

# DEADLY SYMBOLS, VIBRANT ELECTORAL POLITICS AND WAR CRIMES IN SRI LANKA

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[**Abstract:** Symbols are emotional and they play significant role in all aspect of human communities, including electoral politics. Symbols are deadly in nature because they can provoke deadly violence and war crimes. In Sri Lanka, Sinhala politician and elites often resort to symbols in order to win political power. This study examines the interaction between Buddhist ethnic symbols and politics in Sri Lanka. This paper examines the process of politicization of Buddhist symbols, and the use of symbols in the general elections in 1956 that brought the Sinhala exclusivists to the power establishment of Sri Lanka and the sixth Presidential elections in 2010. This paper, also briefly discusses the war crimes allegedly by committed security forces against the Tamils.]

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## **Some Remarks on the Sinhala-Buddhist Religio-Political**

### **Parties and Groups in Sri Lanka**

Although Buddhist monks have enjoyed a prominent position with the society for long time and that the state policies were being eschewed towards Buddhism from the early days of independent Sri Lanka, political parties solely based on religious identity is a relative new phenomenon. There are approximately 45 registered political parties, including the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP).<sup>1</sup> To date, two major political parties can be *exclusively* categorized as political parties that employ Sinhala-Buddhist concerns and demands for electoral gains. They are: the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). However, the UNP and the SLFP often use Sinhala symbols to outbid their opponents and to win power.

These political parties share common goals: to uphold Buddhism and establish a link between the state and religion, and to advocate a violent solution to the Tamil national question. The JHU and JVP are the key parties in this regard.<sup>2</sup> The former was founded in 2004 and the latter in 1965.

The JVP, which mounted two failed rebellions against the Sri Lanka state in 1971 and 1987-89 in which an estimated 50,000 people were killed, still claims that it is Marxist party, but its policies and actions contradict its claim and suggest that it vigorously resorts to Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism to win Sinhala-Buddhist votes. The JVP is exceptionally strong in its organization to mobilize underprivileged sections of the

Sinhalese. However, the general elections in April 2010 for the national legislature suggest that the JVP has become increasingly unpopular among the Sinhala masses. Mr. Rajapaksa's aggressive strategies to take advantage of the war victory against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and his effective use of Sinhala chauvinism could have contributed to the loss of the Sinhala votes for the JVP.

The JVP dynamically supported the war against the LTTE and all forms of political and military concessions to the LTTE, and thus it opposed the implementation of the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) with the LTTE, the separatist Tamil Organization commonly referred to as Tamil Tiger, established in May 1976 and defeated in May 2009). The JVP also violently rejected the Tsunami Joint Mechanism (JM) otherwise known as Post Tsunami Operation Management (P-TOMS) signed in June 2005.<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that the JVP's pro-war and anti-devolution positions (modern deadly Sinhala symbols) helped increase the sympathies for the JVP and to challenge the UNP and the SLFP in electoral politics. The JVP, due to the existing proportional representative electoral system (PR) and its electoral alliance with the SLFP, has grown in strength: increasing its parliamentary seats from 10 in 2000 to 16 in 2001 and to 38 in the last general elections held in 2004.<sup>4</sup>

The JVP had suffered an internal conflict in April 2008, between Wimal Weerawansa, who resorted to extreme forms of pro-Sinhala-Buddhist policies and the party leadership.<sup>5</sup> Wimal Weerawansa was suspended from all party activities from March 21, 2008, and he formed the Jathika Nidahas Peramuna (JNP).<sup>6</sup> The JNP began its activities on May 14, 2008 and vowed to seek an alternative to the main political parties, the UNP and

SLFP. It rejects a political solution to the Tamil nation question and supported the government war against the LTTE.<sup>7</sup>

The JHU was founded by Buddhist monks to promote the interests of the Sinhala-Buddhists and to make Buddhism a guiding principal of state affairs, as well as to wipe out Tamil violence by force. The JHU shuns non-violence as a means to seek political alternatives for the Tamil national question, and has been urging young Sinhala-Buddhists to sign up for the army.<sup>8</sup> As a result, “as many as 30,000 Sinhalese young men have signed up for the army in the past few months.”<sup>9</sup>

The JHU in its first parliamentary elections held on April 2, 2004 won 9 seats out of 225, or 6% of popular vote. The JHU on July 21, 2004 submitted a bill in Parliament seeking to outlaw religious conversions based on offers of cash or other incentives.<sup>10</sup> The legislation which won the blessing of the government in Sri Lanka raised profound concerns especially among Christians, a small minority of the population.<sup>11</sup> In 2005, Mr. Rajapakshe sealed an electoral deal with the JHU.

The emotional symbolic agendas of the JHU and JVP, as well as the JNP favoring Sinhalese interests, are the biggest hurdle for the government of Sri Lanka to seek meaningful political initiatives to reform the state and its institutions as a means to engage with a political solution that seeks an irrevocable autonomy beyond the current unitary state structure. The government’s decision to abrogate the CFA on January 16, 2008 confirms the influence, exerted by these extremists, on the ruling Sinhala political class.<sup>12</sup>

## **Elections in Sri Lanka and Religious Symbolism**

The introduction of universal adult suffrage in 1931 laid the foundation for a party system in Sri Lanka and has served as the point of departure of democratic practices.<sup>13</sup> The country has enjoyed uninterrupted democracy in the sense that the elections have been held in regular intervals. Since independence, the UNP and the SLFP have dominated the island's political system. These parties basically represent a secular political position, but have resorted to symbolic emotional agendas to outbid their opponents.

