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New Buddhist Extremism and the Challenges to Ethno-Religious Coexistence in Sri Lanka



Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri

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Sri Lanka

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New Buddhist Extremism and the Challenges to Ethno-Religious Coexistence in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Politics in Sri Lanka has always been closely related with certain articulations of Buddhism. In the last few years, this relationship is again in the limelight with the proliferation of new forms of activism by a cluster of Buddhist organizations that aggressively intervenes in the public life. The most well-known among these organizations is Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), while Sihala Ravaya (SR) and Ravana Balaya (RB) are also well known. There are several other organizations which are less known but engaged in similar activities. A new organization, which is popularly known as 'Sinha-Le', is also added to the list recently.

These organizations are led by young Buddhist monks who have been active figures in the recent politicization of Buddhism. Moreover, these organizations have succeeded in attracting a large number of young Buddhist monks to their fold.

This essay attempts to understand the emergence of these organizations, their mode of activism, the way in which their role is being perceived and responded to by the other forces of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and, lastly, how the activities of these organizations affect the precarious political equilibrium in the post-Eelam war Sri Lanka which is dominated by antagonistic relationships among a number of ethno-religious nationalisms. It argues that these organizations are very much part of the hegemonic Buddhist organizational network in Sri Lanka, and logical offspring of a recent evolution of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. I build this argument, particularly in opposition to certain discursive efforts from some quarters of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism to dissociate themselves from the aggressive behaviour of these organizations.

The problem researched by this study could be formulated as follows: "While there is a wider belief that these extremist Buddhist organizations are a temporary phenomenon, facilitated by the direct or indirect support of major players in the government, why do they continue to make a decisive contribution to the public-political life even when they do not enjoy such support?"

In addressing the problem, it is necessary to closely scrutinize the discourse of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in order to understand its inner dynamics. This has not been done in most of the recent studies on Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. This study attempts to take a closer look at the multiple voices of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist discourse in relation to the recently emerged extremist Buddhist organizations. This particular group of organizations is here called Extremist Buddhist Organizations because of the nature of their behaviour in the public space.

This essay aims at providing a fair assessment of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist approach towards non-Sinhala Buddhist ethno-religious minorities. A problem in most critical studies on the Sinhala-Buddhist approach to minorities is the lack of understanding of the subtle nuances of this relationship. Because of this, Sinhala-Buddhist intellectuals flippantly dismiss these critical studies as a part of a malicious propaganda campaign against Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. In this context, this essay attempts to scrutinize the internal nuances of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist discourse on its attitudes towards ethno religious minorities.

The essay is structured in three parts:

Part I will focus on the immediate context of extremist Buddhist activism, with special focus on the post-Eelam war period, and a detailed discussion of the dynamics and the background of Buddhist monks in politics since 1983, in the context of the resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the same period.

Part II provides an account of the rise of new Buddhist extremist organizations, their behaviour, and issues that they make use of as justification for their activism.

Part III discusses the complicated responses of the other major players in Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism to the new extremist Buddhist organizations. In conclusion, it also discusses the impact of the continued activities of these extremist organizations on the fragile relationship between ethno-religious communities in Sri Lanka.

Part I

The Context

The discourse of this essay is located within the politico-ideological context of the Sinhala-Buddhist South, which is ideologically and politically dominated by hegemonic Sinhala- Buddhist ethno-nationalism.¹ The political and ideological power of Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism has been strongly felt in the political landscape in Sri Lanka, especially in the last decade, which was dominated by the regime led by the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), under the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Politicized Buddhism, articulated within an ethno-nationalist paradigm by various groups and individual intellectuals, formed an essential ingredient of Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism. In other words, the political consciousness of the Sinhala-Buddhists is closely related to their identity of being Buddhists.² A caption that appears at many public as well as private spaces in the Sinhala-Buddhist social space clearly captures this relationship. The caption is “*me gauthama buddha rajyayayi*” (මේ ගෞතම බුද්ධ රාජ්‍යයයි). There are several other identical captions such as “*me budunge deshayayi*” (මේ බුදුන්ගේ දේශයයි). But the former is the most significant. It is probably not easy to translate this caption into English. Although “Rajyaya” has now come to literally mean “the state”, it is more correct to translate it as: “*This is the realm of the Gauthama Buddha*”.

A few years ago, just after the end of the civil war, I noticed this caption was printed on large stickers pasted on the rear window of state-owned SLTB buses plying from Colombo to Jaffna. This, I suggest, is as if to remind the people of Jaffna, the ideal political order, in the context where a serious attempt at transgressing that order had just been defeated militarily.³

¹ I have explained what I mean by “Sinhala-Buddhist South” elsewhere. See Dewasiri (2013).

² The relationship between politics and Buddhism in Sri Lanka is well known, and virtually needs no introduction. There are a number of distinguished scholars who have studied this relationship. The most important works, especially in connection with the post-1983 period, are Seneviratne (1999) and Tambiah (1992). It is also important to see Bartholomeusz (2002). For a useful review of the literature on modern political Buddhism in Sri Lanka see De Silva (2007).

³ Note that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was militarily defeated under the Rajapaksa regime in May 2009. The LTTE fought a war to establish a separate state within the territory of the state of Sri Lanka.

The political message that is carried by the sticker, I further suggest, forms the core of the Sinhala-Buddhist political imagination. In this imagination, Sri Lanka is a land that belongs to Sinhala-Buddhists; the other non-Sinhala-Buddhists are allowed to live here without any problem as long as they recognize this exclusive right of Sinhala-Buddhists.⁴

This imagination finds its various manifestations in times of political transformation and crises. The election campaign of 1956 was one such important occasion. The famous cartoon, entitled “*Mara Yuddhaya*” (the resisting of all temptation by the Buddha, prior to enlightenment) appeared in the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) election campaign of 1956, published by the Eksath Bhikshu Peramuna, a leading organization that campaigned for the MEP, represents this notion very clearly.⁵ A more articulated form is found in the discourse of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), in their election campaign of 2004, where its goal is presented as the establishment of a “*Dharma Rajjaya*” (a realm of Dharma).

The LTTE ideologically legitimized the war by using the territorially based political aspirations of Tamil ethno-nationalism.

⁴ This forms the core of the political ideology of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The most eloquent exponent of this position is Prof. Nalin de Silva. His writings on this theme are contained in a number of volumes. I recommend the following works for a basic understanding of De Silva’s approach: Prabhakaran, Ohuge Seeyala, Bappala saha, Massinala (De Silva, 1995); Demala Jathivadaya Erehiwa (De Silva, 2009) and Ape Pravada 3 (De Silva, 2010).

⁵ For a detailed account of the 1956 election campaign, see Weerawardana (1960).



From EKSATHI BHIKKU PERAMUNA

A 1956 cartoon lampooning the U.N.P.

reached a decisive point in the last one-and-a-half decades, and climaxed with the consolidation of the UPFA regime. The military defeat of the LTTE was particularly a decisive victory for the Sinhala-Buddhist political imagination. At the same time the defeat of the LTTE posed a major existential threat to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, because the former was the pivotal antagonistic other of the latter. When the “otherness” of the LTTE disappeared as a tangible threat to the Sinhala-Buddhist population, it was not easy to justify the immediate political significance of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Indeed there were, and still are, attempts to show that the LTTE threat is still looming large, especially in the form of its alleged proxy, the TNA, and various organizations of the Tamil diaspora. It was also argued that there was an international conspiracy against Sri Lanka, which could be averted only through the collective strength of Sinhala-Buddhists who would rally around a strong nationalist force.⁶

⁶ The most sophisticated exponent of this school of thought is Dr. Nalin de Silva, former professor of mathematics. On a TV talk show in 2011, in which I also took part, he confidently announced that the US will attack Sri Lanka within six months. Wimal Weerawansa, a popular politician and a member of parliament, is also another strong exponent of this line of thinking.

However, these claims were not as convincing as the threat of the LTTE before May 2009, physically felt by the entire population of the country. The politics of the TNA and the Tamil diaspora, as well as alleged international conspiracies are, nonetheless, beyond the day-to-day experience of the people.

It was against this background that the new extremist Buddhist organizations make their presence felt in the Sinhala-Buddhist South, by opening up a new frontier in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist politics, viz. the threat from Muslim and Christian fundamentalism to the existence of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

This was indeed not a completely new discourse. Muslims and Christians were always perceived as potential threats to the wellbeing of Sinhala-Buddhists. However, these threats were viewed as lesser evils in the presence of the more serious threat of the LTTE, which had the support of Tamil ethno-nationalism. However, it was relatively difficult to mobilize the Sinhala-Buddhist people against Christians of established churches. But there were more vulnerable Christians, new evangelical groups who were passionately and enthusiastically engaged in conversion efforts, especially among poor Sinhala-Buddhists.⁷ It was easier to portray them as a threat to the Sinhala-Buddhist cause. Even the established churches were not too happy about these evangelical groups, as they are threatening to them as well (Mathews, 2007).

