



CHANGING NARRATIVES OF THE SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR:  
HOW SINHALESE BUDDHIST NATIONALISM AND TAMIL NATIONALISM ARE  
ROOTED IN CLASS AND CASTE CONFLICT

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The dominant discourse on the Sri Lankan civil war classifies it as an ethnic conflict resulting from Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and Tamil nationalism. The classification of Sri Lanka as an ethnic conflict neglects to account for divisions within both the Sinhala community and the Tamil community, especially along class and caste divisions. This thesis provides a nuanced historical understanding of the Sri Lankan civil war as a class conflict arising from Sinhalese nationalism and manufactured ethnic tensions. The argument presented is that the Sri Lankan civil war is rooted in class struggle within and across ethnic groups for access to political power and economic equality. Since there have been instances of solidarity between Sinhalese people and Tamils due to shared class interests, it is clear that ethnic divisions were not inherent to the Sri Lankan polity but were caused by colonial policies and class divisions. To make this argument, the thesis utilizes an intersectional Marxist framework accounting for the influence of ethnic relations in class theories of exploitation, exclusion, and class interests. The thesis concludes with a focus on the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka and how it furthers my argument for a nuanced understanding of the civil war with attention to the class disparities in the nation.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTC	All Ceylon Tamil Congress
FP	Federal Party
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LSSP	Lanka Sama Samaja Party
LTTE	Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UNP	United National Party



## PREFACE

As a Sinhalese Sri Lankan that was born and raised in America, I grew up with more knowledge about U.S. history than about the present conditions and civil war in Sri Lanka. Both of my parents are Sinhalese immigrants from Sri Lanka and the country holds a dear place in my heart as I grew up on staple Sri Lankan foods and traditions. As a child, I would visit Sri Lanka for months during the summer in the early 2000s when the civil war was ongoing. However, I was too young to really understand what was happening and instead, I grew up being subjected to dominant discourses that persist today about the civil war being an ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils. Coming from a Sinhalese background, I was exposed to the narrative of the war that portrayed the Tamils as terrorists and the Sinhalese people as protectors of their nation. As I started to become exposed to more Tamil people in the media such as M.I.A. who has created songs supporting Tamil separatism, I recognized how this narrative did not tell the whole story and was based on Sinhalese nationalism. Through a few google searches on the ethnic tensions in the civil war, I learned more about accusations of genocide by the Sinhalese dominated government against the Tamil people and the way that Tamils had been discriminated against in almost every aspect of life.

As someone involved in anti-racism work in the U.S. through my role leading an anti-racism activist organization on campus, I was inclined to reflect on my own racial identity and question the dominant narrative of the war. Through my reflection on being a

part of the majority racial group in Sri Lanka, I recognized how that has implicated myself in the horrendous acts that the government committed in the pursuit of Sinhalese nationalism. As a result, my own identity as a Sinhalese Sri Lankan has encouraged me to learn more about the twenty-six year long civil war and to advocate for a nuanced perspective of it. I decided to write this thesis examining the civil war and the nationalisms present in it with an attention to class relations as I've learned that race and class go hand in hand. I hope this thesis emphasizes the importance of challenging dominant narratives and paying attention to the interests of those most oppressed in order to create a just society.

## INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of civil wars in our international system has grown increasingly over the past century. Today, a majority of conflicts are not interstate or conflicts *between* nations, but they are intrastate or conflicts that occur *within* nations. Intrastate (civil) conflict has become the most common form of armed conflict since World War II.<sup>1</sup> Although recent developments with the conflict between Russia and Ukraine appear to challenge this trend, intrastate conflict remains the most common form of conflict in the international realm. There are currently eight conflicts classified as civil wars or internal conflicts occurring in the world today including the Syrian Civil War, Yemeni Civil War, and the Myanmar conflict.<sup>2</sup> With the increasing number of civil wars and intrastate conflicts occurring internationally, it is imperative to understand the causes of civil war in order to prevent them and develop proper solutions to resolve them. A civil war that is overlooked but that encompasses pressing issues of current civil wars today such as ethno-religious nationalism and asymmetric warfare is the Sri Lankan civil war. As a Sinhalese Sri Lankan myself, I have been exposed to narratives of the Sri Lankan war that depict the Sinhalese as protectors of a land being infiltrated by Tamil terrorists. The common narrative of the civil war as a battle between Sinhalese and Tamils depicting either ethnic group as the enemy or victim fails to genuinely explain the causes of the conflict and the current situation of the nation. In the following analysis, I challenge the

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<sup>1</sup> Halvard Buhaud, Scott Gates, Harvard Hegre, and Havard Strand, "Global Trends in Armed Conflict." *Globale Norge - hva nå?*. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2007): 3.

<sup>2</sup> "Countries Currently at War 2022," World Population Review, accessed March 26, 2022. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-currently-at-war>

dominant discourse on the Sri Lankan civil war and argue for a class-based perspective to be developed in conjunction with an intersectional framework in order to explain the rise of nationalist sentiments that caused the war and the shortcomings of its resolution.

After the Cold War, it was commonly accepted that ethnic and religious diversity made countries more prone to civil war because it led to forms of nationalism that intensified sectarian divisions.<sup>3</sup> The belief that nationalism causes conflict is evident in the case of the Sri Lankan civil war as many academic articles and scholars discuss the Sri Lankan civil war to be a result of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism in the nation.<sup>4</sup> However, the narrative of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism as the dominant contributor to the civil war neglects to account for the divisions within the two major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. During the civil war, Sinhalese and Tamil groups were not united within themselves as there were disputes and conflicts within the ethnic groups regarding forms of action taken during the war. As there have also been instances of solidarity between Sinhalese people and Tamils due to shared class interests, it is clear that ethnic divisions were not inherent to the Sri Lankan polity but were caused by colonial policies and class divisions. Therefore, through an intensive case study of the Sri Lankan civil war, I argue that ethnic-religious nationalism claimed to be the cause of the civil war is rooted in class and caste divisions that prevail at the intra and inter-ethnic levels. These divisions can be

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<sup>3</sup> Lisa Trei. "Causes of world's civil wars misunderstood, researchers say," *Stanford News Service*, September 24, 2002, <https://news.stanford.edu/pr/02/civilwar925.html>

<sup>4</sup> Neil DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka* (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007).

perceived as driving divisions within the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups as well as between the two ethnic groups. Class and caste are used in similar contexts due to their overlap as contemporary elites and upper classes are often from higher castes and the poor or lower classes are from lower castes. A class-based perspective to the causes of the Sri Lankan civil war and the rise of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism will permit for a more genuine understanding of the war and why ethnic tensions within the nation have still not been resolved. For example, the continued militarization of Tamil dominated regions and the presence of security checkpoints are a testament to the ongoing ethnic and religious tensions in the nation that continue to persist 13 years after the end of the civil war. On a macro-level, the analysis of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism and Tamil nationalism during the Sri Lankan civil war as rooted in class relations will encourage that the role of class be analyzed in the current civil wars occurring today, especially those classified as ethnic and religious conflict.

The Sri Lankan civil war was a twenty-six-year long conflict characterized by violence and ethnic tensions beginning in 1983 and lasting until 2009. Despite being a lengthy battle involving serious crimes such as genocide against the Tamil people, there is limited academic research and articles that discuss the topic. There is a lack of academic inquiry into the causes of the Sri Lankan civil war and its connections to nationalism and class divisions. Additionally, the lack of academic research is evidenced by the search results retrieved from various search engines and databases including Google Scholar, Web of Science, JSTOR, WorldCat, and Bibliography of Asian Studies.

When researching “class and nationalism in Sri Lanka” on the Web of Science database, 8 results appeared. When broadening the search for “causes of the Sri Lankan civil war,” 9 results had appeared on the Web of Science and only 39,100 results on Google Scholar. There is clearly a need for more research and academic engagement on the topic of the Sri Lankan civil war which is what I aim to provide with this paper.

The Sri Lankan civil war has been classified as an ethnic conflict between Sinhalese, the majority ethnic group, and Tamils, the largest minority ethnic group in the nation. The conflict and sectarian divisions between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka is attributed to the rise of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.<sup>5</sup> However, this classification simplifies the conflict and fails to recognize the class and caste dimensions of the civil war. Although ethnic-religious nationalism has emerged as an explanation for the cause of the Sri Lankan civil war, it still falls short of truly explaining the conflict. An ethno-religious nationalism framework simplifies the conflict into the divisions *between* Tamils and Sinhalese, but neglects to recognize divisions *within* the Sinhalese and Tamil communities formed on the basis of class. The divisions within Sinhalese and Tamil groups based on class are evident with the existence of separate working class and elite political parties within both ethnic groups. The political parties demonstrated how class interests had superseded the common interests and unity of each ethnic group. The ideology of ethno-religious nationalism portrays the Sinhalese and Tamils as monolithic

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<sup>5</sup> Mujib Mashal, “For Sri Lanka, a Long History of Violence,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/world/asia/sri-lanka-history-civil-war.html>

groups that share the same goals. However, in the progression of the Sri Lankan civil war, it is clear that's not the case.

In the following analysis, the Sri Lankan civil war is argued to be rooted in class and caste distinctions within the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups, as opposed to primarily ethnic tensions between the two groups. The Sri Lankan Civil War was driven by political groups including the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP) that consisted of the bourgeoisie and maintained power in the government.<sup>6</sup> During the civil war, Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism was instituted through the Sinhalese dominated government with policies that represented the interests of elites such as the Sinhala Only Act of 1956.<sup>7</sup> Within the Tamil community, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) maintained power, but there was much opposition towards their ideology and their violent tactics from within the Tamil community.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, certain lower-class Tamil groups such as the Indian Tamil Plantation workers were excluded from the LTTE and other Sri Lankan Tamil resistance groups. Drawing from mainly qualitative analyses of the civil war, it is evident that the dominant narrative of the Sri Lankan civil war as a war between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and the Tamil minority neglects the real problem of elites and upper classes

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<sup>6</sup> MeeNilankco Theiventhran, "A Class Based Approach to the Sri Lankan National Question," *Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Maiuran Satgunarajah, "'Never Again': The Case Study of Sri Lanka and the Collective Action Theory of Genocide" (Master Thesis, University of Windsor, 2016). <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/5915>

<sup>8</sup> Neil DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest For Separatism in Sri Lanka," *Asian Survey* 49, no.6 (2009). DOI: 10.1080/09546559708427405

claiming to represent the interests of middle and working classes under the guise of nationalism.

To provide context for this analysis, I will provide the historical background of Sri Lanka with an emphasis on the period of colonization from 1505 to 1948. The paper will address the different methods used in this analysis including the utilization of class-centric frameworks from theorists indebted to Marx in conjunction with nationalist frameworks. The analysis will then continue to explore existing literature on the topic of class and nationalism in Sri Lanka as well as Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism and identity politics, more generally. The paper will end with an application of the framework to the situation of the Sri Lankan Civil War and its aftermath.

The paper will argue that when analyzed from a class-based perspective, the underlying causes of the Sri Lankan civil war and nationalism as rooted in class divisions become clearer and permit for a more lasting solution to the ethnic divisions within the nation. To conclude, the greater implications of this analysis will be discussed including how the framework of ethnic-religious nationalism being rooted in class divisions can be applied to ongoing civil wars in the present and result in more durable solutions to conflict.

## **CHAPTER 1: GENERAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

History is the backbone of the present. To fully understand the Sri Lankan civil war as rooted in Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism and more deeply, class conflict, it is necessary to know the origins of the nation of Sri Lanka and the ways that colonialism influenced the twenty-six year long civil war. In his analysis of the history of Sri Lanka and its civil war, Spencer claims that “present conflicts can only be explained by reference to the past.”<sup>1</sup> Although the Sri Lankan civil war is not a present conflict as it ended 13 years ago, it still requires a historical analysis to understand it. The point at which the history of a nation begins is a contested matter. However, for the purposes of this analysis, the historical background of Sri Lanka will briefly address the pre-colonial period dating back to the 3rd century B.C. Then, the history of Sri Lanka during the colonial period from 1505 - 1948 will be discussed in-depth followed by details of Sri Lanka during the civil war until the present day. In this historical analysis, the elements of Sri Lankan society including demographics of the population with regards to religion and income-levels will also be discussed.

### **1.1 PRE-COLONIALISM PERIOD**

The ancient kingdom of Sri Lanka dates back to about 483 B.C. with the arrival of Prince Vijaya and his followers from North India to Sri Lanka and the establishment of

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Spencer, *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990), 3.

the city of Anuradhapura a century later.<sup>2</sup> The arrival of Vijaya to Sri Lanka is seen as the beginning of the island's connection with the Theravada Buddhist religion because the day that Vijaya arrived in Sri Lanka is said to be the day that Lord Buddha died.<sup>3</sup> The myth of Prince Vijaya's arrival is recorded in the *Mahavamsa* or the Great Chronicle which was written to legitimize the Buddhist association with Sri Lanka. This myth also marks the beginning of the association between Sinhalese people and Buddhism. It fostered the idea that Vijaya is the ancestor of the Sinhalese people and that Lord Buddha designated the island of Sri Lanka as a repository for Theravada Buddhism. Additionally, the story serves to promote Sinhalese dominance and nationalist sentiments. Although the Sinhala people acknowledge that they may not have been the first inhabitants of the island due to the presence of the Veddas, they claim to be the first 'civilized' settlers of Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhism was officially introduced to Sri Lanka around 250 B.C. by the great Indian Emperor Asoka who had sent his own son as a missionary. With this introduction of Buddhism, strong ties between Sri Lanka and the preservation of Buddhism were created. The connection between Sri Lanka and Buddhism and the myth of Prince Vijaya contributed to the rise of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist sentiments that were promoted during the civil war. In the pre-colonial time, kingship was the unifying political

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<sup>2</sup> S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe and Vidyamali Samarasinghe, *Historical Dictionary of Sri Lanka*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identities," in *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, ed. Jonathan Spencer (London: Routledge, 1990), 20.

institution with strong Buddhist influences as all kings were practicing Buddhists and patrons of Buddhist institutions.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, from early Sri Lankan history, there was a connection between the elites or ruling classes and the practice of Buddhism. During the 13th to 14th centuries, a Tamil kingdom was established in the northern province of Sri Lanka in Jaffna. The Tamil kingdom was a result of the occupation of northern Sri Lanka around the 10th century by the Cholas, who were south Indian Tamils and Hindu Shaivites, and then around the 13th century by the Pandyan, who were part of a Tamil kingdom in India.<sup>6</sup> The Sinhalese and Tamils dominated different geographic regions of Sri Lanka. The northern and eastern regions were Tamil-dominated, while the south or southwestern regions were characterized by Sinhalese domination. This trend has continued to the present-day with Tamils being a majority in the Northern Province and the Sinhalese people being a majority throughout the southern, western, and central regions. The distinctions between ethnic groups that already existed within the nation would become exacerbated by the colonial powers that invaded Sri Lanka.

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald Hubert Peiris, "Sri Lanka," Britannica, last modified April 4, 2022.  
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka/New-cultivation-techniques>

<sup>6</sup> Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "India and Sri Lanka in Antiquity," The Diplomat, September 18, 2016.  
<https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/india-and-sri-lanka-in-antiquity/>

## 1.2 COLONIAL PERIOD

### PORTUGUESE RULE

The colonial era of Sri Lanka began around 1505 and lasted for about four centuries until Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948.<sup>7</sup> During this period, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British were involved in the colonization of Sri Lanka. The Portuguese first arrived in 1505 and dominated the west coast of the island while pushing the Sinhalese rulers inland. In addition to exploiting resources and controlling territory, the Portuguese forcibly converted large numbers of Sri Lankans to Catholicism. The presence of Sinhalese Christians became troubling for Sinhalese Buddhists who believed that their religious and cultural identities were inseparable.<sup>8</sup> The existence of Sinhalese Christians also complicates the typical narrative of the Sri Lankan civil war as driven by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism against the Tamils. This narrative fails to account for the role of Sinhalese Christians in the conflict which can be better understood through a class analysis.

The Portuguese had introduced the term “caste” to refer to the social units of the island. Different castes formed based on the work that people performed in the nation. For example, the Salāgama caste arose as the caste responsible for collection of cinnamon while the Mudaliyār class consisted of higher castes and colonial elites.<sup>9</sup> The Mudaliyārs

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<sup>7</sup> During the period of British colonial rule, Sri Lanka was called “Ceylon.” It was referred to by similar names under Portuguese and Dutch colonization. However, for purposes of consistency, the paper will only refer to the nation as Sri Lanka.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 43.

were an example of how Europeans depended on the support and allegiance of a powerful group of locals to maintain order during their exploitation of natural resources and labor. Dutch colonial rule also depended on the Mudaliyārs who were appointed to the Governor and performed administrative functions entrusted to them in their provinces and districts.<sup>10</sup> The different caste groups created by colonial rulers exacerbated class divisions and created classes of elites that worked with the colonial administration. These class distinctions informed the Sri Lankan civil war and formed the basis of the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist movement as well as Tamil separatism.

#### DUTCH RULE

During their rule, the Portuguese failed to subjugate the kingdom of Kandy and were eventually expelled by the Dutch in 1656. The Dutch arrived in Sri Lanka during the 17th century at Batticaloa. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) administered the Dutch territory and created a flourishing trade in cinnamon. During their rule, the Dutch provided grants of land to the Mudaliyār class and a colonial elite emerged among the Low Country Sinhalese well before British accession. In their colonization efforts, the Dutch unsuccessfully attempted to establish colonies of Dutch citizens and Burghers, who were an ethnic group of mixed Sri Lankan, Dutch, and Portuguese descent.<sup>11</sup> Geographical separations and class divisions were exacerbated by residential colonies that were exclusive to those of European descent. For instance, the area of Colombo

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<sup>10</sup> M.U. de Silva, "Mudliyar System and their Claim for Exclusive Social Status during the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 60, no. 2 (2015): 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 46.

called “Cinnamon Gardens” was an exclusive residential area where the elites had built mansions and contributed to the class divisions in the nation. During their rule, the Dutch occupied low-country Sinhalese and Tamil regions from 1656 until 1796 when the British invaded.

### BRITISH RULE & CASTE SYSTEM

The colonization by the British had the biggest influence on Sri Lanka, including its culture and governmental system, as it was the last colonizer before the nation achieved independence. The British unified the entire country under a single administration which had not happened for 400 years before that.<sup>12</sup> During the period of British colonial rule, Sri Lanka was referred to as “Ceylon.” The British had conquered the whole island by 1815 including the Kandyan kingdom which the previous two colonizers had not been able to accomplish. The Government of Ceylon was established by the British and it had created a unitary state in place of Sinhalese and Tamils living exclusively within their own traditional homelands.<sup>13</sup> During their rule, the British chose to identify people with social categories such as race and to control the people through their use of those categories. The British administered the island through racial separatism and considered the Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers, and “Moors” to be distinct races and governed them separately.<sup>14</sup> Although categories of caste existed during the Dutch and Portuguese rule, the caste system was also a product of British colonial

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<sup>12</sup> A. Samarasinghe and Samarasinghe, *Historical Dictionary of Sri Lanka*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Satgunarajah, “Never Again,” 5.

<sup>14</sup> Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 48.

enforcement. The British divided each race into ranked subcategories which they considered as castes or caste-like units.<sup>15</sup> Castes were further divided internally with ranked grades and the highest grades of the highest caste who had a “first class” status were Sinhalese Govigamas and Tamil Vellalas.<sup>16</sup>

The caste system in Sri Lanka prior to colonial rule was more fluid and castes would absorb other people. However, the colonial system turned these fluid relationships into a rigid system and enforced status distinctions. Therefore, it is evident that an examination of the colonial history of Sri Lanka is necessary in order to understand the class and caste divisions that underlie nationalist sentiments. Colonialism had created beliefs about racial superiority and identity as well as contributed to the creation of distinct social classes, which resulted in the rise of two opposed nationalisms in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese people and the Tamils. The contribution of British colonial rule to the creation of elite classes that would pursue a nationalist agenda during the civil war at the expense of lower classes is evident in their use of traditional elites to maintain control. In this period, the population was classed into ethnic categories and each group was controlled through traditional elites who were recruited from the leading families of the Govigama and Vellala castes. The elites were working with the British colonizers and benefited from their rule for some time. The classes of elites collaborating with the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> M. U. de Silva, “Caste Consideration in Native Appointments - A Review of British Administrative Policy in Sri Lanka During the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 51, (2005): 53.