Elite mobilization manipulating Buddhist symbols have been a major strategy for the major political parties such as the UNP and the SLFP in Sri Lanka. These emotional symbols such as the linguistic nationalism,<sup>14</sup> remembering ancient Buddhist heroes<sup>15</sup> and constricting fears have won elections for them and are likely to be the future strategy to attract the Sinhalese who comprise 74 percent of the population and 70 percent of the electorate. Though the major parties formulate policies to attract the Sinhalese, they still offer cultural and trade concessions to the non-Sinhalese voters such as the Tamils and the Muslims. The Sinhalese, however, think they are the Buddha's chosen people, and view the island of Sri Lanka as the Buddhist Promised land.<sup>16</sup> Sri Lankan Tamils who predominantly live in the North and East consider this area as their traditional homeland and have been non-violently and violently have been fighting against the Sinhala majoritarianism and oppression, the two major product of politicization of Sinhala symbols for electoral gains.<sup>17</sup> The regions where the Sinhalese are majority are, in general, under developed and thus the majority portion of the Sinhalese in the South and the West lives in economically unpleasant conditions. Consequently, the Sinhalese people who live in the region, particularly the economically weaker section of the

Sinhalese become ardent audience of the Sinhalese politicians who use and manipulate the primordial symbols of the Sinhalese for electoral gains.

Almost all elections in Sri Lanka, between 1948 (parliamentary election) and 2010 (both Presidential and general election), have made use of religio-ethnic symbols. Although symbolic slogans were not clearly associated with the agendas of politicians to win the very first general elections, the ruling UNP elites enacted the Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 to deprive *Indian Tamils* of Sri Lanka of voting rights soon after the party came to power. These two bills decitizenised thousands of Plantation Tamils.<sup>18</sup> The bills fragmented the Tamil political parties, for example, the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), the major ethnic party of the Sri Lankan Tamils, supported the bills<sup>19</sup>, while Samuel James Velupillai Chelvanayakam, one of the chief lieutenants of the ACTC, and a Christian Tamil from the Jaffna peninsula split from the party and formed the *Illankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi* (ITAK, literally, ‘Ceylon Tamil State Party’ commonly known as the Tamil Federal Party, FP).<sup>20</sup>

The Sri Lankan Tamils considered that this act was ethnically motivated and directly contrary to the British- introduced constitution<sup>21</sup> that gave special protection under clause 29(2) to minorities.<sup>22</sup> Tamil nationalists have argued “the Act was inspired by Adolph Hitler’s Nuremberg Laws of September 15, 1935, which provided: A Jew cannot be a citizen of the Reich. He cannot exercise the right to vote.”<sup>23</sup>

At this time, the ACBC,<sup>24</sup> lobbied for stern measures to protect and promote the interests of the Buddhists and Buddhism. The ACBC also demanded a Commission of Inquiry to “report on the state of Buddhism.”<sup>25</sup> However, the UNP government led by

D.S. Senanayake resisted growing demands for special concessions to Buddhists.<sup>26</sup> It is important to point out that the Senanayake administration's decision to divorce the state from the religion (Buddhism) goaded the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists, to revolt against the leadership of the UNP, and S.W. R. D. Bandaranayake exploited the situation for his political gains.

### **General Elections in 1956**

The symbolic politics based on ethnic outbidding first appeared in the early 1950's with the formation of the SLFP, the main opposition party to the UNP in 1952 practiced by the British-educated Bandaranaike who was described by Manor as a 'complex, inconstant, visionary' leader of Sri Lanka. The SLFP, the splinter group of the UNP lost to the UNP in the 1952 general elections.<sup>27</sup> The defeat inherently pushed the SLFP to seek straightforward alternatives to win Sinhalese votes in the crucial 1956 general elections: Bandaranaike espoused competitive Sinhala chauvinism and economic nationalism to outbid his electoral enemies, particularly the liberal leaning ruling UNP. It is also important to note that the SLFP customarily relied upon the socially and politically influential groups including the Buddhist clergy or *bhikkus*, the *Sangha*<sup>28</sup> to carry its message to the Sinhalese villages where representative of the Sinhalese rural middle class, such as village teachers, indigenous physicians, and petty landowners play a major role in the political decisions of villagers. The economically disadvantaged Sinhalese, who believed Tamils enjoyed privileged positions and benefits under the British colonial administration, became an ardent audience of the SLFP's religio-ethnic symbolic sentiments, which promised to safeguard the interests of the Buddhists and offered egalitarian social reforms such as the introduction of the Sinhala-Only official language

policy, land reform measures and subsidized agricultural policies and social reforms to institutionalize equity for the rural sector. The significant point is that Bandaranayke vigorously attempted to prove that he was the only voice of the oppressed Sinhalese who would lose their rights and centuries-old Buddhist traditions if the UNP were elected to power. Thus, the SLFP found an easy passage to public office, and gave up Bandaranayke's early policy of language parity between Sinhala and Tamil. In fact, Bandaranayke's *only* aim was to exploit the social and cultural conditions of disadvantaged Sinhalese to win votes.