Muslims were easy to demonize. The constructed image of Muslims vis-à-vis Sinhala-Buddhist interests was such that it was easy to portray them as a fundamental threat to the Sinhala-Buddhist cause. The initial phase of politicization of the negative image of Muslims in Sri Lanka as a part of the larger Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist imagination took shape during the Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915. While these riots were mainly fuelled by the business interests of the emerging Sinhala entrepreneurial class, they occupy a paradigmatic importance, in the long run, in shaping the Sinhala-Buddhist political psyche vis-à-vis the Muslims.⁸ It is also important to note that Anagarika Dharmapala provided Sinhala-Buddhist political

⁷ See Perera (1998) for more detail about the work of Christian evangelical organizations.

⁸ Kumari Jayawardena has documented the formation of this entrepreneurial class in her comprehensive work "Nobodies to Somebodies" (Jayawardena (2002). For detail about Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915, see (Jayasekera, 1984 & 1985)

ideology with a basic framework in order to perceive ethno-religious minority groups vis-à-vis the interests of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.⁹

Although this anti-Muslim component was always present in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology, it had become less significant in the face of the larger threat of Tamil nationalism. When the war with the LTTE was over, the anti-Muslim element came to the fore as the determining focus of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist politics.

The anti-Muslim factor had already taken an important turn in late 1990s when popular Buddhist monk Rev. Gangodavila Soma took a critical stand on the Muslim issue, and took on the late M.H.M Ashroff, leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, in a famous TV debate.¹⁰ Although the former was pushed into a defensive mode by the latter, who was an experienced and shrewd politician more at home than his interlocutor in the art of debate, this set the stage for the showdown a decade later.

The Muslim issue was taken to a new level, by locating it in the context of the global discourse on radicalization of Muslim politics, by Patali Champika Ranawaka. In his polemical text “*Al Jihad Al Quida*”, he not only signalled the alleged rise of “Muslim extremism” in Sri Lanka, parallel to the global radicalization of Muslim politics, but also linked this with the Tamil armed secessionist movement headed by the LTTE (Ranawaka, 2003).

Sinhala Ethno-Nationalist Politics after July 1983

There is a resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the post-1983 period, especially in response to the growing strength of Tamil nationalism. The resurgence

⁹ It is important to quote here the famous words of Dharmapala in this connection: “One day White men will leave this country. But they will leave only after producing twenty-thirty thousands of ‘Brown-Sahibs’. They will hate the Sinhala language and manners. They will teach your children to condemn racial and religious divisions. They will say that Tamils, Moors, Cochchies and Hambayas are all equal. Then they will crown English. Kovils will be constructed near Buddhist temples. You will be waiting for your savior, Prince Diyasena. Remember that these Brown Sahibs are capable of killing Diyasenas to-be-born, before they are born.”
“කවඳ හරි සුද්දෝ මේ රට දාල යනවා. උන් යන්නේ උන්ගේ දරුවෝ වගේ කලු සුද්දෝ විසිතිස් දහස් බෝ කලාට පස්සෙයි. ඊට පස්සේ අපේ රට පාලනය කරන්නේ මේ කලු සුද්දෝ. උන් සිංහල භාෂාවට, සිරිත් විරිත් වලට වෙර කරනවා. උන් උඹලගේ දරුවන්ට උගන්වා වි ජාති, ආගම්, භාෂා හේදයක් එපා කියලා. දෙමළන්, මරක්කලයන් කොච්චියන්, හම්බයන් එකය කියලා උන් කියාවි. එහෙම කියලා උන් ඉංග්‍රීසිම රජ කරාවි. පන්සල් වටේ පල්ලා කෝවිල් හදාවි. උඹල උඹල වෙනුවෙන් දියසේන කුමාරයා ඉපදෙනකල් බලා ඉන්නවා. උප්දින්න ඉන්න දියසේනලා තිඹිරගෙයදීම මරා දමන්න මේ කලු සුද්දන්ට හැකි බව මතක තියා ගනිල්ලා.”
Although this is a popular quote from Anagarika Dharmapala, I could not find the original source.

¹⁰ A summary of the career of Rev. Soma is provided later in this essay.

was to face two formidable challenges. One was the rising power of the Tamil militant movements, and the other was the formidable intellectual onslaught against Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, especially in the aftermath of July 1983.

The response to both challenges came particularly from non-conventional sources. The recovery of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) as a clandestine movement after being proscribed following the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983 was mainly enabled by its Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist orientation. A somewhat broader informal alliance of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces emerged out of resistance to the Indo-Lanka Accord signed in July 1987. The alliance was however weakened when the movement began to be manipulated by the JVP, with the clear agenda of capturing political power.¹¹

The major outcome of the signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord was the breakdown of the hegemonic relationship between the governing elite and the Sinhala-Buddhist constituency. This unsettled political situation was not resolved until 2005, when Mahinda Rajapaksa won the presidential election with the backing of all the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces.

Parallel to the JVP led nationalist resistance, an intellectual movement that the JVP was not fully capable of manipulating also emerged. This movement was spearheaded by a new group of intellectuals who were very well aware of the formidable threat that came from the anti-nationalist intellectual forces. Jathika Chinthanaya (JC) movement became the rallying point for this intellectual movement. The revival of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism after 1983 was fundamentally due to the intellectual efforts of the JC and its offshoots.

Although the Jathika Chinthanaya was only an intellectual movement and was not capable of directly mobilizing the masses, it had a powerful impact on young political activists. Three young radical political activists played a decisive role in the mobilization of Sinhala-Buddhist public support to build the powerful political bloc that brought Mahinda Rajapaksa into power. They were Patali Champika Ranawaka, Rev. Athuraliye Ratana, a young Buddhist monk, and Wimal Weerawansa. The

¹¹ See Wickramasinghe (2006) for a general introduction to the history of this period.

first two were attracted towards the JVP-led university student politics in the latter part of the 1980s, but later converted to the ideas of the JC. Although they parted with the JC and initiated separate political movements, the ideological baggage that they inherited from the JC was central to their political activism, especially in the early 2000s when two of them worked hand-in-hand to form the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

Wimal Weerawansa's indebtedness to the JC was somewhat circuitous. Being in the forefront of the JVP revival after 1990, which had a strong nationalist orientation, he of course inherited a significant political preference for nationalism. However, there was a certain ambiguity in the JVP version of nationalism, because of its heavy ideological bias towards the Marxist tradition, which prevents it from overtly supporting Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-religious nationalism.¹²

This was a particularly difficult task for the JVP, in the context of the anti-minority potential of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The political vision of the JVP did not warrant an overt stand against ethno-religious minorities. When this was a potential threat to the ideological integrity of the JVP, it managed to resolve it by tactically manoeuvring the anti-Indian sentiment that was dominant in the latter part of 1980s, triggered off by the aggressive Indian foreign policy towards Sri Lanka, and articulated by Sinhala-Buddhist politics temporarily watering down the anti-minority aspect of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.¹³

Even at this juncture, some nationalists were highly sceptical about the JVP stand vis-à-vis the issues that were important to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. There

¹² The JVP stand vis-à-vis Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and the political demands of the ethno-religious minorities in Sri Lanka is a highly debated issue. Left wing critics of the JVP have been highly critical about the latter on this issue. JVP leader, Rohana Wijeweera, in his work "What is the solution to the Tamil Eelam struggle?" (දෙමළ ඊළාම් අරගලයට විසඳුම කුමක්ද?) has made a comprehensive effort to solve this problem by reinterpreting the Marxist discourse of the "national question" (Wijeweera, 1997).

¹³ This is clearly evident if one observes the discourse of the advocates of the Jathika Chintanaya movement. They significantly softened their approach towards Tamil nationalism in this conjuncture, where the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka had engaged in a military conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They openly supported the political alliance led by the SLFP at the 1988 presidential election. Some Tamil and Muslim parties were partners of this alliance and a territorially based power sharing arrangement was also proposed in the alliance manifesto, which came to be known as The Manifesto of the Democratic National Alliance (or DPA Manifesto). Under normal circumstances, they would have been vehemently opposed to these kinds of proposals.

was a “cold war”, for example, between the JVP and the *Jathika Chinthanaya* followers, especially in the universities.¹⁴

There was however, a certain ambiguity in the JVP view on Tamil political demands in the 1990s. It was difficult to maintain this view when the political preference of the urban and semi-urban middle-classes, where its mass support mainly came from, was fast drifting towards the extreme form of Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-religious nationalism.

During this time, Wimal Weerawansa, the main link between the JVP and the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp, had come under heavy influence of the JC. He had especially close contact with Gunadasa Amarasekera, one of the pioneers of the JC. The *Deshahithaishee Jathika Vyaparaya* (DJV), which was meant to be a political instrument of the JVP, was transforming into a purely ethno nationalist entity. Wimal Weerawansa, the main link between the JVP and the DJV, was also moving towards Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism.

The early 2000s saw the unprecedented rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the South. This decisively sidelined the somewhat influential “non-nationalist” ideological orientations in the Southern political sphere. The moderate stand followed by the governing elite was a manifestation of this “non-nationalist” orientation. One may even assume there was popular support in the South for this view, especially given the nature of the reception of the political leadership of the People’s Alliance (PA), which came into power in 1994. Both the PA government and its successor, the United National Front (UNF) government followed a “pro-political solution” approach, which was based on the prospect of Sinhala-Buddhist support for such a move.