British were referred to as the colonial and traditional local bourgeois classes that benefited economically from colonization.<sup>17</sup>

Ethnic divisions were further perpetuated by the British with their favored treatment towards Tamils over the Sinhalese majority. The biggest beneficiaries of British colonialism were those who spoke English and Jaffna Tamils had greater access to English education because there were more missionary-built schools in the Tamil-dominated north than the rest of the island.<sup>18</sup> Sinhalese Buddhists nationalists have claimed that this was a result of “divide and rule” policies by the British who promoted ethnic competition with these policies and emphasized differences between ethnic groups. With an English-education, the Tamils had more access to employment and their increased wealth led to the rise of nationalist sentiments among the Sinhalese. As a result, a disproportionate number of elites were Tamils which contributed to tensions between Sinhalese and Tamil people. In addition to contributing to racial and caste divisions, the British had introduced an independent capitalist sector into the Sri Lankan economy. With this system, coffee became a lucrative crop for the British to build capital. Since Sinhalese people were not willing to work the coffee plantations, the British brought Indian Tamil workers to Sri Lanka as indentured laborers.<sup>19</sup> The influx of Indian Tamils,

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<sup>17</sup> Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits, “Contemporary Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism in Sri Lanka: The Relevance of a (Neo-) Marxist Interpretation,” *The Open Area Studies Journal* 4, (2011): 79.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Lim, “The Art of Losing: Beyond *java*, *patois* and postvernacular vitality - Repositioning the periphery in global Asian ecologies,” in *Endangered Languages and Languages in Danger: Issues of documentation, policy, and language rights*, eds. Luna Filipovic and Martin Putz (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016): 293.

<sup>19</sup> A. Samarasinghe and Samarasinghe, *Historical Dictionary of Sri Lanka*, 13.

also referred to as Plantation Tamils, to Sri Lanka contributed further to ethnic divisions between the Sinhalese and Tamils as well as class divisions within the Tamil community itself as Indian Tamils were considered to be of a lower caste.<sup>20</sup>

Although Sri Lanka gained independence from British rule in 1948, the effects of British colonial policies intensified political Buddhism and violence in the nation that would lead to the twenty-six year long civil war.<sup>21</sup> British policies that favored Tamils for government employment and favored Christians over other religions would cause the Buddhists to mobilize.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, an overview of British colonial practices show that the roots of the Sri Lankan civil war are in class relations and ethno-religious nationalism.

### **1.3 THE INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain on February 4, 1948 through peaceful negotiations solidified in the Soulbury Constitution. Sri Lanka's transition from colony to independent state varied greatly from other decolonization efforts like those in India. The transfer of power was not a result of a violent independence movement, rather it was a result of peaceful compromise between elites. Political power was passed from the British to an Anglicized indigenous elite who had already been substantially self-

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<sup>20</sup> M. Riswan, "A Historical Survey of Social Class and Caste System in Sri Lanka," *KALAM* 8, no. 1 (2014): 46.

<sup>21</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

governing since 1931.<sup>23</sup> English was the language of colonial administration and thus, Sri Lanka's ruling elite at independence was highly Anglicized and many could not read or speak Sinhala or Tamil.<sup>24</sup> The multi-ethnic appearance of the political elite is noteworthy as class status and professional relations had transcended ethnic differences. Tamil and Sinhalese elites had shared a common socialization process by attending elite English-medium schools and British universities during the colonial period. Therefore, Tamil elites had considered themselves as ethnic equals with the Sinhalese elites and were treated as such during the period leading to independence.<sup>25</sup> It was the cooperation between Sinhalese and Tamil elites that had actually led to Sri Lanka's independence from Britain in 1948. From the start of independence, there was a clear class alliance between upper class members across ethnic groups showing how class identity had triumphed over ethnic and religious distinctions.

The Soulbury Constitution was developed at independence and created a British parliamentary government. Power was handed over to the English-educated Colombo elite and a few Sinhalese Govigama caste families who dominated politics.<sup>26</sup> The parliamentary system created by the constitution guaranteed that the Sinhalese Buddhist vote would determine who ruled the island. The Ceylon Citizenship Act passed in 1948 made citizenship dependent on descent or registration. Registration included proof of

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<sup>23</sup> Kenneth D. Bush, "Critical Juncture I: 1948 Independence and the Disenfranchisement of the Plantation Tamils," in *The Intra-Group Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 75. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230597822\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230597822_4)

<sup>24</sup> Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," 1025.

<sup>26</sup> Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 5.

three generations of paternal ancestry in Sri Lanka, and thus, citizenship was tied to the birth of one's ancestors.<sup>27</sup> The Act denied citizenship to Tamils of Indian origin which included about 800,000 indentured laborers brought by the British from India to work on coffee, tea, and rubber plantations in Sri Lanka. Power was concentrated in the hands of the feudal elite who disenfranchised the Plantation Tamils in order to ensure a Sinhalese electoral majority in the upcountry area.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the Indian Tamils brought over as indentured laborers were forced to emigrate to India after they were refused citizenship in Sri Lanka. A majority of the Indian Tamils were poor and illiterate. Therefore, they had become the first targets of Sinhalese nationalists after independence as they lacked power and education to resist discriminatory policies. India had always deemed them to be Sri Lankan citizens, so the Plantation Tamils had essentially become stateless.<sup>29</sup> The discrimination that Indian Tamils endured was not only by the Sinhalese, but also by minority indigenous Tamils.<sup>30</sup> When certain Tamil groups advocated for Tamil separatism or nationalism, it was not inclusive of the lower class Indian and Plantation Tamils.

After Sri Lanka gained independence, the island was ruled by various political parties including the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party

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<sup>27</sup> Bush, "Critical Juncture I," 76.

<sup>28</sup> A. Sivanandan, "Ethnic Cleansing in Sri Lanka," *Institute of Race Relations* 51, no.3 (2010): 60.

<sup>29</sup> Al Jazeera, "Disenfranchisement of Tamil," *Al Jazeera*, January 27, 2009.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/1/27/disenfranchisement-of-tamils>

<sup>30</sup> PBS POV, "Timeline: History of the Conflict in Sri Lanka," Accessed March 26, 2022.

[http://archive.pov.org/nomoretars/timeline/#:~:text=The%20new%20government%20passed%20anti,on%20foreign%20Downed%20plantations\).](http://archive.pov.org/nomoretars/timeline/#:~:text=The%20new%20government%20passed%20anti,on%20foreign%20Downed%20plantations).)

(SLFP). From 1948 to 1956, the UNP ruled the country and proposed interethnic mixed policies that were based on class and discriminated against the Plantation Tamils.<sup>31</sup> The UNP was responsible for enacting the Ceylon Citizenship Act and developed other conservative policies that reflected the preferences of the western-educated elite. Policies did not reflect the interests of the entirety of the Sinhalese population, rather it was focused on the elites who consisted of both Tamils and Sinhalese. Therefore, it is evident how divisions were rooted in classist structures that provided power to elites over the majority population. In order for Sinhala elites to maintain power, however, they appealed to the majority non-elite Sinhala population through nationalism.

In order to continue pursuing their class interests, the elites promoted nationalist sentiments as a way to obscure class differences.<sup>32</sup> Ethnic identities from the colonial period began to change and distinctions between “Low Country” and Kandyan Sinhalese or Ceylon and Indian Moors were no longer included in the census.<sup>33</sup> Ethnic groups became more encompassing on the surface, but still operated along class lines. When political parties and leaders represented the interests of the Sinhalese people or Tamils, it was not the interests of the middle or lower class being represented, but that of the elites and those in power. This is clearly evident in the leaders of the political parties that were elected during the post-independence period. In 1956, the SLFP party led by S.W.R.D.

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<sup>31</sup> A. Samarasinghe and Samarasinghe, *Historical Dictionary of Sri Lanka*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Ahlin Kadirgamar, “Polarization, Civil War, and Persistent Majoritarianism in Sri Lanka,” in *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia*, eds. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2020).

<sup>33</sup> Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 8.

Bandaranaike had won the election on a platform of Sinhalese nationalism. The party proposed and passed the “Sinhala Only” bill introduced in 1956 which made Sinhalese the official language of Sri Lanka.<sup>34</sup> Although this act is characterized by embodying Sinhalese nationalism and Buddhist nationalism as Sinhala was the language of Sri Lanka’s Buddhists, it also consists of class dimensions. The policy angered Tamil elites who were in positions of power during British colonial rule, and would lose that opportunity with this policy. The extent that the Sinhala Only bill would affect poorer Tamils such as the Plantation Tamils is unclear as those Tamils were illiterate in their own native language of Tamil. However, Tamils from upper classes who had more power and wealth would be able to access more resources to learn the Sinhala language. Thus, the policy would not be as tough of a barrier to the Tamil elites than to the Tamils of lower and middle classes.

In 1972 and 1978, new constitutions were adopted that made Buddhism the state religion and replaced the cabinet form of government with a presidential system including an elected president as head of state and government. The new constitutions accorded Buddhism the foremost place among the other religions in the nation and declared that the state should protect and foster Buddhism.<sup>35</sup> These constitutions were another result of the Sinhala Buddhist elite who instituted policies to protect their own interests. The 1972 Constitution had declared the nation as a republic and made Sri Lanka

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<sup>34</sup> Satgunarajah, "Never Again," 6.

<sup>35</sup> Alvappillai Veluppillai, “Chapter 7: Sinhala Fears of Tamil Demands,” in *Buddhism, Conflict, and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Mahinda Deegalle (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 94.

the official name of the nation replacing its colonial name “Ceylon” that was granted by the British.<sup>36</sup> Since Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, the Sinhalese-dominated governments have passed legislation discriminating against all Tamils in matters of education, language, religion, and employment.<sup>37</sup> These policies instituted by the Sinhalese elite affected the position and power of Tamil elites and would foster a tense environment that broke out into civil war.

#### **1.4 EMERGENCE OF THE CIVIL WAR AND THE AFTERMATH**

During the period after independence in 1948 and until the start of the civil war in 1983, tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils had increased and resulted in race riots and anti-Tamil pogroms. Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), which was the dominant Tamil party after 1956, had attempted to advocate for Tamil rights and work with the Sinhala-dominated government. After failing to peacefully achieve equality and rights, a group of Tamil youth led by V. Prabhakaran created the Tamil New Tigers in 1972.<sup>38</sup> The armed group utilized violent tactics to assassinate police personnel and pro-government Tamil politicians. In 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was created after the Tamil New Tigers joined another Tamil group.<sup>39</sup> The concept of a separate Tamil state or Eelam in the northern part of Sri Lanka was first proposed by the Tamil

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<sup>36</sup> Associated Press, “Sri Lanka to end use of its colonial name Ceylon,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 3, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Nancy Murray, “The State Against Tamils,” in *Sri Lanka: Racism and the Authoritarian State*, ed. A. Sivanandan and Hazel Waters, (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1984)

<sup>38</sup> DeVotta, “The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” 1027.

<sup>39</sup> Al Jazeera, “Timeline of Sri Lanka’s Civil War,” *Al Jazeera*, March 27, 2007. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2007/3/27/timeline-of-sri-lankas-civil-war-2>

United Liberation Front (TULF). In 1977, the TULF was banned by parliament for advocating for an independent state.<sup>40</sup>

The long-term objective of the LTTE was to establish an independent Tamil or Eelam state comprising the northern and eastern provinces in Sri Lanka.<sup>41</sup> They aimed to overthrow the forces of the Sri Lankan government through violence and terrorism. Through factional struggles, the LTTE has gained supremacy over the other guerrilla organizations to fight for political rights to counter what they viewed as state-promoted violence.<sup>42</sup> The LTTE demanded complete Tamil independence and that it be the only voice of the Tamil people.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, I argue that a non-ethnic nationalist approach to the analysis of the Sri Lankan civil war is needed in order to account for the divisions within ethnic groups such as divisions between the LTTE and the rest of the Tamil population.

The Sri Lankan civil war began on July 23, 1983 as a result of mob violence between Sinhalese and Tamils. The previous night the LTTE had ambushed an army patrol in Jaffna and killed 13 soldiers. This resulted in six phases of week-long rampage in Colombo consisting of mob violence, systematic intimidation of Tamils, and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Gamini Samaranyake, "Political Violence in Sri Lanka: A diagnostic approach," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no.2 (1997): 109.

<sup>42</sup> Bardwell Smith, "Chapter 10: Identity Issues of Sinhalese and Tamils," in *Buddhism, Conflict, and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Mahinda Deegalle (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 163.

<sup>43</sup> Marshall R. Singer, "Sri Lanka's Tamil-Sinhalese Ethnic Conflict: Alternative Solutions," *Asian Survey* 32, no.8 (1992): 715.

destruction of their property including looting, murder, and arson.<sup>44</sup> This period known as “Black July” consisted of the bloodiest anti-Tamil riots that resulted in thousands of deaths and forced Tamils to leave Sinhalese majority areas.<sup>45</sup> As a result of the outbreak of violence, the Sinhalese-dominated state declared war against the Tamil insurgents in July 1983. In 1987, the government signed the Indo-Sri Lanka peace accords which made several concessions to Tamil fighters such as the recognition of Tamil as an official language. India agreed to help keep order in the north and eastern regions of the country under the control of the LTTE with the termination of aid to Tamil fighters and a peace-keeping force that remained in the country until 1988.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, the Indo-Sri Lanka peace accords failed and hostilities continued between the LTTE and the Sinhalese dominated government. Ten years after the war began, the Sri Lankan president, Ranasinghe Premadasa, was killed by an LTTE bomber in 1993. During the period of the civil war, state-sanctioned violence and violence committed by the LTTE continued to escalate with brief periods of peace talks that eventually failed. A ceasefire was declared in 2002 and remained until the Tamil Tigers killed about 12 Sri Lankan navy personnel in 2005. After that, violence continued to increase and the LTTE was blacklisted as a terrorist organization by the EU.<sup>47</sup>

Before being labelled as a terrorist group, there was international sympathy for the LTTE and the discrimination of Tamil people in Sri Lanka. However, international

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<sup>44</sup> Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 135.

<sup>45</sup> Al Jazeera, “Timeline of Sri Lanka’s Civil War”

<sup>46</sup> Al Jazeera, “Timeline of Sri Lanka’s Civil War”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

sympathy declined with the 9/11 attacks and increased antipathy towards terrorist tactics. Additionally, the lack of support from India to the Tamil movement and the support from the People's Republic of China to the regime of President Mahinda Rajapaksa contributed to the successful military campaign against the LTTE in 2009. The LTTE was defeated around 2009 after the death of leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.<sup>48</sup> After the war ended, both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government were deeply scrutinized for the countless human rights violations they committed such as the government's participation in the high rate of disappeared persons.<sup>49</sup> In the present day about 13 years after the end of the war, tensions still persist and Tamils continue to be discriminated against by the Sinhalese dominated government. For example, Tamil majority regions are still heavily militarized and occupied by Sri Lankan troops, and Tamils are routinely stopped and searched at checkpoints.<sup>50</sup> Many argue that the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in post-independent Sri Lanka bears much of the responsibility for the civil war between the majority Sinhalese and minority Sri Lankan Tamils.<sup>51</sup> In reality, the Tamil people were being used as scapegoats to distract Sinhalese people from any economic crisis and class inequality. Discrimination that contributed to the rise of the civil war still exists in Sri Lanka today and is due to the lack of analysis and research into the class distinctions that fueled the civil war. The ongoing discrimination against Tamils

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Hayward, "The Spoiler and the Reconciler: Buddhism and the Peace Process in Sri Lanka," in *Between Terror and Tolerance: Religious Leaders, Conflict, and Peacemaking*, ed. Timothy D. Sisk, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 186.

<sup>49</sup> Satgunarajah, "Never Again," 2.

<sup>50</sup> Visvajit Sriramrajan, "Post-War Sri Lanka: Fractured and Unjust for Tamils," *The Diplomat*, May 15, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/post-war-sri-lanka-fractured-and-unjust-for-tamils/>

<sup>51</sup> Jayasundara-Smits, "Contemporary Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism," 74.

that persists years after the end of the civil war is a testament to the need of a new approach to analyzing the conflict and creating solutions that address the root of the conflict in the class system.

## **1.5 DEMOGRAPHICS OF SRI LANKA**

The ethnic, religious, and class composition of the nation of Sri Lanka had contributed to the onset of conflict as there is and was clearly a majority ethnic and religious group that dominated the political sphere after Sri Lanka gained independence. Although the focus of this analysis is on the civil war primarily fought between the Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus, it is important to recognize the other existing ethnic and religious groups within the nation that were affected by the war. The last Census of Population and Housing in Sri Lanka conducted in 2012 provides information on the background of the population residing in Sri Lanka. The current population of the country is about 21.5 million people.<sup>52</sup> In terms of religions, about 70% of the population follow Buddhism which is the official religion of the nation. Other prominent religions in the nation include 12.6% of the population following Hinduism, 9.7% following Islam, and 7.6% following Christianity.<sup>53</sup> There is a big overlap between religious and ethnic groups in Sri Lanka with a majority of the Buddhist population being Sinhalese and a majority of the Hindu and Christian minorities being Tamil. Meanwhile, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka consists of Sri Lankan Moors, Malays, and other groups.

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<sup>52</sup> Worldometer, "Sri Lanka Population," Accessed March 26, 2022. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sri-lanka-population/>

<sup>53</sup> Minority Rights Group International, "Sri Lanka," Accessed March 20, 2022. <https://minorityrights.org/country/sri-lanka/>

The Sinhalese are the majority ethnic group that make up about 75% of the population while Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils who were counted separately in the Census make up 15.4%. Other minority groups include Sri Lankan Moors at 9.3% of the population, Malays at 0.2%, Burghers at 0.2%, and the indigenous Wanniyala-Aetto or Veddhas at a significantly smaller amount.<sup>54</sup> In terms of class and socioeconomic status, there were about 4 million people below the poverty line in Sri Lanka in 2002.<sup>55</sup> The mean income per month per household in Sri Lanka in 2016 was 62,237 rupees or about \$927. In terms of income shared by households, the richest 20% of the population earned 50.8% of the total income in the nation, the middle class was 60% of the population and earned 44.4% of the total income, and the poorest 20% of the population earned 4.8% of the total income.<sup>56</sup> This data provides evidence of the wealth inequality in Sri Lanka and how it goes beyond ethnic divisions. Although Sinhalese nationalism rules the nation and 75% of the population are Sinhalese, the data shows that over half of the nation's income is in the hands of only 20% of the population. Therefore, Sinhalese nationalism has not benefited the Sinhalese population equally, but has been used to maintain and increase the wealth of the ruling class. Many analyses of the civil war use an ethno-religious lens to explain why the conflict arose, but they neglect a big area of inequity within the nation

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Shakeela Jabbar and Dinushka Senanayake, "Overview of Poverty in Sri Lanka," A Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) Publication, (2004).

<https://www.cepa.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Overview-of-Poverty-01.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> Central Bank of Sri Lanka, "Sri Lanka Socio-Economic Data 2020," (2020).

[https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb\\_documents/publications/otherpub/publication\\_sri\\_lanka\\_socio\\_economic\\_data\\_folder\\_2020\\_e.pdf](https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/publications/otherpub/publication_sri_lanka_socio_economic_data_folder_2020_e.pdf)

with regards to the distribution of wealth and social classes. The analysis will continue with an examination of existing literature on the Sri Lankan Civil War especially with regards to nationalism and class. In the following chapter, I describe the methodology of this paper and the intersectional Marxist framework that I have developed to analyze the involvement of class relations in Sinhala and Tamil nationalism leading to the civil war.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

The questions that this work aims to address include (1) the role of social class and caste along with ethnicity in the development of Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism and Tamil Nationalism during the Sri Lankan civil war and (2) how the Sri Lankan civil war can be viewed as a class conflict. The broader issue that the paper touches on is how ethnic-religious nationalism and other forms of identity politics are rooted in class conflict. To address these questions and issues, I develop an intersectional Marxist framework drawing from Marxist theories on class analysis and Erik Olin Wright's interpretation of them combined with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. This paper is centered on the Sri Lankan civil war due to the lack of attention the conflict has received from Western scholars and academic researchers. The ethnic-religious nationalist framework that is frequently adopted by scholars to analyze the war is inadequate due to the current realities of the nation, including its current economic crisis. Therefore, I argue that a materialist framework is needed to understand how economic disparities and restricted access to resources and positions of power played a role in the ethnic nationalisms that led to the civil war.

The methods that I use to produce this analysis include an intensive review of existing literature on topics such as Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, an analysis of secondary sources, and the development of a theoretical framework to make my argument. The secondary sources that form the basis of my argument include studies from academic research, peer-reviewed articles, theoretical frameworks, archival work,

newspaper articles, books, and dissertations. My analysis itself is an intensive case study of the Sri Lankan civil war and Sinhalese Buddhist as well as Tamil nationalism. The purpose behind this analysis is to demonstrate how narratives of ethnic conflict impede proper solutions from developing because they neglect a class-based analysis. My argument challenges the dominant discourse on the Sri Lankan civil war through an analysis of how ideologies of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and Tamil nationalism are rooted in class conflict, rather than solely ethnic tensions.