To win the general elections of 1956, he formed an electoral alliance with the pro-Sinhala nationalist parties. An election coalition called the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) or People's United Front was formed between Bandaranayke's SLFP, Philip Gunawardena's Viplavakari Lanka Samasamaja Party (VLSSP) or Revolutionary Equal Party, and W. Dahanayaka's newly formed Sinhala Bhasa Peramuna (SBP) or Sinhala Language Front. The election coalition manifesto declared "*Sinhala only within 24 hours*" with "*reasonable use of Tamil.*" The newly formed, monks-only party, the Eksath Bhikku Peramina (EBP) played a critical role in this election as a major political pressure group. The EBP, fiercely anti-UNP, anti-West and anti-Catholic, presented a ten-point agenda (the Dasa Panatha) to Bandaranayake, at a massive rally in Colombo. The ten-point agenda included making Sinhala the only official language and giving Buddhism its 'rightful' place.<sup>29</sup>

Bandaranayke, with the total support of Sinhala-Buddhists, strongly campaigned in the villages of the South and West of the island, while his anti-West and anti-Catholic groups largely concentrated on the urban areas of the South and West with pro-Buddhism



voices. One of the EBP's slogans was "A vote for the UNP is a vote for the Catholics; a vote for the MEP is a vote for the Buddhists."<sup>30</sup> The EBP succeeded in organizing a strong structure that would provide a militant basis for the purpose of attracting disgruntled Sinhalese in urban areas.

The election results sent the message that Bandaranayke's religio-ethnic symbolic policies had swayed the Sinhalese, particularly the rural voters: the MEP polled 39.5% of the votes and won 51 of the 95 seats in Parliament and hence formed the government. The UNP, which campaigned on a secular platform, was decimated, gaining a mere eight seats although it polled 27% of the votes. Leftist parties, both the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) and Community Party (CP), opposed to the Sinhala-Only language agenda secured 14 and 3 seats, respectively. In the Tamil minority-dominated northeast, the Federal Party (FP), led by Tamil politician S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, won 10 seats, polling 5.4 % of the votes.<sup>31</sup> The FP, the major Tamil moderate party, campaigned on the federalist alternative for the territorially- based Tamils and attempted to win Tamil rights from the Sinhalese-dominated state through available democratic channels.

On 5 June 1956, Bandaranayke introduced in the House of Representatives a bill to make Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka. The purpose of the legislation was to terminate the English language influence in Sri Lanka. Due to the British language policy, the English language had occupied a superior place in pre-independence Sri Lanka. Minorities in Sri Lanka particularly ethnic Tamils and Christians enjoyed better opportunities due to the British way of implementation, and ordinary Sinhala-Buddhists' hesitation to adopt English as their medium of instruction/communication.

The bill was passed on the same day with the main opposition *UNP voting with the government* and opposed by the Tamil parties (FP and ACTC) and leftist parties (LSSP and CP).

The Tamils were riled because their language was not given the same official language status as Sinhala, and they actively tendered their support to the FP's non-violence campaigns. The Sinhalese political leaders' decision to introduce the Sinhala-Only Act not only promoted religio-ethno-linguistic nationalism, on both sides of the ethnic divide, but became a source of radical Tamil nationalism in the 1980s.

The 1956 election, which successfully mobilized the extremist Sinhala-Buddhists, radically changed the shape of the island's politics for years to come: the major Sinhala parties, including the left parties<sup>32</sup> switched to religio-ethnic symbolic politics sandwiching religious emotions and ethnic hostile politics as a way to garner popular Sinhalese support.<sup>33</sup> The LSSP, the major left party, is a case in point. The party which used to claim that it fights for the oppressed marginalized segments of the society demanded that the state provides special assurance to the Sinhalese people so that a national unity can be forged.<sup>34</sup> Notably, since then the UNP has changed its secular policies and rhetoric to balance the Sinhala nationalists. The UNP's support of the MEP's Sinhala-Only Act of 1956, its violent opposition to the Bandaranaike - Chelvanayakam pact of 1957 (described later),<sup>35</sup> enthusiastic involvement in the anti-Tamil campaign in March 1960 and after the 1977 general elections, and its abrogation of the power-sharing pact with the FP leader Selvanayagam in 1965,<sup>36</sup> otherwise known as the Dudley-Selva Pact, to allay the Sinhalese opposition, were a few demonstrations of the UNP's radical

changes in adopting anti-Tamil outbidding strategies to challenge the SLFP and left parties, in order to seek Sinhalese votes.

The election victory of Bandaranaike strengthened the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists, and encouraged Buddhist monks to play a more active role in state affairs and activities directed towards the Sinhala-Buddhist interests. These forces continued to lobby government to make Buddhism the national religion, and opposed political concessions to the Tamils.

Bandaranaike, in the meantime, attempted to seek some political compromise with the FP to reduce Tamil fears. He took the constructive step of signing an agreement with Chelvanayakam, the FP leader on 26 July 1957, known as the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact (B-C Pact).<sup>37</sup> The Sinhala political opposition led by J. R. Jayawardene, the opposition leader (later President of Sri Lanka) mobilized Sinhala-Buddhist forces against the pact. Jayawardene called on Sinhala-Buddhists to fight to safeguard their religion and language and promised that he would lead the campaign to this effect.

Bandarnayake was aware of legal constraints in making Buddhism the state religion.<sup>38</sup> His efforts to seek a political compromise with the Tamils and his inability to make Buddhism the state religion frustrated the Sinhala extremists who had tirelessly worked for the election victory of Bandaranayake. All this effectively contributed to his assassination, on September 26, 1959, by a Buddhist *Bhikku*.<sup>39</sup>

In identity politics, politicians disproportionately use symbols because they win votes. Such use of symbols can polarize the society when moderate political forces use symbols of a particular group to refuse political and social equality to the ethnic others.

Marginalized groups seek justice through their moderate politicians. When dominant forces deny justice, given the fact that they were being filled with hatred by the politicians of the majority people, it is likely extremists would dominated the politics of the marginalized, and oftentimes extremists would lead a campaign for partition when they have a clear territorial control.