Some public opinion surveys, conducted by Colombo-based Non-Governmental Organizations, painted the picture that the large majority of the Sinhala-Buddhist

¹⁴ This tension that grew sometimes turned into open confrontation in the run up to the 1988 presidential election, which the JVP boycotted, in a tactical move to make sure that Ranasinghe Premadasa wins so that they can continue their armed insurgency when Premadasa would become unpopular. The Jathika Chinthanaya group, on the other hand, strongly campaigned for Sirima Bandaranaike. The two groups engaged in aggressive polemics in universities. This rivalry became quite tense at the Colombo University, where Jathika Chintanaya followers had strong political support.

population was in favour of a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict. Massive amount of funds, both by the state and internationally funded NGOs, were spent on public campaigns to promote the idea of a 'peaceful solution to the ethnic problem' among the Sinhala-Buddhists.

These calculations were proved wrong. It is possible to argue that two significant steps taken by the PA and UNF governments, indeed, indirectly helped the resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. One was the political package introduced by the PA government in 1995 and the state-sponsored public awareness campaign to support it. The other is the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the UNF government with the LTTE in 2002. Both these initiatives were countered by Sinhala-nationalist forces and proved to be extremely successful. The ultimate outcome of this Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist counter-force was bringing the UPFA, led by Mahinda Rajapaksa, into power in 2005, with strong Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist backing. The new radicalization of political Buddhism is integrally linked to the revival of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

Part II

Rise of New Buddhist Organizations

Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ravana Balaya (RB) and Sihala Ravaya (SR) came into the limelight owing to their aggressive behaviour towards Muslims and Christian evangelical groups.¹⁵ These three organizations are closely linked with three highly dynamic and extremely aggressive activist monks who began to dominate the public space. They are Rev. Galagodaatte Gnanasara, Rev. Ittekande Saddhatissa and Rev. Akmeemana Dayaratana.

The confidence with which they displayed their violent behaviour in public spaces was remarkable. They grossly violated the law even in the presence of the police, who took no action. Apart from the political protection that they enjoyed with impunity under the Mahinda Rajapaksa government,¹⁶ they fully exploited the public respect for the robe and the authority that was commanded by those who wore it. Perhaps the most exemplary moment was when Rev. Gnanasara clashed with police and other officials at an expressway entrance when his vehicle was stopped from entering the expressway due to its poor technical condition. At one point of the heated argument, he shouted at expressway officials with the following words: “දැන ගනිලිලා මේ අම්මගේ රෙද්දෙන් ආණ්ඩු පෙරළන්නක් පුළුවන්.” (Make note you bastard!!! This piece of cloth is capable of even toppling governments’).¹⁷

¹⁵ Violent acts of these organizations have been well documented. See the report compiled by Centre for Policy Alternatives on “Attacks on Places of Religious Worship in Post-War Sri Lanka” (CPA, March 2013).

¹⁶ The privileged position these groups enjoyed under Rajapaksa government is now well known. D.B.S. Jeyaraj has provided a detailed report on the controversial public appearance of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the secretary of the Ministry of Defence under Mahinda Rajapaksa, at a BBS event (<http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/17939>). The public perception that these organizations command strong government backing was a major factor in driving away votes of non-Buddhists from the Rajapaksa-led UPFA coalition in the recent elections.

¹⁷ It is not possible to translate “ammage redda” into English to render the actual meaning it carries. This is indeed considered to be an extremely indecent expression, not supposed to be used in public. By using the term “ammage redda” for the saffron robe he in fact ridiculed it. See the following link to view video clip of the particular incident: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDD5IKni7Qk>

It would also be pertinent to cite two more incidents that show the way that the other two monks also behave in public. Rev. Ittakande Saddhatissa, in a public gathering at a Buddhist temple, appealed to Buddhists to attack the Christian evangelical groups with a broom and chase them away when they visit their houses with the intention of converting them. See: <https://lankacnews.com/sinhala/news/100881/>. Note that this news website is run by the supporters of Wimal Weerawansa, who also supports Rev. Saddhatissa. See also this link: <http://lankapolity.blogspot.com/2013/06/buddhist-extremist-kangaroo-court.html>

These three monks have emerged out of the recent radicalization of young Buddhist monks. Both Gnanasara and Dayaratana were linked to the JHU and contested for the JHU at the 2004 general elections, where Dayaratana indeed won a parliamentary seat. Gnanasara made his debut appearance in the public space when he disrupted a rally organized by anti-war groups in Colombo in 2006.¹⁸ Ittakande Saddhatissa is known to have a close political association with Wimal Weerawansa.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the claims to the contrary, these organizations are by no means the illegitimate offspring of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and peripheral to its political intervention. The original location of the BBS headquarters was quite significant and symbolic. It was located in the newly built Buddha Jayanthi Mandiraya, which was ceremonially opened by the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa.²⁰ The Buddha Jayanthi Mandiraya was owned by the Buddhist Cultural Centre²¹ headed by Rev. Kirama Wimalajothi, who was also the founding president of the BBS. After the anti-Muslim riots in June 2014, he publicly announced his resignation from the BBS.²² Nevertheless, he seems to be continuing as the BBS president even after this announcement.²³

It is also notable that these aggressive monks had no problem with taking part in any event of the mainstream Sangha, and the high level of tolerance towards their ill behaviour is conspicuous.

The scope of activity of these organizations covers a wide range. One of its remarkable features is that, while they primarily targeted non-Sinhala-Buddhist ethnic and religious groups, they also sporadically attacked unorthodox Buddhists.

¹⁸ <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items06/190806-6.html>

¹⁹ Wimal Weerawansa has been a crucial player in Sri Lankan politics in the last two decades. He began his political career as a young activist of the JVP during the JVP-led armed insurrection in the late 1980s. He became a central figure in the recovering of the JVP after the insurrection was suppressed in late 1989. Through his oratory, he became the most popular figure of the JVP and also became a central figure in Sinhala ethno-nationalist politics in the last one and half decades. He left the JVP with a group in 2009 and formed the Jathika Nidahas Peramuna. Later he joined the UPFA government and became a cabinet minister.

²⁰ <http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2011/05/16/2600th-sri-sambuddhatwa-jayanthi-being-commemorated-very-grand-scale-sri-lanka>

²¹ <http://www.vivalanka.com/news/page.jsp?articleid=90809>

²² <http://www.asianmirror.lk/news/item/1590-bbs-leader-kirama-wimalajothi-resigns-from-organization>

²³ <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/33616>

These organizations took on any issue that was perceived in the Sinhala-Buddhist hegemonic discourse as detrimental to the Sinhala-Buddhist cause. Issues raised related to Muslims are notable and could be listed as follows:

- Muslims live mostly as closely-knit communities in predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist areas. Although there are amicable relations between the two ethno-religious groups under normal circumstances, the negative perception towards each other is also conspicuous. Sinhala-Buddhists have a tendency to look at them with utmost suspicion, especially owing to some of their behaviour. Some of the frequent allegations are worth mentioning. It is alleged that Muslim motorcyclists do not, in defiance of the law, wear helmets in the areas they live as groups. It is also alleged that Muslims show extremely hostile behaviour towards non-Muslims in areas they live in as groups.²⁴
- Certain cultural habits of Muslims also trigger off anger towards them. Two such instances of the recent anti-Muslim rhetoric were the dress practice of Muslim women, i.e. covering the head (wearing abhaya and hijab) and the requirement of Halal certification on some consumer items.²⁵
- The most controversial issue is however the contest over sacred places, which needs a detailed discussion.

The contest over sacred places became the centrepiece of the Buddhist-Muslim showdown. “Sacred geography” is central to Sinhala-Buddhists’ relationship to the land they live. As is represented by the ideological claim cited above “*Me Gauthama Buddha Rajyayi*” the territory of the state has been given a strong religio-ideological signification. The term “*Dhammadeepa*” (Island of Dharma) powerfully encapsulates this signification. This notion of “sacred land”, deeply rooted in the Sinhala-Buddhist religious and political mind, sanctifies the *religionization* of any Sinhala-Buddhist claim for land when they are confronted by counter-claims of non-Sinhala-Buddhists.²⁶

²⁴ My personal observation is that these allegations are not entirely baseless. However, such behaviour patterns are not restricted to Muslims in particular; many other groups historically tend to live as closely-knit communities. This could be seen among some caste groups as well.

²⁵ Farzana Hanifa has dealt with these issues in detail. See Hanifa (2016)

²⁶ There is an exception to this rule of “Buddhist-Muslim” conflicts over “sacred places”, i.e. conflict over recent

One of the most sensitive issues in the Sinhala-Buddhist – Muslim conflict of the recent past has been over “sacred places”.²⁷ The first was the conflict over “Digawapi” in the Ampara district of the Eastern Province. This is a typical example of how an issue over land usage by an agrarian community is transformed into an ethno-religious conflict over a “sacred place”. The issue was transformed into a “national” issue, especially, when Rev. Gangodavila Soma took it over on the side of the Buddhists.²⁸

There were more Buddhist-Muslim battles thereafter, some of which still continue, over “sacred places”. They include Anuradhapura,²⁹ Dambulla,³⁰ Devanagala,³¹ and Kuragala.³² The first two places are considered to be dominant Buddhist sacred towns. In these two incidents, conflict occurred over issues related to practising the Muslim religion in what were known as Buddhist “sacred cities”.