The analysis chapters of this paper will analyze the role of political parties and resistance organizations such as the LTTE within the context of the Sri Lankan civil war through an intersectional Marxist framework. Chapter 5 will focus on analyzing the policies and demographics of political parties and organizations such as the UNP during the post-independence period until the end of the civil war. Chapter 6 will examine the influence of both ethnic identity and class in the aftermath of the civil war, its solutions, and the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka. It will demonstrate the ways that ongoing class and ethnic tensions in the post-war period are due to a lack of working class solidarity and a lack of discourse categorizing the war as a class conflict.

## **2.1 MARXIST THEORY**

The intersectional Marxist framework that I develop to analyze class relations that led to nationalism during the Sri Lankan civil war draws from Marxist theories of class. Marx declares that the class which is “the ruling material force of society, is at the same

time its ruling intellectual force,” because upper classes that control the means of material production are also in control of the means of dominant ideology.<sup>1</sup> In this way, Marx explains that the ideology and the values that we have in society are a product of our class system and production. The ruling class dominates material relationships and also rules “as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate[s] the production and distribution of ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.”<sup>2</sup> Marx’s view of the ruling class as dominating both material forces and ideology in society supports my claim that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology gained prominence due to the interests of the ruling class. The ruling class of Sinhalese elites were able to promote nationalist ideology through their material power and government positions that pursued policies to institutionalize Sinhala nationalism. Additionally, in his class analysis, Marx views social classes as the main agents in society that are able to transform societal institutions through class revolutions.<sup>3</sup> In my analysis of the aftermath of the civil war, I will address how solutions formed by the working classes as agents would have contributed to more durable solutions to the conflict and an avoidance of the current economic crisis.

In addition to Marx’s views that the ruling class controls material production and ideology, I draw from Erik Olin Wright’s interpretation of Marx’s theory of class conflict. According to Wright’s interpretation of Marx’s class analysis, what “most

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “German Ideology,” in *Classical Sociological Theory*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Steven Pfaff, and Indermohan Virk (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” in *Classical Sociological Theory*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Steven Pfaff, and Indermohan Virk (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

sharply distinguishes the Marxist conceptualization of class from other traditions is the concept of ‘exploitation.’”<sup>4</sup> Wright discusses three principles for exploitation which include the inverse interdependent welfare principle, exclusion principle, and appropriation principle. In my analysis, I will draw from the exclusion principle of exploitation which claims that “the material welfare of exploiters causally depends upon the material deprivations of the exploited” which is accomplished through “the exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the application of Wright’s perspective to the Sri Lankan civil war attributes the success of the exploiters which are the Sinhalese ruling elites to the material deprivation and exclusion of the exploited or the working class, particularly the Indian Plantation Tamils. In my analysis of political parties and policies during the post-independence period, I focus on the exploitation of Plantation Tamils and their exclusion from political resources as the way ruling elites maintained power.

Wright also outlines four concepts in Marx’s class framework that I draw from in my analysis including class interests, class consciousness, class formations, and class struggle.<sup>6</sup> Class interests are defined as the material interests of people derived from their location within class relations and class consciousness is seen as “the subjective awareness that people have of their class interests and the conditions for advancing

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<sup>4</sup> Erik Olin Wright, “Foundations of Class Analysis in the Marxist Tradition,” In *Alternative Foundations of Class Analysis*, ed. Erik Olin Wright (2000), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 24.

them.”<sup>7</sup> The similar class interests of the elites and the lack of class consciousness among the working classes contributed to the development of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology and the perception of the Sri Lankan civil war as an ethnic conflict. Class formations such as political parties are defined as “collectivities people form in order to facilitate the pursuit of class interests,” while class struggle includes “conflicts between the practices of individuals and collectivities in pursuit of opposing class interests.”<sup>8</sup> I analyze the UNP and SLFP political parties as class formations that engage in a class struggle against Tamil elites and the Sinhalese and Tamil working class. While Wright’s perspective, including the concept of exploitation and the four class-related concepts, is broadly relevant to the Sri Lankan civil war, it needs to be supplemented by a more intersectional perspective.

## 2.2 DISCOURSE ON INTERSECTIONALITY

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her work that analyzed the intersection between race and gender with specific attention to the experiences of Black women in comparison to white women and Black men.<sup>9</sup> Crenshaw claims that “dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis.”<sup>10</sup> However, in reality, forms of discrimination and multiple identities intersect. Thus, Crenshaw argues

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 149.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 140.

for the concept of intersectionality to acknowledge that identities are not isolated, but they are intersecting and compounding. She touches on the experiences of Black women and how they experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. As a result, Crenshaw declares that “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.”<sup>11</sup> Analyses of discrimination based on identity have been limited to the experiences of the most privileged members of discriminated groups. With intersectionality, Crenshaw argues for a focus on the least privileged and those facing intersecting forms of oppression. Therefore, my analysis focuses on the experience of Indian Plantation Tamils who face discrimination along both ethnic and class lines and are analogous to Black women who are discriminated against based on race and gender. Moore-Berg and Karpinski add more to this approach with a focus on the intersection of race and social class in intergroup processes. Social class information is claimed to play a pivotal role in how people interpret and remember racial categorizations of themselves and others.<sup>12</sup> Within racial or ethnic groups, high-status group members are prejudiced against low-status members and discriminate against them. The distinctions between Sinhalese Govigama and the Sinhala working class as well as between Tamil Vellalas and the Plantation workers are evidence of this disparity. The intersectional framework accounts for differences in the treatment of social groups based on both ethnicity and class.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Samantha L. Moore-Berg and Andrew Karpinski, “An intersectional approach to understanding how race and social class affect intergroup processes,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 13, no. 1 (2018)

### **2.3 INTERSECTIONAL MARXIST FRAMEWORK**

I will employ an intersectional Marxist framework that synthesizes the work of Marx, Wright, and Crenshaw to analyze how class relations influenced by ethnicity produced Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism and Tamil Nationalism during the Sri Lankan civil war. I will synthesize Wright's concept of exploitation and the principle of exclusion with Crenshaw's argument of intersectionality and how intersecting identities compound oppression. Exploitation does not occur only along class lines, but it targets groups that hold the least privilege across identities including class and ethnicity. Therefore, the unique experience and exploitation of Indian Plantation Tamils in the pursuit of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism cannot be explained solely through Wright's concepts of exploitation and class relations. Instead, they require the addition of an intersectional approach that recognizes the influence of ethnicity along with class in their exploitation and material deprivation. Additionally, Wright's four concepts of class relations will be supplemented with an intersectional perspective that recognizes how class formations and class interests form along both class and ethnic lines and produce political parties such as the UNP composed of mainly Sinhalese elites. Marx's theory on the ruling class dominating material production and ideology will also be synthesized with the concept of intersectionality to demonstrate how the ruling class which is also part of the dominant ethnic group is the one that dominates material forces and the production of ideology in a nation.

Marxist theories are criticized for relying on binary structures to explain society and for reducing analyzes of oppression to primarily class oppression.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, intersectionality approaches that embrace identity politics are criticized for not considering the influence of class in the formation of social identities. With these criticisms in mind, I draw from the work of Bohrer and develop an intersectional Marxist framework that places class relations at the center of intersectionality, but does not promote class as the only factor to be considered.<sup>14</sup> Instead of viewing the Sri Lankan civil war as an ethnic conflict, the framework supports the view of the war as a class conflict influenced by ethnic and racial discrimination. It avoids an ethnocentric perspective that views one's own ethnic group as the center of everything, and all others as rated in reference to it.<sup>15</sup> Ethnocentrism as the root of nationalism does not account for the existence of the Sinhalese working class that belongs to the dominant ethnic group, but has class interests that are not accounted for by the Sinhalese elite in government. Therefore, in this framework, class is viewed as the central connecting factor that has formed the basis of relations in Sri Lankan society and promoted the development of ethnic nationalism. I argue that given the struggle of Indian Plantation Tamils and the Sinhalese working class for access to political representation and economic stability in the post-independence and civil war period, it's clear that the Sri Lankan civil war was not merely an ethnic religious conflict, but a more complex struggle among variegated

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<sup>13</sup> Ashley Bohrer, "Intersectionality and Marxism: A Critical Historiography," *Historical Materialism* (July 30, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Paul C. Rosenblatt, "Origins and Effects of Group Ethnocentrism and Nationalism," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8, no. 2 (1964): 131.

groups for political power and economic equality. The originality of my claim arises from my call for a more nuance based historical understanding of the Sri Lankan civil war as a class conflict arising from Sinhalese nationalism and manufactured ethnic tensions.

## 2.4 ANALYSIS OF THE FOUR SOCIAL GROUPS

In this paper, I focus on analyzing and providing background on the role of four particular social classes and castes during the Sri Lankan civil war to demonstrate how ethnic nationalisms were rooted in class disparities and the ideology of the ruling class. The four social classes and castes that I analyze were chosen in accordance with the concept of intersectionality. The Sinhalese Govigamas represent the highest caste in Sri Lanka and they hold strong control over major political parties in the nation.<sup>16</sup> They are from the majority ethnic group in the nation and thus, have both a dominant ethnic and caste identity. As the caste system changed to a social class system, the status that Govigamas, particularly the subcaste of Radalas, held is similar to Sinhalese elites or upper class people.<sup>17</sup> An analysis of the ways that the Sinhalese Govigama and elites promoted Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism to pursue their own class or caste interests will be analyzed in chapter 5. On the other side of the spectrum, I chose the Indian Plantation Tamils who represent the lowest caste and class among the Tamils in Sri Lanka and are part of the minority ethnic group in the nation. The Indian Plantation Tamils are perceived as low-caste outsiders and are ranked among the lowest rung in the social

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<sup>16</sup> Devanesan Nesiah, "Caste in Sri Lanka and India," *Ground Views*, March 18, 2011. <https://groundviews.org/2011/03/18/caste-in-sri-lanka-and-india-2/>

<sup>17</sup> E.M. Samatha Ekanayake, "Social Stratification, Modernization and Restructuring of Sri Lankan Society," *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 5, no.2 (2016): 100.

hierarchy.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the way that the Plantation Tamils lack representation in Tamil politics and Tamil nationalism demonstrates the influence of class relations within ethnic groups.

In the middle of this class and ethnic spectrum, I chose the Vellala Tamil caste and the Sinhalese working class. The Vellala Tamils are considered to be the highest caste among the Tamil system and are distinctively different from the Plantation Tamils who have a lower socio-economic reputation.<sup>19</sup> From the 19th century, socio-economically privileged upper caste Tamils became the main actors of Tamil politics and thus, the Vellala Tamils influenced the ways in which both Tamil nationalism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism came about.<sup>20</sup> The Vellala caste is at the intersection between an upper class or caste and a minority ethnic group. The last social group I will analyze is the Sinhalese working class as it represents the lowest class among the Sinhalese people with many coming from lower or “untouchable” castes. The Sinhalese working class is the social group at the intersection of a dominant ethnic group and a low class. A historical background and analysis of these four social groups will provide the basis for my argument and demonstrate the way that class relations underpin ethnic tensions and are at the root of ethnic nationalism.

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<sup>18</sup> Nandini Rathi, “‘Indian Tamils’ of Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Tamils: Here is the difference,” *The Indian Express*, May 16, 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/indian-tamils-and-sri-lankan-tamils-here-is-the-difference-4654435/>

<sup>19</sup> B.A.C. Ajith Balasooriya, “Issues at Own Backyard: Caste Based Socio-Economic Inequalities as ‘Unseen Hurdles’ in Post-Conflict Northern Sri Lanka,” *Journal of International Development and Cooperation* 19, no. 3 (2013): 19.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## **2.5 POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS AND POLICIES IN THE POST- INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

In the analysis chapters, I will focus on political parties and discriminatory policies that promoted Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism during the civil war. In regards to political parties, I focus on the UNP (United National Party) and SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) which were the main political parties that ruled Sri Lanka during the post-independence period. The parties are dominated by the Sinhalese bourgeoisie and thus, require an intersectional Marxist framework in their analysis. I also will address Marxist working class parties in the nation including the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) and LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party). In regards to Tamil organizations, I analyze groups that represented Tamil politics and nationalism during the post-independence period including the TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) and the LTTE (Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam). In the last analysis chapter, I focus on the results of the civil war and how its solutions which lacked a focus on the intersecting ethnic and class struggles have contributed to the current severe economic crisis in the nation.

## CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 IDENTITY POLITICS AND CLASS POLITICS

Conflicts between differing ethnic, racial, religious, or gender groups have been attributed to identity politics. The narrative of the Sri Lankan civil war as a conflict between rival ethnic groups of the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils can fall under this categorization. Through a discussion of the works of Das, Bernstein, Juergensmeyer, and Pletsch, I examine the advantages and disadvantages of an identity politics framework. I focus on how identity politics have the advantage of bringing awareness to various forms of discrimination, but also it has a serious disadvantage of being dislocated from economic and material issues. According to Raju Das, a Professor at York University, identity politics are “based on the ‘fact’ of self-identity of a person or group of persons” including identities such as race and gender.<sup>1</sup> He claims that identity politics is the “politics of (social-cultural) difference” that views society as divided into numerous groups defined on the basis of their social-cultural identity. Mary Bernstein, a Professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut, offers a similar perspective when she defines identity politics as cultural politics because identity groups are seen “as advocating for recognition of and respect of their cultural differences...”<sup>2</sup> As a result, identity politics are classified as the belief that identity itself is and should be a fundamental focus of political work. The term of identity politics refers to “any

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<sup>1</sup> Raju Das, “Identity Politics: A Marxist View,” *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 8, no. 1 (2020). DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.8.1.008921

<sup>2</sup> Mary Bernstein, “Identity Politics,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, (2005): 50.

mobilization related to politics, culture, and identity.”<sup>3</sup> An example of identity politics is ethno-religious nationalism such as the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism seen in the Sri Lankan civil war. Mark Juergensmeyer, an American sociologist and a Professor of Global Studies, addresses the concept of ethnic religious nationalism and how religion provides another “identity that makes a community cohere and links it with a particular place.”<sup>4</sup> Although ethnic-religious nationalism can unify groups, it also divides people as it requires an identification of an enemy as an opposing ethnic religious group. As a result, Bernstein, Das, and Pletsch offer critiques on the perspective of identity politics and its lack of connection with class politics and class relations.

Bernstein and Das address how identity politics are viewed as class-less politics and the intersection between class and social identities are ignored.<sup>5</sup> Identities are made to be based on social rather than economic status, however, the contemporary rise of identity politics in the world during the end of the 20th century can be attributed to economic well-being. Identity politics, as for example in nationalist struggles and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the West, tend to be bourgeois in character. Another reason for the rise of identity politics, according to Bernstein and other scholars, is due to the lack of viable alternatives to capitalism.<sup>6</sup> Carl Pletsch, a Professor of History at University of Colorado Denver, discusses how “class was not the dominant focus of solidarity or

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Worldwide Rise of Religious Nationalism,” *Journal of International Affairs* 50, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 5.

<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, “Identity Politics.” Das, “Identity Politics: A Marxist View.”

<sup>6</sup> Bernstein, “Identity Politics,” 52.

identity” in the 19th century and was “invented as a popular ideology to compete with nationalism.”<sup>7</sup> Identities formed around ethnicity, gender, race, and religion had displaced class status as forms of nationalism based on these identities mobilized masses more successfully than class. The success of identity politics in mobilizing people can be attributed to how identity politics “does not require the investment in consciousness raising which organizing around class requires.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, Pletsch claims that identity politics is more conducive to the political elite of society because elites fear class-based political activity and are more able to appease demands based on ethnic or racial identity.<sup>9</sup> Das goes further to argue that identity politics is used as a tool by political elites to uphold the capitalist system. Certain forms of identity politics are a result of the “ideology of the (petty-) bourgeoisie class used to justify its own economic and political privilege...”<sup>10</sup> Das refers to this form of identity politics as “from above” such as when ruling class politicians develop nationalist policies.<sup>11</sup> When identity politics is utilized by elites, it divides the working class and makes a recognition of class consciousness more difficult. When class is mentioned within identity politics, it is viewed as classism and as cultural-social prejudice against the working class people.<sup>12</sup> With this definition of class divisions as classism, Das argues that the objective relations of class become transformed into a subjective process.

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<sup>7</sup> Carl Pletsch, “Class, Nationalism and Identity Politics,” *Peace Review* 11, no.2 (1999): 197.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 202.

<sup>10</sup> Das, “Identity Politics: A Marxist View.”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

According to Pletsch, “elites and ruling groups have always been aware of their common interests” as a class, unlike oppressed classes that have struggled to recognize their common fate.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the nature of identity politics creates in-group fighting among the working class, rather than against the ruling class and the state which are responsible for their discrimination. Das specifically touches on one goal of identity politics which is “to increase the representation of under-represented groups.”<sup>14</sup> During the civil war, Tamil elites advocated for more representation of the Tamil population within the Sri Lankan government. However, as Das argues, oppressed groups are not oppressed because they are underrepresented, but they are under-represented because of systemic oppression in the society. In the case of the Sinhalese, the systemic oppression was the British colonial system and with the Tamils, it was and is the Sinhalese Buddhist dominated government. By advocating for the increased representation within the system, identity politics neglects the deeper cause of the lack of representation and the role of class within it.

However, the Neo-Marxist perspective that identity and class politics are mutually exclusive can also be criticized for separating culture or race from class and the political economy. Bernstein addresses this argument and recognizes how identities such as race and gender are “affected by both the political economy and the cultural-valuational structure of society.”<sup>15</sup> Class is not the only source of exploitation as it can also be based

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<sup>13</sup> Pletsch, “Class, Nationalism and Identity Politics,” 199.

<sup>14</sup> Das, “Identity Politics: A Marxist View.”

<sup>15</sup> Bernstein, “Identity Politics,” 53.

on gender, race, and other identities. Thus, it is not productive to view identity and class politics as completely separate, rather, there is a need to view them as interconnected and to recognize the class structure of ethnic identities. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism promoted the cultural and ethnic identity of the Sinhalese people through the Sinhalization of Tamil areas with the declaration of Sinhala as the official language and the construction of Buddhist temples in Tamil regions.<sup>16</sup> However, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was pursued by the ruling class and cannot be understood as a cause of the conflict without an identification of the role of class relations and how the conflict could have been better resolved through working class solidarity.

### **3.2 THE FORMATION OF SINHALESE-BUDDHIST NATIONALISM**

Popular narratives of the Sri Lankan civil war depict Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism as a major cause of the conflict. Through a discussion of the works of DeVotta, Veluppillai, and Eiichi and Auerback, I review the historical formation of Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism and how it has been instituted in Sri Lanka. These works depict Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism and ethnic tensions as the cause of the civil war and neglect to address the role of class struggles and class relations in the nation. According to Neil DeVotta, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Hartwick College, in order to explain the civil war, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology must be

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<sup>16</sup> Hasnain Bin Sajjad Raja, "Sri Lanka's Post-Conflict Reconstruction," *Modern Diplomacy*, July 13, 2021. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/07/13/sri-lankas-post-conflict-reconstruction/>

confronted and analyzed.<sup>17</sup> In another one of DeVotta's works, he asserts that a fundamental tenet of the nationalist ideology is "the belief that Sri Lanka is the island of the Sinhalese, who in turn are ennobled to preserve and propagate Buddhism."<sup>18</sup> DeVotta and other scholars acknowledge how the belief of Sri Lanka as the land of the Sinhalese is tied to the myth of Prince Vijaya.<sup>19</sup> Another myth that plays into the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist narrative and the belief that Sri Lanka is a repository for Buddhism is the story of the Sinhalese Buddhist King Duthagamani and his winning battle against Tamil King Elara. The new ethnicity of the Sinhalese people that developed from these myths relied on religion and language to differentiate itself from others. Nationalist sentiments arose from the insecurity of Sinhalese Buddhists regarding the preservation of their religion and language due to India's proximity with many Tamil Hindus. According to DeVotta, "a deep sense of insecurity among Sinhalese Buddhists" led the majority community to "suffer from a minority complex and embrace nationalism."<sup>20</sup> To justify this nationalist sentiment, Veluppillai, a Sri Lankan Tamil historian, claims that the Sinhalese people argue that they need to preserve Buddhism. The preservation of Buddhism is done by engaging in "political Buddhism" which is inflated with communal identity and ignores the ethical content of Buddhism.<sup>21</sup> Although myths that support Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism may have evolved accidentally, the myths have been

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<sup>17</sup> Neil DeVotta, "The Genesis, Consolidation, and Consequences of Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism," in *When Politics are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed. Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 188.

<sup>18</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, vii.

