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ENGAGING SINHALESE BUDDHIST MAJORITARIANISM AND COUNTERING RELIGIOUS ANIMUS IN SRI LANKA: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INCOMING U.S. ADMINISTRATION

By Neil DeVotta

Sri Lanka, an island approximately the size of West Virginia with over 20 million people, is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Ethnically, the Sinhalese comprise 74.9 percent of the population, while Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, and Muslims are 11.2 percent, 4.1 percent, and 9.3 percent, respectively. In terms of religion, Buddhists are 70.1 percent, while Hindus, Christians, and Muslims are 12.6 percent, 7.6 percent, and 9.7 percent, respectively (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka 2012, 20–21). The vast majority of Sinhalese are Buddhist, while the vast majority of Tamils are Hindu. Groups of Sinhalese, Tamils, and Burghers (the latter a diminishing Eurasian demographic) constitute Christians, with Catholics being around 6.2 percent of the country's population. While Muslims mainly speak the Tamil language, they use their Islamic identity as their primary identity so as to differentiate themselves from the Tamil communities.

Sri Lanka's strategic location made it an attractive possession and this led to the Portuguese, Dutch, and British occupying the island for around 450 years. While colonialism contributed to an already rich cultural heritage, certain malpractices during this period also influenced Sinhalese Buddhist majoritarianism. For instance, Buddhist institutions, which depend on lay donations and state subventions, were neglected during the colonial era and monks and Buddhism were likewise ridiculed even as some colonial authorities promoted Christian proselytization. That unfortunate past plays no small role in the siege mentality of the Buddhist clergy and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists and should be taken into consideration when interacting with the island.

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Buddhism is mainly responsible for Sri Lanka's unique character. Even the Sinhala language is linked to Buddhism in that Sinhala is derived from Pali, which is the language that the Buddhist scriptures were written in and propagated. The *Mahavamsa* (or Great Chronicle), a 6th century text that discusses the roles various Sinhalese kings played beginning in 543 BCE, especially legitimated the relationship between Sri Lanka and Buddhism by claiming Lord Buddha chose the island to preserve and promote his teachings (*dhamma*). Sinhalese Buddhists thus ardently hold that Sri Lanka is *sinhadipa* (the island of the Sinhalese) and *dhammadipa* (the island containing Buddha's teachings).

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists in turn have used these claims to fashion an ideology that justifies majority domination and minority subordination (DeVotta 2007). The subsequent ethno-religious majoritarianism, which seeks to absorb or disregard minorities, saw the 1972 constitution providing Buddhism special status, which the 1978 constitution reiterated. This nationalist ideology also insists that Sri Lanka must be a unitary state and hence opposes meaningful devolution to the predominantly Tamil-speaking northeast (despite Sri Lanka comprising of three independent kingdoms when the Portuguese landed and prominent Sinhalese politicians having considered federalism in the 1930s). Tamils continue to clamor for a more devolved political structure, but the island is slated to remain a unitary state.¹

Majoritarianism has been the bane of Sri Lanka and was the basis for a nearly three decade long Civil War between the Sinhalese-led government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that likely killed over 100,000 people by the time it ended controversially in May 2009.² While discrimination along linguistic lines was the main reason for post-independence Sinhalese-Tamil contestation (DeVotta 2004a), pro-Buddhist sentiment played no small role in galvanizing Sinhalese and creating the extant majoritarian dispensation (Little 1994). For instance, the movement that culminated in Sinhala being made the country's only official language in 1956 coincided with the

2500th anniversary of Buddha attaining final nirvana, and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists deftly conflated religion and language in cementing their ethnocentric preferences. This continues to be the case, although with Sinhala now enjoying hegemonic status it is Buddhism that gets mainly manipulated for ethno-political purposes.