In the last two cases, conflicts occurred over contradictory historical claims to the sites of Muslim settlements. In the case of Devanagala, Sinhala-Buddhists, being mobilized primarily by SR and BBS, placed historical claims to a Muslim settlement. Somewhat similar to Digawapi, the Muslim settlement area was claimed to be an encroachment on the property of a Buddhist temple. The archaeological importance of the location was also used by Buddhists to boost their claims. Kuragala is also an example of how archaeological significance is used as a ‘charter of rights’ by Buddhists to impose restrictions on the religious and cultural behaviour of Muslims.

Confronting Evangelical Christians

The proliferation of Christian Evangelical activities has undoubtedly been a marked feature of the religious life in Sri Lanka in the recent past. Sinhala-Buddhist organizations and intellectuals have identified it as a formidable threat

Muslim settlements in Wilpattu. The counter-claim of the Buddhist protest campaigners against these settlements was based on the environmental sensitivity of the area.

²⁷ The Muslim Secretariat has produced a two-volume report on the Buddhist-Muslim conflicts over “sacred” places, with the title “Of Sacred Sites and Profane Politics: Tensions over Religious Sites and Ethnic Relations” (Secretariat of Muslims I & II)

²⁸ Secretariat of Muslims (Vol. II, p. 11, footnote 10). The career of Rev. Soma will be discussed later in this essay.

²⁹ CPA, 2013, p. 51

³⁰ Secretariat of Muslims (Vol. II, pp. 30-48)

³¹ Secretariat of Muslims (Vol. I, pp. 7-30)

³² Secretariat of Muslims (Vol. I, pp. 31-47)

to the endurance of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. There has been a formidable public outcry among Buddhists to bring about legal restriction for what was identified as “unethical conversions”. When the JHU monks contested in the 2004 general election, this became one of the prominent issues in the campaign. JHU made an unsuccessful effort to bring an “anti-conversion bill” in the parliament (DeVotta, 2008).

Although there is a history behind the tension between Buddhism and Christianity in Sri Lanka, the two religious establishments have come to a tacit agreement not to penetrate each other’s sphere of influence in recent decades. As a result of this tacit agreement, no major conflicts occurred between mainstream Christians and Buddhists. Probably the strongest testimony for this tacit agreement is Nalin de Silva’s assessment of this relationship. He asserts that the acceptance of the legitimacy of primacy of Sinhala-Buddhists in Sri Lanka by Christians and Catholics is a major achievement in the last five decades (De Silva, 1995: 16). What he claims, in essence, is that there is no need for Sinhala-Buddhists to fear the Christians and Catholics as a possible threat to the Sinhala-Buddhist cause. It is particularly noteworthy because of the fact that he is quite critical about the political and ideological role of established churches in Sri Lanka.

There were, of course, times in which the promotion of Buddhism as against Christianity was the means through which the Sinhala-Buddhist population was mobilized. Anti-Christian rhetoric has indeed a powerful attraction for the Sinhala-Buddhists.³³ As evident from the cartoon reproduced above (see page 5), anti-Christian rhetoric played a major role in the 1956 election campaign, by enhancing the popular attraction towards the MEP.

Christian Evangelical groups, however, have “violated” this tacit agreement. In the last few decades, Christian Evangelical groups were very active not only among non-Christian communities, but also among the Christians of established churches. Established Christian and Catholic churches are also critical of the activities of these evangelical groups.³⁴

³³ Early phase of the Buddhist revival has been sufficiently documented. Malalgoda has provided a comprehensive inquiry into the early phase of Buddhist Revival (Malalgoda, 1976). Also see, Bond (1992). For the complex nature of the Buddhist-Christian relationship in the early phase of the Buddhist revival, see Haris (1995).

³⁴ See Mathews (2007) and Perera (1998) for recent Evangelical activities in Sri Lanka. See also (CPA, March 2013).

Buddhists were seriously alarmed by the activities of Evangelical Christians. There have been constant demands from Buddhists to take actions to stop the activities of Evangelical organizations. This anti-Evangelical sentiment took a new turn when Rev. Gangodavila Soma took up the issue (Mathews, 2007: 461).

It is in this context that the attacks against Evangelical Christians could be assessed. As the 2013 report of the Centre for Policy Alternatives indicates, there has been a series of attacks against Christian Evangelical groups since 2009. BBS, RS and SR have targeted Christian evangelism as one of the imminent dangers to Buddhism.

Who are the true Buddhists? Attacks on “Other” Buddhists

Buddhist spaces and individuals were also targeted by a number of recent acts of violence. In these cases, the new extremist Buddhist organizations assumed the task of distinguishing “true” and authentic Buddhist practices from “false” and unauthentic practices, and justified their violent behaviour towards “false” and “unauthentic” Buddhist elements in terms of re-installing “true” and “authentic” Buddhism.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives has documented 10 incidents, between January 2010 and August 2012, where Buddhist religious spaces and individuals were being targeted. Some of them, indeed, cannot be considered as religiously, or politically, motivated acts of violence, as they seem to be acts of treasure-hunters etc. But there are several incidents which can be directly linked to the recent upsurge of religion-based violence. Three out of these ten incidents need special attention here: an attack on a Mahayana centre in Colpetty, Colombo. The incident took place in the “Ashramaya” of the famous preacher Pitiduwe Siridhamma (who was later self-styled and renamed himself as Samanthabhadra), where a group of monks entered the premises and forced Siridhamma to stop his activities. The second incident took place in Wanduramba, Galle district, where a mass protest against a popular preacher, who claimed to be an incarnation of the Maithree Buddha, turned into an act of violence against him and his centre. There are indeed other intra-Buddhist violence that could be highlighted here.

Then a series of attacks took place against Rev. Wataraka Vijitha, who had close connections with Muslims. His eccentric behaviour and overt links with perceived anti-Buddhist elements enraged extremist Buddhist forces, irrespective of the fact that Vijitha was a local government representative from the ruling UPFA. The highlight was the forceful entrance of BBS activists, led by its leader Gnansara, to a media conference in which Vijitha was taking part. In this instance, he was harassed by BBS activists in the presence of the police.³⁵ It is also important to mention his abduction claim in June 2014. Vijitha was found with injuries in an isolated location and claimed that he was abducted and physically harassed. When the blame was initially directed towards the BBS, they vehemently opposed the allegation and claimed that the incident had been orchestrated by Vijitha Thero himself.³⁶

“Soma Hamuduruwo” as a Turning Point

The sudden rise of Rev. Gangodavila Soma as a popular preacher was a landmark phenomenon in the resurgence of radical political Buddhism in the post-1994 phase.³⁷ His unconventional approach to preaching captured the imagination of the semi-urban Buddhist laity who were somewhat critical about established Buddhism. The most significant aspect of his preaching was the way he politicized the Sinhala-Buddhist sentiments. His way of politicization, particularly, became attractive to the Buddhist audience, as he took meticulous effort to not show support to any political party.³⁸

While his relatively short career as a popular preacher awakened the Buddhist laity into a new type of religio-political imagination, his sudden death was a traumatic experience to the Sinhala-Buddhist community. A massive upsurge of public emotions was unleashed through the rupture of the hegemonic setting that had been in crisis since the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987.

³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTJnLEGzHvI>

³⁶ <<http://newsfirst.lk/english/2014/06/venerable-watareka-vijitha-thero-assaulted/40744>>.

³⁷ For a critical review of the career of Rev. Soma see Uyangoda (2007) and Berkwitz, (2008).

³⁸ There were even rumors that he was preparing himself as a candidate for the next presidential election. For a review of the political appeal of Rev. Soma, see Berkwitz, (2008: 95-98).

It is possible to argue that his own unconventional career as a monk symbolizes the new Buddhist revival which became evident through his work. Unlike most other Buddhist monks, who enter the order at very young age, he entered the order at the age of 26. He also did not occupy any higher position in the established order (Uyangoda, 2007: 167).

Soma Hamuduruwo turned the conventional Buddhist sermon (බණ) upside down. He fearlessly touched upon many controversial and contemporary topics that most ordinary monks would avoid, particularly in a sermon. They ranged from day-to-day politics to the state of existing religious life of Buddhists. He also introduced this dimension to the religious TV programs that he attended regularly. Until his intervention, this type of TV programs too discussed only issues related to the conventional themes of Buddhism. He made extremely controversial interventions in relation to existing affairs in public life, including very controversial political issues.

If the conventional Buddhist sermons were significantly detached from the daily experience of the audience, the topics he covered were directly related to it. Even the way he delivered these sermons was unconventional. He touched upon sensitive issues for the Buddhist laity, especially female devotees, such as alcoholism. He was highly critical of Buddhists worshipping, and seeking favours of, Hindu deities, and alerted Sinhala-Buddhists to the threats from Muslims and evangelical Christian groups.