<sup>19</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*. Otani Eiichi and Micah Auerback, "A Comparative Analysis of Buddhist Nationalism in Asia," *The Eastern Buddhist* 43, no.1 (2012). DeVotta, "The Genesis, Consolidation, and Consequences."

<sup>20</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Veluppillai, "Sinhala Fears of Tamil Demands," 93.

utilized and maintained by elites to manipulate the masses and gain political power.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, a deeper analysis of the role of elites in propagating Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology is something lacking from the work of the scholars.

British colonial practices intensified racial and religious divisions, and contributed to the rise of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. During their rule, the British disproportionately provided government employment to minority Tamils and favored Christians over other religions in the colonial bureaucracy which resulted in the mobilization of Buddhists. Thus, DeVotta claims that “Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism is a reactive phenomenon” to British colonial practices.<sup>23</sup> Eiichi and Auerback also touch on the idea of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism as a reactive phenomenon by noting how “resistance to British control largely took the form of movements to revive Buddhism” in the late 19th century to 20th century.<sup>24</sup> The unequal treatment of ethnic groups along with the marginalization of Buddhism by British colonial practices resulted in the Sinhalese–Buddhist nationalist movement. According to DeVotta, a key figure in the rise of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism against British rule is Anagarika Dharmapala who believed the British were destroying the Sinhalese race and emphasized avoiding British customs and Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Eiichi and Auerback expand on DeVotta’s description of Dharmapala and address how Dharmapala “stressed the superiority of Buddhism and came to espouse a particular Buddhist nationalism which linked that superiority to race

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<sup>22</sup> DeVotta, “The Genesis, Consolidation, and Consequences,” 192.

<sup>23</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Eiichi and Auerback, “A Comparative Analysis of Buddhist Nationalism in Asia,” 162.

<sup>25</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 15.

and an ethnic nation.”<sup>26</sup> Dharmapala emphasized that the Sinhalese are a unique race and stressed the link of the Sinhalese to Buddhism through the Prince Vijaya myth.

Veluppillai also touches on how Dharmapala constructed the ideology of a Sinhala Buddhist state and attacked Tamil as well as Muslim minorities in his writings.<sup>27</sup> His racist rhetoric laid the groundwork for the creation of an ethnocentric state that would propel the island toward civil war.

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism became instituted through policies and governmental institutions after Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. The first act of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism can be seen in the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 that denied citizenship to Indian Tamils out of fear of their political mobilization.<sup>28</sup> DeVotta also addresses how the “Sinhala Only” Act of 1956 which made Sinhalese the official language of Sri Lanka was a clear reactive policy to British colonial practices that promoted the overrepresentation of Tamils in the civil service, armed forces, and other positions.<sup>29</sup> The act was successful in instituting Sinhalese domination as DeVotta notes how “the percentage of Tamils in the bureaucracy plummeted from 30% in 1956 to 5% in 1970...”<sup>30</sup> While this policy promoted the Sinhala language, the 1972 Constitution gave Buddhism the foremost place in Sri Lanka and made it the duty of the state to protect Buddhism. Veluppillai expands on the institutionalization of Sinhalese Buddhist

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<sup>26</sup> Eiichi and Auerback, “A Comparative Analysis of Buddhist Nationalism in Asia,” 165.

<sup>27</sup> Veluppillai, “Sinhala Fears of Tamil Demands,” 98.

<sup>28</sup> DeVotta, “The Genesis, Consolidation, and Consequences,” 195.

<sup>29</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> DeVotta, “The Genesis, Consolidation, and Consequences,” 196.

nationalism to note how political parties are so entrenched with ethnic majoritarianism that “there is no scope for minorities to get justice through parliamentary methods.”<sup>31</sup> The Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact is evident of this as the pact called for a form of regional autonomy for the Northeast with Tamil as the administrative language, but the pact was not followed due to opposition from Sinhalese nationalists. Although Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was a reaction to British colonialism, the ideology was promoted through Sinhalese colonization of Tamil-dominated regions. DeVotta and Veluppilai address how Sinhalese from majority Sinhala areas in the southwest were transplanted to majority Tamil regions in the east.<sup>32</sup> This was a result of the fear of Tamil nationalism and the possibility of a separate Tamil state in the eastern or northern region of Sri Lanka. DeVotta notes that the concern with population numbers is “an important part of the nationalist mindset because it is associated with security, majoritarianism, and domination.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to legislative policies, DeVotta touches on how the predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist government instituted its nationalist ideology through anti-Tamil riots and military occupation in predominantly Tamil areas to counter Tamil protests against the ethnocentric state.<sup>34</sup>

According to DeVotta and Veluppilai, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was built on the racist ideology of Sinhalese people being superior to Tamils and was used to justify discriminatory acts against Tamils. The racial superiority of Sinhalese people was

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<sup>31</sup> Veluppilai, “Sinhala Fears of Tamil Demands,” 101.

<sup>32</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 46. Veluppilai, “Sinhala Fears of Tamil Demands.”

<sup>33</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 47.

<sup>34</sup> DeVotta, “The Genesis, Consolidation, and Consequences,” 197.

tied to the connection between the Sinhala language and Indo-Aryans dialects of North India, while the Tamil language drew from Dravidian languages in South India. Therefore, the Sinhalese people established superiority partly through their association with Indo-European languages and western civilization. In DeVotta's work, he declares that "Tamil nationalism is a reactive phenomenon" in response to the ideology of superiority and the discriminatory policies of the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist government.<sup>35</sup> Veluppilai also examines the rise of Tamil nationalism and how "Tamils were pushed to the limits of desperation to demand separation and take up arms during the 1970s."<sup>36</sup> The failure of the Sinhalese to share power had led Tamils to demand an independent state in the lands where they were a majority so that they could enjoy freedom. The Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) was created by radical young Tamil rebels that pursued their quest for an independent state through violent means including eliminating other Tamil rebel groups. DeVotta discusses how the LTTE dominated other rebel groups and "claim[ed] to be the sole representative of Sri Lanka's Tamils."<sup>37</sup> Opposition to the LTTE is a major part of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology which claims that Sri Lanka does not have an ethnic problem, but has a terrorist problem in order to justify violence against the Tamils. Additionally, the violence associated with the nationalist ideology is not limited to Tamil Hindus, but Sinhalese Buddhists also view Christians as Western sympathizers and as a threat to their identity.<sup>38</sup> The nationalist sentiment in Sri Lanka is a result of a perceived threat to identity and the

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<sup>35</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Veluppillai, "Sinhala Fears of Tamil Demands," 95.

<sup>37</sup> DeVotta, "The Genesis, Consolidation, and Consequences," 201.

<sup>38</sup> DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 40.

belief that Sri Lanka has to be protected because it is the only Buddhist Sinhala country in the world.

During the civil war, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism targeted the Tamil population and now, nationalists also target the Muslim community, which is mainly Tamil but they identify more with their religious identity. DeVotta recognizes how the increased Islamophobia and anti-Muslim violence is evident in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter bombing with Sinhalese people attacking Muslims and blaming the whole community for the devastating act.<sup>39</sup> In the works of these scholars, a deeper analysis of who contributes to the rise of nationalist sentiments and who is exploited by nationalism is missing. DeVotta touches upon it at the end of his work when he states that “ethno-religious violence takes place because individuals and parties profit from such mayhem” and nationalist elites promote violence to ensure ethno-religious supremacy.<sup>40</sup> However, DeVotta along with the other scholars do not adequately address the connection between elites and nationalist ideology in Sri Lanka.

### **3.3 CLASS AND CASTE SYSTEMS IN SRI LANKA**

Class and caste systems in Sri Lanka during the period of the civil war are under-analyzed. Hierarchies within class and caste systems that crossed ethnic boundaries played an important role in determining the beneficiaries of the conflict and the passage

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<sup>39</sup> DeVotta, “The Genesis, Consolidation, and Consequences,” 205.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

of discriminatory policies. The work of Riswan, Silva, and Gamage address the historic role of class and caste in Sri Lanka and the existence of class disparities within the nation. However, their work fails to address how these class disparities had contributed to the rise of Sinhala and Tamil nationalism and the civil war.

Riswan, a research scholar of Sociology, analyzes the practice of social stratification and social class among Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims in his survey of social class and the caste system in Sri Lanka. He defines social stratification as “the hierarchical system that society uses to rank and categorize people.”<sup>41</sup> In Sri Lanka, Riswan identifies four key elements that make up social stratification which are caste, class, gender, and ethnicity. He defines social class as “economic or cultural arrangements of groups in society.”<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, the caste system is viewed as the system of division of labor and power in society. Silva, a Professor of History, notes the difficulty in studying the Sri Lankan caste system as he concedes that “the origin of the caste system in Sri Lanka is lost in the obscure past” because most literature on it was written by foreigners until the end of 19th century.<sup>43</sup> The concept of caste in Sri Lanka was introduced from India and the Kandyan Kingdom in Sri Lanka was used as a guide to analyze the caste system. Silva provides an overview of three parts of the administrative apparatus of the Sinhalese Kandyan caste system which included institutions and positions connected with the monarchy that were given to the favorites of the King. The

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<sup>41</sup> Riswan, “A Historical Survey of Social Class,” 40.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> de Silva, “Caste Consideration in Native Appointments,” 42.

second part included *baddas* which were “departments responsible for the maintenance and development of various industrial and commercial pursuits...”<sup>44</sup> These departments included labor related to transportation and cinnamon which were run by members of the *Navandanna* caste, *Karava* caste, *Salagama* caste, and others. The third part included the administration of provinces, districts, and villages which was done by the Govigama caste under British rule.

Gamage, a Sri Lankan sociologist, describes the social class system in Sri Lankan society as consisting of “three main classes” including the “working class, middle class, and upper class” with the middle class further divided into upper and lower classes.<sup>45</sup> The upper class which is the wealthiest class includes industrialists, businessmen, and serving government ministers. Whereas, the upper middle class includes the bourgeoisie and educated professionals such as lawyers and doctors.<sup>46</sup> The lower middle class is defined as white collar jobs and the working class includes rural, urban, and plantation workers. Although the class system is the same among Sinhalese and Tamils, the caste system varies between the two ethnic groups. Riswan analyzes how the caste system further differs by region with a distinction between Kandyan or Up-Country Sinhalese and Southern ones as well as separation between the Northern and Eastern Tamils. Caste among the Sinhalese includes the Govigama, also known as Goyigama, which includes at

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Siri Gamage, “Post-independent political conflicts in Sri Lanka: Elites, ethnicity, and class contradictions,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 20, no.1 (1997): 376.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 381.

least half of the Sinhalese population and is traditionally made up of farmers.<sup>47</sup> The caste system among the Tamils includes the Vellalar which dominates the Northern caste as well as the Hill Country Tamils who are from India. Within the Northern Tamils, the caste system is identified as a regional variant of South India. In the caste hierarchy of Northern Tamils, Silva states that “a small segment of *Brahmins*” and a majority of *Vellalas* were at the top.<sup>48</sup> The Vellala or landed gentry lived like feudal lords and the base of this hierarchy was formed by small professional castes and the laborers of the untouchables.

Riswan connects the colonial period to the social class system by recognizing how the upper-class Sri Lankans had derived their wealth from land holding that was passed down generations and derived power from serving in positions in the British colonial administration.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is clear how British colonial rule has directly influenced the composition of social classes in Sri Lanka. Silva also makes this connection in analyzing how from the beginning of their administration in maritime provinces, British officials were “carried away by the impression that only the *Goyigama* headmen in the Sinhala dominated areas and the *Vellala* headmen in the Tamil dominated areas could command the respect of the inhabitants as a whole.”<sup>50</sup> The British had further divided castes and ethnic groups by providing responsibilities of controlling the lower caste population with the higher castes such as the Govigamas or Vellalas. Thus, Silva goes beyond Riswan’s

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<sup>47</sup> Riswan, “A Historical Survey of Social Class,” 43.

<sup>48</sup> de Silva, “Caste Consideration in Native Appointments,” 44.

<sup>49</sup> Riswan, “A Historical Survey of Social Class,” 42.

<sup>50</sup> de Silva, “Caste Consideration in Native Appointments,” 44.

connection of class with colonization and addresses how the British not only privileged higher castes, but made them police lower ones. British rule and the existence of the British school system also contributed to the formation of upper classes and elites as the schools allowed access to positions of power and admission into them was only possible for the economically privileged.<sup>51</sup> Although the British attempted to adhere to native laws and customs in terms of caste, there was still change among the way they distributed privileges to the castes. During 1832 - 1835, Silva records how there were reforms to the caste system in which compulsory services on the basis of caste were discontinued. As the caste system was experiencing change, so was the socio-economic system in which merchant and wage-earning classes were being created.<sup>52</sup>

Silva acknowledges that reforms to the caste system did not lower the rank of higher castes such as “the Govigama caste nobility that was mobilized for judicial purposes in Kandyan provinces” by the British.<sup>53</sup> The Govigama caste “had a monopolistic hold over the indigenous institutions of the government” and British patronage to the Govigamas had laid the groundwork for their political ascendancy in the future.<sup>54</sup> It was not only through the distribution of power, but Silva also points to how the caste system experienced change as a result of the capitalist system instituted by Western powers in Sri Lanka. The development of capitalism in Sri Lanka is attributed to the establishment of the plantation economy and the elimination of restrictions on the

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<sup>51</sup> Gamage, “Post-independent political conflicts,” 365.

<sup>52</sup> de Silva, “Caste Consideration in Native Appointments,” 47.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

economy by the British such as the abolition of state monopolies. Tea and rubber grown on the plantations became extensive capital investment and new economic enterprises were established such as the selling of land for plantations. The capitalist system led to the development of economically powerful people outside of the privileged Govigama caste as merchant and wage earning classes made more money and rose in the social hierarchy.<sup>55</sup> However, the Govigama caste continued to maintain power and many political leaders of Sri Lanka are of Govigama backgrounds. Silva argues that these changes led to competition between the Govigama castes and the Mudaliyars as well as the emerging elites as to who was to be the representatives of peasant and farmer communities of Sri Lanka.<sup>56</sup> The position of upper castes or elites as the representatives of the working class people is explored further by Gamage in his analysis of who mobilized the masses of lower classes during Sri Lanka's post-independence period.<sup>57</sup>

From the beginning of the civil war, elites that made up political parties such as the UNP had mobilized the urban working population and lower classes in order to build a mass party base. Gamage discusses how the "UNP commenced mobilizing people against the Tamils" in order to bridge the gap between the UNP which was composed of elites and the majority working population,<sup>58</sup> In terms of the Sinhalese population, the UNP and SLFP successfully mobilized the lower strata of society during the 50 years after independence. Similarly, in the northern and eastern regions of the nation, Tamil

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>57</sup> Gamage, "Post-independent political conflicts," 359.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 361.

militants were able to mobilize Tamil lower classes through nationalist slogans of Tamil liberation and Tamil Eelam. Gamage clearly makes a connection between class hierarchies and nationalist ideology when he says “the ruling upper strata have successfully used socio-economic slogans and strategies based on those slogans to divide and rule the lower strata of the Sri Lankan society.”<sup>59</sup> Gamage refers to another scholar Bopage who believes that the fundamental nature of the conflict in Sri Lanka is of a class nature. However, because the ruling classes have used ethnic factors to divide and rule society, Gamage points to how there is also an ethnic dimension to the class conflict in Sri Lanka.<sup>60</sup>

Other scholars including Silva and Riswan provide important analyses on the construction of class and caste in Sri Lanka, but fail to connect the distinct class hierarchies to the cause of the civil war and the development of nationalism. The importance of class and status is further emphasized by Gamage when he says that the revolt of the Tamil Tigers is not against the 75% Sinhala community, but against the rulers and bureaucracy of the nation because those are the people with power.<sup>61</sup> During elections, lower classes transfer their sovereignty to politicians who are made up of upper class-elitists that neglected the interests of the lower classes. The upper class is engaged in political and ideological campaigns to maintain the status quo and deny lower classes an equal participation in politics. Thus, Gamage’s analysis views the post-independent

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 362.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 363.

political conflicts in Sri Lanka as class conflicts that are accentuated by ethno-cultural consciousness.<sup>62</sup>

### 3.4 CLASS AND NATIONALISM

The ties between ethnic nationalism and class conflict that Gamage touches upon is explored further by scholars such as Theiventhran, Stokke, and Jayasundara-Smits. Stokke, a Professor of Geography at the University of Oslo, defines nationalism as a “political movement and a set of political ideas.”<sup>63</sup> The core of his argument is that Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism represent post-colonial political projects where nationalist practices are used by the dominant class for the purpose of mobilization. Theiventhran, a PhD scholar, also addresses this idea and begins his analysis by noting “what many analysts have failed to bite is that class issues underlie the development of the national question” and that a class perspective is the way forward to form workable solutions.<sup>64</sup> Jayasundara-Smits, an Assistant Professor of Conflict and Peace Studies, has a similar argument about the nature of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism and how it “can only be understood when sufficient attention is paid to the class-based nature of politics in Sri Lanka.”<sup>65</sup> The discourse on nationalism in Sri Lanka is influenced by the dominant western understanding of the nation-state. The term “ethno-religious” nationalism is linked to the inter-ethnic and religious tensions between Sinhalese and Tamil groups.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 374.

<sup>63</sup> Kristian Stokke, “Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism as post-colonial political projects from ‘above’ 1948 - 1983,” *Political Geography* 17, no.1 (1998): 83.

<sup>64</sup> Theiventhran, “A Class Based Approach,” 1.

<sup>65</sup> Jayasundara-Smits, “Contemporary Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism,” 73.

However, the classical understanding of nationalism has proven to be insufficient in understanding the underlying causes of the Sri Lankan civil war. Jayasundara-Smits defines nationalism as not “‘love for a nation,’ but a political instrument of mobilization for the political gains of certain privileged classes of society.”<sup>66</sup>

In his work, Jayasundara-Smits uses a Marxist and Neo-Marxist perspective to show the connection between class interests and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism which is evident by how the political forces made of elites are the ones who have advanced Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.<sup>67</sup> Theiventhran also draws on Marxist concepts of class conflict including how political organizations and power are instruments of class struggle, and how the reigning ideas of a nation are a reflection of the ruling class.<sup>68</sup> He also clarifies the distinction and overlap between class and caste in Sri Lanka. Caste identity is determined by one’s birth and encompasses social status. On the other hand, class identity derives from the system of private property and the exploitation of labor and is based on one’s relationship to the means of production.<sup>69</sup> The upper castes had predominantly constituted the upper classes through their ownership of land. Theiventhran goes on to argue that no nationalism can transcend class. Jayasundara-Smits also emphasizes the connection between class and nationalism as he states that the ruling

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Theiventhran, “A Class Based Approach,” 1.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 13.

classes used nationalist ideology to “establish the Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lanka’s contemporary politics and its state of affairs.”<sup>70</sup>

According to Theiventhran, the UNP party “represented the interests of the corporate elite and was responsible for launching the war in 1983.”<sup>71</sup> From the beginning of the 20th century, there were hostilities between nationalities created to serve class interests. Nationalist views of needing to preserve one’s culture were advanced by upper classes that collaborated with capitalism and colonialism to protect their self-interests. Theiventhran makes the claim that nationalist policies such as the “Sinhala Only” Act were passed by elite political parties with the intention to divert Sinhala masses from class-based issues.<sup>72</sup> The UNP and SLFP were made up of the bourgeois class and campaigned on claims of protecting Sinhala Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Theiventhran notes how Tamil leadership had also “emphasized the rights of Tamils only to the extent that it served Tamil elitist interests.”<sup>73</sup> The causes of Tamil workers, peasants, or women were never the center of their movement, rather, the Tamil identity that Tamil nationalism fought for was primarily the identity of the Tamil Vellala caste and elites. Members of the advanced upper caste and classes including Sinhalese and Tamils are the dominant social forces that lead Sri Lankan politics. In 1977, when the UNP instituted an economic liberalization program, Stokke addresses how they were careful to “make symbolic concessions to Sinhalese nationalism” to distract from the social distress that the program

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<sup>70</sup> Jayasundara-Smits, “Contemporary Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism,” 75.

