperatives. The literature that focuses on the post-colonial nationalist discourse is instead mainly centred on cultural and ethnic interpretations and relies on a clear binary view of inter-ethnic relations. This view is built on the perception of intensified ethnic conflict between the minority of Tamils and the majority of Sinhalese inhabitants, which has evolved further as a result of the strife between the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeois classes and inter-Sinhala bourgeois class conflicts. Such explanations tend to picture Sri Lankan nationalism as a purely inter-ethnic phenomenon, which arose from cultural differences and demands that the Sinhala and Tamils groups made on power and resources.

The following section, while keeping the above interpretations in mind, attempts to explain the class nature of post-colonial Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and nationalist politics. This analysis provides a better understanding of the reasons why this class-based nationalism was able to give rise to a seemingly unresolvable, protracted ethnic conflict in contemporary Sri Lanka.

POST-COLONIAL SINHALA-BUDDHIST NATIONALISM

During the transfer of power from the British colonisers to the native population, the bourgeois classes (consisting of traditional and colonial bourgeoisies) in Sri Lanka successfully managed to take over the political leadership of the country. The willingness of the local bourgeoisie to collaborate with the British colonial administration and its promotion of a peaceful nationalist movement positively impressed the British, who eventually decided to transfer their powers peacefully to the local bourgeoisie. In this process, the Tamil

bourgeois class was largely left at the mercy of its Sinhalese counterpart. The result of this transformation was that political power gradually began to concentrate in the hands of the Sinhalese bourgeois class. What was more striking, however, was the surfacing during this period of an open class conflict within the Sinhalese bourgeois class who divided along their primary class identities drawn along traditional and colonial bourgeoisie status. The fact that many historically and politically significant events had their foundations in this conflict suggests that this Sinhala intra-bourgeoisie conflict has had an impact on the direction of the nationalist discourse, particularly that of its Sinhala-Buddhist variant. This conflict was also marked by the beginning of the rapid falling apart of the short-lived inter-ethnic bourgeoisie class solidarity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils [26].

The remainder of this paper focuses on the intra-Sinhala bourgeoisie class relations in post-independent Sri Lanka, as this has had important implications for the understanding of the contemporary form of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and its functions in national politics, in particular. During the late 1940s and onwards, three dominant political forces existed in independent Sri Lanka. The post-colonial struggle for political power cannot be divorced from the vested interests that these forces continued to have on the access to state resources. The rising power of the three Sinhala bourgeois groups in the country's post-colonial national politics eventually gave rise to an open intra-Sinhala bourgeois class conflict that eventually influenced the making and shaping of post-colonial policies that led to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and influenced the very nature of politics in Sri Lanka. Although the ideologies of the three political forces were crafted on the basis of different political ideologies – conservative-liberalism, Marxist-socialism and a mixture of indigenous nationalism and socialism – they all advocated an ethno-religious nationalism based on politicised Sinhala culture and Buddhism. In order to understand Sri Lankan post-colonial nationalism in this political environment, one should carefully investigate the class nature of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The formation of popular politics, informed by class conflicts and related intra-ethnic and intra-bourgeois class conflicts, is of special importance in this regard.

In order to understand better the underlying class nature of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in post-colonial Sri Lanka, it is essential to scrutinise the class formation and class consciousness of the three factions of the post-colonial Sinhala ruling class. Although all three political forces of the Sinhalese ruling class can be identified as representatives of the Sinhala bourgeoisie, they fall into two sub-class categories, namely: colonial and local/traditional bourgeois classes. The third political force, which strongly advocated Marxist socialist ideas until the 1960s, also belonged to one of these sub-class categories.

The 'colonial bourgeois class' was the class that economically triumphed mostly from its engagement in new businesses during the colonial capitalist economy. This was also the social class that was able to climb the economic ladder most significantly and rapidly, as a result of the capitalist economic expansion that took place at the time of British colonial rule on the island. This segment of the Sinhalese bourgeois class traditionally enjoyed only a secondary position in the island's hierarchical caste and class system [27].