Sri Lanka's post-1956 elections and social transformations effectively prove the theoretical rational. The scholars on Buddhism and politics in Sri Lanka suggest the different reasons to understand the growth.<sup>40</sup> The politicization of Buddhism by politicians one of the major contributing factors for the rapid growth of Buddhist extremism.

In 1966, the opposition parties, including the left opposed political autonomy to the Tamils. Donald Horowitz explains the Sinhalese behaviors:

“Most important were UNP electoral concerns. Following the 1965 elections, the SLFP had moved back to an anti-Tamil line, portraying the UNP as a party manipulated by the federalists. The district council issue provided a focus for such attacks, spurred by Buddhist monks. Some UNP backbenchers, fearful of the consequences-for the government would have to go to the polls by 1970-were on the verge of revolt. In the end, the UNP leadership withdrew the bill... the party had not yet faced an election with the Federal Party millstone around its neck and did not know how much it weighed.”<sup>41</sup>

The general elections in 1970 brought the pressured the SLFP to form an alliance with the leftists. The alliance also promised to replace the British introduced Constitution, with its article 29(2) which sought to protect the rights of minorities to outbid the UNP.<sup>42</sup> The SLFP allies who fought on the symbolic pro-Sinhala agenda recorded a massive win: the SLFP won 91 out of 108 seats, while its key allies the LSSP and the CP won 19 and 6 seats respectively. The UNP only secured 17 seats out of 130 it contested. And the Tamil moderate party the FP which contested in the Tamil dominated Northeast on Tamil autonomy and security won 13 out of 19 seats where it fielded candidates.<sup>43</sup>

The new government took some drastic measures to consolidate its power by formulating pro-Sinhala policies. A leading Trotskyite, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva was appointed as a Minister of Constitutional Affairs and granted authority to design a new Constitution. Dr. de Silva who voiced equality and justice for all the Sri Lankans “compromised his Trotskyite principles” to consolidate his party among the Sinhalese masses.<sup>44</sup> Thus, he framed a constitution that included articles entrenching state patronage for Buddhism, which re-affirmed the pre-eminence of the Sinhalese language in all aspects of public life and anti-Tamil education policies. Notably, the new constitution removed the formal safeguards for minorities that had been incorporated into the British Soulbury Constitution under article 29(2). Chapter II of the 1972 Constitution read as follows:

“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 Buddhism while assuring to all religions the right guaranteed by section 18 (1) (d).”

The UNP did not oppose the constitution. The major reason is that it did not want to annoy any Sinhalese by opposing anti-Tamil laws/policies As Schwarz observed, obviously provoked alienation among the non-Sinhala-Buddhists, particularly the Tamil youths whose chances to gain admission to the universities were marginalized due to the ethnic standardization policy, which was now characterized by the government as positive discrimination.<sup>45</sup>

The Tamil nationalist opinions described the First Republican Constitution of 1972, which helped institutionalized the Buddhism, as a “charter of Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy.”<sup>46</sup> The SLFP led alliance deep desire to Sinhalacize the island provided a sense of identity triumph to the Sinhalese over the Tamil nation, and thus pushed the Sinhala masses to demand more from the government to help their material needs. However, the government that stimulated the Sinhalese symbols did not succeed to fill their materials needs. The country had to face severe economic difficulties due wrong economic policies and economic management.

During this period, the LTTE emerged as the major Tamil polity entity. The successive governments’ failure to negotiate with the Tamil moderates to offer irrevocable political autonomy, the decisive political will to politicize the state and its institutions with Buddhism and Sinhala interest through constitutional provisions, were some of the key factors that gave birth to the LTTE, which adopted violence, to seek a separate state.<sup>47</sup> On May 5, 1976 Vellupillai Prabhakaran formed the LTTE.

The Sinhala politicians’ use of Sinhala symbols contributed to the growth of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the rapid politicization of the Tamil nation and the Tamil struggle to win a separate state strappingly encouraged the Sinhala

politicians to increase the influence of Sinhala-Buddhist extremism. The growth of the Tamil nationalism as a reaction to the Sinhala Symbolism brought Bhikkhus disproportionate involvement in the island's politics.

By 2004, the island of Sri Lanka witnessed vigorous Bhikku politics to win power. The JHU, monks only party, formed in February 2004, provided political vehicle to mobilize the Sinhala masses. In April 2004 general elections, the JHU won 6 seats out of 225 seats of national legislature. What election results suggest is that the JHU's systematic pro-war, anti-Tamil and anti-political solution campaign had attracted the section of (hard-line) Sinhalese. The JHU's campaign against the political accommodation aimed at sharing power with the Tamil nation cunningly connected the West with the Sri Lanka's pathetic condition and opposed all form of political involvement with the LTTE. In other words, the JHU, monk-only party, shun non-violence.

Sri Lanka scholars on religion and politics provide different explanations to understand the JHU's sudden growth. This study argues that the growing popularity of the LTTE among the Tamils, the South India's interests in the island's politics as well as the West's demand for a political solution to the Tamil question and to negotiate with the Tamil nationalists progressively pushed the Bhikkus to provide politico-spiritual leadership to the Sinhalese.

On July 21, 2004, the JHU submitted Anti-conversion bill to Parliament. The legislation has raised profound concerns especially among Christians, a small minority of the population. The JHU believed that the bill was consistent with the Constitution which

guarantees Buddhism the foremost place and requires the State to protect and foster Buddhism. Moreover, the Supreme Court has assured the President and the Speaker of the House that the bill entitled “Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Act” published in the Gazette of 28 May 2004 does not contravene the Constitution.<sup>48</sup>

A casual reading of Sri Lankan history suggests that the movement for anti-conversion is the application to the religious sphere of the provocative “Sinhala-only” policy that helped precipitate the country’s violent ethnic conflict and civil war. Understood simply analytically and historically, anti-conversion was a step towards a “Buddhism-only” policy that has the potential to provoke a level of religious conflict akin to the ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils.