<sup>71</sup> Theiventhran, “A Class Based Approach,” 4.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 9.

caused.<sup>74</sup> Nationalism is used as a cover for economic problems in order to unite elites and working class people against a common enemy. The peace initiative that the UNP took at the end of the war is a further demonstration of the elites acting on their own interests and not on those of the working class people. The peace initiative, according to Theiventhran, was accepted “as a result of the realization that war discouraged foreign investment and hindered economic development of the island.”<sup>75</sup>

Stokke addresses how both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms claim that colonial and post-colonial processes have led to a situation with economic oppression and political domination of one nation by the other.<sup>76</sup> In this way, both nationalisms involve a reaction to economic conditions and are related to class structures. Sinhalese nationalists claim that Tamils and other minorities have an unfair share of government jobs, while Tamil nationalists claim that they are economically exploited and dominated by the Sinhalese dominated country. Thus, Stokke, citing another scholar, argues that “there is nothing inevitabl[e] about the rise and transformation of ethnic identity into nationalism” as it occurs under circumstances with “elites seeking to mobilize the ethnic group against its rivals.”<sup>77</sup> After independence, political power was rooted in the specificities of Sri Lankan class formation rather than ethnicity. As a result, Stokke notes how political elites chose unifying cultural symbols such as language and religion as their primary rallying points in order to gain the support of middle and lower classes. Jayasundara-Smits

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<sup>74</sup> Stokke, “Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism,” 105.

<sup>75</sup> Theiventhran, “A Class Based Approach,” 4.

<sup>76</sup> Stokke, “Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism,” 87.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

touches on the same idea and argues that “the masses are being manipulated for the gains of a powerful few: the ruling class.”<sup>78</sup> The class consciousness of the Sinhala bourgeoisie led to the birth of nationalism in Sri Lanka as a way to portray struggles of the bourgeoisie against the British as a result of cultural or ethnic differences.

Theiventhran addresses the situation of the anti-Muslim riots in 1915 and how “leading members of the Tamil elite sided with the Sinhala elite.”<sup>79</sup> In centuries before that, during the period of colonial rule, groups of Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim elite had all worked together and collaborated with colonial masters. In return, colonial masters perpetuated class differences and granted partial power to the elites. Stokke addresses the effect of colonization and how “the colonial accumulation regime had created a multi-ethnic domestic dominant class.”<sup>80</sup> Regarding Tamil politics, the beginning of the 20th century was monopolized by Colombo-based Tamil elite groups until power was transferred to the elitist segment of the Jaffna Tamil society and the Vellalar caste. At the time of independence, the Tamil dominant class favored “political cooperation with the Sinhalese elite for the maintenance of colonial economic and political order.”<sup>81</sup> Jayasundara-Smits also notes how the Tamil bourgeoisie class united with its Sinhalese counterpart in the anti-British colonial struggle.<sup>82</sup> Tamil nationalism and the focus on the

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<sup>78</sup> Jayasundara-Smits, “Contemporary Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism,” 76.

<sup>79</sup> Theiventhran, “A Class Based Approach,” 7.

<sup>80</sup> Stokke, “Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism, 93.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>82</sup> Jayasundara-Smits, “Contemporary Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism,” 77.

government's oppression of Tamils was used by the elites to draw attention away from the challenges to Vellalar dominance in the Tamil community.

Although DeVotta, Jayasundara-Smits, and Stokke address the argument that I propose regarding the connection between class and nationalism in Sri Lanka, there is information lacking in each. The scholars lack a focus on how the intersection between class and ethnicity in Sri Lanka influenced both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism leading to the civil war. I use an intersectional Marxist framework that accounts for class politics and how class interests, formations, and exploitation are formed along ethnic lines. My thesis adds nuance to the work of these scholars and analyzes how class relations influenced by ethnicity are at the core of nationalist ideology and the root of the Sri Lankan civil war. The following chapters will provide historical background on four social groups that lie at different intersections of class and ethnicity and address how policies that instituted Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism were rooted in ruling class interests and ethnic discrimination.

## **CHAPTER 4: HISTORICAL CONTEXT ON GOVIGAMAS, VELLALAS, THE SINHALESE WORKING CLASS, AND PLANTATION TAMILS**

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, I will be analyzing four different social groups in Sri Lankan society and the roles that they held before the start of the civil war in 1983. The analysis of each group will show how class relations are at the center of ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka and how they have contributed to the promotion of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism as well as Tamil nationalism. In this analysis, I find that Sinhalese and Tamil elites both utilized nationalism as a means to obscure class disparities and to mobilize the masses of middle and lower classes to pursue their own interests. On the other hand, the Sinhalese working class and Indian Tamils had failed in attempts to mobilize based on their class interests and had become subject to the nationalist ideology by elites that disguised class issues as ethnic conflict.

### **4.1 GOVIGAMA CASTE AND SINHALA ELITES**

Caste was the key principle of political and social organization during the Kandyan Kingdom among the Sinhalese population. The Govigama caste is at the top of the Sinhalese caste hierarchy and service castes such as the Rodee are at the bottom comparable to the untouchable caste in India. In contemporary Sri Lankan society, the importance of caste distinctions has been declining and the class system based on wealth and living conditions has become the more significant parameter of social stratification.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ekanayake, "Social Stratification, Modernization and Restructuring," 103.

However, there is a clear connection between caste and class with contemporary elites and upper classes yielding from higher castes such as the Govigama and Karava castes. In rural, particularly Buddhist areas, caste and class boundaries coincide with the rich and dominant coming from the Govigama and the poor coming from low castes.<sup>2</sup> In recent times, the influence of the Govigama caste and its ties to the elite families in Sri Lanka is still visible. All Sri Lankan presidents and prime ministers with the exception of Ranasinghe Premadasa have belonged to the Govigama caste.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, my analysis is focused on both the Govigama caste and Sinhalese upper classes or elites as they represent similar populations. The terminology of Sinhala elites or upper classes is more representative of contemporary social stratification in Sri Lanka as the Govigama caste and the influence of the caste system has been decreasing. Caste system was the dominant mode of social stratification among the Sinhalese and Tamils until the period of colonialism.<sup>4</sup> The decline of the caste system and the evolution of social classes was significantly influenced by colonizers through their control of the local populations' access to economic resources.

The Sinhalese are divided culturally and geographically into upcountry Kandyan and low-country Sinhalese. Historically, there have been tensions between the Govigama caste and those immediately below it such as the Karava and Salagama castes. During the

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<sup>2</sup> Satchi Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle*, (London: Tamil Information Centre and Zed Books, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Punya Perera, "Caste And Exclusion In Sinhala Buddhism," *Colombo Telegraph*, March 7, 2013. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/caste-and-exclusion-in-sinhala-buddhism/>

<sup>4</sup> Ekanayake, "Social Stratification, Modernization and Restructuring," 99.

British colonial period, there were factional rivalries for political and economic power between the elite of the low country Govigama and the Karava. The creation of a bourgeois class is a result of British colonial practices and their patronage of low country Sinhalese mudaliyars from the Govigama caste who became the landed elite. With the bourgeoisie, allegiances were based first on class and then on caste because ethnicity was not viewed as a framework for domination at the time.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Tamil Vellala elite had worked with the low country Govigama against the Karava caste in order to maintain upper caste exclusiveness. The political and economic processes developed during the British colonial period had divided society on the basis of economic and social classes and created a bourgeois class that was inter-ethnic.<sup>6</sup> The reaction to class alliances across ethnicities including among elites was perceived by other elites to be dangerous. Thus, nationalist policies were instituted to prevent class alliances and divide ethnic groups. In order to disrupt the elite class alliances and to prevent potential working class alliances, the Karava elite created the “Sinhala Only” act and institutionalized Sinhalese nationalism.<sup>7</sup> In this case, a Marxist framework on its own would not be able to address the divide between Sinhalese elites and Tamil elites as upper classes or elites are viewed as one entity. The addition of intersectionality to Marxist theory is able to recognize that ethnicity along with class affects the relations between these groups, although class is the central factor. It is among class lines that elites had primarily identified and ethnic

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<sup>5</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

identity had been a secondary identity as it was emphasized in response to potential class alliances and revolts.

The riots in 1983 was the first time that violence was directed against the “Tamils as a group” and did not provide protection to middle and upper class Tamils.<sup>8</sup> The protective effect of class was eliminated when the Tamil community came to be externally defined solely in terms of their ethnicity in order to obscure class distinctions and form Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. The defining of Tamils regardless of their class status as enemies by Sinhalese elites would contribute to both the emergence of nationalism and a lack of class consciousness. The calls for a Sinhalese nation and Sinhala Buddhist cultural revivalism were pushed for by Sinhalese political activists among the elite.<sup>9</sup> Although some of the elite and politicians were Anglicized and did not know Sinhalese, they took it upon themselves to learn it and elevate Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in order to gain political support. Language reforms and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist sentiments were used by elites to divert and mask the class conflict within the country. The Sinhala elite needed to dominate the nation through these policies in order to secure their power base.<sup>10</sup> As a result by the 1930s, the Sinhala nationalist elite had claimed to advocate for the Sinhala peasantry, while expressing anti-Tamil sentiments

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth D. Bush, “An Overview of Sri Lankan Politics,” In *The Intra-Group Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2003): 38.

<sup>9</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

<sup>10</sup> Sanka Chandima Abayawardena, “The core problem is the elites, not the people,” *Open Security*, May 14, 2012. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/core-problem-is-elites-not-people-sanka-abayawardena-respon/>

especially towards the Tamil plantation workers.<sup>11</sup> Intersectionality may appear to account for this discrimination based on class and ethnicity, but it falls short as it is a concept for understanding oppression and not exploitation. Marxism offers the framework for understanding the relationship between oppression and exploitation and identifies how the working class is the agency for change.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, an intersectional Marxist framework accounts for the discrimination and exploitation of the Sinhalese working class that led to their support of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, rather than their allegiance with the Plantation Tamils. The Sinhalese working class was mobilized along ethnic divides by Sinhalese elites who exploited their lack of education and power to make Sinhala nationalism appear as the solution to their economic struggles.

In “third world” countries, nationalist ideology is classified as “new nationalism” which is the mobilization of masses in post-colonial societies towards attaining political, economic, and social goals.<sup>13</sup> Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism fits this notion of a “new nationalism” as the Govigama caste and Sinhalese elites had utilized nationalism as a means to mobilize the Sinhalese masses to protect their positions of power from Tamil elites. Tamils and Sinhalese had lived together peaceably for almost two millennia. The differences that existed between them, including language and religion, were made into something new by the devices of the modern state.<sup>14</sup> Elites and upper classes had used

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<sup>11</sup> Kadirgamar, “Polarization, Civil War, and Persistent Majoritarianism in Sri Lanka,” 55.

<sup>12</sup> Sharon Smith, “A Marxist Case for Intersectionality,” *Socialist Worker*, August 1, 2017. <https://socialistworker.org/2017/08/01/a-marxist-case-for-intersectionality>

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Nancoo, “Nationalism and Change: A Framework for Analysis,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 3 (1977): 301.

<sup>14</sup> Bush, “An Overview of Sri Lankan Politics,” 34.

these differences to formulate conflict on the basis of ethnic and racial lines blaming the enemy ethnic group for the problems that lower classes were facing. The formation of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movement began with Angarika Dharmapala who came from a Govigama caste business family.<sup>15</sup> The Sinhalese elites in government had also promoted Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism through policies such as their colonization of Tamil areas with the settlement of Sinhalese peasants.<sup>16</sup> Lower and working classes were not only being subjected to nationalist ideologies, but they were being used to promote it. However, it was not only the acts of Sinhalese elites, but also the work of the Tamil elite ruling class that had deprived Tamils of rights and discriminated against them.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.2 VELLALA CASTE AND TAMIL ELITES

The Tamil elites and Vellala caste operate similarly to Sinhalese elites and the Govigama caste. However, Tamil elites did not have institutional power as they lacked representation in the Sinhalese dominated government, especially in the post-independence period. Instead, Tamil elites and the Vellala caste exercised their superiority over lower Tamil castes and classes. The Vellalas played an important role as chieftains in the Jaffna Kingdom and they considered themselves to be superior to all other castes besides Brahmins.<sup>18</sup> The hierarchical order of Jaffna Tamil castes included Brahmins at the top, then Vellalas, the Karaiyar caste, and the service and untouchable

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<sup>15</sup> Kalinga Tudor Silva, "Caste, Ethnicity and Problems of National Identity in Sri Lanka," *Sociological Bulletin* 48, no.1 (1999): 205.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 42. (Bush)

<sup>17</sup> Abayawardena, "The core problem is the elites."

<sup>18</sup> Ekanayake, "Social Stratification, Modernization and Restructuring," 101.

castes at the bottom.<sup>19</sup> Tamils also organized based on regional differences with Colombo and Jaffna Tamils at the top of the hierarchy, East Coast Tamils in the middle, and Up Country or Plantation Tamils at the bottom.<sup>20</sup> These regional hierarchies are underscored and maintained by caste differences.

A study conducted in a Tamil village of Ramyapuram in Sri Lanka consisted of interviews with women in the village and revealed that social interaction was controlled very carefully by the Vellala caste.<sup>21</sup> The Vellalas had maintained strict control of Jaffna society and assumed the role of defining Tamil civilization. The high caste position of Vellalas was reinforced economically as the Vellalas were the major landowners on the Jaffna peninsula and monopolized political leadership. As a result, caste and class boundaries among the Tamils coincided and the Tamil “bourgeoisie” as well as the political elite are part of the Vellala caste.<sup>22</sup> Lower caste Tamils are a result of both ethnic and caste-based socio-economic inequalities as they were exploited by Tamil elites in the socio-economic and political relations within society.<sup>23</sup> The caste-based Tamil struggles show how the caste system and class differences had deprived Tamils of socio-economic needs well before ethnic disputes. This is evident through the protests of lower-castes during the 1960s against the dominance of the Vellalars due to their discriminatory practices. I argue that class forms the basis on which identities are formed and this has

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<sup>19</sup> Bush, “An Overview of Sri Lankan Politics,” 51.

<sup>20</sup> Bush, “An Overview of Sri Lankan Politics,” 39.

<sup>21</sup> Francesca Bremner, “Recasting Caste: War, Displacement, and Transformations,” *International Journal of Ethnic & Social Studies* II, no. 1 (2013): 33.

<sup>22</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

<sup>23</sup> Balasooriya, “Issues at Own Backyard,” 21.

resulted in the exploitation of lower-caste Tamils by Tamil elites. The role of ethnicity in promoting nationalism was utilized after class distinctions had already formed which emphasizes the idea of class being at the center of societal relations. After ethnicity had been emphasized and nationalisms developed, the treatment of social groups varied based on their intersections of ethnicity and class.

In the beginning of the independence period, Tamil leadership did not perceive the Tamil ethnic community as a nation and instead, aligned with Sinhalese elites out of bourgeois interests. It was only in 1951 that Tamil politicians had developed Tamil nationalism and defined Tamils as a distinct nation with the Tamil Federal Party.<sup>24</sup> The Tamil elites had broken from a class alliance with the Sinhalese elites after the institutionalization of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Class conflicts also arose within the Tamil community with Tamil youth becoming frustrated with the political environment that resulted from the Tamil elites and Vellalas being in power. There were challenges to the domination of the Vellalas by untouchable castes, but Vellala landlords crushed these challenges through physical violence. However, when the Colombo government attempted to mediate these disputes among Tamil castes, Tamil nationalism was formed as a defense to unify the Tamil community and promote common ethnic sentiments against the Sinhala dominated government.<sup>25</sup> The undereducated Tamil community had

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. - Ponnambalam

<sup>25</sup> Silva, "Caste, Ethnicity and Problems of National Identity in Sri Lanka," 203.

not understood how they were being utilized by the elite political class for their own means.<sup>26</sup>

## UNITY BETWEEN SINHALA AND TAMIL ELITES

The multi-ethnic appearance of the elite in Sri Lanka demonstrates how class and professional relationships had transcended ethnic differences. The dominant discourse on the Sri Lankan civil war as an ethnic conflict between Sinhalese people and Tamils neglects the collaboration and unity that had existed between Sinhalese and Tamil elites prior to the development of nationalist ideologies. The Sri Lankan government had a multi-ethnic elite character in 1948 with the Ceylon Tamil Congress entering the ruling coalition with Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake.<sup>27</sup> Tamil elites had not opposed discriminatory policies such as the disenfranchisement of Up-Country Tamils and in fact, had colluded in the process as part of the government.<sup>28</sup> Most of the Tamil bourgeoisie members of parliament joined in the campaign of the Sinhalese political class to deprive the Indian Tamils of their citizenship and right to vote.<sup>29</sup> Inter-group relations between Tamils and Sinhalese were relatively harmonious in 1948 at the level of the political elite. The Sinhala and Tamil elite had come together on the basis of class interest, rather than through anti-colonialism. By siding with Sinhalese elites, Tamil politicians had contributed to the ethnicization of the political system which would eventually harm them.

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<sup>26</sup> Abayawardena, "The core problem is the elites."

<sup>27</sup> Bush, "Critical Juncture I," 75.

<sup>28</sup> Kadirgamar, "Polarization, Civil War, and Persistent Majoritarianism," p.55

<sup>29</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

It was at the intersection of ethnic and class domination that the Sinhalese elite had promoted the ideology of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism as a means to unify previously divided classes and divide previously unified ethnic groups. The Sinhalese elite hold both a privileged class and ethnic position. At the root of both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism was not naturally occurring ethnic tensions, but politically manufactured ethnic divides to obscure class differences and govern Sri Lanka in accordance with western norms and traditions.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, polarization cannot be reduced to two competing forces, but involves multiple poles of varying levels of power.<sup>31</sup> In this case, the framework I adopt identifies ethnicity and class as two of those poles creating polarization with class holding a larger role in influencing the conflict. Although Tamil and Sinhalese leaders push ethnic divisions as the forefront of the conflict, class interests strongly influence elite politics and ethnic communities themselves are divided among class and caste lines.<sup>32</sup> As a result, it is evident how class becomes the central factor that is used in conjunction with ethnicity to form the nationalist ideologies that led to the Sri Lankan civil war. The working class regardless of ethnicity was exploited by Sinhalese and Tamil elites, but the ethnicity of the working class determined the extent to which they were discriminated against with the Sinhalese working class being more privileged than the Tamil plantation workers.

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<sup>30</sup> Abayawardena, "The core problem is the elites."

<sup>31</sup> Kadirgamar, "Polarization, Civil War, and Persistent Majoritarianism," p.53

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 54.

### 4.3 SINHALESE WORKING CLASS

The Sinhalese working class is at the intersection of the dominant ethnic group within the nation and the lowest class. The position that the Sinhalese working class holds emphasizes the influence of class relations in Sri Lankan society by showing how members of the dominant ethnic group are discriminated against by upper class members of the same ethnicity. The working class in Sri Lankan society consisted of plantation workers, agricultural workers, and small-scale farmers which were also associated with lower castes.<sup>33</sup> In the early 20th century, there was no monolithic Sinhalese identity. There were divisions within the Sinhalese on the basis of caste, religion, and class lines. By the 1930s, a new social synthesis emerged with the upper middle class at the apex, and the working and lower middle class being exploited at the base.<sup>34</sup> When the British left and transferred power to Sri Lankan elites of both Tamil and Sinhala backgrounds, the ordinary Sinhalese working people were not socially emancipated and remained subordinate to the elites.

In their attempts to ensure that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism prevailed, the Sri Lankan government and elites worked to alter the demographic composition of the Eastern coast of Sri Lanka by increasing Sinhalese settlement and control over those lands. Elites had promoted the colonization of predominantly Tamil lands through exploitation of Sinhalese landless peasants and the settlement of them in the Tamil areas

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<sup>33</sup> Ekanayake, "Social Stratification, Modernization and Restructuring," 104.

<sup>34</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

of the Dry Zone.<sup>35</sup> Land settlement has a broad appeal as a way to tackle socio-economic problems as the scheme sprang from the need for the social amelioration of people dispossessed of their lands.<sup>36</sup> However, the re-settlement was not only due to economic reasons, but also ethnic factors as the Sinhalese peasants were settled into predominantly Tamil regions as a way to change the ethnic demographic of the region and ensure Sinhalese hegemony. Another way that the Sinhalese working class and lower castes had been exploited by the elites was in their mobilization against Tamils during the 1983 riots. Economically depressed Sinhalese lower castes were a resource that was usefully mobilized by UNP politicians.<sup>37</sup> Working class alliances constituted part of the fear that Sinhalese elites had and thus, led to their development of policies that would create a united and privileged ethnic group among the Sinhalese. There was more amity at the level of ordinary working people in Sri Lanka than at the elite level because nationalism and the pursuit of economic advancement brought them into competition.<sup>38</sup> As a result, ethnic and class identity had prevented Tamil and Sinhala working classes from uniting due to their view as being competitors for jobs that were being controlled by the elites.

However, there were attempts by the working class to formulate class alliances and to mobilize against the exploitative elites. The Ceylon Labour Party was a trade union that assisted in organizing the working class struggle along with the LSSP (Lanka

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<sup>35</sup> Patrick Peebles, "Colonization and Ethnic Conflict in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no.1 (1990): 37.

<sup>36</sup> Nihal Amerasinghe, "An Overview of Settlement Schemes in Sri Lanka," *Asian Survey* 16, no. 7 (1976): 620.

<sup>37</sup> Bush, "An Overview of Sri Lankan Politics," 50.