The LTTE's defeat has further emboldened Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, and some among them, supported by certain extremist Buddhist clergy and politicians, have targeted the island's Muslims (and some Christians). This anti-Muslim agitprop that feeds off the Islamophobia now trending globally was especially rife under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose majoritarian ethno-religious policies were dictated by the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology. The Rajapaksa years saw Buddhist supremacy flaunted on television and in movies and newspapers, Buddha statues erected in Muslim and Tamil areas in the northeast where hardly any Buddhists lived, state land in the predominantly minority northeast set aside for Buddhist temples, some villages with Tamil names given Sinhalized titles, and the Department of Archeology takeover of certain areas by claiming they were historically connected to Buddhism. Rajapaksa's defeat in the January 2015 presidential election and failure to become prime minister in the August 2015 parliamentary elections (DeVotta 2016a; International Crisis Group 2015) have led to a more tolerant religious milieu, but his continued politicking along nationalist lines coupled with dormant anti-Muslim sentiment make religious violence a very real threat in the years ahead.

This essay, consequently, discusses the Sinhalese Buddhist-Muslim dynamic in the country as part of its focus on religion and public life in Sri Lanka. The essay has two sections: the first juxtaposes religious intolerance in Sri Lanka with Buddhist apprehensions, while the second discusses how best the United States may engage the country's leaders on this front. With nationalist discourse often caricaturing the West (and especially the United States) as being part of a conspiracy to undermine Sri Lanka and Buddhism, the essay argues that a policy that

combines discretion and persuasion with a firm stance consistent with United States ideals, rooted in religious freedom and tolerance, will be necessary when dealing with Sri Lankan stakeholders.

The Majoritarian Mindset

A prominent Sri Lankan historian has noted that the island's Civil War could be considered a conflict between "a [Sinhalese] majority with a minority complex, and a [Tamil] minority with a ... majority complex" (De Silva 1998, 304). Having benefitted disproportionately in education, employment, and influence during the British colonial period and being able to count on the support of tens of millions (currently nearly 70 million) ethnic cousins in India's state of Tamil Nadu, it is easy to see how the Tamil minority cultivated a majority complex. On the other hand, the Sinhalese Buddhists, despite being a clear majority, have long felt surrounded by non-Buddhists in South Asia. Many among them understandably argue that while minorities speaking Tamil and English and practicing Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity can look for support beyond the island's borders, the Sinhalese people and Sinhala language have only Sri Lanka to call home.

This fear and self-imposed isolation, when coupled with notions of *sinhadipa* and *dhammadipa*, contribute to Sinhalese Buddhists viewing pluralism pejoratively and framing majoritarianism as an entitlement. Thus the scholar monk Walpola Rahula could argue that

Sri Lanka is a Buddhist Sinhala country. Let no one make a mistake. Seventy percent of the country consists of Buddhists and Sinhala people. Also ... Sri Lanka is the only Buddhist Sinhala country in the world. If we don't live here, are the LTTE and some of the Tamil parties asking us to jump in to the sea? (Quoted in Peiris 1996)

And Sarath Fonseka, who contested for the presidency and is a current Member of Parliament, could likewise claim (when he was Commander of the Army) that the

country belongs to the Sinhalese but there are minority communities and we treat them like our people. ... They can live in the country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things. (LankaNewspapers.com 2008)

Similarly, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, a leader of the extremist Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force, or BBS), has argued: "This is a Sinhala Buddhist country. We have a Sinhala Buddhist culture. This is not Saudi Arabia. But you must accept the culture and behave in a manner that doesn't harm it" (*The Economist* 2013, 35).

Politicians and other ethnic entrepreneurs have deftly manipulated such fears. Starting in the mid-1950s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP) leaders sought to outbid each other on who could provide the best deal for the majority at the minorities' expense. If this outbidding phenomenon now plays out in a less conspicuous manner it is because the majority community has now secured most of its preferences, such as (1) making Sinhala the official language, (2) providing Buddhism the foremost place in the island, (3) defeating the separatist and terrorist LTTE, (4) having the military occupy the northeast, (5) promoting Sinhalese colonization of hitherto predominantly Tamil areas in the northeast, and (6) securing employment within the state sector for those in the majority community so that over 95 percent of the bureaucracy and 98 percent of the military are now Sinhalese. But nationalists need a supposed enemy or threat to stay relevant, and with the LTTE militarily eradicated, the island's evangelical Christians and especially Muslims have turned out to be convenient scapegoats.