The members of this class mainly originated from the lower parts of the country and its coastal regions. These regions are commonly regarded as being 'spoiled', due to the cultural influences they enjoyed during the three periods of the country's colonisation.¹³ In other words, people from these areas have traditionally never been considered as the 'authentic', cultural representatives of Sri Lanka.

The economic prosperity they gained as a consequence of their engagement with newly created industries – arrack renting, mining in the graphite industry, and various trades – eventually elevated their lower class position and enabled them to overcome deeply rooted caste insecurities from which they had suffered for decades [28]. During this period, various conflicts took place within the Sinhala bourgeois classes. These struggles were regularly interpreted on the basis of caste, while other underlying causes were often brushed away. However, with reference to the findings of Jayawardena, this paper suggests that the underlying class conflicts between the two class fractions of the Sinhala bourgeoisie are, more than caste, essential for understanding such popular caste conflicts.

At the time of British colonisation, the 'colonial bourgeois' class worked in close collaboration with the British capitalists and began to admire and mimic the capitalist economic and liberal political ethos in their own economic and social lives. Later on, towards the moment of the country's independence, they founded the United National Party (UNP). The UNP is a political party which was (and continues to be) primarily based on conservative and liberal political and economic traditions that were very much influenced by the British. Their allegiance and newly acquired economic prosperity, which derived from their engagement in the growing international capitalist economy, helped the colonial bourgeoisie to gain access to higher (international) education that they initially could not afford. This, among other privileges, helped them to reach the same social status as the traditional local bourgeois classes.

Much of the literature on the subject argues that the birth of the United National Party (UNP) was the consequence of a political coalition that was formed with many communal parties, and was shaped hastily just before independence [29]. It should be noted, however, that the main reason for the participation of communal groups in the creation of the UNP was more of a signal to the traditional Sinhala bourgeoisie rivals than an honest enthusiasm for a true inter-communal political coalition. The origins of the UNP seem to suggest that the ability of political groups to form inter-ethnic alliances may have been greater than their skill of creating intra-ethnic class alliances. It could be concluded that class relations seem to be more difficult to address than ethnic relations.

The main opposition against the colonial bourgeoisie seemed to have come from the traditional local bourgeois class, who represented the upper castes and the country's traditional land holders. In contrast to the colonial bourgeoisie, the latter class is of upcountry origin¹⁴ and proudly con-

siders itself to be the true Sri Lankan representative of authentic Sinhala-Buddhist cultural values. Many of the members of this class belong to the aristocracy of Sri Lanka. Before the colonial introduction of the capitalist mode of production, they had been the segment of the ruling class which benefited the most from the colonisation. They were also the dominant local economic force during the pre-colonial, feudalist history of the country. Over a long period of time, they also cultivated a vast network of patronage with the rural peasantry and the rural petty bourgeoisie, thanks to the socio-economic positions they enjoyed traditionally. The economic prosperity that was gained by the rival colonial bourgeoisie, who eventually began to rise to political power by pushing the historical boundaries of caste and regional identities, challenged the dominance of the traditional wielders of powers in Sri Lankan society. Although, shortly after the country's independence, the traditional local bourgeoisie entered into a seemingly cordial relationship with the colonial bourgeoisie-led UNP, within a few years the former group began to show signs of frustration, as a result of a lack of sufficient opportunities to achieve their (narrowly based) class interests.

It was under these circumstances that the traditional local bourgeoisie leadership broke away from the UNP and formed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1951. The SLFP was based on the hope that it could pursue the political goals that followed from the class-based interests of the traditional bourgeoisie. Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike (S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike), the founding father of the SLFP, was a former senior member of the UNP that was controlled by the rival colonial bourgeoisie. From the very beginning, it was clear that the UNP had aspired to establish a dynastic political culture, which firmly placed the party leadership in the hands of the Senanayake family [30].¹⁵ In other words, this meant the party would be under the control of the colonial bourgeoisie.