The JHU openly supported the war against the LTTE and recruited Sinhala youth to join the Army to fight against the LTTE. On May 17, 2009 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, (LTTE), the major Tamil resistant movement, admitted defeat in the war that was waged without any witness and vowed to silence guns against the Sinhala-Buddhist state. In May 18, Sri Lanka security forces announced that the LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran, was killed by “Sri Lanka’s military in a firefight that signaled the effective end to one of Asia’s longest-running military conflicts.”<sup>49</sup>

Human right groups expressed deep concerns about the use of heavy weapons against the Tamil civilians. Human Right Watch in its report on Sri Lanka’s war against the LTTE pointed that “the Sri Lankan armed forces have indiscriminately shelled densely populated areas, including hospitals, in violation of the laws of war.”<sup>50</sup> Evidence gathered by the Times newspaper has revealed that at least 20,000 Tamil people were killed on the Mullaitivu beach by Sri Lanka Army shelling.<sup>51</sup>



## **The Presidential Elections in 2010**

Sri Lanka's Sixth Presidential elections held in January, 2010 provided a means to reinforce the past tradition that linked the state with symbols. Politicization of Buddhism and war victory against the LTTE were the key agendas of the ruling UPFA in a bid to outmaneuver its opponents.

There were 22 candidates in the field. However, the major competitors of the elections are incumbent Rajapaksa who came to power on November 17, 2005 on an anti-peace and anti-Tamil agenda and Fonseka who was carefully recruited to the Sri Lanka's Army by the ruling Sinhala political establishment led by Rajapaksa to defeat the violent form of the Tamil resistance movement, led by the LTTE.

Moreover, Rajapaksa represents the UPFA, the combine political vehicle of Sinhala extremists and the traditional Marxist parties as well as some minority parties while Fonseka portrays himself as a common candidate and contests the elections, using the swan symbol. The major opposition parties, including the UNP and the JVP endorse the candidacy of Fonseka. Also, Fonseka won the endorsements of the major parties, representing the minorities such as the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA).

Most importantly, Rajapaksa was able to secure support of the JHU, the party that strongly supports the Sinhalization of the island, and want the unitary character of the Sri

Lankan state to be preserved. The JHU significantly contributed to the victory of Rajapaksa in 2005.

For Rajapaksa, the major problem of the island is the LTTE, which successfully challenged state terrorism since 1983. Rajapaksa successfully capitalized the war victory to secure a second term to further fill his family and friends' interests in the name of narrow Sinhala patriotism and nation building.

Both Rajapaksa and Fonseka were able to win the support of the minority political establishment. But the election polices and promises of these candidates did not recognize the special problems of the Muslims, existence of the ethnic conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, or for that matter the Tamil national question.

Mr. Fonseka, for example, wants the people of Sri Lanka to believe him as an agent for change. Also, he is assertively trying to represent himself as a human face of Sinhala compassionism. It was reported in the media that Mr. Fonseka strongly believes that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalese. According to an interview in Canada's National Post newspaper in 2008, Mr. Fonseka said that "We being the majority of the country, 75%, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country... We are also a strong nation ... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things... In any democratic country the majority should rule the country. This country will be ruled by the Sinhalese community which is the majority representing 74% of the population."<sup>52</sup>

Incumbent President Rajapakse defeated Mr. Fonseka by polling 6,015,934 votes (57.88%). The latter was only able to win 4,173,185 or 40.15% of the votes.<sup>53</sup> Mr.

Rajapakse who carefully employed Sinhala-Buddhist slogans and war victory over the LTTE attracted massive sympathies from Sinhalese voters, members of Sri Lanka's Buddhist majority. Mr. Rajapakse in his native Hambantota district "got 67% of the vote. His triumph also extended to coastal areas, where General Fonseka, a member of the Sinhalese fisher caste, had been expected to do well. In the general's home town of Ambalangoda Mr. Rajapaksa won with 63%. He also won in several strongholds of the parties that backed his rival. In the southern towns of Galle and Matara, turf of the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, Mr Rajapaksa got 64% of the vote."<sup>54</sup> On the hand, Mr. Fonseka won 76% of the vote. In other words, Mr. Fonseka won the majority of the Tamil and Muslim votes. In Jaffna, for example, the crumbling northern capital of Sri Lankan Tamils, who are 12% of the island's 20m people, he won 64%.<sup>55</sup> What the 2010 president election results suggest is that the country is deeply divided along ethnic lines, and the minorities particularly the Tamil nation has less trust in the state and its institutions.

The country has entered into a new phase. A new (the post war) phase would not anyway promise peace in Sri Lanka nor would it take the island into a post-conflict period. Sri Lanka, in the context of this study, poses some questions; will the demise of the LTTE lead to the erosion of the rights of the non-Sinhala Buddhists in the island of Sri Lanka? Will the collapse of violent resistant by the LTTE further strengthen the hands of the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists who aspire to build Sinhalese only Sri Lanka? Or will it further alienate the minorities of Sri Lanka?