Most Tamils and Muslims vote for their respective ethnic parties in parliamentary elections and, in the main, for the UNP candidate in presidential elections. The Sinhalese typically split their votes between the SLFP and UNP, with the former commanding more support in rural areas. The LTTE's defeat, however, saw SLFP President Mahinda Rajapaksa's popularity skyrocket, especially among Sinhalese. His easy reelection in 2010 and the SLFP's strong

performance in the subsequent parliamentary elections led to the belief that whatever minority support the SLFP had hitherto garnered was now unnecessary (Uyangoda 2011, 133). The impunity the BBS enjoyed under the Mahinda Rajapaksa presidency must be seen in this light.

The BBS was formed in July 2012 and embraced anti-Muslim and anti-Christian (mainly anti-evangelical) rhetoric from the beginning. The immediate predecessor to the BBS was the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Sinhala Heritage Party, or JHU), which was created in February 2004 following the death of a telegenic monk named Gangodavila Soma. Soma, who embraced anti-Muslim, anti-Christian, and anti-Western sentiments when seeking to create a new Buddhist revival and contest for the presidency, died while on a trip to Russia in December 2003 (DeVotta and Stone 2008; Ivan 2009, 219). But his adversarial positions are very much a part of the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology that the BBS has taken to new heights.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is not a recent phenomenon in Sri Lanka. The very first ethnic riots in the island were between Sinhalese and Muslims in 1915, and there is reason to believe the BBS was hoping to mark its centennial with a pogrom. Furthermore, the Buddhist revival that began in the late 19th century saw some Sinhalese nationalists denounce minorities, and the Muslims were no exception. For instance, a few years before independence in 1948 one writer referred to Muslims as “barbarians” when comparing them to the Sinhalese (Dharmadasa 1992, 138), and Anagarika Dharmapala, the foremost revivalist of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, claimed Muslims were “alien people ... [who] by Shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews” (quoted in Guruge 1965, 540). The anti-Muslim rhetoric the BBS now embodies is merely an extension of such calumny.

The BBS has grasped at a number of issues while trying to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment. It demanded that the government (1) ban Sri Lankan women from working in the Middle-East, (2) stop women from wearing the *niqab*, (3) halt mosques being built using Middle Eastern funds, (4) go after Muslims it claimed were at the forefront in pushing narcotics in Sri Lanka, and

(5) counter Muslim fundamentalists who were seeking to make Sri Lanka an “Arabian country.” The latter was mainly used when it violently sought to ban halal products, a movement that various Buddhist temples around the country appeared to support given how they incorporated that particular message into the Sunday school curriculum.

Many areas of South Asia practice syncretic forms of Islam that incorporate Hindu and Sufi practices, and this is the case in parts of Sri Lanka as well. Yet over the past few years, perhaps due to the manner in which the ethnic conflict solidified identities (Haniffa 2008) and/or the Salafi/Wahabi influence that those returning from employment in the Middle-East have promoted, a more pietistic Islam has been increasingly on display. The dogmatism certain Muslim clerics espouse and the rise in those wearing the burqa (a garment that was rarely seen among Sri Lankan Muslim women a quarter century ago) is partly evidence of this.

The concerns stemming from this transformation, signifying a more conservative Islam, feed into a prevalent anti-Muslim sentiment that the island’s ethnic conflict conveniently masked. Yet even during the Civil War it was commonplace to hear Sinhalese claim that it was possible to coexist with Tamils provided they stopped supporting separatism, whereas Muslims were not to be trusted as they were more loyal to Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia than they were to Sri Lanka. Other stories, that they traded unfairly with non-Muslims, were insular, were prone to having large families, and insisted on non-Muslim spouses converting to Islam (with the latter two criticisms suggesting there was a calibrated movement among Muslims to grow their numbers) were common. The BBS and other extremist Buddhist groups have manipulated and magnified these exaggerations and misconceptions to claim that Islamist fundamentalism is threatening the island.³