It was certainly this innovative and controversial approach that led to the cancellation of his popular program on the state-run ITN TV channel. This happened during the PA government under Chandrika Kumaratunga, who was considered to be hostile to the Sinhala-Buddhist cause. This negative response from the top of the governing elite indeed made him more popular, when he continued the program on a privately owned TV channel.

He was indeed the role model for the bhikkus who intervened in public affairs in later years. It is possible to see his legacy in two forms. On the one hand, there was a mushrooming of bhikkus delivering sermons, following his example, in an

unconventional manner, sometimes even duplicating his voice and mannerisms. On the other hand, another group claimed to continue his legacy by representing his political views. The JHU was founded quite soon after the death of Rev. Soma, exploiting the intense public emotion generated by his death, and the post-JHU extremist Buddhist organizations use Rev. Soma as their point of reference.

Rise of the JHU and Post-JHU Bhikku Politics

Although the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU) was formed just before the April 2004 general election, its genealogy goes back to the latter part of the 1980s. It emerged out of a group of radical young political activists who were initially politicized in the JVP in the late 1980s. At the centre of this radical group was Patali Champika Ranawaka, an energetic and intelligent engineering undergraduate from the University of Moratuwa.³⁹ He, together with a group of like-minded student activists, broke ranks with the JVP and moved towards the “*Jathika Chinthanaya*” (JC). JC was becoming a formidable intellectual force in the latter half of the 1980s and was more attractive to student activists with an intellectual orientation.

One of the major limitations of JVP politics in the mid-1980s was that it was not attractive to politically conscious students with a high level of intellectual curiosity, who did not respond to the oversimplified vulgar Marxism of the JVP. An instance, which Champika Ranavaka has cited in his autobiography, is exemplary of the gap between the JVP and the other students with high intellectual curiosity.

“When we were undergraduate students (1985), a student in our batch, Indunil, asked a question from our student leader, Thilakasiri Gallage. The question was, “Why are you a Marxist?” The answer of Gallage was, “Marxism is scientific”. Then Indunil asked, “What is science?” Gallage’s reply was: “The system of theories that are based on the scientific

³⁹ His Wikipedia page provides some basic information about his early political career.

< https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Champika_Ranawaka >

He also published an autobiography in 2009. It has, however, been written in a highly self-glorifying manner (Ranawaka, 2009).

method, i.e. proving theories through experiments. (සිද්ධාන්ත-නිගමනය-පරීක්ෂණය - සාධනය යන විද්‍යාත්මක ක්‍රමවේදය අනුව බිහිකරන සිද්ධාන්ත පද්ධතිය.) Then Indunil asked whether Marxist theories have been proved by an experiment. I cannot recollect the answer given by Gallage to this last question.” (Ranawaka, 2009: 60).

Students such as Indunil were highly inspired by Nalin de Silva’s intellectual arguments at that time. The founders of the JHU, including its central figure Ranawaka, belonged to this group of undergraduates.

Before the foundation of the JC, it was the sophisticated version of Marxism that was attractive to such intellectually oriented student activists. Especially in the late 60s and 70s, there were a number of Marxist groups that made a strong intellectual appeal to young undergraduates. With the emergence of the JC, a non-Marxist and nationalist intellectual alternative was made available to this group in the late 1980s. As Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism had become the most important ingredient in the ideological baggage of the radical youth of the Sinhala-Buddhist South, the JC was more attractive as an intellectual alternative to the JVP.

The association of Ranawaka and his group with the JC did not however last long. As Nalin de Silva was more focused on intellectual work and less on political activism, he was too slow moving in the eyes of this fiery young group. They slowly moved away from the JC and attempted to combine intellectual work with intensive political activism. The turning point of this orientation was the foundation of the organization “*Janatha Mithuro*” (Friends of the People) in 1992 (Ranawaka, 2009: 64).

Interestingly enough, the intellectual orientation of the *Janatha Mithuro* (JM) was less nationalist and more environmentalist, compared to the political vision of the JC. Nalin de Silva was highly critical about this approach and would blame Ranawaka at a later period for dismissing nationalism as a “dead body” (ජාතිකවාදය මළමිනිසක).

At this stage, Champika Ranawaka seems to have been more influenced by the environmental movement that was gaining global popularity (see Ranawaka, 2009: 60-66). The intellectual orientation of the JM could be seen in Ranawaka's work *Sanwardanaye Thunveni Yamaya* (The Third Phase of Development), which is a strong critique of the 'Development Discourse'.

The progress of the JM was hindered by the reorganization of the JVP. The JVP managed to make a strong comeback after the suppression of its armed insurgency in 1989, benefitting from the democratic political atmosphere that emerged after the victory of the PA in 1994. This was a severe blow to the growing popularity of the JM among the politically conscious youth.

When the JVP was able to regain its command on the domain of youth politics, especially in the all-important university student politics, the Ranawaka group was pushed back to nationalism, which it viewed with some reservation in the early 1990s. Benefiting from the new political situation which was marked by the introduction of a political package by the People's Alliance government under Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1995, the Ranawaka group smartly gained the ascendancy of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist political front. This move forced the JVP to take another new leap towards nationalism. The JVP had watered down its nationalist orientation through most of the 1990s and even went to the extent of forming a loose alliance with some non-nationalist left groups.⁴⁰

Losing the battle for youth politics, the Ranawaka group now tuned towards nationalism, and began to establish contacts with politically conscious Buddhist monks. This is how Ranawaka described this decisive political metamorphosis:

⁴⁰ There was a serious internal discussion on the Sinhala nationalist turn of the JVP in the early years of the 1990s. The critical moment of this discussion was the split of the group, which came to be known as Hiru Kandayama. Hiru was one of the newspapers that the new young leadership of the JVP published as a part of its reorganization. A significant number of young activists who worked for the newspaper later gained control of its publication and split from the JVP, criticizing its nationalist orientation. Even then the JVP showed signs of softening some of its strong nationalist views, which were dominant in the late 1990s. Around 1997, it even entered into a loose alliance with the anti-nationalist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which was well known for its sympathy towards Tamil nationalist political demands. Moreover, the JVP at that time cultivated close relationships with many small non-nationalist left groups as well as intellectuals. What is important is that the leading figure of the JVP leadership, who worked closely with these non-nationalist elements of the political left, was Wimal Weerawansa, who became one of the most vociferous spokesmen of the Sinhala-Buddhist political camp.

“The change of our political line had been reported by the JVP newspaper as follows: “Janatha Mithuro who came by train from Matara to Colombo and gathered in front of the Colombo-Fort train station and dispersed to go home. JVP might have thought that the group, which challenged it from their university days, and became a big headache, was dissolved. Some others might also have thought so. Indeed the Janatha Mithuro ceased to exist as an organization. But we built an organization of a different type. Even we did not realize that this is going to be a new beginning in our own lives as well as in the country.” (Ranawaka, 2009: 72).

They began to penetrate the bhikku political organizations with significant effect. This culminated in the foundation of the “National Sangha Council” (ජාතික සංඝ සභාව) in 1995, particularly to protest the “package of political solutions” presented by the PA government. The politically most effective Buddhist monks, such as Rev. Ittepane Dhammalankara, Rev Maduluwawe Sobhitha, and Rev. Muruttettuwa Ananda were in the forefront of the National Sangha Council.

The 2004 election was an important showdown of the strength of these forces. Both the JVP and the Ranawaka group emerged as formidable forces. What was important was the fact that the Ranawaka group was able to form the Jathika Hela Urumya (JHU) by mobilizing a large contingent of popular Buddhist monks and, to gain large support among the semi-urban middleclass, even contesting against the UPFA, which had the support of a large number of Sinhala nationalist groups including the JC and the JVP.⁴¹

As already mentioned, the formation of the JHU and its gains in the 2004 general election was a major turning point in the history of modern radical political Buddhism in Sri Lanka. However, this electoral victory also produced the spark for division within the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp, in particular setting the stage for the emergence of a new wave of extremist Buddhist organizations.

The formation of the BBS by a group of Buddhist monks, who were previously attached to the JHU, was the most significant manifestation of this inner division.

⁴¹ For more detail about the history of the JHU, see De Votta and Stone (2008).

The formation of the BBS was followed by the emergence of several other organizations with the same ideological orientation. Ravana Balaya (RB) and Sihala Ravaya (SR) are such organizations.

The way in which a conducive environment was created for the emergence of these organizations after the JHU gains at the 2004 general election have to be explained. The formation of the JHU as an organization was a carefully calculated move by the Ranawaka group in order to carve a niche for themselves in the political mainstream, at a time when they found themselves in a sort of political wilderness. They especially took advantage of the dramatic effect of the death of Rev. Soma on public sentiment.

The Ranawaka group transformed this public trauma into a political force, establishing the JHU with the participation of a large number of popular monks. These monks were not from the upper echelons of the hierarchy of the Sangha but had emerged as popular preachers and intellectual figures in the preceding period. It is also important to note that they did not have a political history.

Broadly speaking, the monks who rallied around the JHU could be classified into three main groups:

- 1) Popular preachers (Uduwe Dhammaloka, Kolonnawe Sumangala): These popular preachers followed the example of Rev Soma and attempted to emulate him. After his death, these monks gained popularity, especially among middle class Buddhist women.
- 2) Intellectual monks (Ellawala Medhananda, Omalpe Sobhitha): Medhananda is particularly significant as a popular writer on historical issues from a Sinhala-Buddhist perspective.
- 3) Young activist monks (Galagodaattte Gnanasara, Hadigalle Wimalasara): These were young politically conscious monks who had been attracted to the work of the Ranawaka group since the late 1990s.