Bandaranaike's political ambitions cannot be divorced from the class interests he represented, as a member of the traditional local bourgeois class who already had an established patronage network with the rural petty bourgeoisie. The political coalition¹⁶ formed and led by Bandaranaike as of 1955 received an unprecedented level of support from the rural petty bourgeoisie, Buddhist monks, other radical nationalist Sinhalese-Buddhists and Marxist political segments in the 1956 elections, and thereby defeated the conservative Western-oriented UNP.

The party ideology of the SLFP was based on the promotion and encouragement of local and indigenous cultural values. The spiritual philosophy of Buddhism and the Sinhala language, which were respectively the religion and the language of the majority of the population on the island, were given prominence. It is important, however, to realise that by choosing this ideology, based on the endorsement of a particular local cultural practice, the SLFP favoured one specific

tion. In Sri Lankan politics, strategic marriage alliances are common as a way of enhancing social status.

¹⁵The Senanayake family belonged to the Sri Lankan aristocracy from the time of British colonial rule of Ceylon.

¹⁶This electoral political coalition was called MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) and consisted of five social forces, namely *Sangha*, *Weda*, *Guru*, *Govi*, *Kamkaru* (in English translation, Monks, indigenous Ayurveda physicians, teachers, peasants and laborers).

¹³During the Portuguese (1505-1658), Dutch (1685-1798) as well as British (1802-1948) colonisation.

¹⁴The founder of SLFP, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, is of low-country origin. His marriage to Sirimavo Ratwatte of up-country aristocratic origin elevated his low-country posi-

ethnic and religious group over the others. This development not only resembled the characteristics of an imposed form of late colonialism, but also proved to threaten the capitalist, Western oriented UNP which previously had enjoyed the fruits of independence by its political control over the state and its concurrent advancement of its capitalist class interests. The breakup that took place within the Sinhala bourgeois class alliance forced Sri Lanka to embark on a dangerous path of nationalism. This new form of nationalism, which not only legitimised the supremacy, but also endorsed the hegemony of Sinhala-Buddhism, was soon established in all elements of social life.

Since the earlier described fragmentation of the Sinhala bourgeois class alliance, the contemporary form of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism began to be shaped by the ideas and interests of the two conflicting fractions in their struggle for political power. In the aftermath of their struggle, which took place over decades, both the colonial and local bourgeoisie managed to project their narrowly defined class-based interests on a new common scapegoat: the Tamils. This was done in such a way that the intra-bourgeoisie conflict of interest remained hidden from the general population.

The introduction of modern political structures in post-colonial Sri Lanka, a souvenir of the British colonial legacy, compelled the two classes to confront their opposing class conflicts within the modern political framework that was established on the basis of a representative democratic electoral system. This new situation was one in which Sri Lankan feudal class and caste conflicts largely operate in secret. The new political circumstances, brought about by a Westminster type of parliamentary system, forced the SLFP leadership to find new strategies and popular slogans to mobilise the masses in their favour. It gradually became evident, under these new circumstances, that the SLFP leadership was forced to look for communal political slogans that eventually damaged the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nature of the Sri Lankan state.

Besides the colonial bourgeoisie and their traditional local counterparts, both of which were firmly represented in the UNP and the SLFP, there was a third political force: the Marxist-socialist political force which was a collection of political parties and attracted members from both bourgeois sub-class categories. These often self-appointed protagonists declared to represent the interests of the proletariat and hailed themselves as the liberators of the Sri Lankan plebs. This political force took a Marxist-socialist stance and became the only major political alternative to the UNP and SLFP domination of national politics. At the outset, the allegedly Marxist alternative campaigned for the rights and welfare of the urban working class and the rural plantation workers that are of Indian Tamil origin. However, as the inter-ethnic bourgeois class conflict between the UNP and SLFP intensified, the Marxist-socialists began to lean towards the SLFP in the hope of gaining more political power.