Nationalists especially obsess over demographics. The BBS has called on Buddhists to have five or six children even as it bemoans the slight rise in Muslim numbers over the years. The JHU’s Gangodawila Soma claimed Muslims (and

Hindus) were seeking to make Buddhists a minority in the country (Balachandran 1999). While the BBS parrots the same argument when targeting Muslims, this is a line some prime ministers have also promoted. For instance, former Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka claimed that foreign powers were conspiring to make Sinhalese Buddhists a minority and the community's "declining population is a serious threat to the country's unitary status" (Jayasinghe 2006). His successor D.M. Jayaratne compared the Sinhalese to the small Eskimo population and claimed it was "endangered with extinction" (Shanthaudaya 2012, A-18). Such bogus arguments get reiterated despite the island's Sinhalese population having gone from 66.1 percent in 1911 to 74.9 percent in 2012. The Buddhist population has climbed from 60 percent in 1911 to 70.2 percent in 2012 (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka 2012, 20–21; Denham 1912, 196 and 245).

Much of this anti-Muslim rhetoric mirrors that of India's Hindutva adherents. Its comingling of Islamophobia and Buddhism is especially similar to that of the anti-Muslim 969 Movement in Burma. This is mainly due to the internet and globalization now enabling "emulative linkages," whereby these groups learn from one another (Thomas 2005, 39–40). Indeed, leaders from the BBS and the 969 Movement have not only visited each other in Sri Lanka and Burma, they claim to work together to protect Buddhism from Islamist extremism and the sociocultural challenges that Islam's growth portends for their societies.

Despite speaking the Tamil language, Sri Lanka's Muslims successfully cultivated a different identity vis-à-vis Tamils (McGilvray 2008, 314). Younger Muslims learned Sinhala even as community leaders sided with the Sri Lankan government against Tamil attempts to secure greater rights for Tamil speakers. Until the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was formed in 1981, Muslims also avoided setting up their own political parties and worked instead through the UNP and SLFP. For all this the community was branded the "good minority" (De Silva 1986, 443–452). Their pro-government tilt partly

influenced the LTTE to expel over 60,000 Muslims from Northern Province in 1990 and also led to LTTE attacks on some Muslim mosques in Eastern Province. During the Civil War some Muslims played important roles gathering intelligence on the LTTE for the armed forces and Muslim politicians lobbied Muslim countries in the Middle-East to support Sri Lanka at international forums. The two leading Muslim parties that were eventually formed were also part of the coalition led by President Rajapaksa's SLFP. The anti-Muslim violence the BBS unleashed, consequently, surprised and terrified Muslims even as it made them feel used and abused (Imtiyaz and Mohamed-Saleem 2015).

While 65 attacks against religious establishments took place between May 2009 (when the Civil War ended) and January 2013 (Center for Policy Alternatives 2013, 6), the Secretariat for Muslims reported 155 anti-Muslim acts during the first six months of 2013 (Perera 2013). Between July 2012 (when the BBS was organized) and December 2014 over 350 threats and acts of violence against Muslims were documented. In most instances the police watched passively as mobs attacked mosques and vandalized Muslim stores and homes. The worst violence took place in June 2014 when thugs attacked a Muslim enclave south of Colombo called Dharga Town and torched homes and vehicles. Residents claimed that the paramilitary Special Task Force assisted the mobs.⁴ This, together with the fact that no one has yet been charged for any of the anti-Muslim violence, highlights the impunity with which certain forces were able to operate under the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime.

Catholic churches have also experienced sporadic attacks, although evangelical church houses have fared worst among Christians. While 21 and 52 attacks took place against Protestant groups in 2011 and 2012, respectively, there were 49 such incidents documented between January and July 2013 (National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka 2013, 3). In Hambantota District, in the island's south, evangelical pastors have been asked to control church growth, charged with disturbing the peace, and forced to close down places of worship.⁵ Sinhalese

Buddhists claim that evangelical Christians especially distribute money and rations among poor Buddhists and Hindus and thereby resort to “unethical conversion,” an accusation pastors strongly dispute.