There are no hypothetical answers for these questions, but Sri Lanka's past behaviors and attitudes do not offer any optimistic answers to ease the concerns often

share by the ethnic and religious minorities. The point is that the commitments from the UPFA leaders, both Kumaratunga and Rajapakshe, to Buddhism and safeguard the interests of the Sinhala-Buddhists increasingly generate sense of deep anxieties and fears among the minorities, particularly the Christians and Hindus. It also suggests that Buddhism will continue to play a determined role in Sri Lanka's polity, and that Sinhala political elites, regardless of their attachments to various ideologies, will employ Buddhism to win public office and to outbid their opponents in elections.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study argues that symbols are powerful, and they often motivate voters against the ethnic others when they are being politicized. In electoral politics, as argued above, symbols of groups become critically important due to its appeal to the nature of electoral politics, which requires votes for its survival. Political choices of masses not always associated with rational choices, and symbols often influence their choices.

In Sri Lanka, elections are heavily symbolized. Sri Lanka experiences prove that the symbols win votes and thus politicians continuously use them to win and consolidate power. But what is equally true is that the use of symbols or politicization of symbols of a particular group gradually increases the sense of insecurity among the ethnic others who became clear victim of politicization of symbols. In Sri Lanka, the Tamils, who became a clear victim of politicization of symbols that paved the way for the introduction of the deadly anti-Tamil policies such as the Sinhala-only language and ethnic education standardization as well as state supported anti-Tamil ethnic pogroms, feel that they were

being marginalized by the Sinhala politicians to please the Sinhalese, and they will not win justice from the Sinhala polity. Conversely, the Sinhala symbolism and nationalism pressed the Tamils to adopt their own form of symbolism as a defensive strategy to counter the threats of the Sinhala symbolism. Moreover, the Tamils' distrust in the fair deliver of state and its institutions persuaded some to embrace violence to exercise their self-determination to build the separate state in the corner of the North and Eastern.

Sri Lanka experiences also prove that the use of symbolism for electoral politics in deeply divided societies would hurt the progress of the country. The island of Sri Lanka could have emerged as a model for successful democracy and economic growth if there was ethnic harmony and unity among the masses. But such progressive end was not gained mainly due to Sinhala elites' misuse of primordial symbols for electoral gains.

Democracy is a beautiful political practice, but it can trigger deadly ethnic conflict and instability when politicians resort to deadly symbols to win power in vibrant democracy in deeply divided ethnic societies. The Sinhala political establishment needs to understand this basic truth. The form of violent Tamil ethnic nationalism, led by the LTTE, was inhumanely crushed, and threats by the LTTE had been marginalized. The questions now are, will Sri Lanka win peace? Is ethnic reconciliation possible?

The global actors, including the West assumed that the regime led by Rajapakshe would deliver peace. But it is plain fact that the regime in Colombo is not at any rate interested in building peace, and in fact, it is difficult for the regime to commence genuine peace when the Sinhala political elites had used the symbols in its war against the Tamils. The political elite may think it can retract its symbolic promises once in power. However, Sri Lanka's past experiences suggests that politicians find it next to

impossible to backtrack on their divisive promises. And the same problem befalls their successors.

Despite the fact that Sri Lanka is practicing illiberal democracy, it still maintains some form of (unhealthy) relations with the democratic institutions. This may be a positive and can be used to build viable mechanisms for power-sharing democracy as an effective means to seek ethnic reconciliations between the different ethnic groups.

If there is a resistance to offer power sharing, the other option is partition. Partition may not terminate tensions and violence, but it can eventually calm the fears and concerns of conflicting groups and provide them much needed security in the near future. “Experiences of Pakistan from India, Eritrea from Ethiopia, Bangladesh from West Pakistan, and Greeks from Turks on Cyprus all show that partition can be helpful, even if it is less than completely successful in terminating violence.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the recent experiences of Kosovo and the possible partition (in 2011) for the Christians in the South Sudan further validate the case for partition when ethnic nations refuse to live together.

It is a plain fact that the global actors energetically assisted the government of Sri Lanka in its war which killed many thousands of Tamil people “than previously estimated and targeted hospitals and humanitarian operations as part of their final onslaught on the rebel Tamil Tigers” in the so-called “No-Fire Zone” due to government fire.<sup>57</sup> Tamils expect the same global forces should apply their leverage on the government of Sri Lanka to initiate ethnic reconciliation. The starter may be the call for the establishment of war crimes allegedly committed by the warring parties, both the LTTE and the security forces. Special attention should be made on the war crimes of the

security forces for two reasons (a) the LTTE silenced its guns and its leaders either brutally killed or security forces detained them undisclosed military location. Hence, war crime charges against them would not any logical sense, but charges still can be made against them as well for their role to kill fleeing Tamils and (b) Sri Lanka security and war establishment is unbroken, and serious accusation related war crimes against the Tamils by the security forces are well documented.

For example, International Crisis Group documents the mass murders of the Tamil civilians. It explains that the security forces killed “tens of thousands of Tamil civilian men, women, children and the elderly ... countless more wounded, and hundreds of thousands deprived of adequate food and medical care, resulting in more deaths.”<sup>58</sup> All this qualifies the ruling Sinhala political establishment to face the UN (appointed war tribunal). Further, it is the responsibility of the global actors to devote serious efforts to bring those (particularly the members of the Sinhala political and military establishment) who committed war crimes against the innocent civilians *from 1983*, and to urge the Sinhala politicians to freeze their deadly symbols to secure electoral victory.

It is not clear to what extent the developments of the past can help resolve the basic issue at stake: whether, federalism or partition—as repeatedly asked by the Tamil nationalists, Sinhala political elites would not seek beyond the failed 13<sup>th</sup> amendment. Then again, one would have to be a considerable optimist to believe that the global pressure will compel Sinhala ruling hard-line elites to change direction toward the Tamil question.