<sup>38</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

Sama Samaja Party) that called for a series of strikes by agricultural workers on plantations.<sup>39</sup> The working class frustration and Marxist inspired labor unrest had led to the general strike of 1946. This strike followed by many others in the late 20th century were predominantly economic in character and confronted the state apparatus.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) party developed which mobilized youth from low caste Sinhala communities in rural areas and targeted upper caste leaders. This mobilization of the working class was a result of frustration at traditional elites and the concentration of power in the hands of Govigama families.<sup>41</sup>

According to Karl Marx, the movements by the working class are the solution to existing class conflict. However, the addition of the ethnic factor is needed to recognize how the working class differed among ethnic groups with the Sinhalese working class being treated better in comparison to the Tamil plantation workers. Abeyratne refers to the political conflict that developed in Sri Lanka as a “twin conflict” that requires considerations beyond ethnic factors and an analysis of conflict within and across ethnic communities.<sup>42</sup> The concept of the Sri Lankan civil war being a “twin conflict” encompasses the purpose of the intersectional Marxist framework in recognizing the role of both ethnicity and class in the rise of nationalist sentiments. With regards to the Sinhalese working class, it is evident how they faced exploitation by the upper classes

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Ponnambalam

<sup>40</sup> Laksiri Fernando, “The State and Class Struggle in Sri Lanka: The General Strike of July 1980,” *Labour, Capital, and Society* 16, no. 2 (1983): 205.

<sup>41</sup> Silva, “Caste, Ethnicity and Problems of National Identity in Sri Lanka,” 207.

<sup>42</sup> Sirimal Abeyratne, “Economic Roots of Political Conflict: The Case of Sri Lanka,” *The World Economy* 27, no. 8 (2004): 8.

and mobilized to combat it by following their own Marxist ideologies. However, the failure of these movements and the success of the nationalist ideology can be attributed to the focus on ethnic boundaries and the lack of working class alliances that worked with the Tamil working class. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and eventually the Sri Lankan civil war was able to persist due to the lack of class consciousness across ethnic boundaries among the working class of the Sinhalese people as well as the Tamils. The only way for the Sri Lankan working class to ally would be for them to realize that their real enemies are not each other but their respective bourgeoisie.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4.4 PLANTATION TAMILS

The last social group that I will analyze is one of the most oppressed groups in Sri Lankan society as it occupies both a marginalized ethnic and class identity. The Hill or Up-Country Tamils, also known as the Plantation Tamils or Indian Tamils, are one of the most economically, socially, and politically marginalized communities in the country.<sup>44</sup> They belong to lower caste groups, and most were poor and illiterate. The Plantation Tamils, as I will refer to them as, were brought over from India during the British colonial period as cheap labor for coffee and tea plantations in the 1840s. They are among the most economically depressed on the island and frequently suffer from starvation and poor educational resources.<sup>45</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper,

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<sup>43</sup> Anthony Marcus, "Post-War Sri Lanka: Deficient realities and unexplored possibilities," *Dialectical Anthropology* 39 (2015): 252.

<sup>44</sup> Rehana Mohammed, Sakeena Razick, Rashmi Dias, Amal de Chickera, and Gehan Gunatilleke, "Hill Country Tamils of Sri Lanka: Towards Meaningful Citizenship," Verite Research and Institute of Statelessness and Inclusion, August 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Ethnic Unrest in Modern Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: M.D. Publications, 1994).

gender dynamics also created greater disparities within the Plantation Tamils as female plantation workers were among the lowest paid in Sri Lanka.<sup>46</sup> The cheap labor of the Plantation Tamils laid the foundations for the prosperity of Sri Lanka and their conditions were little better off than bonded slaves.

The conditions for employment of the Plantation Tamils included low wages, long hours, and poor working as well as living conditions. They remained relatively invisible in mainstream political discussions as Tamil elites neglected to advocate for their interests. As a result, many policies were passed in the post-independence period that rendered a majority of Plantation Tamils as both ‘stateless’ and ‘voteless.’<sup>47</sup> The Citizenship Act in 1948 declared that citizenship was to be determined by descent or registration. As a result, the amount of Plantation Tamils that could claim citizenship with this act was very small. The deprivation of Plantation Tamils’ citizenship and voting power was due to their ability to bolster Tamil strength in Parliament and their capability of working class solidarity with their Sinhalese counterparts which posed a constant danger to upper-class control of the state.<sup>48</sup> The Sinhala nationalist elite developed nationalist policies out of fear of the trade union base of Tamil plantation workers and their electoral support for left-leaning parties.<sup>49</sup> Tamil elites had also been a part of the government that passed these policies and collaborated with the UNP, instead of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Bush, “Critical Juncture I,” 76.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>49</sup> Kadrigamar, “Polarization, Civil War, and Persistent Majoritarianism,” p.55

advocating for the Plantation Tamils. Therefore, both class and ethnic motivations can be attributed to Sinhalese and Tamil actors with these acts.

There was resistance from the Plantation Tamils in regards to their conditions and neglect of their rights. A number of them had collaborated with the Marxist Sinhala JVP party during the terror of 1987 - 1989. This collaboration demonstrated the possibility of class alliances across ethnic lines which is exactly what elites feared as they pushed for nationalist policies. Shortly after in the 1990s, there was the emergence of the Up-Country Tamil political movement called Up-Country People's Front that was created to advocate for this heavily marginalized group. Plantation Tamils were also involved in trade unions such as the Ceylon Indian Congress that was organized by leaders of their own community. They do not express their collective identity in terms of language, culture, or religion, but rather, it is their class identity that is at the forefront.<sup>50</sup> The Plantation Tamils held a distinctive position as the largest proletarian force and their unionization which resulted in class solidarity had brought substantial improvements to their working life. As part of the socially excluded lower-caste Tamils, Plantation Tamils are the ultimate product of both ethnic and caste or class based socio-economic inequalities.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

<sup>51</sup> Balasooriya, "Issues at Own Backyard," 21.

The ability for Plantation Tamils to mobilize along their class identity is representative of Marxist ideology and his emphasis on the working class as agents of change. The rise of ethnic sentiments and the politicization of ethnicity at the higher level undermines some aspects of caste which highlight internal differences and status distinctions within ethnic groups.<sup>52</sup> When Plantation Tamils mobilized based on their shared class identity, it emphasized the part of their identity that elites tried to obscure. In the promotion of Tamil nationalism, anti-caste movements during the 1940s and 1960s are rarely mentioned because they offer a counter-narrative that attacked Tamil elites rather than the oppressive Sinhala dominated state.<sup>53</sup> The Plantation Tamils endured extreme discrimination due to not only their social class, but also their ethnicity. The experience of Sinhalese working class and Plantation Tamils differ greatly from each other due to this part of their identity. The intersectional Marxist framework allows us to recognize how class was at the center of the experiences of Plantation Tamils and had contributed to the development of Tamil nationalism that did not account for their interests. At the same time, the ethnic background of Plantation Tamils contributed to their further marginalization by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist policies that discriminated against them in order to protect Sinhalese elite interests.

The elite alliance that had formed between the Govigama and Vellala had failed due to specific areas of competition including areas of political power, which resulted in

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<sup>52</sup> Silva, "Caste, Ethnicity and Problems of National Identity in Sri Lanka," 202.

<sup>53</sup> N. Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of the Contested Identities*, (Sri Lanka: VijithaYapa Publications, 2006)

the polarization of the Sinhalese and Tamils along ethnic lines. The ethnic polarization mobilized the majority of the Sri Lankan population, consisting of Sinhalese working and middle classes, to support Sinhalese elites over Tamil ones. On the other hand, cross-ethnic working class alliances were compromised from the start due to the differences in the groups' respective forms of exploitation.

## **CHAPTER 5: POLITICAL POLITICS AND POLICIES BEHIND NATIONALISM DURING THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

An examination of the four social groups in the previous chapter provides context into the importance of class or caste relations and ethnicity in the development of nationalism in Sri Lankan society. Similar to how Crenshaw emphasized a focus on the experiences of Black women in order to understand systems of discrimination based on race and gender, I will provide a focus on the Indian Plantation Tamils in order to demonstrate how nationalism and the civil war in Sri Lanka were based on class and ethnic discrimination. This chapter will apply the intersectional Marxist framework to an examination of how marginalized groups particularly, the Indian Tamil Plantation workers, were exploited and neglected through the development of both Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism and Tamil Nationalism. I will emphasize how Sinhalese and Tamil political parties are class formations that pursued nationalist ideologies leading to the civil war due to their own class interests and ethnic identity. I will also look at how the rise of the LTTE and its rule of Tamil areas during the civil war contributed to a form of Tamil nationalism based on the exploitation and exclusion of lower class Tamils. Through my analysis, it is evident how the conflicts produced by the ideology of ethnic nationalism were caused by the ideological domination of elite classes among both the Sinhalese and Tamils.

## 5.1 SINHALESE NATIONALIST POLICIES

During the post-independence period of Sri Lanka, a series of policies were passed by the Sinhalese-dominated government that institutionalized Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. My analysis will focus on three of these policies including the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1979. I will provide a brief overview of the policies and then analyze their effects utilizing the intersectional Marxist framework.

The Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 tied citizenship to the birth of one's ancestors and thus, denied citizenship to a person born in the country before or after 1948 unless, at least, their father was born in or was a citizen of Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> This act had resulted in nearly a million people of Indian origin who had permanently settled in Sri Lanka to become non-citizens and essentially, stateless because they were not considered citizens of India either.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, the Ceylon Amendment Act of 1949 tied franchise to citizenship and deprived the Indian Tamils of their right to vote. This step to disenfranchise the Plantation Tamils was taken because they bolstered Tamils' strength in Parliament and their working class solidarity with their Sinhalese counterparts was a constant danger to upper class control of the nation.<sup>3</sup> The importance of an intersectional framework is emphasized with this outlook of how Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was perpetuated as a way to combat both the Plantation Tamils' class and ethnic solidarity.

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<sup>1</sup> Bush, Kenneth D. "Critical Juncture I," 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The objective of these acts was to restrict the voting rights of the Plantation Tamils whose political and ethnic allegiance was viewed by the ruling elite to be a threat to their positions of power.<sup>4</sup> The elimination of the plantation workers from the electorate would aid in securing an absolute majority for the UNP in future elections.<sup>5</sup>

The motive of the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Amendment Act of 1949 was partly economic as the lack of citizenship and disenfranchisement it instituted was aimed to prevent Indian Tamils from residing and being employed in Sri Lanka as well as from voting for leftist parties and aligning with the working classes. The influence of class interests in this act are also evident as Sinhalese elites adopted this act “to divide the working class, both Sinhalese and Tamil, which was united, militant, and threatening upper class control of the late colonial and post-colonial state.”<sup>6</sup> The threat to elites from Sinhalese and Tamil working classes unifying was demonstrated in the 1946-1947 general strike that consisted of both Sinhalese and Tamils. As a result, the Ceylon Citizenship Act and Amendment Act promoted Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism through the exclusion of Plantation Tamils. During the colonial period, the work of Plantation Tamils was exploited to build up the Sri Lankan economy and now they were being excluded from Sri Lankan society. From the intersectional Marxist framework, Wright’s exclusion principle stating that “the material welfare of exploiters casually depends upon

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<sup>4</sup> A.M. Navaratna-Bandara, “Ethnic Relations and State Crafting in Post-Independence Sri Lanka,” in *Sri Lanka’s Development Since Independence: Socio-economic Perspectives and Analyses*, eds. Weligamage D. Lakshman and Clement A. Tisdell (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2000): 116.

<sup>5</sup> Rohini Hensman, “The role of socialists in the Sri Lankan civil war,” *The Platypus Review*, no.13 (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

the material deprivations of the exploited” and the exclusion of the exploited from access to resources can be applied.<sup>7</sup> The welfare of Sinhalese elites and nationalists was pursued through the exclusion of Plantation Tamils, the exploited population, from access to participation and representation in the Sri Lankan government and employment beyond the estates. Without citizenship and the right to vote, Plantation Tamils were deprived of having any influence in the Sri Lankan government and its institutions. The Plantation Tamils were excluded and exploited on a basis of both class and ethnic identities. Plantation Tamils belonged to the marginalized ethnic group of the nation and the lowest class group and thus, they posed a threat to the domination of Sinhalese Buddhist elites that belonged to both the dominant ethnic and class group. The threat that Plantation Tamils and other marginalized groups pose is their advocacy for their marginalized identity through the creation of new political parties and their mobilization through protests and coalitions against the leadership of the elites. After independence, the successive Sri Lankan governments “began to exploit the racism against Indian plantation workers for political as well as economic purposes.”<sup>8</sup> The development of races in Sri Lanka are rooted in colonialism through strategies employed to divide and conquer the Sri Lankan population. Race is used as a way to foment nationalist feeling among the Sinhalese as it creates an “us” versus “them” and maintains these divisions through privileges granted to the dominant race, the Sinhalese, and discrimination policies against the minority, Tamils. As a result, Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism gained its start in the

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, “Foundations of Class Analysis in the Marxist Tradition,” 27.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Kurian, Jenny Bourne, and Hazel Waters, “Plantation Politics,” in *Sri Lanka: racism and the authoritarian state*, eds. A. Sivanandan and Hazel Waters. (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1984): 84.

post-independence period through the exclusion of the Plantation Tamils, the most marginalized group, on the basis of both their ethnic and class identity.

Another policy that had contributed to the institutionalization of Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism was the Sinhala Only Act in 1956 passed by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike under the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which made Sinhala the only official language of the nation. For Sri Lankan Tamils, this act threatened their occupations and status as an integral part of the Sri Lankan polity.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the Sinhala Only Act, Tamils were excluded from the public sector, and access to the private sector as well as higher education was curtailed. However, at independence, the major political parties including the UNP and SLFP were for parity of status of Sinhala and Tamil languages.<sup>10</sup> In the run-up to the 1956 general elections, the force of Sinhala Buddhist opposition to the two language policy was so strong that the SLFP switched its position to a Sinhala Only policy.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Sinhala Only Act was a result of conflict between two Western elite factions, the UNP and the SLFP, in which the SLFP more effectively and instrumentally mobilized the support of the Sinhalese masses.<sup>12</sup> The Sinhala Only policy was a result of “ethnic outbidding” from Sinhalese politicians that strived to outdo one another by playing on the majority community’s fears and

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<sup>9</sup> Robert B. Kearney, “Sinhalese Nationalism and Social Conflict in Ceylon,” *Pacific Affairs* 37, no.2 (1964): 132.

<sup>10</sup> Navaratna-Bandara, “Ethnic Relations and State Crafting,” 116.

<sup>11</sup> Madurika Rasaratnam, *Tamils and the Nation: India and Sri Lanka Compared*, (C. Hurst & Co.: London, 2016): 139.

<sup>12</sup> Bush, “An Overview of Sri Lankan Politics,” 90.

ambitions.<sup>13</sup> Outbidding stems from politicians' desire and determination to acquire and maintain power. When it incorporates ethnicity, it marginalizes minority communities and exacerbates polyethnic tensions.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the UNP and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike representing the SLFP along with his wife Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who became the first female Prime Minister in the world after the death of S.W.R.D., had exploited the issue of language for political gain. During their rule, the SLFP had claimed that they tried to eliminate the gap between the elites and masses "by giving the due and rightful place to the Sinhala language as the official language of the country."<sup>15</sup> This led to ordinary Sinhalese people feeling like they belonged to the ruling ethnic community and thus, they accepted the position of domination conferred on them.<sup>16</sup> However, the intentions of the elites was not to improve conditions for the Sinhalese masses and working classes, but to maintain their political power. The elites had exploited the interests of the Sinhalese working class and excluded Tamils from opportunities due to their own class interests. The prospect of "ethnic outbidding" as described by DeVotta emphasizes how the Sinhalese elites played on the fears of the Sinhalese working class in order to gain their vote. The Sinhala Only Act was a way for the elites to stay in power by promoting and institutionalizing Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism which had appealed to the Sinhalese masses. The intersectional

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<sup>13</sup> Neil DeVotta, "South Asia Faces the Future: Illiberalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no.1 (2002): 84.

<sup>14</sup> Neil DeVotta, "From Ethnic Outbidding to Ethnic Conflict: The Institutional Bases for Sri Lanka's Separatist War," *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 1 (2005): 142.

<sup>15</sup> Navaratna-Bandara, "Ethnic Relations and State Crafting," 117.

<sup>16</sup> Bush, "An Overview of Sri Lankan Politics."

Marxist framework makes clear how the class interests of the elites were formed on a basis of class and ethnicity as the Sinhala Only Act was formulated to exclude the Tamil population in order to gain the support of the Sinhala masses and working classes. Additionally, this act would further exploit and regulate the Plantation Tamils to plantation work and exclude them from accessing higher positions of employment as they were already illiterate in their native Tamil language and did not have access to learn Sinhala.<sup>17</sup> The Sinhala Only Act was instituted to promote Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in order to benefit the elites and secure their political power.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1979 was enacted a few years before the civil war and had contributed to the discrimination of the Tamil people. The preamble declared that the PTA was to deal with “elements or groups of persons or associations that advocate the use of force or the commission of crime as a means of, or as an aid in, accomplishing governmental change within Sri Lanka.”<sup>18</sup> The PTA had suspended the writ of habeas corpus and allowed authorities to hold suspects incommunicado and for up to 18 months without trial.<sup>19</sup> This act had led to numerous innocent Tamils being arrested for unspecified “unlawful activities” and many suspects have been held on remand for years awaiting trial.<sup>20</sup> It was first enacted as a temporary measure in 1979 but became a permanent measure in 1982 and was intended to eliminate threats to a unified Sri

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<sup>17</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

<sup>18</sup> Gehan Gunatilleke, “Emergency Law in the Context of Terrorism - Sri Lanka,” *South Asian for Human Rights* (2006).

<sup>19</sup> DeVotta, “South Asia Faces the Future,” 90.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch, “‘In a Legal Black Hole’: Sri Lanka’s Failure to Reform the Prevention of Terrorism Act,” *Human Rights Watch*, February 7, 2022.

Lanka.<sup>21</sup> The PTA did not define terrorism and as a result, it allowed for the arrest and indefinite detention of any persons' suspected of being involved in any unlawful activities. Thus, many Tamil civilians were rounded up and detained without access to lawyers or their family for long periods of time.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, the threat of terrorism was used to institute emergency regulations that suppressed opposition parties in order to sustain power.<sup>23</sup> It had permitted for the military occupation of the Tamil homeland of the North and East by any means and suspended their basic democratic and human rights.<sup>24</sup> Between the time of the civil war from 1983 - 2009, the PTA was used by the Sri Lankan government against those accused of being involved with the LTTE or other militant groups and thus, it targeted Tamils.<sup>25</sup> The PTA was used as a cover for the torture, disappearance, and killing of thousands of Tamils by the state.<sup>26</sup> Sinhalese elites had instituted the PTA as another way to pursue their class interests and exclude the Tamil population from positions of power. The act had contributed to the monopoly on violence that the Sinhalese elites held as part of the state by detaining the Tamil population if they used similar forceful tactics to pursue their interests. The intersectional Marxist framework highlights how not only were

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<sup>21</sup> Radhika Coomaraswamy and Charmaine de los Reyes, "Rule by emergency: Sri Lanka's post-colonial constitutional experience," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 2, no. 2 (2004): 275.

<sup>22</sup> Mia M. Bloom, "Ethnic conflict, state terror and suicide bombing in Sri Lanka," *Civil Wars* 6, no.1 (2003): 62.

<sup>23</sup> Sarath Vitharana and Chaminda Abeysinghe, "Transformation of Political Culture in Post-Independent Sri Lanka: Conceptual and Empirical Overview," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 18, (2021): 588.

<sup>24</sup> Tameshnie Deane, "Historical and Political Background to the Erosion of the Rule of Law and Human Rights During Sri Lanka's Civil War and the Way Forward," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27, no 6 (2016): 974.

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch. "In a Legal Black Hole."

<sup>26</sup> Hensman, "The role of socialists in the Sri Lankan civil war."

Tamil people excluded from access to violent means to call for institutional change, but also Sinhalese non-elites were excluded. The PTA was a tool of the Sinhalese elites to monopolize violence and detain ethnic and class minorities that used violence. This is evident in how the Supreme Court ruled that the Bill did not require the approval of the people through a referendum.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the PTA was passed by the UNP and clearly formed by the class interests of Sinhalese elite. Once again, this Sinhala nationalist policy had excluded marginalized groups across ethnic and class boundaries in order to promote Sinhalese elite class interests.