The paradox of the post-election JHU politics was how to find a working balance between the interests of the Ranawaka group, which engineered the entire process, and those of the monks who were indeed the source of the public support for the JHU. A similar situation had emerged with Sihala Urumaya (SU), the predecessor to the JHU, which was, again, masterminded by Champika Ranawaka in the late 1990s as part of his strategy to gain the upper hand over the JVP after the JM strategy was aborted.

Tensions occurred very early, in the form of a defection of two elected members to the UPFA camp, at the election of the speaker in the 2004 parliament. The crisis worsened after the 2005 presidential election, where the JHU began to play a crucial role. The source of the tension was the effort by the Ranawaka group to dominate JHU affairs at the expense of the monks, who aspired for relative autonomy.

Some monks were extremely unhappy about the way in which the Ranawaka group was trying to dominate the affairs of the JHU. This certainly contradicted the initial claim by them that they offered the *Sihala Urumaya* to the Sangha (එක්මය ශාසනයට පුරා කළා). Gradually, the Ranawaka group regained the ascendancy in party affairs at the expense of the other monks.

Radicalization of Young Buddhist Monks

The backbone of the new Buddhist extremism was the new generation of young radical monks. Their aggressive behaviour is always at the forefront whenever the work of these organizations is discussed. The front pages of newspapers often carried photographs of young Buddhist monks showing intensely aggressive behaviour at public demonstrations. Even at university students' demonstrations, the participation and the violent behaviour of student monks was constantly highlighted. Notwithstanding the fact that these images caused a critical and negative perception of these monks, they also showed the significance of the young Buddhist monks as a radical political force.

The radicalization of young Buddhist monks was a process that was closely linked to the radicalization of rural youth since the late 1960s. Until the end of the 1980s,

the JVP commanded the political orientation of these young monks. In the 1980s, the JVP took the initiative to form a separate organization, the Inter-University Bhikku Federation (IUBF), alongside their Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF). Moreover, young Buddhist monks played a significant role in the JVP-led armed insurgency in the late 1980s. Young monks in universities and rural temples were frequently targeted by state oppression.

Parallel to the JVP activism in the 1980s, inspiration for politically conscious young monks was coming from the emerging new Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.⁴² Some leading monks were at the frontline of these activities. H.L. Seneviratne has incisively demonstrated how the role of the Buddhist monk was redefined as a social activist during this period. He observed, "... how the liberation of the monk has led to an opening of the floodgate for them to do more or less as they please". He refers to these monks as, "... those with a modern education, often a university degree..." He further argues that, "... the idea of the monk's vocation as "social service" has ... trickled down to the less educated monks who live in villages or small town monasteries as well," (Seneviratne, 1999: 210).

The steep decline of the JVP's influence over young radical monks was notable. The JVP's ambiguity towards Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism gave the upper-hand for other players with purer Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideological credentials. Nalin de Silva had always branded the JVP as a false nationalist force (ව්‍යාජ ජාතිකවාදීන්).⁴³

The JVP managed, for the time being, to continue to be attractive to the Sinhala-Buddhist constituency by maintaining its anti-secessionist stance in opposition to

⁴² Ananda Abeysekera has documented in detail how politically active leading monks addressed young monks and inspired them in radical nationalist politics (Abeysekera, 2001).

⁴³ In 2007, a group of students who organized themselves in the University of Peradeniya as the "Sarasavi Sanvada Kendraya" (Centre for Dialogue in the University) published a series of letters exchanged between them and the JVP. The purpose of the letter written by them to the JVP was to request the JVP to abandon Marxism. They identified the JVP as a genuine political force that represents the social ethos of Sinhala-Buddhist youth and its Marxist orientation was identified as incompatible with its Sinhala-Buddhist heritage. Significantly, the first letter was written on 25 June 2004, immediately after the 2004 general election, in which JVP emerged as a formidable political force in the Sinhala-Buddhist South. This young group comprised active members of the Jathika Chinthanaya movement (Jayasumana, 2007).

the LTTE. The success of this strategy, however, foreshadowed the coming split where its most popular leader of the time left the party, taking with him the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist sentiment.⁴⁴

While the JVP's ability to attract radical young Buddhist monks was weakened by this splitting, other contending players such as the JHU and JC were gaining strength.

The JVP suffered another blow in 2012, when "radical Leninists" left the party and formed a separate movement. Both the IUSF and IUBF supported the new group, virtually ending the JVP monopoly on student politics, and also on student monks.

The relationship between the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), the new group, and the radical monks, who were organized in the IUBF was even more problematical. While the FSP was ideologically inclined more towards the anti-nationalist line, student monks in the IUBF fold were inclined more towards the nationalist line. When the JVP was part of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp, this paradox did not emerge. In the recent past, however, FSP leadership of the IUBF had found itself in a somewhat embarrassing situation, over balancing these two opposing ideological lines.

The lack of a political centre to mobilize young radical monks was clearly evident at the time of the emergence of the new radical Buddhist organizations. The stance of the JVP, the organizational crisis of the JHU, and the lack of commitment of the JC to function as a centralized organization, left the large contingent of radical nationalist Buddhist monks uncontrolled in a highly turbulent political arena. There could have been no better time for the mushrooming of radical nationalist Buddhist organizations such as BBS, RB and SR.

⁴⁴ A group of frontline activists, led by its propaganda secretary and parliament group leader, Wimal Weerawansa, left the JVP in 2009 to join the UPFA government as a separate party.

Part III

New Buddhist Radicalism and Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism

The activities of the new extremist Buddhist organizations posed a major dilemma for Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The ambivalence with which many frontline players of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism responded to the aggressive behaviour of these organizations clearly demonstrates this. On the one hand, these organizations embarrassed major players in the Sinhala-Buddhist mainstream, owing to their aggressive behaviour towards those they identified as enemies. On the other hand, these organizations addressed issues that were acknowledged by all in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp as important.

Quite similar to the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983, the work of these extremist Buddhist organizations provides a supreme opportunity to destroy the image of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Due to this, responses to these extremist organizations are highly diverse and require closer scrutiny before coming to swift conclusions.

The new extremist organizations were a double-edged sword to the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist cause. These organizations command a formidable capability to mobilize Sinhala-Buddhist public opinion. Therefore, any organization which depended on Sinhala-Buddhist public opinion, which takes a critical stand on these organizations, is exposed to the wrath of Sinhala-Buddhist public opinion. These organizations mostly intervened in matters that many mainstream organizations found uncomfortable to handle. They were capable of handling them because there seemed to be no boundary that these organizations could not cross. They were not only aggressive in their character, but also had the willingness to take up any issue which would be perceived to be important for Sinhala-Buddhist interests.

One of the frequent allegations by Sinhala-Buddhist opinion leaders is that non-Sinhala-Buddhists in Sri Lanka misuse the complacency of Sinhala-Buddhists and their tolerance towards non-Sinhala-Buddhists. Their non-violent attitude is

perceived as a weakness and being exploited by outsiders with a malevolent agenda.⁴⁵ The claimed benevolence of the Sinhala-Buddhists is viewed to be detrimental to the very survival of the Sinhala-Buddhists. This situation had created a sort of surreptitious desire in the mind of Sinhala-Buddhists, to cross the threshold of this zone of benevolence and face the threat of the evil forces of non-Sinhala-Buddhists. These new organizations satisfied, in full, that desire.

There is also a desire to safeguard the self-proclaimed Sinhala-Buddhist benevolence towards the non-Sinhala-Buddhist “other”. It is this image that mainstream Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism desires to project to the outside world. Frontline advocates of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is well aware that the work of these extremist organizations inflict heavy damage to this image and provide ammunition to the critics of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. This ambivalence is conspicuous in the array of highly diverse responses to the work of these extremist organizations from the various other voices of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp.

There were, and are, a number of dominant voices in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp who were very keen on distancing themselves from these organizations in general, from the BBS in particular. At one extreme of this critical discourse is the view that the BBS is a conspiracy. At the prospect of non-Sinhala-Buddhist constituencies, especially Muslims, becoming a potential danger to Mahinda Rajapaksa’s victory in the upcoming presidential election, this conspiracy theory was tried out by at least two major voices of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp, namely the Jathika Chinthanaya movement and Jathika Nidahas Peramuna (JNP). The popular news website, ‘lankacnews.com’, known to be run by the supporters of Wimal Weerawansa, the leader of JNP, maintained a critical stand on the BBS.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ There is a belief that Sri Lanka is a country where religious coexistence prevailed. This view is shared by scholars irrespective of whether they are ideologically in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp or not. This is mainly based on the assumption that the Sinhala-Buddhists were naturally a people who welcomed and tolerated outsiders. This way of thinking is explicit in the recent novel ‘Maharaja Gamunu’ by Jayantha Chandrasiri (Chandrasiri, 2011). See Dewasiri (2013) for a detailed discussion of this novel.