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<sup>1</sup> List of political parties in Sri Lanka, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_political\\_parties\\_in\\_Sri\\_Lanka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_parties_in_Sri_Lanka), accessed on April 6, 2010.

2. Neil DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka*. (Washington, DC: East West Center, 2007), 24-27.

3. “The JVP intensifies its campaign against Sri Lankan peace talks,” [www.wsws.org/articles/2004/aug2004/jvp-a31.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/aug2004/jvp-a31.shtml) ( 12 January 2008).

4. Department of Elections, *Sri Lanka*, [www.slections.gov.lk/genaral/2004\\_results/general.html](http://www.slections.gov.lk/genaral/2004_results/general.html) (4 March 2008).

<sup>5</sup> **Wimal : notable absentee,** <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2008/04/080405\\_april.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2008/04/080405_april.shtml)> (8 June 2009)

<sup>6</sup> **JNP 'alternative' to main parties,** <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2008/05/080514\\_jnp\\_weerawansa.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2008/05/080514_jnp_weerawansa.shtml)> (8 June 2009)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

8. Emily Wax, “As Fighting Flares in Civil War, Key Buddhist Shuns Nonviolence,” *The Washington Post Online*, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/25/AR2008032502695.html?hpid=topnews](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/25/AR2008032502695.html?hpid=topnews) (19 June 2008).

9. Ibid.

10. Timothy Samuel Shah and A.R.M. Imtiyaz, “A Brief on Sri Lanka’s Proposed Anti-Conversion Legislation: Information, Observations, and Analysis,” [www.lankaliberty.com/reports/Anti-ConversionLegislationBrief.doc](http://www.lankaliberty.com/reports/Anti-ConversionLegislationBrief.doc).

11. Sarah Page, “Buddhist Mobs Attack Five Churches in Sri Lanka: Aggression Designed to Force Passage of Anti-Conversion Laws,” *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int*, [www.hrwf.net/html/sril\\_lanka\\_2003.html](http://www.hrwf.net/html/sril_lanka_2003.html) (7 August 2003).



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12. "Sri Lanka 'withdraws' from CFA," *BBC Online*,  
[www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2008/01/080102\\_cfa\\_government.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2008/01/080102_cfa_government.shtml) (19 June 2008). A. R.M. Imtiyaz, "Theoretical understanding of the death of truce," *The Sunday Times*, 42(34) (20 January 2008) /[www.sundaytimes.lk/080120/News/news00020.html](http://www.sundaytimes.lk/080120/News/news00020.html).
13. Robert N. Kearney, "The Political Party System in Sri Lanka," *Political Science Quarterly*, 98(1) (Spring 1983): 17-33.
14. Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R. de Silva, "Buddhist Fundamentalism and Identity in Sri Lanka," in *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, eds Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R. de Silva. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press. 1998),1-35.
15. Josine van der Horst, *'Who is He, What is He Doing': Religious Rhetoric and Performances in Sri Lanka during R. Premadasa's Presidency-1989-1993*. (Amsterdam: VU University Press. 1995),1-16.
16. Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R. de Silva, Op.Cit,1-35.
17. The ethnic composition of the east has undergone transformation both as a result of natural factors and as a result of the conflict. The long civil war has created many Internally Displaced Persons. There are also a considerable number of both Tamils and Muslims who have migrated. The stated percentage as it is today going by the recent survey done by the Department of Census and Statistics makes the Muslims a majority in the Eastern region, the former stronghold of the Tamil Tigers where elections were held on May 10, 2008 to legitimize the provincial council system.
18. A. Shastri, "Estate Tamils, the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 and Sri Lankan politics," *Contemporary South Asia*, (8)1 (1999): 65-86.

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19. Sri Lankan Tamils who dominate the island in the North and east consider they area nation of people due to their symbolic identities and do not identify with the Indian Tamils who were brought to the island in the 19th century as an economic class. See Elizabeth Nissan and R.L Stirrat, "The generation of communal identities," in *Sri Lanka: History and the roots of Conflict*, ed Jonathan Spencer. (London: Routledge. 1990), 38.

20. Mohan Ram, *Sri Lanka: The Fractured Island*. (New Delhi: Penguin Books.1989).

21. V. Navaratnam, *The Fall and Rise of the Tamil Nation*. (Madras: Kaanthalakam. 1991), 48.

22. To prevent discriminatory laws being enacted, the British provided a safeguard prohibiting the enactment of any law which would make persons of any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of other communities or religions were not made liable, or confer advantages or privileges on persons of any community or religion which were not conferred on persons of any communities or religions. This provision, which became Section 29(2) of the Soulbury Constitution (1947), proved to be totally ineffectual in preventing either individual discrimination or outright deprivation of existing collective rights of franchise, citizenship, language, etc.

23. Bruce Fein, "International Law, Human Rights will salute Tamil Statehood", *TamilNet*, [www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=25709](http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=25709) (19 June 2008).

24. Sri Lanka witnessed several Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist organizations in the early twentieth century. Among the most important of these was an organization of lay

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Buddhists-the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, whose goal was totally dedicated to promote, protect and foster the interests of the Buddhists.

25. K.M. De Silva, "Religion and the State," in *Sri Lanka: Problems of Governance*, ed K.M. De Silva. (New Delhi: Center for Policy Research. 1993), 316.

26. Donald E. Smith, "The Sinhalese Buddhist Revolution," in *South Asian Politics and Religion*, ed Donald E. Smith. (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1966), 456-57.

27. Laksiri Jayasuriya, *The Changing Face of Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka: 1994-2004*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International. 2005), 11.

28. The highest Buddhist order.

29. S.J Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*. (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press. 1992), 42-44.