Minorities voted en masse against President Rajapaksa in the January 2015 presidential election. The new government led by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe have promoted a message of tolerance, albeit without seeking to prosecute those responsible for the recent communal violence. The realization that they cannot undermine the rule of law with the same degree of impunity as they did under Rajapaksa has forced extremist groups to tone down their rhetoric, but Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have consistently manipulated Buddhism and promoted anti-minority sentiment when seeking to mobilize masses. Given the economic challenges and various crosscutting cleavages facing the island, there will be ample opportunity for them to continue to do so. Mahinda Rajapaksa is determined to keep playing a leading political role, mainly to counter accusations of corruption that have piled up against him and his family, and it is amply clear that he intends to mobilize people to his side by portraying himself as a Sinhalese Buddhist icon. The current government thus operates under his baleful shadow, and such dynamics need to be seriously considered as the United States and the international community engage Sri Lanka on issues of inter-religious relations and religious freedom.

Engaging Sri Lanka

While demands for accountability for alleged war crimes soured relations between the Mahinda Rajapaksa government and the United States and led to anti-American commentary and protests (often with government collaboration), Sri Lankans are hardly anti-American (as any American tourist or diplomat will confirm). While the local media criticize United States

foreign policy as arrogant and hypocritical, especially when countering United States criticism of Sri Lanka, Sri Lankans in general admire and envy the United States. With the change in government and return to a more democratic climate, the United States now enjoys relations with the island that are more amicable than at any point during Mahinda Rajapaksa’s 10 years in office.⁶ The steady stream of American dignitaries, including United States Secretary of State John Kerry and United States Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power, who have visited the island since President Sirisena was elected, is testament to this.

President Rajapaksa sought to cozy up to

China even as his policies estranged India, and his ouster has also seen Indo-Lanka relations improve dramatically even as the island adopts a more traditional nonaligned foreign policy (DeVotta 2016b). This has meant engaging China and the West

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while not unnecessarily upsetting India. Sri Lanka’s western partners especially are sensitive to Indian security concerns, and the United States consults closely with India regarding its interactions with Sri Lanka. At a time when the United States is pivoting towards Asia and enjoys increasingly robust military relations with India, the changes that have taken place in Sri Lanka in the past 18 months are helpful for maintaining America’s geostrategic interests in the region.

Security issues are very much a part of the two countries’ relationship and the inaugural USA-Sri Lanka Annual Partnership Dialogue (that took place in February) is significant in this regard. Should Sri Lanka deal adequately with issues pertaining to ethnic reconciliation and accountability for alleged war crimes, there is no reason for the United States to not ramp up military ties with the island. For instance, the Sri Lanka Navy can easily assist in protecting Indian Ocean sea lanes, and this is an outcome that both the United States and India stand to benefit from. Such geostrategic opportunities must be balanced against the American desire to promote good governance and democracy, but doing so may

now be easier provided the United States understands the island's majoritarian zeitgeist.

Given recent events, it is perhaps not surprising if Sri Lanka's friends feel the need to promote secularism. But doing so is bound to be futile because nationalists consider secularism a Western notion designed to weaken Buddhism's primacy, and they brand those advocating such a position to be enemies of the state. If secularism in the South Asian context is defined as "equal respect for all religions (and for those who choose not to follow any religion)" (Aiyar 2004, 5), Sri Lanka, having provided foremost status for Buddhism in the constitution since 1972, has failed in that regard. Likewise, if one was to consider secularism an ideational standard under which religion is denied a determining role in how society functions (Thapar 2013, 30), the island fails in that regard as well, given the influence the Buddhist clergy especially commands on issues like devolution, the military presence in the predominantly Tamil northeast, and how the government handles accountability and reconciliation in the post-Civil War era.

The reality in Sri Lanka is that whatever degree of "secularism" may have existed, it has now been replaced with Sinhalese Buddhist majoritarianism. This is why former President Dingiri Banda Wijetunge saw nothing wrong in likening the Sinhalese to a tree and the minorities to the vines that cling to it. This majoritarian sentiment was perhaps best captured recently by a leading BBS Buddhist monk who said:

This is a Sinhala Buddhist country. Can you go to England or the US and say that they are a multi-religious country? Of course there are other communities in those countries, but they are Christian countries. It's the same here. Other communities have been living here, but this is a Sinhala Buddhist country. You call a coconut plantation a coconut plantation. We don't identify it by the other small plants that have grown there. (Jayasuriya 2013)

It is in the United States interest to recognize the extent to which majoritarianism has triumphed in

Sri Lanka even as it advocates for religious coexistence.