A different explanation for the shift in course of the Marxist party could be found in the explicit pro-capitalist bias of the UNP, which was after all a party of the descendants of the colonial bourgeoisie. This fact could have been an additional reason for the bourgeois members of the Marxist party to enter into a coalition with the SLFP, which in fact had a stronger bias towards socialism. The Marxist-socialist

representatives eventually gave up their Marxist political ideology in order to enter into a coalition with their fellow traditional bourgeois class compatriots. They consequentially also fell in the 'popular ethnic' trap, which was advocated and further nurtured by the local bourgeoisie under the flag of the SLFP. The latter sought to attain more power over the state, at the expense of the UNP, by appealing to the large number of vernacular groups in the Sinhala rural petty bourgeoisie and the rural peasantry. These segments of society often felt politically alienated from the Western-oriented UNP regime.

One of the main slogans of this traditional and petty bourgeoisie class alliance was directed at the preservation of Sri Lanka's culture and economy and its protection against the Western-oriented capitalist UNP. The alliance also emphasised the importance of the establishment of a new social and political order that was to be founded on the country's indigenous culture and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology. Such forms of political propaganda sounded especially attractive to the large percentage of petty bourgeois Sinhalese, who previously had felt isolated and excluded from post-colonial local politics. They therefore willingly took part in this newly established class alliance, which they hoped would help them to secure upward social mobility. By this time, although a certain degree of class consciousness was raised among the petty bourgeoisie and the other lower classes in the class hierarchy, the simultaneous process of ethnicisation of politics prevented the eruption of overt inter-class conflicts in Sri Lanka¹⁷. Rather, this situation led to the establishment of a bizarre political tradition in post-colonial Sri Lanka. On the one hand, the intense intra-bourgeoisie conflict within the Sinhala faction of the ruling class was camouflaged, while, on the other hand, an artificial unity was forged among various classes in Sinhala society in the face of perceived and imagined threats from the Tamils. All these led to many ruptures in Sri Lanka from this moment onwards.

The period after this shift witnessed a new political configuration that was inspired by narrow class solidarities, which were to become an established component in Sri Lankan politics. This new configuration of class alliances compelled the UNP to face a situation of political isolation from petty bourgeois nationalist parties that presented themselves as protectors of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology. These parties hid their real class interests under the mantle of cultural nationalism. Their real class interests can, in fact, be exposed as attempts to capture political power from the two dominating class factions of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, which, they hoped, would help them establish a petty bourgeoisie state that would allow them to capitalise on their own class interests.¹⁸

The ways in which Bandaranaike led his election campaign in 1955 are crucial for understanding the changed direction of the nationalist ideology and its success as an instrument for political mobilisation and association. Bandaranaike designed his entire election campaign on Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism. This political move involved a series of ethnic, linguistic and religious sentiments which were

¹⁷The only exception to this situation is the short-lived youth uprising led by JVP in 1971.

¹⁸Only the UNP and SLFP have ruled the country since its independence.

subjected to a process of ethnic outbidding. The rural petty bourgeoisie and other nationalist forces on the island proved to be eager enough to embrace these narrow, yet politically popular ideas. The ideas on local culture, local economic development and prominence propagated the displacement of the old English educational system by a vernacular form of education. Similarly, the nationalists argued for the replacement of officials in the historically strong state apparatus by the vernacular educated classes, a move that intended to safeguard the sovereignty of an independent Sri Lanka and, more importantly, establish the supremacy of the Sinhalese over the Tamil people. Many state affairs, in short, became the subject of nationalist discourse. In later years, these ideas stopped to be political rhetoric, but instead were translated into actual policy measures and constitutional provisions.