⁴⁶ Whenever there was an incident which would be embarrassing for the BBS leader lankacnews.com gave wider publicity. The most controversial incident in this connection was when the BBS leader Gnanasara was grilled by the host of a popular TV talk-show presenter Dilka Samanmalee in the program “3600” of Derana TV (<http://lankacnews.com/sinhala/main-news/95956/>).

This seemed to be linked to two factors. Firstly, the JNP was very much concerned about a possible rift between the UPFA and its Muslim vote base. The JNP media spokesperson, a Muslim, made a desperate effort to pacify the Muslim sentiment towards the UPFA, damaged by the acts of the BBS. The other factor is the competition between BBS and Ravana Balaya (RB). As already mentioned RB has the backing of the political camp of Wimal Weerawansa.

Nalin de Silva and his followers kept their distance from the BBS.⁴⁷ The website yuthukama.com was started after the January 2015 presidential election to promote the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist political discourse that had been dealt a severe blow with the defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa. The major intellectual and ideological backing for this website come from Nalin de Silva's politico-ideological project.⁴⁸ The writers of this website, mostly supporters of the JC, make constant effort to argue that the BBS and its aggressive behaviour towards religious minorities is not a part of the authentic Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. They specifically attempt to locate the BBS activities within the JHU political project.⁴⁹ When the issue of Halal certification became a major political issue in 2013, Nalin de Silva made the following remarks in his weekly column in the Divaina Sunday newspaper:

“Today all the problems in this country are understood in order to gain narrow benefits for one's individual politics, for the benefit of one's political party, or in order to attack rival political parties. Another reason for this state of affairs is the weakening of the national movement today. The national movement, which was strong in the 1990s, has been derailed by various monks and laymen, and weakened through the power agendas of two political parties.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See <http://www1.kalaya.org/> for Nalin de Silva's writing on political and ideological issues.

⁴⁸ There are several writers who are strong supporters of Nalin de Silva and regular contributors to the website. Shirantha Chamara, Charitha Kariyawasama, Lasantha Wickramasinha and Mahinda Pathirana are among them. The president of the Yuthukama Sanwada Kawayaya is Gevindu Kumaratunga. He is intellectually and politically associated with the Jathika Chintanaya movement since the mid-1980s, when he was an undergraduate at the University of Colombo. He runs a successful book publishing business, which contributed immensely to the dissemination of the ideas of the JC movement.

⁴⁹ Shirantha Chamara provided probably the most sophisticated explanation on this. See the following link: <http://www.yuthukama.com/2015/07/HelaUrumaya.html>.

⁵⁰ Divaina, 3rd March, 2013 "මෙරට සෑම පුරුෂයෙක් දෙසම අද බැලෙන්නේ ඉන් කම පොද්ගලික දේශපාලනයට, කම පක්ෂයේ දේශපාලනයට වාසියක් ලබා ගැනීම හා ප්‍රතිවාදියාට, ප්‍රතිවාදී පක්ෂවලට පරන ගැසීම යන කරුණු පෙරදැරි කරගනිමිනි මෙයට තවත් හේතුවක් නම් මෙරට ජාතික ව්‍යාපාරය අද වන විට නැවතත් දුර්වල වීමය. අනුවේ දශකයේ ශක්තිමත්ව තිබූ ජාතික ව්‍යාපාරය විවිධ හික්ෂුන් ද ගිහියන් ද විසින් වල්මත් කෙරී අද වන විට දේශපාලන පක්ෂ දෙකක් කම බල ව්‍යාපෘති ඔස්සේ දුර්වල කෙරී ඇත." (<http://www.divaina.com/2013/03/03/nalin.html>)

Nalin de Silva blames some “monks and laymen” for derailing the national movement. He is certainly referring to the radical monks of BBS and other organizations, and his archrival Champika Ranawaka. He also accuses two political parties. Obviously, he is referring here to the JHU and the JNP.

Although Nalin de Silva was an outright critic of all the new extremist Buddhist organizations, and the two political parties, namely JHU and JNP, which provided political backing for them, his young followers maintained a somewhat cautious approach towards them. They were fiercely critical of Champika Ranawaka and the JHU, but not of Wimal Weerawansa and the JNP.

Writing also to yuthukama.com, Wimukthi Wanigasekera bluntly links BBS to the overall political agenda of the JHU. His essay is published with the provocative title: “The BBS project that was directed by Patali (Champika Ranawaka)’s media mafia”.⁵¹ His main argument is that, while the entire BBS project was orchestrated by Champika Ranawaka, the discredit and blame went to the Rajapaksa government. He further argues that there is a hidden agenda behind all these activities that the BBS leadership themselves too may not have been aware of. He seems to be implicitly arguing that the BBS leadership was also a victim of a major conspiracy.

It is notable how Wimukthi Wanigasekera locates Wimal Weerawansa’s role in this. He states, approvingly, that Weerawansa warned at the very beginning that the BBS is a mere puppet organization, dependent on Norwegian funds. Then he says: “To my knowledge no successful response for this allegation came from this organization. Nonetheless, a massive resistance came against Wimal Weerawansa from the BBS and also in the social media.”

Wanigasekera’s attempt to associate the BBS project with Champika Ranawaka is fairly vindicated by an account that has been provided by Ashoka Abayagunawardana.⁵² A longstanding and close political associate of Champika

⁵¹ පාඨලීගේ මාධ්‍ය මාරියාව අධ්‍යක්ෂණය කළ බෞද්ධ බල සේනා ව්‍යාපෘතිය (<http://www.yuthukama.com/2015/03/ChampikaBBS.html>)

⁵² This account is found in his recent work “Yuga Peraliya” (Abayagunawardana, 2015). This work ostensibly provides “the hidden story” behind the campaign that ousted Mahinda Rajapaksa from the presidency on January 8 2015. An engineering graduate from the University of Moratuwa, Asoka Abayagunawardana is closely associated with Champika Ranawaka since the early 1990s. He is known to be a part of the think tank of the Ranawaka group. It seems, however, there is a subtle tension between the two in recent times.

Ranawaka, Abayagunawardana provides a personal testimony into the origin and evolution of the BBS. According to him, even though the former had no direct link with the launch of the BBS, it was consistent with his political agenda at that moment and, therefore, he tactically promoted it. Abayagunawardana further says that Ranawaka initially attempted to persuade Rev. Athuraliye Rathana, another close associate of Ranawaka, to form a new “movement of Buddhist monks”, to drive away the Sinhala-Buddhist constituency from Mahinda Rajapaksa, and to fight the “Muslim challenge”.

Mahinda Pathirana is another prominent writer for yuthukama.com, who launched a harsh attack against these organizations.⁵³ He classifies JHU, BBS and the recently emerged ‘Sinha-le’⁵⁴ in one category, having a negative impact on the image of the Sinhala-Buddhist. He argues that the monks and laymen who founded these organizations are opportunists and promote an agenda that paints Sinhala-Buddhists as racists before the world. He warns Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces to be vigilant of this danger and argues that Mahinda Rajapaksa’s inability to manage these forces caused his downfall.

These views are, however, subtly different from that of Nalin de Silva. He has a more fundamental critique of these organizations. His argument that, “... the (Sinhala-Buddhist) nationalist movement was strong in the 1990s and it has been weakened now,” is a crucial point. This claim is somewhat problematical because it might seem to an outside observer that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was stronger in the period between 2005 and 2015 than in the 1990s. His assessment seems to be based on the “essence” of the nationalism that developed since the late 1990s.

One needs a detailed study of Nalin de Silva’s vast corpus of writings to understand the highly nuanced vision that he produces. He has a strong idiosyncratic thinking pattern, where he projects his version of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism as the most genuine and authentic version. His approach to “true” Buddhism is also relevant here. He discards most current Buddhist practices, as variants of what he terms as

⁵³ <http://www.yuthukama.com/2015/12/Sinhale.html>

⁵⁴ Although an organization has been established by name “Sinha-le” (Lion-Blood), it is more than an organization. It has become a popular trend to display the sign ‘සිංහ-ලේ’ in various forms, such as stickers, t-shirts etc.

“Olcott Buddhism”.⁵⁵ His young followers, notwithstanding the enormous respect they have for their undisputed ‘grand thinker’, are more pragmatic and aware of the fact that a more accommodative approach towards other voices in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp is needed.⁵⁶

The attempt to launch a collective initiative under the auspices of leading Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist groups to address the issue of “religious harmony” has to be understood in this context. These organizations and individuals, under the banner of the Federation of National Organizations, held a media conference on 20th March 2014 to announce the establishment of a ‘Collective for Religious Harmony’ (ආගමික සංහිදියා එකමුතුවක්).⁵⁷ The timing of this initiative was very important. It was at the height of BBS activism. The objective was certainly to water down the negative impact of the anti-minority campaigns led by the BBS and other extremist Buddhist organizations. It has been, however, difficult for this initiative to continue to be a significant one. There seems to be no serious efforts from the organizers to take this initiative further.

Irrespective of raised concerns over the activities of extremist Buddhist organizations, there were clear manifestations, among the mainstream voices of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp, of implicit approval of their work. It has been already argued above that the discourse of these extremist organizations tacitly represents certain aspects of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist aspirations. This becomes clearer when observing the responses of the leading Bhikku voices to the aggressive behaviour of the BBS and other extremist organizations. Their complacency is conspicuous.