The United States may not disburse the most aid in Sri Lanka, but the country enjoys as much clout as any other when dealing with the island. While American hegemony is one reason for this, the United States is also Sri Lanka's biggest export market. The soft power the United States commands, especially in areas such as tertiary education, the rule of law, and effective and impartial government institutions, makes it a preferred destination for educated Sri Lankans and adds to its influence (as it does in other parts of the globe). Consequently, the Sri Lankan government and media take serious notice when the Department of State or United States Embassy in Colombo issues statements or intercedes in the face of gross injustice towards minorities. For instance, the United States Ambassador visited Dharga Town soon after BBS-inspired thugs attacked that Muslim enclave in June 2014, and this is said to have pressured the Rajapaksa government to address the violence.⁷

Indeed, Sri Lanka's minorities count on the United States to speak out against ethno-religious harassment, although doing so persistently can complicate relations between the two countries. The minorities' reliance on the United States and other western embassies were especially acute during the Rajapaksa years. The Rajapaksa regime mauled civil society and neutered the opposition in parliament, which then forced minorities to rely on the diplomatic corps to voice their legitimate grievances. But the diplomatic corps is in Sri Lanka to take care of their respective countries' interests, not those of the island's Tamils, Christians, and Muslims. This notwithstanding, the United States was at the forefront in pressuring the Rajapaksa regime on democratic regression and ethno-religious malpractices and it should continue to voice its concerns on these issues irrespective of the regime. Some Sri Lankans, and this is certainly true of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, will not appreciate their island being placed under a United States microscope, but a United States that does not speak out in defense of democracy, human rights, religious tolerance, and good

governance only emboldens the forces of sectarianism and violence. The more democratic a country, the better it will treat its ethno-religious minorities. Comparing the Rajapaksa regime with the current one alone proves that point. The United States should therefore continue to advocate forcefully when promoting a more democratic milieu in Sri Lanka. Doing so is not merely part of its avowed mandate, it is also in the island's best interest.

Sri Lanka has a strong civil society whose rich history in the religious, cultural, and economic spheres extends to pre-independence times (DeVotta 2004b; Saravanamuttu 1998). President Mahinda Rajapaksa may have sought to emasculate civil society, but various organizations nevertheless played a major role in deposing him. Some of these leading organizations have long promoted interfaith dialogue and they should be helped to scale up such activity. The present Sri Lankan government also appears serious about facilitating inter-religious dialogue through an Inter-Religious Advisory Committee. The Maithripala Sirisena administration has sought civil society expertise when creating oversight committees and to write a draft constitution, and the government should be encouraged to liaise with civil society to promote religious tolerance as well. Many Sinhalese Buddhists loathe the BBS and its ilk but are especially averse to speak out against Buddhist monks. A government and civil society that is proactive against religious intolerance may empower them to oppose the extremists who tarnish Buddhism.

Sri Lanka has robust ties to Pakistan and other Muslim-majority states in the Middle-East, where hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans work in various capacities. The United States should liaise with these Muslim-majority states to lobby the Sri Lankan government to crack down against anti-Muslim sentiments being spread. While this is bound to look hypocritical given the Islamophobic rhetoric the Republican presidential primary campaign has unleashed, it is imperative for the Sri Lankan government to realize that BBS-type anti-Muslim agitprop can only radicalize hitherto peaceful Muslims and entangle Islamist extremists causing mayhem in South Asia and beyond. Riots and pogroms

against Sri Lanka's Muslims remain a real possibility, and while this is more likely if a hardcore Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist takes power, the United States and the international community should be prepared to deal with such eventualities.