The 1956 Language Act (known as Sinhala Only Act),¹⁹ for instance, was a consequence of this new form of nationalism in Sri Lanka. The first republican constitution of 1972 and the privileges it bestowed to Buddhism over other religions in the country is another example in this regard [31]. Jayatilleke keenly observes that from this period onwards, the Sinhalese ruling classes successfully managed to employ the 'ethnic card' [32]. This was particularly visible in the deteriorating economic conditions during the post-independence period, in which conflicts over resource allocations and access to deteriorating state resources began to intensify.

Over time, a number of other smaller radical nationalist political parties have gained an important voice, as members of the overall ruling classes, in national politics. These parties are often considered to be hardliners of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) are perhaps the two most prominent new parties that have been led by members of the petty bourgeoisie. These two parties claimed to represent the 'oppressed' Sinhalese majority. The JVP, for example, often claimed to act as the voice of the landless peasants in the rural areas of Sri Lanka. Moreover, it propagated a change of the political system of the country and a redistribution of power. At the time of the inception of the party in the mid-1960s, the leadership of the JVP intended to fill the vacuum that traditional leftist parties had left after they had abandoned their socialist political approach upon their alliance with the SLFP.

Perhaps most surprising about the JVP's ideological configuration are its seemingly paradoxical propositions. As a Marxist-Socialist party, the JVP advocates extreme forms of ethno-religious nationalism to support the majority ethnic and religious group, on the one hand, but ignores the inter-ethnic class solidarity across many social divisions, on the other [33]. For reasons such as this one, some observers are reluctant to label the party as being true to its Marxist-socialist ideals. The absence of class solidarity across social divisions, in other words, is namely fundamental to the Marxist-socialist political ideology. Until the early 1980s, the main contender of the JVP was the perceived pseudo-

nationalist project, which later was extended by the rhetorical 'saving Sri Lanka' campaign, of the Senanayake and Bandaranaike 'dynastic regimes' [34].

When examining the JVP's form of nationalism, it is important to remember the long-lasting effects of the patronage network system that was established by the bourgeoisie of the UNP and SLFP during the decades they were in power. The patronage networks and political clientelism of the UNP and the SLFP blocked the employment opportunities in the state sector of the rural youth, who constitute the majority of the electoral support base of the JVP. In Sri Lanka, especially until the liberalisation of the economic system in 1977,²⁰ securing state-sector employment was the dream of educated youth. The socio-economic circumstances of the country led to the adoption of more vigorous forms of ethnic nationalism by the JVP. This form of nationalism was less genuine in its intentions and more strategic, as it was crafted to appeal to the vulnerable Sinhala youth, who constituted a considerable percentage of its local electoral base.

The JVP neglected Tamil youth, who were a smaller percentage of its overall voter base, in its political strategy. The party in fact considered and always perceived Tamil youth to have privileged access to state employment, an advantage that they had thanks to the old colonial English education system. The neglect and abandonment of the younger Tamil population in the struggle for social revolution can be interpreted as a strategic measure taken by the Sinhala petty bourgeois class to protect their self-proclaimed economic and employment opportunities. This safeguarding was especially urgent for the rural petty bourgeoisie during the persistent deteriorating economic conditions of the country. The best example in support of this argument is the exclusion of Tamil youth in the very popular 1971 youth uprisings that were waged by the JVP against the state and the Sinhala bourgeoisie.

The nationalism expressed by the JVP therefore needs to be understood beyond its fiery ethno-political rhetoric that claims to protect the unitary Sinhala-Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka from the Tamil secessionist movement or Indian and Western forms of neo-imperialism. It should be understood, instead, against the background of its class basis, which stems from the underprivileged socio-economic position of its supporters.