30. S.J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed*, 44.

31. Statistics of Elections from 1947 to 1977,  
<http://archive.srilankanelections.com/elections4777/1956.html> (16 June 2008).

32. The left parties realized that their pro-minority policies would alienate them from the majority Sinhalese, who are demographically and electorally superior. And the LSSP at its annual conference in June 1964 accepted "Sinhala-Only" and joined the SLFP and other Sinhala chauvinistic groups' demonstration to protest the Dudley-Selva pact of 1965, a power-sharing accord signed by the then Premier Dudley Senanayake of the UNP and Tamil leader Selvanayakam of the FP.

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33. Kumari Jayewardene, *Ethnic and Class Conflicts in Sri Lanka: Some Aspects of Sinhala Buddhist Consciousness over the past 100 years*. (Colombo, Dehiwala.: Center for Social Analysis. 1985), 74-79.

34. A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Break-up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict*. (London: Hurst. 1988), 39.

35. The pact could have resolved the ethnic conflict in a way acceptable to both the Tamils and the Sinhalese. The pact paved the way for the wide-ranging decentralization of administration and devolution of powers to the Tamil areas of the North and East. This pact sought that Tamil Northern Province would constitute a single regional authority, while the predominantly Tamil but demographically more complex eastern province would be divided into two or more such units. However, all these units would be free to amalgamate, if they so desired. Moreover, it was agreed that Parliament would devolve all powers to the regional bodies on the following subjects-agriculture, cooperatives, lands and land development, colonization, education, health, industries, fisheries, housing and social services, electricity, irrigation schemes and roads. Most important of all, the pact stipulated that Tamil should be used as the official language for all administrative work in the northern and eastern provinces.

36. The new pact proposed a moderate degree of devolution of power through the mechanism of district councils in the Tamil areas. It also underscored in the granting of land under colonization schemes, the following priorities to be observed in the northern and eastern provinces: (a) Land in the two provinces to be granted in the first instance to landless persons in the district concerned; (b) Secondly, to Tamil-speaking persons

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resident in the northern and eastern provinces; and (c) thirdly, to other citizens of Sri Lanka, preference being given to Tamil residents in the rest of the island

37. The pact opened the way for a wide-ranging decentralization of administration and devolution of powers to the Tamil areas of the north and east. It proposed that a Tamil Northern Province would constitute a single regional authority, while the predominantly Tamil but demographically more complex Eastern province would be divided into two or more such units. However, all these units would be free to amalgamate, if they so desired. Moreover, it was agreed that Parliament would devolve all powers to the regional bodies on the following subjects - agriculture, cooperatives, lands and land development, colonization, education, health, industries, fisheries, housing and social services, electricity, irrigation schemes and roads.

38. Section 29 (2) (c) of the Soulbury constitution explicitly states that no law enacted by Parliament shall... confer on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions.

39. Mapitigama Buddhakkita was the key figure behind the assassination of Bandaranayake who played the leading role in mobilizing the Bhikkhu against the UNP. However, the actual killing was carried out by another Bhikkhu.

<sup>40</sup> See, S.J Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*, Op.Cit and J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R. de Silva, Op.Cit,1-35.

41. Donald I Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1985), 390.

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42. To prevent discriminatory laws being enacted, the British provided a safeguard prohibiting the enactment of any law which would make persons of any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of other communities or religions were not made liable, or confer advantages or privileges on persons of any community or religion which were not conferred on persons of any communities or religions. This provision, which became Section 29(2) of the Soulbury Constitution (1947), proved to be totally ineffectual in preventing either individual discrimination or outright deprivation of existing collective rights of franchise, citizenship, language, etc.

43. Statistics of Elections from 1947 to 1977,  
<http://archive.srilankanelections.com/elections4777/1970.html> (25 January 2008).

44. A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Op.Cit.*, 87.

45. Tigers celebrate Heroes Day to Butress myth of “a Tamil Homeland”  
<[http://www.slembassyusa.org/features/2007/tigers\\_celebrate\\_26nov07.html](http://www.slembassyusa.org/features/2007/tigers_celebrate_26nov07.html)> (10 June, 2009)

46. A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Op.Cit.*, 88.

47. *Ibid.*, 115.

48. Timothy Samuel Shah and A.R.M. Imtiyaz, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Emily Wax, Death of Rebel Leader Marks ‘End of an Era’ in Sri Lanka  
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/05/18/AR2009051800308.html?nav=emailpage>> ( 21 May 2009)

<sup>50</sup> [Sri Lanka: Satellite Images, Witnesses Show Shelling Continues](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/05/12/sri-lanka-satellite-images-witnesses-show-shelling-continues)  
<<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/05/12/sri-lanka-satellite-images-witnesses-show-shelling-continues>> (15 May 2009.)

<sup>51</sup> Slaughter in Sri Lanaka  
<[http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading\\_article/article6276147.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article6276147.ece)> (6 June, 2009)

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<sup>52</sup> National Post, September 23, 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Department of Elections,  
<http://www.slections.gov.lk/presidential2010/province.html>, accessed on April 5, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> **Victory for the Tiger-slayer**

[http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=15393468&fsrc=nwl](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15393468&fsrc=nwl), accessed on April 5, 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Department of Elections, Op.Cit, 2010

<sup>56</sup> A.R.M. Imtiyaz and Ben Stavis, “Ethno-Political Conflict in Sri Lanka.” *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol 25, No.2, fall 2008, pp.135-152.

<sup>57</sup> War Crimes in Sri Lanka, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/191-war-crimes-in-sri-lanka.aspx>, accessed on May 19, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.