Additionally, the United States, perhaps by working through civil society and Muslim leaders, should encourage Sri Lanka's Muslims to speak out against Islamist terrorism being perpetrated by the likes of ISIS and Al-Qaeda. While Sri Lankan Muslims do not hesitate to speak forcefully against Islamist terrorism in private, they appear fearful about doing so publicly. Countering Islamist extremism by merely claiming Islam is a religion of peace (as opposed to pointedly condemning violent jihad) allows Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists to pillory the community as enablers of terrorism. Muslims must therefore be encouraged to draw a clear distinction between solidarity with the *umma* and disapproval of Islamist extremism.

Ensuring meaningful accountability for alleged war crimes is likely to be the most vexing issue for the United States when dealing with Sri Lanka. The island's own Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) recommended a number of reforms so minority grievances that led to, and were exacerbated by, the ethnic conflict could be rectified. President Rajapaksa disregarded the LLRC's recommendations and this was a major reason the United States and others had to work through the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to push for reconciliation and accountability. The current Sri Lankan government co-sponsored the UNHRC resolution that called on it to investigate alleged war crimes, account for missing persons, facilitate reparations, and ensure such incidents will not recur. However, given the widespread opposition among Sinhalese to see military personnel and politicians held accountable for crimes committed during the war, the government will most likely fail to fully satisfy the Tamils and international community in this regard. With former President Rajapaksa and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists determined to use the reconciliation and accountability process to undermine the government, it becomes tricky to

know how far to pressure Sri Lanka to meet its UNHRC obligations. Soft-peddling the issue of accountability, especially after having pushed for it so forcefully, will allow Rajapaksa and the nationalists to burnish their credentials as saviors of the Sinhalese Buddhists even as it delays transitional justice, without which meaningful reconciliation is unlikely. But forcing the present regime to operate in a manner antithetical to majority Sinhalese Buddhist wishes could very well topple the government, catapult Rajapaksa to the helm, and propel the island once more towards sectarianism and authoritarianism. This is not a scenario the United States wants to deal with once more. In any case, Asia's oldest democracy most certainly deserves better.

Conclusion

Pope Francis visited Sri Lanka a few days after Maithripala Sirisena became president and the

vast crowds that lined up to welcome him and the cordial interactions he enjoyed with Buddhist and other religious leaders helped promote a much-needed sense of inter-religious harmony among Sri Lankans. While the international community can try to build on this, it will need to do so amidst a majoritarian milieu. This is because the notion that Sri Lanka is for Sinhalese Buddhists is now fully embedded, and policies supporting it are fully institutionalized. Trying to alter this is counterproductive and may only further complicate minorities' position in the island. The reality is that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism has triumphed. The challenge for the United States when dealing with Sri Lanka is how to promote ethno-religious tolerance in the island amidst such triumphalism even as it balances its geostrategic preferences in the region. ❖

Notes

1. The island is currently in the process of trying to create a new constitution. All major Sinhalese politicians and parties have made clear that the new document will continue to uphold Buddhism's special status and the country's political structure will remain unitary.
2. The conflict saw the LTTE, a group the United States proscribed as a terrorist organization in 1997, militarily defeated and the war crimes allegations stemming from the government's victory has since complicated relations between Sri Lanka and especially western countries.
3. While Sri Lankan military sources have repeatedly said there is no ISIS presence in Sri Lanka, some reports claim that nearly three dozen Sri Lankans may have gone to fight for ISIS. If true, this has the potential to further aggravate religious tensions in the island.
4. Author interviews with Dharga Town residents, February 2015.
5. With the Sri Lanka constitution protecting religious freedom, the pastors usually get charged for disturbing the peace, not for preaching Christianity. Author interviews in February 2012 and February 2015.
6. The U.S. now also enjoys tremendous access to those at the highest levels of government, which contrasts with how the Rajapaksa regime cavalierly cancelled appointments with visiting U.S. dignitaries.
7. Some Dharga Town residents felt the ambassador's visit forced President Rajapaksa to also subsequently make a visit. It appears that concerns expressed by the diplomatic corps representing Muslim countries also forced the president to visit the area. Author interviews in Colombo (June 2014) and Dharga Town (February 2015).

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