The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) was formed more recently (2004). It is led by the Buddhist clergy, who publicly claim to represent the majority Sinhala-Buddhist interests. The faction also wishes to re-establish the ancient glory of pre-colonial Sri Lanka on the basis of the values and principles of Buddhist and Sinhala culture [35].²¹ In its political projections on the future of Sri Lanka, the party has reserved a prominent role for the country's rural peasants. If one carefully looks at the class background of the party's leadership and scrutinises their regular voter base however, it is not surprising to find a common set of class and material interests, underneath their popular branch of Sinhala-Buddhist

¹⁹The Sinhala Only Act is a law that was passed in the Sri Lankan Parliament in 1956. The law made Sinhala, which is the language of Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese community and is spoken by over 70 per cent of Sri Lanka's population, the only official language of the country.

²⁰Until the introduction of the open economic system in 1977, Sri Lanka followed a socialist economic path.

²¹It is important to note that Sangha is in Sri Lanka not a monolithic entity. Especially in the Sri Lankan political realm, Sangha is divided on a range of issues concerning secular life. One such issue is the participation of monks in politics (Seneviratne B. The Broken Palmyra: A Collection of Essays. UTHR, University of Jaffna, 2001).

nationalist. A good example of such underlying class and material interests is the faction's obsession with the reclaiming of vast areas of land in the eastern and the northern parts of the country. These plots of land, which Tamils regard as their homelands, were originally donated to the Buddhist temples before the British had arrived and are now claimed to belong to the Sinhala-Buddhist cultural heritage.²² The leadership, which was assigned by the petty bourgeois classes and the vernacular educated organic intellectuals,²³ showed, moreover, a clear bias towards the aim of fulfilling the interests of a particular class. This was however to be expected from a political party that is mainly supported by the petty bourgeoisie and composed of members from a similar class.

For reasons such as these, one needs to be careful in understanding the extreme forms of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that the JHU publicly advocates. This is particularly true when one considers that class politics play an important role under the guise of the party's popular ethnic and religious rhetoric.

There is currently sufficient evidence to argue that the effects of this post-colonial politically charged Sinhala-Buddhist ideology is a result of the deep class rifts within the Sinhala bourgeois and ruling classes. Any serious and comprehensive analysis will likely discover that the nature of Sri Lankan class relations and class conflicts has had a great influence in determining the path of ethnic conflict management in contemporary Sri Lanka.

The influence of the extreme form of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology is, interestingly enough, not limited to pure cultural interpretations, but more importantly also seems to transpire increasingly into secular areas. The ideology is, for example, already firmly rooted in the economic development and foreign policy orientations of Sri Lanka. The underlying formula of the Sinhala cultural identity, which comprises themes of *wewa, dageba and yaya*, (i.e. tank, temple and paddy-field), has become the foundation for the largest development project that was launched in Sri Lanka in the 1980s [36]. Despite the underlying motives of such events, which can only be identified through a rigorous class analysis, this exclusively cultural message – based on a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology – has been able to win the hearts and more importantly the votes of the majority of the Buddhist-Sinhalese population. The tragedy of this development is the subsequent intertwining of the ruling class' ideological materialism and the political state ideology

that are united in the artificial form of Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalism.

THE RELEVANCE OF A NEO-MARXIST UNDERSTANDING OF NATIONALISM

On the basis of the historical developments described in earlier sections, this paper has argued that there are a number of reasons to suggest that the birth and spread of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lankan politics has not been the result of autonomous ethnic-religious processes, but is rather a 'deliberate creation' of the Sinhala bourgeois class and its subordinate class alliances.

The analysis of the construction of the dominant nationalist discourse of Sinhala-Buddhism with the help of a neo-Marxist framework firmly suggests that this discourse has thus far been treated largely as a one-sided phenomenon. Nationalist discourse has been interpreted mainly in relation to the Sinhala-Buddhist identity. This approach has failed to recognise the importance of agency in the promotion of nationalism and of the social context in which the nationalist discourse is grounded. The causes of such failure are various. One important cause is the strong influence of Western scholarship on the Western-educated local elites in their post-colonial studies of Sri Lankan nationalism. The dominant Western view on the subject of nationalism seems to have led to an ethno-religion-centric discourse on Sri Lankan nationalism.