## **5.2 SINHALESE WORKING CLASS POLITICAL PARTIES**

Sinhalese political parties were a result of class formations that Wright classified as groups that people form to pursue class interests.<sup>28</sup> The major political parties during the post-independence period were the SLFP and the UNP which were both parties of the ruling class.<sup>29</sup> However, there also existed Sinhalese political parties that claimed to advocate for the interests of the working class. The existence of political parties that advocated for the working class through a nationalist framework would appear to contradict my claim that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was a result of the ideology of the ruling class. However, the eventual failure of these working class parties is an indication of the incompatibility between Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and working class interests because the former relies on the exploitation of the latter.

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<sup>27</sup> W. A. Wiswa Warnapala, "Sri Lanka 1979: New Stresses in the Economy and the Polity," *Asian Survey* 20, no.2 (1980): 209.

<sup>28</sup> Erik Olin Wright, "Foundations of Class Analysis in the Marxist Tradition," 24.

<sup>29</sup> Hensman, "The role of socialists in the Sri Lankan civil war."

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was a political party and movement that advocated for the Sinhalese working class through socialism and nationalist policies. Most JVP activists had minimal opportunities for employment and were drawn from rural areas. The economic crisis of the 1960s had created conditions conducive to their discontent with economic policies that resulted in increasing unemployment and other conditions.<sup>30</sup> As a result, The JVP conducted an armed insurrection in 1971 which consisted of rural Sinhalese Buddhist youth from Karava, Durava, and other low caste groups.<sup>31</sup> The insurrection had involved a mass concerted attack against the police force and 92 police stations.<sup>32</sup> Within three months, the SLFP government suppressed the JVP insurrection and its leaders were jailed until 1977.<sup>33</sup> The movement was directed against the Govigama dominance in the country and was an attack on the formal political structure as an inadequate parliamentary game played in the interests of elite families and bourgeois parties that had manipulated social relationships to their own advantage.<sup>34</sup> In 1987, there was a resurgence of JVP armed insurrection against the government, but the Sri Lankan military was deployed and crushed the JVP in a massacre where 100,000 Sinhalese were killed.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kenneth D. Bush, "Critical Juncture III: 1971 JVP Insurrection and 1987 JVP Resurgence," in *The Intra-Group Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question*.

<sup>32</sup> Bush, "Critical Juncture III."

<sup>33</sup> Vitharana, "Transformation of Political Culture in Post-Independent Sri Lanka," 585.

<sup>34</sup> Bush, "Critical Juncture III."

<sup>35</sup> Rasaratnam, *Tamils and the Nation*.

In addition to JVP, there was the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) which was a Marxist party that formed in 1935 and was composed of nationalists and those advocating for Marxism and the working-class struggle.<sup>36</sup> The LSSP had opposed the Sinhala Only Act in 1956 and campaigned on a policy of equal status for Tamil and Sinhala.<sup>37</sup> However, by the 1960s, the LSSP changed their position and had joined a coalition government with the SLFP and contributed to their pursuit of Sinhala elitist interests.<sup>38</sup>

The existence of the JVP as a party of the Sinhalese working class demonstrates the conflicting class interests that existed within ethnic groups and that had contributed to Sinhalese nationalism. The exploitative relationships that I addressed in the previous section through the institution of Sinhala nationalist policies was evident to the Sinhalese working class that was suffering economically. However, the working class parties failed to recognize how Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism contributed to their exploitation. Sinhala Buddhism was “a political category, rather than an expression of ethnic sentiment, as it sought to include - more or less successfully - a plurality of Sinhala Buddhist caste groups.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was an attempt to unify the Sinhalese against Tamils by emphasizing ethnic similarities and neglecting class differences. Although the JVP and LSSP had advocated for the Sinhalese working class, they had attempted to do so through a nationalist perspective. Despite shared experiences of exploitation, ethnic nationalism had superseded class solidarity and excluded the Tamil

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<sup>36</sup> V. Kumari Jayawardena, “Origin of the Left Movement in Sri Lanka,” *Social Scientist* 2, no. 6 (1974): 3.

<sup>37</sup> Rasaratnam, *Tamils and the Nation*, 140.

<sup>38</sup> Jayawardena, “Origin of the Left Movement in Sri Lanka,” 3.

<sup>39</sup> Rasaratnam, *Tamils and the Nation*, 142.

working class from the advocacy of JVP and LSSP. In this case, the class consciousness of the JVP and LSSP parties was limited by their ethnic identity as class solidarity failed to extend across ethnic groups. The failure of both parties and their movements to advocate for working class interests within an ethnic nationalist perspective demonstrates how Sinhalese nationalism was primarily an ideology weaponized by Sinhalese elites to obscure class differences and exploit the working class. The failure of the JVP and LSSP parties to pursue a working-class struggle within their ethnic group demonstrates the importance of adopting an intersectional Marxist framework that recognizes how class consciousness and exploitation are influenced by ethnicity and do not occur only along class lines. Thus, in order to be successful, the working class struggle needs to cross ethnic boundaries and create a class formation with members from all ethnic groups.

### **5.3 TAMIL POLITICAL PARTIES**

In order to advocate for their rights, Tamils formed their own political parties that attempted to challenge the Sinhalese dominated government. Before independence, the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) had advocated for Tamil interests under the leadership of G.G. Ponnambalam.<sup>40</sup> In 1948, Ponnambalam had joined the UNP government while Chelvanayakam and others who opposed this had split and formed the Tamil Federal Party (FP). Most members of the ACTC were Tamil elites and in 1948, they had voted in favor of the Ceylon Citizenship Act which had made the Indian

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<sup>40</sup> A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2000).

Plantation Tamils stateless and thus, contributed to divisions among Ceylon and Indian Tamils.<sup>41</sup> Governments led by both the UNP and SLFP sought to co-opt Tamil politicians, but Tamil parties failed to secure Tamil rights this way.<sup>42</sup>

In 1956, the Tamil Federal Party (FP) had become the dominant political party of the Sri Lankan Tamils. They did not offer anything to oppressed Tamil workers fighting for their political rights and most members of the FP were members of the dominant landowning caste. While seeking equality with the Sinhalese, the “FP also sought to regulate differences of caste, region, and religion within the Tamil category through the principle of equality...”<sup>43</sup> However, the indigenous Tamil politicians of the north and east had seldom been interested in the lot of the plantation workers whom they regarded as low caste.<sup>44</sup> The plantation workers were as much outside the Jaffna social system as they were outside that of the Sinhalese South.<sup>45</sup> The distinct identity of Plantation Tamils as ‘Up-country Tamils’ emerged from their oppression by both the British colonizers and Sinhala elite, as well as their betrayal by the Jaffna Tamil elite.<sup>46</sup>

The Ceylon Workers Congress was created to represent the Plantation Tamils and it came together with the FP and ACTC in the Tamil United Front in 1972 which later

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Rasaratnam, *Tamils and the Nation*, 151.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>44</sup> Kurian, “Plantation Politics,” 86.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ahilan Kadirgamar, “The Making of the Marginalized,” *Himal South Asian*, May 5, 2013. <https://www.himalmag.com/the-making-of-the-marginalised/>

became the Tamil United Liberation Front.<sup>47</sup> Since 1976, the TULF was a major Tamil political party that oscillated between a constitutional program seeking regional autonomy and a revolutionary program seeking the creation of an independent state of Tamil Eelam.<sup>48</sup> In 1976, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) initiated the call for a separate Tamil state, albeit to be achieved constitutionally.<sup>49</sup> The call for secession and an independent Tamil state had become the last resort of the political leadership.<sup>50</sup>

The membership and goals of Tamil political parties lie at the intersection of class and ethnicity in the Marxist framework as the political parties developed with their shared elitist class interests that had resulted in the exclusion of the Plantation Tamils. Tamil political parties like the ACTC and FP were composed of Ceylon Tamil elites that did not consider the class interests of the Plantation Tamils. The intersectional Marxist framework recognizes how there are divisions within ethnic groups based on class interests. The differing class interests of Tamil politicians and Plantation Tamils had led to a lack of consideration of the interests of the Plantation Tamils in the major Tamil political parties. Thus, Tamil demand for federalisms and a separate state in the North and East of Sri Lanka did not accommodate the geographically distinct region of the central highlands, which is home to the Up-country Tamils.<sup>51</sup> As a result, class, caste, and location had excluded the Plantation Tamils from the Tamil nationalist dream. Tamil

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<sup>47</sup> Hensman, "The role of socialists in the Sri Lankan civil war."

<sup>48</sup> Bush, "An Overview of Sri Lankan Politics," 55.

<sup>49</sup> Robert I. Rotberg, "Sri Lanka's Civil War: From Mayhem toward Diplomatic Resolution," in *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> Navaratna-Bandara, "Ethnic Relations and State Crafting," 121.

<sup>51</sup> Kadirgamar, "The Making of the Marginalized."

politicians such as the ACTC had attempted to achieve their own political power by siding with Sinhalese elites and contributing to the deprivation of Plantation Tamils' access to political participation. The Plantation Tamils not only faced exclusion and exploitation from the Sinhalese, but also from their own ethnic group which furthers my claim that the nationalisms resulted from class relations influenced by ethnicity.

#### **5.4 FORMATION OF THE LTTE AND TAMIL NATIONALISM**

Tamil political parties such as the FP and TULF had attempted to advocate for Tamil interests before the civil war. However, during the civil war, it was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that had dominated the sphere of Tamil representation in Sri Lanka. The LTTE began as the Tamil New Tigers in 1972 and was formed by a young Tamil, Velupillai Prabhakaran, as an alternative to the moderate politics of the TULF.<sup>52</sup> The LTTE aimed to create an independent Tamil state and to be the sole leadership of the Tamil nation. In order to achieve both of these goals, the LTTE engaged in violent acts such as suicide bombings, assassinations, and guerrilla strategies against the Sinhalese dominated government, Tamils politicians, and civilians.<sup>53</sup> The beginning of the civil war is attributed to the LTTE's ambush of an army patrol in Jaffna in July 1983 which resulted in the death of 13 soldiers and resulted in anti-Tamil rioting across the nation.<sup>54</sup> After 1983, the LTTE drew its support from marginalized Tamils who resented their second-class citizenship status and from a number of internally displaced

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<sup>52</sup> Sumit Ganguly, "Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War," *Dædalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 147, no. 1 (2018): 80.

<sup>53</sup> Rotberg, "Sri Lanka's Civil War," 8.

<sup>54</sup> DeVotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam."

people.<sup>55</sup> The LTTE had taken advantage of a vulnerable and excluded Tamil population in order to pursue their own goal of leading a separate Tamil nation.

The Tamil Tigers directed a lot of their violence against other Tamils.<sup>56</sup> The LTTE had killed thousands of fellow Tamils who dissented from their ideology and regime including civilians. In order to be to sole leadership of the Tamil nation, the LTTE murdered leaders of the TULF in 1989 and massacred the leadership of rival militant groups such as the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) and Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF).<sup>57</sup> The rural poor were largely ambivalent towards the LTTE and most local Tamils did not support them.<sup>58</sup> However, civilians targeted by the Sinhalese dominated government had little choice but to support the LTTE. The LTTE also had a strategy of deliberately using the civilian population, particularly through the exploitation of children as spies and frontline soldiers<sup>59</sup> Many parents worried that their rations would be cut off if they did not allow their children to be recruited. Applying the intersectional Marxist framework, it is evident how the LTTE had exploited vulnerable Tamils such as rural children and used them as soldiers in order to achieve their own agenda of a Tamil nation. As a result, recruits for the LTTE were mainly from lower castes or classes that could be easily coerced or exploited into serving the LTTE because they lacked other options. Although the LTTE is a militant

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<sup>55</sup> Bloom, "Ethnic conflict, state terror and suicide bombing in Sri Lanka."

<sup>56</sup> Jannie Lilja and Lisa Hultman, "Intraethnic Dominance and Control: Violence Against Co-Ethnics in the Early Sri Lankan Civil War," *Security Studies* 20, no. 2 (2011): 172.

<sup>57</sup> Hensman, "The role of socialists in the Sri Lankan civil war."

<sup>58</sup> Bloom, "Ethnic conflict, state terror and suicide bombing in Sri Lanka."

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

organization, it also fits the category of a class formation due to the shared class interests of the LTTE in desiring to improve economic opportunities for Tamils and to create an independent nation with themselves as leaders.

The LTTE faced difficulties in building their national movement due to hierarchies within the Tamil population based on caste, gender, and religion. The roots of the LTTE are in the Karaiyar caste which is ranked just under the Vellala caste and above the service and untouchable castes. Although the LTTE aimed to undermine the caste system, they still established a hierarchy and governed Tamil regions through totalitarian rule. The dominant form of governance in LTTE controlled areas was a strong and centralized state. The LTTE did not participate in electoral politics, but instead, it established power by practicing intolerance and eliminating competing Tamil forces.<sup>60</sup> The LTTE took control of large parts of the north-east including the Jaffna peninsula where they had set up a *de facto* state apparatus.<sup>61</sup> The control of Tamil dominated areas by the LTTE was without the consent of those living there. Due to their focus on the Tamil state consisting of the Eastern and Northern provinces, the LTTE had also neglected the Plantation Tamils. Their call for a separate Tamil nation would exclude the Plantation Tamils from access to the resources and rights that Tamils would be granted in a separate nation as they lived outside the North-eastern region in the Hill Country. The intersectional Marxist framework and particularly, Wright's exclusion principle, show

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<sup>60</sup> Kristian Stokke, "Building the Tamil Eelam State: emerging state institutions and forms of governance in LTTE controlled areas in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): 1035.

<sup>61</sup> Rasaratnam, *Tamils and the Nation*, 181.

how the LTTE operated similarly to Sinhalese elites and Tamil elite politicians in their exclusion of Plantation Tamils and the exploitation of lower classes and vulnerable populations. The neglect of the class interests of Plantation Tamils and the exploitation of lower class Tamils is evidence of how the LTTE's Tamil nationalism was built upon deeper class struggles existing between non-elites within the Tamil ethnic group.

The Sri Lankan civil war was characterized by constant violence on the part of both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE with occasional ceasefires in the early 2000s.<sup>62</sup> The end of the civil war eventually came about with the brutal military onslaught of the LTTE under the regime of President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2009. However, the end of the civil war did not end the ethnic or class tensions that characterized Sri Lankan society. Ongoing ethnic tensions and the current economic crisis in the nation is a result of the lack of policies that acknowledged how the Sri Lankan civil war was a class conflict and how current policies contributed to the most marginalized group in the nation which were the Plantation Tamils.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER 6: THE AFTERMATH OF THE CIVIL WAR AND CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS**

In this final chapter, I will analyze the outcome of the civil war and how the lack of attention to class disparities has contributed to ongoing ethnic tensions and the current economic crisis in the nation. I will discuss policies and development projects instituted after the civil war and how they have neglected to address ethnic tensions that persist in the nation today through Islamophobia and anti-Tamil sentiments. Lastly, I will address the very recent economic crisis in Sri Lanka that has led to increasing class consciousness among the working class people. The severe economic crisis supports the importance of the argument that I make for an intersectional Marxist approach in analyzing and addressing the nationalism that led to the Sri Lankan civil war and that continues to rule the nation.

### **6.1 RECONSTRUCTION AND THE PRIORITY OF RULING CLASS INTERESTS**

After the defeat of the LTTE and the end of the civil war, the government faced several challenges including the resettlement of more than 500,000 internally displaced people of which many were Tamils.<sup>1</sup> The Northern Province, which continues to be a Tamil-dominated region, was the province most affected by the fighting during the civil

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<sup>1</sup> Osantha Nayanapriya Thalpapwila, "Post-War Reconstruction in Sri Lanka: Reconstruction and Development of the Socio-economic Sectors," *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science* 4, no. 5 (2016): 44.

war as most battles occurred there.<sup>2</sup> During the civil war, some Tamils fled from the violence to other countries and became refugees. However, many of those unable to migrate or flee were typically those who were worse-off and without economic or social capital.<sup>3</sup> As a result, many Tamils remaining in Sri Lanka, especially in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, were those who could not afford to leave and remained on the frontlines of the war. Thus, the importance of class relations is evident in how the poorer Tamils were disproportionately affected by the violence in the Northern and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka.

The civil war had impacted the Northern and Eastern provincial economies through the destruction of infrastructure and an embargo on the regions which limited the movement of goods. In terms of economic development, there were a number of efforts to develop the infrastructure in conflict-affected areas that were destroyed during the war including the start of development programs that cost about 221 billion Sri Lankan rupees.<sup>4</sup> However, it remains unclear if the development has sufficiently benefited the lower socioeconomic classes in the nation. Despite development programs and 10 years passing since the end of the war, the Northern and Eastern provinces remain the regions with the highest poverty headcount ratio.<sup>5</sup> The country's poverty headcount ratio or the

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<sup>2</sup> Umesh Moramudali, "Sri Lanka's Uneven Reconstruction," *The Diplomat*, November 7, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/sri-lankas-uneven-reconstruction/>

<sup>3</sup> Anna O'Donnell, Mohamed Ghani Razaak, Markus Kostner, and Jeeva Perumpillai-Essex, *Shadows of Conflict in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka: Socioeconomic Challenges and a Way Forward*, (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Moramudali, "Sri Lanka's Uneven Reconstruction."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

proportion of the population living below the poverty line was 4.1% in 2016, while the Northern and Eastern Provinces had poverty headcounts of about 7%.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the Northern and Eastern provinces are the only Tamil dominated areas in the nation and are experiencing the highest poverty rates demonstrates the importance of utilizing an intersectional Marxist framework. Poverty is being concentrated in Tamil regions due to a lack of a focus on class interests and the increased exclusion of poor Tamils from resources in society. The population being exploited and deprived of material resources for the benefit of Sinhalese elites are poor Tamils who continue to be the most marginalized population in Sri Lanka due to both their class status and ethnic identity.

The development program in the Northern province was known as Uthuru Wasanthaya or the Northern Spring.<sup>7</sup> This program involved humanitarian assistance, resettlement, and rehabilitation of infrastructural facilities. Money was used to reconstruct roads and bridges in the region in order to connect it with the rest of the country. However, roads in the rural areas were still in poor conditions and the government neglected to build more roads in rural areas though farm products required them in order to be transported from villages to towns.<sup>8</sup> The lack of attention and funds to develop rural areas where poorer Tamils lived is more evidence of the Sinhalese elitist government operating on their class interests and pursuing a nationalist ideology that most marginalizes lower class ethnic minorities. Wright's exclusion principle is clearly

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Hasnain Bin Sajjad Raja, "Sri Lanka's Post-Conflict Reconstruction," *Modern Diplomacy*, July 13, 2021. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/07/13/sri-lankas-post-conflict-reconstruction/>

<sup>8</sup> Thalpawila, "Post-War Reconstruction in Sri Lanka," 51.

applicable in this case as exploited poor and rural Tamils were excluded from the benefits of the development programs in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Although the development programs were seemingly made to benefit all Tamils, it is clear that there were underlying class interests. Poor households in the north were not the main beneficiaries of the development projects. An examination of the most marginalized population, namely poor Tamils, in accordance with Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, demonstrates how exploitation occurred along both ethnic and class lines. The programs focused on building the industrial sector and creating jobs that would benefit those who already had the skills to work in that sector. Therefore, although job growth had increased in the Northern and Eastern provinces, there was an uneven distribution of employment. A majority of people who resettled in the Northern provinces were still facing several difficulties since they could not obtain employment in the newly constructed industrial sector due to their lack of skills.<sup>9</sup> The class interests of poor Tamils were neglected in the post-war reconstruction period as evidenced by how the development programs did not focus on enhancing the skills and education of poor Tamils in order for them to be able to attain better jobs. As a result, the unemployment rate in the Northern and Eastern provinces remains high and most districts in the Northern Province have the highest unemployment rates in the country.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Moramudali, "Sri Lanka's Uneven Reconstruction."

In the Eastern Province, the development program was referred to as the “Reawakening of the East” and was focused on demining, resettling internally displaced people, and restarting agriculture.<sup>11</sup> Compared to the Eastern Province, the Northern Province was in much worse condition due to it being under the control of the LTTE for a majority of the civil war period. The delivery of relief and recovery programs were “centrally designed with minimal inputs and participation from local populations.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the economic interests of the local Tamil population were not considered in the creation of recovery programs which merely reflected the interests of the Sinhalese ruling class. DeVotta emphasized this priority of ruling class interests in his classification of the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime as a form of soft authoritarianism where the “regime may allow its citizens ample freedoms provided they do not challenge certain institutions representing the state or become hypercritical of the ruling elite.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, the ruling elite's class interests were prioritized over the rest of the population and the regime focused on political consolidation over ethnic reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

Although the development projects and reconstruction policies were a result of the elected government of the Rajapaksa regime, it is evident how the interests of the Sinhalese people were exploited. Similar to political parties in the post-independence period, the regime had exploited the insecurities of the Sinhalese working class people

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<sup>11</sup> Thalpawila, “Post-War Reconstruction in Sri Lanka,” 44.