When the BBS aggressively sabotaged the media conference of a rival monk, even in the presence of the police, a leading newspaper published responses from several prominent Buddhist monks.⁵⁸ The highlight was one from the late Rev.

⁵⁵ One needs to venture through the vast scope of his writings to understand the highly elusive meaning of what he calls “Olcott Buddhism”. However, this essay may give a general idea: <http://www.divaina.com/2012/06/10/nalin.html>

⁵⁶ Nalin de Silva is severely critical even of Gunadasa Amarasekera, who indeed popularized the term Jathika Chinthanaya. De Silva openly claims in recent times that Amarasekera has no idea what ‘Jathika Chinthanaya’ is. <http://lankacnews.com/sinhala/news/112382/>

⁵⁸ <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2014/04/20/mixed-reactions-of-sangha-to-bbs-antics/>

Maduluwawe Sobhitha, who was widely respected by the Muslims for his social and political interventions.⁵⁹ While opting not to criticize openly the aggressive actions of the BBS, he went on to question some “provocative actions” from the “Muslim side”, which should have resulted in legal action by the government. This stand seems like an indirect justification of the behaviour of the BBS (and other parallel organizations).

Chief of the Asgiriya chapter of the Siyam Nikaya, Rev. Tibbatuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala was more straightforward in defending the BBS. He said he was pleased with the “aims and aspirations” of the BBS, and encouraged such organizations, “... at a time when Buddhism and the country were facing challenges.” When a BBS delegation led by its president Rev. Kirama Wimalajothi visited him to formally present to him the resolutions adopted by the BBS at its convention, Rev. Sumagala openly admitted that he is in agreement with these five resolutions.⁶⁰

In summary, it is safe to conclude that conventional Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has failed to resist these extremist Buddhist organizations, although there were discontents. Even they object most strongly to the possible damage they might cause to the image of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and not to mention the damage they inflict on the multi-ethnic and multi-religious social fabric of Sri Lanka, this dissent cannot be seen as more than a tactical move to distance themselves from the negative effects. None of these dissenters seem to have made any serious effort to raise their voice or apply pressure on the authorities when these extremist organizations were on a rampage against religious minorities, and even against some Buddhists, in gross violation of the law.

The capability of these organizations in mobilizing Sinhala-Buddhist public support is significant. Compared to this, the criticisms from the Sinhala-Buddhist camp

⁵⁹ Rev. Maduluwawe Sobhitha, who passed away recently, had been a dominant public figure in the last few years. He was the charismatic figure that unified the diverse political forces that opposed the regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was defeated at the presidential election of January 2015. Most importantly, Muslims and other non-Buddhist communities acknowledged the moderate stance of Rev. Sobhitha, in contrast to the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the likes of Galagodatte Gnanasara. Sobhitha’s career as a public socio-political activist is, however, in an extremely contradictory one. It has swung from one extreme to another. He was at the forefront of the oppositional political camp, hated by the overwhelming majority of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists. See Seneviratne (1999: 237-240) for an assessment of his early public career.

⁶⁰ http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=58829

seem to be insignificant. Moreover, it is notable that these extremist organizations receive indirect or direct acknowledgement from the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist camp. It is possible to conclude that these extremist Buddhist organizations are not illegitimate or peripheral in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist universe; they are very much part of it.

New Radical Buddhism, Minorities and Ethno-Religious Coexistence

One of the central political problems faced by Sri Lanka at present is the strained relationships between the different ethno-religious communities. Although the military conflict that was linked with territorially based political demands of ethnic Tamils in the North and East came to a decisive end, the underlying issue of the conflicted political relationship between Sinhala-Buddhists and Tamils was not eased. One may argue that the crisis has become more complicated, because certain voices and concerns that were sidelined during the war are now freely expressed. The end of the military conflict has therefore set the stage for multiple players to raise their voices. The political character of the Rajapaksa regime however, made it utterly incapable of handling the delicate political balance in the post-war period.

It has been widely acknowledged that the defeat of the Rajapaksa regime was primarily due to the unification of non-Sinhala-Buddhist constituencies under the candidacy of Maithripala Sirisena, the common opposition candidate. It was also widely believed that the defeat of the Rajapaksa regime would have been a big blow to the extremist Buddhist organizations. There were reasonable grounds for this belief because a major factor behind the rapid growth of these organizations was the direct or indirect blessings that came from that regime. The unprecedented level of impunity that the members of these organizations enjoyed has already been referred to. One might have expected that there would be no possibility for these organizations to continue to behave the way they used to, when they no longer had the blessing of the state machinery.⁶¹

⁶¹ Even nationalist critics of the BBS believed that its organizational mechanism has been dismantled following the presidential election. Wimukthi Wanigasekera (see supra, p. 39), in his critique of the BBS and its JHU links, argues that the entire BBS organizational mechanism is dismantled after JHU “withdrew its support to the BBS” (<http://www.yuthukama.com/2015/03/ChampikaBBS.html>).

The experience since the regime change, however, shows otherwise. There is not only a gradual resurgence of the BBS activities, but also the emergence of other similar organizations. A new organization called *Sinhale Jathika Balamuluwa* (සිංහලේ ජාතික බලමුළුව - popularly known as ‘Sinha-Le’ - සිංහ ලේ) has been added to the list of extremist Sinhala-Buddhist organizations recently. As in the other organizations, *Sinhale Jathika Balamuluwa* (SJB) is also led by two monks, namely Rev. Madille Pannaloka (general secretary) and Rev. Yakkalamulle Pavara (president).⁶²

It is obvious that they do not enjoy the same level of impunity under the new regime. For example, legal action was taken against the BBS leader and other monks when they attempted to disrupt a court hearing recently. The irony, however, is that the legal measures taken against the monks seem to be enhancing their popularity. Contrary to the belief of some that these organizations would not be capable of continuing without the direct or indirect support of the authorities, they continue to make their presence felt.

It is possible to arrive at several conclusions from the discussion of Part I and Part II of this essay:

- These organizations are an integral part of the historical development of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. They emerged and engaged in their activities not in violation of the fundamental norms of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism; they were fully a part of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist imagination and performed certain tasks that were desired by, but beyond the reach of, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism because of certain restrictions that surrounded them. The validity of this conclusion is proven by the pronouncement by none other than the Mahanayaka of the Asgiriya chapter of the Siyam Nikaya, Rev. Tibbatuwawe Sumangala, that he is “pleased with the aims and aspirations” of the BBS, and they emerged “at a time when Buddhism and the country were facing challenges”.
- As organizations, they are directly linked to the dynamics of the recent history of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The mobilization of young Buddhist monks as

⁶² <http://nethfm.com/article/92986>

a political force is a marked feature of this history. While the JHU, and the JVP, to some extent, played a major role in bringing bhikku politics onto a new level by transforming organized groups of monks into a formidable political force, the internal crises in these political parties flushed out a large contingent of these politically active monks, paving the way for this new type of extremist Buddhist organization.

- Contrary to the belief that the support of the government was the main source of the organizational capability of these organizations, it is clear that they not only draw significant public support, but also fulfil certain unrealized, and mostly suppressed, desires of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist mind. Their violent behaviour against ethno religious minorities is a fundamental desire of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist imagination, mostly kept in check by “civilized” moral restrictions. The recent rally of the new kid in the block ‘Sinha-Le’, in Kandy (see image p. 40), clearly demonstrates their ability to mobilize the masses around these hitherto suppressed and now unleashed violent desires of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, even without the direct backing of the political authorities. It is also notable that the recent wave of arrests of BBS monks has drawn more public sympathy towards them.

What do these conclusions mean in the context of the present political situation?

There is a possibility that these organizations will continue as significant players in the public-political life and pose a serious threat to the fragile relationships between ethno-religious minorities. There is a new political context where the major rallying cry of the political camp led by ousted president Mahinda Rajapaksa, organized as the “Joint Opposition”, is Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. While the extremist Buddhist organizations are criticized by them as the biggest factor in the defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa, they continue to reap the political harvest from the work of these organizations. This became clear when a series of arrests of BBS leaders occurred recently. Spokesmen of the Joint Opposition showed their solidarity and made use of this opportunity to create a rift between the Sinhala-Buddhist mind and the political leadership of the present government. In this context it is possible to expect a new trajectory in the development of these extremist Buddhist organizations and their activities.



Public rally of Sinha-Le organization on 23rd January, 2016

Photo courtesy: <http://www.lankanewsweb.today/archives/8030>

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New Buddhist Extremism and the Challenges to Ethno-Religious Coexistence in Sri Lanka

This study attempts to understand the emergence of politically motivated Buddhist organizations, their modes of activism, the way in which their role is being perceived and responded to by the other forces of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and lastly, how the activities of these organizations affect the precarious political equilibrium in the post-Eelam war Sri Lanka which is dominated by antagonistic relationships among a number of ethno-religious nationalisms. It argues that these organizations are very much part of the hegemonic Buddhist organizational network in Sri Lanka and logical offspring of a recent evolution of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

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