The theories of Ernest Renan and Max Weber, which revolve around concepts of 'nation' and 'nation state', have influenced the local elite's scholarly interpretation of the subject. More recent theorists of bourgeoisie/classical nationalism, such as Hans Kohn, Carlton Hayes and Louis Snyder and Mary Kaldor, have placed central emphasis on the 'nation'. In their view, nationalism should be understood in primarily subjective and idealist terms. For example, Kohn has argued that "nationalism is a state of mind... An act of consciousness... Nationalism is an idea, an *idée-force*, which fills man's brain and heart with new thoughts and sentiments, and drives him to translate his consciousness into deeds of organized action" [37]. Similar overtones can be found in Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities', which has given much inspiration to local discourses on nationalism [38].

Understandings of nationalism that are based on the fundamentals of idealism and culture may well be appropriate for analysing the establishment of Western European nation states. For a country such as Sri Lanka, where class (as well as caste) plays a determinant role in social, economic and political relations, class should be a central element in the analysis of nationalist discourse in order to avoid misunderstanding and confusion. A careful study of class is, in other words, essential to effectively examine Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and to understand the role it has played in contemporary popular politics in Sri Lanka.

Classical interpretations of nationalism, which focus on subjectivities operating at a super-structural level, fail to grasp the complexities of human life and the multifarious web of relations that characterise post-colonial societies, where class and caste continue to play a dominant, yet not-so-obvious, role. As the case of Sri Lanka has illustrated, it is

²²This idea seems to be based on the arguments made by the early nationalist leaders (especially Harischandra) in collaboration with the British colonial administration at the time of the controversy of the creation of the new towns in the Anuradhapura area. This is a territory which is considered to a sacred city, a state which is granted by King Devanampiyatissa, and thought of as the place for the future Buddhist temples and monasteries (Nissan E. History in the Making: Anuradhapura and the Sinhala Buddhist nation. In: Seneviratne HL, Ed. Identity, Consciousness and the Past, Forging of Caste and Community in India and Sri Lanka. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 37). The lands in which the city is located are known as *Viharagam* and are meant for Buddhist and Hindu Temples.

²³In a Gramscian understanding, organic intellectuals are those intellectuals who do not define social life in accordance with scientific rules. They rather articulate these issues through the language of culture. In the context of Sri Lanka, one can also observe strong class biases this type of intellectuals (mostly self appointed) represent in their articulations. These articulations are mostly used to promote the class interests of the particular class they belong to. Idea derived from Mouffe C. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. London: Routledge, 1979.

crucial to identify the agencies of nationalism and uncover the real underlying motivations of these agencies in order to gain a comprehensive overview of the practice and functions of nationalism. Nationalism in Sri Lanka cannot be understood without careful analysis of the zero-sum electoral politics that are dominated by ethnic nationalist propaganda.

Contemporary Sri Lankan nationalism should be seen as a strong expression of deeply rooted class conflicts among the Sinhalese ruling classes. This conflict has been given an ethnic outlook by the Sinhala ruling elites, who are *de facto* pursuing their respective class interests. The employment of a (neo-) Marxist theory of nationalism, which is essentially based on the principles of historical materialism and class analysis, is intellectually promising and academically relevant for understanding the phenomenon of nationalism in the Sri Lankan context.

The use of a (neo-) Marxist framework can serve as a solid point of departure for coming to terms with the underlying causes of national, religious and ethnic conflicts that mainstream social scientists have thus far studied as empty determinants of social relations [39]. According to Marxist theory, "nationalism and national movements are phenomena that cannot be studied in isolation without taking into account the social and class structure of the society in which they arise. National and ethnic divisions (as well as nationalist ideology, as an extension of such divisions) are manifestations of class conflicts and class struggles that are at base, a reflection of social relations of production" [40]. Marxism, in other words, identifies social and class forces as decisive agents of nationalist ideologies and nationalist movements.