<sup>12</sup> O'Donnell, *Shadows of Conflict in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Neil DeVotta, “From Civil War to Soft Authoritarianism: Sri Lanka in Comparative Perspective,” *Global Change Peace & Security* 22, no.3 (2010): 333.

<sup>14</sup> Jayadeva Uyangoda, “Sri Lanka in 2010: Regime Consolidation in a Post-Civil War Era,” *Asian Survey* 51, no.1 (2011): 131.

and promoted Sinhala nationalist ideology in the campaign.<sup>15</sup> The ruling class was pursuing their own class interests and did not consider the interests of the Tamils or the Sinhalese working class. Exploitation along class lines and the use of nationalist ideology to hide it continued to occur in the post-war period after the defeat of the LTTE, the strongest Tamil opposition group. In fact, the development projects were tied to Sinhalese nationalism and the militarization of Tamil-dominant areas in order to prevent the re-emergence of a Tamil separatist movement.<sup>16</sup> The further exploitation and exclusion of Tamils on a basis of both class and ethnic identity is evident in how the poorer segments of the Tamil population were more susceptible to issues of alcoholism and suicide due to eroded community structures, displacement, and psychosocial challenges after the war.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, in this period of development, the focus was on Northern and Eastern provinces which neglected the creation of opportunities and infrastructure for the Indian Plantation Tamils that lived in the central highlands. The continued exclusion of the Plantation Tamils and neglect of their class interests in the development policies in post-war Sri Lanka are further evidence of how the lack of understanding of the civil war as a class conflict is harmful to marginalized groups.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Sumith Chaaminda, "Uthuru Wasanthaya and Negenahira Navodaya: Analyzing the Development Discourse," *Colombo Telegraph*, March 24, 2012. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/uthuru-wasanthaya-and-negenahira-navodaya-analyzing-the-development-discourse/>

<sup>17</sup> O'Donnell, *Shadows of Conflict in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka*, 43.

## 6.2 ONGOING ETHNIC TENSIONS IN THE POST-CIVIL WAR PERIOD

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Sri Lanka had interned the entire surviving Vanni population, consisting of Tamils from the Vanni region in the Northern Province, in military-run camps and defended mass internment as “necessary to identify and capture LTTE cadres.”<sup>18</sup> The government has set up numerous police stations and army camps in the areas that the LTTE controlled during the war. The goal was to spread the military throughout the northeast in order to avoid another minority insurrection and maintain peace.<sup>19</sup> The heavy military presence is not just at checkpoints that Tamils must pass through, but also the military runs businesses and controls civil society activities in Tamil regions.<sup>20</sup> As a result, there is limited freedom of expression in the North and Eastern regions, and Tamils are often screened in order to find members of the LTTE.<sup>21</sup> Although the war is over, the Sinhala dominated government continues to discriminate against the Tamils by using the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979 (PTA) to arbitrarily imprison them and interrogate them due to suspicion of their involvement with the LTTE.<sup>22</sup> Over the past two years, human rights organizations have reported an increase in the harassment, surveillance, and arbitrary detention of Tamils.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it is evident how the end of the civil war which is classified by dominant discourses to be an ethnic conflict did not end ethnic tensions in the nation. The ongoing ethnic divisions are not

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<sup>18</sup> Rasaratnam, *Tamils and the Nation*, 217.

<sup>19</sup> DeVotta, “From Civil War to Soft Authoritarianism.”

<sup>20</sup> Bin Sajjad Raja, “Sri Lanka’s Post-Conflict Reconstruction.”

<sup>21</sup> Bozenko Devoic, “Sri Lanka: Physical Reconstruction and Economic Development as Conflict Prevention Factors,” *CIRR XLIX*, no. 69 (2013): 64.

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Tamils fear prison and torture in Sri Lanka, 13 years after civil war ended,” *The Guardian*, March 26, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/26/tamils-fear-prison-and-torture-in-sri-lanka-13-years-after-civil-war-ended>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

just a result of failed post-war policies, but they are also tied to the fact that the deeper roots of the conflict are in neglected factors, such as class interest and class struggle, which are part of the intersectional Marxist framework.

In accordance with Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, Sri Lanka has pursued an expansive strategy of militarization and state-sponsored Sinhalization in the Tamil speaking regions.<sup>24</sup> After the civil war, the government had plans to establish military settlements in the Tamil dominated North and East. Some old Tamil villages in these areas were removed and internally displaced Tamils were settled in Sinhala and military settlements.<sup>25</sup> The continued Sinhalization of Tamil dominated areas through the construction of Buddhist shrines and victory monuments affirms Sinhalese control and is evident of the ongoing ethnic tensions.<sup>26</sup> Sinhalese culture has slowly replaced that of the Tamil population and has infringed upon Tamil and Hindu elements of the country's culture.<sup>27</sup> While Sinhalese elites mobilized Sinhala Buddhist nationalism to control the State, Tamils in the North and East started to lose faith in Tamil nationalism after the war.<sup>28</sup> The decrease in support for Tamil nationalism after the death of the leader of the LTTE is evident of how the nationalist ideology was spear-headed and promoted by Tamil leaders and elites. The Sinhalization of Tamil areas is representative of the

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<sup>24</sup> Rasaratnam, *Tamils and the Nation*.

<sup>25</sup> Chaaminda, "Uthuru Wasanthaya and Negenahira Navodaya."

<sup>26</sup> Bin Sajjad Raja, "Sri Lanka's Post-Conflict Reconstruction."

<sup>27</sup> Nithyani Anandakugan, "The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020," *Harvard International Review*, August 31, 2020. <https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war/>

<sup>28</sup> Ahilan Kadirgamar, "Sri Lanka's Post-War Political Economy and the Question of Minorities," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no.24 (2009): 72.

continuing Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism that continued to rule the nation after the civil war. Sinhalese elites utilized Sinhala Buddhist nationalism to infringe on Tamil culture and to obscure differences between Sinhalese elites and the working class.

In the post-war period, the country is as segregated as ever with the Sinhalese Buddhist majority concentrated in the wealthy South and Tamils occupying less-developed and heavily militarized North and East regions of the country.<sup>29</sup> The end of the war did not resolve ethnic tensions claimed to be the cause of conflict, and it failed to resolve economic disparities. Poverty in the plantation sector, including Plantation Tamils, remains higher than in the urban and rural sectors. The average household income in the plantation sector in 2016 was about 34,804 Sri Lankan rupees or \$238 which was about half of the average national income.<sup>30</sup> The need for working class formations and increased class consciousness was noted by Kadirgamar after the civil war as he stated that “the ethnic minorities forming only a quarter of the population will have to make common cause with sections of the Sinhalese community in order to struggle for a share of state power...”<sup>31</sup> In 2015, there were signs of rising class consciousness as the Rajapaksa regime lost to Maithripala Sirisena due to Mahinda Rajapaksa’s corruption and nepotism which had alienated the Sinhalese majority.<sup>32</sup> The growing class consciousness of the Sinhalese working class had resulted in institutional change with the election of a new regime. The fact that working classes were, in this

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<sup>29</sup> Ellis-Petersen, “Tamils fear prison and torture in Sri Lanka.”

<sup>30</sup> Mohammed, “Hill Country Tamils of Sri Lanka.”

<sup>31</sup> Kadirgamar, “Sri Lanka’s Post-War Political Economy,” 77.

<sup>32</sup> Ganguly, “Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War,” 86.

particular instance, agents of social change is illuminated by the Marxist framework. The continuation of class consciousness among the Sri Lankan working class including Sinhalese and Tamils could have produced more significant change in the nation that would have addressed and resolved class struggles along with ethnic tensions. However, the growth of working class consciousness was stalled with the increase of Islamophobia in the nation that started around the beginning of the 20th century. In 1915, there was an anti-Muslim pogrom carried out by the Sinhalese population due to perceived preferential treatment of Muslims by the British.

Anti-Muslim sentiments have increased among the majority ruling class since the end of the civil war.<sup>33</sup> In 2013, Buddhists attacked a mosque in Sri Lanka and in 2014, there were a series of anti-Muslim riots.<sup>34</sup> This wave of Islamophobia in the nation gave rise to a narrative that framed Muslims as the new enemy of the Sinhala community which became more solidified in 2019. On Easter Sunday on April 21, 2019, eight explosions went off in the vicinity of churches and hotels in Sri Lanka leaving hundreds dead. The attacks were an example of the ongoing ethnic tensions in the nation particularly with regards to the Muslim population in Sri Lanka which had become another target of Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinism, especially after the defeat of the LTTE. The ongoing ethnic and religious tensions in the nation were also emphasized by the

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<sup>33</sup> M.M. Fazil, "State and Society Contestation in Post-war Sri Lanka: The Politics and Counter-Politics," *Indian Journal of Research in Management, Business, and Social Sciences* 2, no.1 (2014).

<sup>34</sup> Damien Kingsbury, "Sri Lanka has a history of conflict, but the recent attacks appear different," *The Conversation*, April 22, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/sri-lanka-has-a-history-of-conflict-but-the-recent-attacks-appear-different-115815>

reaction toward the Muslim community after the attacks. Muslim communities in the nation had denounced the attacks, but many still received hateful online messages and attacks on their homes and businesses.<sup>35</sup> Apparently, authorities had been warned about the attacks committed by an Islamist militant group, National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), about two weeks in advance.<sup>36</sup> The fact that authorities were notified about the attacks and neglected to notify the public furthers my argument that the Sinhala ruling elite does not consider the interests of the middle and working class populations, even those belonging to their same ethnic group. The ongoing ethnic tensions in the nation between Sinhalese and Tamils as well as Muslims demonstrate the insufficiency of post-war policies and popular discourse that views the conflict as merely an ethnic one and neglects to formulate solutions through an intersectional Marxist framework that also accounts for class relations.

### **6.3 SRI LANKA'S ECONOMIC CRISIS IN 2022**

At the time of the writing of this paper, Sri Lanka is currently dealing with one of its worst economic crises in its recent history. The country is facing severe fuel shortages leading to daily power cuts for up to 13 hours and shortages of food, medicine, and other essential items.<sup>37</sup> The crisis has also affected education as the nation cannot organize

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<sup>35</sup> Pamela Constable, "Sri Lanka's Muslims fear retaliation after Easter attacks on Christians," *Washington Post*, April 24, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/sri-lankas-muslims-fear-retaliation-after-easter-attacks-on-christians/2019/04/24/9ffdfc8-6611-11e9-a698-2a8f808c9cfb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/sri-lankas-muslims-fear-retaliation-after-easter-attacks-on-christians/2019/04/24/9ffdfc8-6611-11e9-a698-2a8f808c9cfb_story.html)

<sup>36</sup> Sinnappah Arasaratnam and Gerald Hubert Peiris, "Sri Lanka," *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka/The-Republic-of-Sri-Lanka#ref341604>

<sup>37</sup> Gulbin Sultana, *Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka: An Assessment*, (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2022): 3.

exams for students due to a shortage of paper.<sup>38</sup> As a result of the shortages of supplies, there are long lines to obtain essentials such as fuel and food with some items becoming more expensive.<sup>39</sup> The price of items such as rice, sugar, and milk powder have been increasing immensely. Some people have to wait in line for days on end to get their rations, and a few people have died while waiting in the heat.<sup>40</sup> The economic crisis and increased prices of essential items demonstrates the way that the class interests of the working population in Sri Lankan society have been neglected and the interests of the wealthy and upper-classes have been privileged. In this section, I will focus on how existing class struggles neglected during the civil war have contributed to the current economic crisis. Since the current economic crisis has only been going on for about two months at the time of this paper, a lot of information is drawn from new articles covering the crisis.

The reason for Sri Lanka's current economic crisis in the post-independence period is due to factors such as huge borrowings at high interest rates from international financial institutions like the Asian Development Bank and foreign governments, bans on chemical fertilizers, decline of tourism, and the two and half decade long civil war that

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<sup>38</sup> Deepak Joseph, "An Overview of Sri Lankan Economic Crisis 2022 and How it Affects India," *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Topics* 3, no.4 (2022)

<sup>39</sup> Niluksi Koswanage, "How Sri Lanka Landed in a Political and Economic Crisis and What It Means," *Bloomberg*, April 4, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-04/how-sri-lanka-landed-in-a-crisis-and-what-it-means-quicktake>

<sup>40</sup> Zaheena Rasheed, "No Sri Lankan, rich or poor, spared as economic crisis worsens," *Al Jazeera*, April 8, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/8/no-sri-lankan-rich-or-poor-spared-as-economic-crisis-worsens>

slowed economic growth.<sup>41</sup> Some factors such as the ban on chemical fertilizers were intended to assist the Sri Lankan population. In the case of the ban of fertilizers, it was aimed to limit the increase in health care costs brought about by the overuse of chemicals in agricultural production. However, the crisis is mainly attributed to increased imports and a reduction in the inflow of foreign reserves at a time when the outflow is significant.<sup>42</sup> Sri Lanka has been borrowing a lot of money from countries such as China in order to finance its infrastructure projects. International events such as the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia have also contributed to the downfall of Sri Lanka's economy and the rise of fuel prices. However, the present and past Sinhalese ruling class governments bear the most responsibility for the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

The economic crisis has severely affected the most exploited and vulnerable population of lower class Tamils. The potential refugee flow due to the economic crisis has already started as sixteen Tamils from the Northern and Eastern regions were recorded to have fled to Tamil Nadu in India.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the economic crisis has been detrimental to all working class people. In the informal settlements of Colombo, people claim that they are eating half of what they used to as food prices have doubled.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> M. Nazeeruddin and M. Jafarullah Baig, "Sri Lanka's Economic crisis- An Eye Opener," *RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary* 7, no. 4 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.31305/rrijm.2022.v07.i04.001>

<sup>42</sup> Sultana, *Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka*.

<sup>43</sup> FP Explainers, "Explained: How economic crisis is forcing Sri Lankans to flee to Tamil Nadu," *Firstpost*, March 23, 2022. <https://www.firstpost.com/world/explained-how-economic-crisis-is-forcing-sri-lankans-to-flee-to-tamil-nadu-10481591.html>

<sup>44</sup> Rasheed, "No Sri Lankan, rich or poor, spared as economic crisis worsens."

Chanda Upul, a 50-year-old man living in a poor northern suburb of Colombo, is among those struggling to survive during this crisis. During an interview with a member of *The Guardian*, he expressed how he is no longer able to afford repayments on his rickshaw and how he lost his only means of income due to essentials like petrol being scarce.<sup>45</sup> In the interview, he is quoted saying that “I voted for Gota [Gota refers to Gotabaya Rajapaksa] thinking he was a lion, now I can see that he is worse than a dog.”<sup>46</sup> The lion is a symbol of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism as the Sinhalese are called the people of the lion. Thus, Upul’s statement represents how Gotabaya used Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism to exploit the fears of many middle and working class Sinhalese people in order to receive their votes and obscure class distinctions. Charu who is a 24-year-old student also voiced his anger at the Rajapaksa regime and said that “this is all the fault of the Rajapaksa’s with their poisonous nationalism and bad governance.”<sup>47</sup> Charu’s classification of “poisonous nationalism” represents how he has become aware of how Rajapaksa used Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism to exploit the insecurities of the Sinhalese middle and working classes in order to pursue his own ruling class interests.

Due to this crisis, there have been protests that started in March of 2022 by the Sri Lankan people. The people have been chanting “Go home, Gota” to demand the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa while referring to his nickname. However,

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<sup>45</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “‘We’re finished:’ Sri Lankans pushed to the brink by the financial crisis,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/09/sri-lanka-financial-crisis-protesters-call-for-gotabaya-rajapaksa-resignation-please>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Rajapaksa was a former military officer that was once viewed by the Sinhalese people as a hero of the civil war and was elected months after the Easter bombing. The change in attitude of the Sinhalese people towards Rajapaksa due to this economic crisis is evident of the increased class consciousness growing among the Sri Lankan population. This is especially clear in how the protests consist of a multitude of people including middle classes, the elderly, businessmen, Muslims, and the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>48</sup> The words of Upul and Charu along with the protests populated by diverse populations represent how class consciousness is developing among the Sri Lankan population. The Sri Lankan people have realized the power of nationalist sentiments and how it has obscured the growing economic issues they face. The protests addressing the current economic crisis demonstrate the power of class consciousness and the mobilization of non-elites to address a nationalist ideology that has perpetuated ethnic tensions and exacerbated class disparities since the post-independence period. The intersectional Marxist framework recognizes how Sinhalese working classes were exploited during Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election and how the economic crisis is influenced by class and ethnic identities as evidenced by the experience of lower class Tamils. Thus, the current situation in Sri Lanka has emphasized the importance of my framework in analyzing both Sri Lanka's past and present and in developing solutions that address the root causes of the crisis.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I argue that the Sri Lankan civil war is not merely an ethnic conflict, but is a more complex struggle among various class formations within ethnic groups for political power and economic equality. I have developed an intersectional Marxist framework to support this argument by synthesizing the ideas of Marx, Wright, and Crenshaw to formulate how aspects of class including class interests, formations, struggle, and consciousness, as well as exploitation occur along ethnic divisions. The framework recognizes the role of both class relations and ethnic tensions in the development of nationalist ideology that had marginalized lower-class Tamils such as the Plantation Tamils along with the Sinhalese working class. Chapter 2 on the historical background of Sri Lanka, with its focus on the period of colonization in Sri Lanka, set up the argument by recounting how ethnic tensions and elite ruling classes developed with the influence of western colonizers. Additionally, the analysis of the historical context of four social groups at the intersections of class and ethnicity, including the Plantation Tamils and the Sinhalese working class, demonstrated how class and ethnicity intersected in Sri Lankan society. The final analysis chapters provided concrete support for the argument through an analysis of the ways that political parties had instituted ethnic nationalism on a basis of class interests in order to form ethnic solidarity to obscure class differences. After the civil war, policies instituted to improve development in Tamil regions and the ongoing economic crisis have further emphasized the impact of class relations in Sri Lanka. In response to the dominant discourse classifying the Sri Lankan civil war as an ethnic conflict between two homogeneous ethnic groups, this thesis

provides an analysis that views the Sri Lankan civil war as a more complex struggle based on class and caste distinctions along with ethnic tensions.

Additional research expanding on this thesis could develop an even more intersectional approach with attention to the role of gender when analyzing Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil nationalism during the Sri Lankan civil war. For example, women Plantation Tamils experienced more exploitation as they received lower wages in comparison to their male counterparts. Additionally, there was a gender gap in labor force participation in the nation that was most pronounced among less educated women.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I recognize that the exploitation and exclusion of populations that had contributed to the development of nationalism occurred along an intersection of class, ethnic, and gender identities. However, an intersectional Marxist framework accounting for gender-based disparities is beyond the scope of this paper as it would require a much more in-depth analysis. Another area for additional research is the inclusion of primary sources such as interviews that could have contributed to the nuanced understanding that I developed of the Sri Lankan civil war through first-hand accounts of the war. Many additional areas for further research exist as the scope of this paper was intentionally narrow for practical reasons.

Although the focus of this thesis is on providing a new framework to analyze nationalism in Sri Lanka and the consequences of the civil war, the framework also

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<sup>1</sup> O'Donnell, *Shadows of Conflict in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka*, 37.

indirectly advocates for durable solutions to be formed with attention to the class relations of society. I propose that durable solutions to the ongoing ethnic tensions and current economic crisis in the nation could be produced through a utilization of the Marxist view of social classes as the main agents in society that are able to advocate for societal change. The mobilization and increased class consciousness of the working and middle classes in Sri Lanka is evident with the ongoing protests in response to the economic crisis. Continued unity and class formations among the working classes in Sri Lanka can produce solutions that will end the corruption in the government and address the root causes of the economic crisis. Additionally, the needs of the most marginalized in the nation such as the Plantation Tamils should be prioritized in order for Sri Lanka to have an equitable system that is not solely based on the class interests of the ruling elites.

This thesis contributes to the ongoing discussion of class relations in Sri Lankan society and its connection to ethno-religious nationalism as evident with the current economic crisis. The severity of the economic crisis and its impact on ordinary Sri Lankan people across ethnic groups through the lack of basic necessities represents how class struggles are prominent in Sri Lanka. The protests in the nation offer hope of an increased class consciousness among working class people and a class revolution that will put power in the hands of the Sri Lankan people over the ruling elite. This thesis is a contribution towards developing more nuanced understandings of the policies implemented in Sri Lanka so that the most marginalized people along the intersection of both ethnicity and class are not exploited, but rather, are prioritized. A reflection on the

civil war as a class conflict that has economically and socially marginalized the Tamil people and the Sinhalese working class is one step towards a Sri Lanka that is built on economic stability and ethnic equality.

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