Sri Lanka's society is extremely class-based. The Sinhalese ruling classes and their close class collaborators compete for the accumulation of state resources, i.e., material resources and other types of political capital (such as power and status) that often translate into ethnic nationalist sentiments. Especially since the 1970s Sri Lanka's history has seen such developments.

Bastian has argued that classes came to dominate the populist development policies with the advent of the Sinhala-Buddhist ideology as the dominant source of power of the country's ruling classes [41]. These class formations are similar to what Kelecki calls 'intermediate regimes'. The capitalist UNP regime of J.R. Jayawardena, who institutionalised a liberal economy as a favour for the Sinhala bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie to maintain their power position in the national political arena, provides perhaps the most fascinating early example in this regard.²⁴ Gunasinghe, one of the most prominent Marxist-sociologists who analysed the linkages between the economic transformation of 1977 and the intensified phase of ethnic conflict, has argued that there is a linkage between economic structure and ethnic contradictions. As he has observed, economic depression does not

necessarily produce an outburst of ethnic violence, as some neo-liberal scholars would like to argue. He has pointed, instead, to the limitations created by the social structural factors in operationalising an open economy [42]. Gunasinghe's approach suggests that an enabling social-political context is required to reap the fruits of an open economy. In the absence of such a structurally conducive context, ideological forces could get violent expressions.

In general terms, there seems to have been a mismatch between the economic policies adopted since independence and the political views of the ruling class. Economic policies seem never to have addressed – or have intended to address – the imbalanced structural conditions of the economy. They served to sustain traditional patron-client relations and adjust to the requirements of the modern system of representative democracy. Under the influence of deteriorating economic conditions of the country over the past decades, such patron-client relationships could not, however be sustained. In these circumstances Sinhala-Buddhist ideology began to serve as a new type of benefit exchanged between the majority Sinhalese voters and their political patrons, without incurring very little or no cost for the patrons.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that politically manifest forms of nationalism, as demonstrated in the case of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, cannot be understood with the help of classical theories of nationalism. Examination of nationalism requires one to locate relevant agencies, which in this case are the class forces that form the primary constructors and operators of nationalist ideologies. The manifest form of nationalism has been a political instrument for the mobilisation of the Sri Lankan population. The competition among the Sinhala ruling classes, for acquiring state resources and political capital, has turned nationalism into the ruling ideology and the state ideology of Sri Lanka.

The introduction of the liberal economic ethos and political reforms in 1978 by President J.R. Jayawardena (UNP), who founded a Gaullist political system in Sri Lanka, seemed to have perfected, institutionalised, legitimised and further strengthened the competition over the country's resources among the various Sinhala ruling classes [43]. The Sinhala ruling classes (non-monolithic in their primary class configuration) have as a result been successful in pursuing their class interests with the use of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

Classical Marxist theories of nationalism suggest that a distinction be made between the nationalism of the oppressor and that of the oppressed in order to really understand the phenomenon [44]. The case of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in contemporary Sri Lanka, this paper has argued, demonstrates that a distinction should be made between the real and the manifested form of nationalism. Such a distinction is best captured when applying a neo-Marxist analysis to the subject of nationalism, as this leads to recognition of the underlying class nature of nationalism.

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²⁴Michael Kelecki uses the term 'intermediate regimes' to explain the political economy of states that are dominated by majority groups. According to him, class coalitions are made of middle level land owning classes and petty bourgeoisie, who play a key role. The petty bourgeoisie include: the trading class, those employed in minor positions in government and the vernacular intelligentsia. In the context of Sri Lanka, the above needs to be placed in relation to the population's ethnicity as well. This latter view is shared by Bastian S. Political and Ethnic Violence in Sri Lanka: The July 1983 Riots in Jayadeva Uyangoda. In: Bastian S. Ed. Matters of Violence: Reflections on Social and Political Violence in Sri Lanka. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2008.

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