Corrupt Peace? Corruption and Ethnic Divides in Post-war Sri Lanka

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Camilla Orjuela[1], Dhammika Herath[2] and Jonas Lindberg[3]

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Abstract
It is widely recognized that corruption risks undermining state legitimacy, diminishing trust, and reducing resources for reconstruction in the aftermath of war. This article aims to advance the understanding of corruption in post-war societies by examining how local experiences of corruption relate to ethnic and other divides in Sri Lanka, where a 26-year war was fought largely along ethnic lines. The article builds on 170 interviews carried out in 2009-2013, focusing on how 'ordinary people' perceive corruption and ethnic divides after the war. The article argues that ethnic grievances have less to do with local inter-ethnic relations than with relations between the state and minority groups. We find that state-citizen relations in the post-war period to a large extent have been shaped by practices and discourses of corruption. Although corrupt practices – or practices perceived to be corrupt – are prevalent in all parts of the country and affect all groups, they are often interpreted as instances of ethnic discrimination. However, it is not only ethnic identity that matters in relations between citizens and the (corrupt) state, but also socioeconomic position, level of education, language skills, gender and social networks.

Key words
Corruption, ethnic grievances, state-citizen relations, post-war peacebuilding, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Corruption in the aftermath of war is a problem that has recently gained attention from both academics and policy makers, who warn that corruption can undermine state legitimacy, diminish trust and reduce the resources available for reconstruction during the precarious post-war phase (Rose-Ackerman 2009). However, it has also been noted that corruption is often ignored or even encouraged by key peacebuilding actors, who may have their own interests in it or who fear that anti-corruption efforts can cause instability and renewed conflict (see Cheng & Zaum 2012; Lindberg & Orjuela 2014; Marquette & Cooley 2015). Another key concern in war-affected societies is the polarization, segregation and enemy images of the 'other' (defined in ethnic, religious or political terms) that often prevail and which may pose obstacles to sustainable peace unless it is replaced with mutual trust and collaboration (see Lederach 1997; Bar-Siman-Tov 2004; Rosoux 2009).

This article aims to advance the understanding of corruption and post-war dynamics by investigating how experiences of corruption risk feeding into – or can help to bridge – ethnic

[1] School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.
[3] Department of Economy and Society, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

and other divides in post-war Sri Lanka. The civil war that raged between the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government of Sri Lanka for 26 years has often been described as an ethnic conflict, where minority Tamils struggled for self-determination against majority Sinhalese dominance. Ethnic polarization was a dominant characteristic not only on the ground in Sri Lanka, but also in narratives about the conflict. After the war ended with government victory in 2009, the government's official approach to peacebuilding focused on economic recovery and reconstruction, while reconciliation received limited attention or was addressed in ways that reflected the context of a victor's peace and strengthened Sinhala nationalism.

The article builds on 170 interviews carried out in Sri Lanka 2009-2013 and focusing on how 'ordinary people', mainly in the former war zones, perceived the post-war situation, particularly when it comes to corruption and ethnic divides. Based on this material, the article explores how – as argued by Thiranagama (2013) – it is the relations between the state and minority groups rather than the relations between people from different ethnic groups which need to be in focus when pursuing long-term peacebuilding. Corruption – defined as lack of impartiality in the exercise of public power (Rothstein 2014, p. 738) – is deeply entwined in state-citizen relations, and therefore of high relevance to the process of building trust and preventing ethnic grievances in post-war societies. Our study suggests that it is often difficult to distinguish corruption from 'normal politics' and enduring injustices, and that corrupt practices tend to connect certain persons with the state while alienating others. Although being a problem shared by people from different ethnic groups, corruption is sometimes interpreted as a manifestation of ethnic discrimination. Frustration over corruption can hence feed into and deepen ethnic grievances. Relations between people and the state in the post-war period are to a large extent shaped by practices and discourses of corruption, which in turn are determined by identity positions related to not only ethnicity but also class and gender.

The article continues from here with a brief review of the theoretical debates about post-war societies, ethnic divides and corruption. After that, we discuss Sri Lanka's post-war situation and look at ethnic relations and reconciliation from the point of view of people in some local sites in Sri Lanka. We then turn to people's experiences of corruption. The paper thereafter focuses more closely on two ways in which corruption is relevant for ethnic grievances and divides – (a) resource distribution and (b) identity positions and vulnerability – before a concluding section reflects on the implications of our findings.

2. The Debate on Post-war Societies and Corruption

The transition from war to peace is often a time of drastic transformation, and therefore a moment of opportunity for change. It is also, however, a time of high risk of relapse to violence. This has motivated ample international attention to post-war societies, to the point of the creation of a 'peacebuilding industry', engaging in everything from demobilization, security sector reform and human rights protection to economic recovery, physical reconstruction, democratization and transitional justice (Chetail 2009; Paris 2004; Berdal & Zaum 2013). The measures of the peacebuilding package are implemented in sometimes radically different post-war situations. The variety can relate to how peace is achieved

(victory of one side or negotiated settlement), to what extent violence has fully ceased and whether and how underlying conflicts are resolved (see Höglund & Söderberg Kovacs 2010). At the same time, post-war societies share some similar challenges, such as great needs for reconstruction, lack of legitimate state institutions, mistrust and trauma among the population – and the influx of international resources for peacebuilding.

An important challenge in the aftermath of war is how to enable peaceful coexistence and trust between communities divided by war (Lederach 1997; Rosoux 2009). Measures promoted by peacebuilding actors in this regard include transitional justice (acknowledgement, accountability and reparation in relation to war atrocities), peace education and dialogue projects (see Teitel 2000; Bajaj & Hantzopoulos 2016). While such initiatives are supposed to generate mutual understanding, heal individuals and wider society and prevent new conflict, they may just as often reproduce the power dynamics of the conflict parties and society in general, and become the arena for continued or additional conflicts (see Hinton 2012).

The fight against corruption has also become part of the international post-war peacebuilding package, with its aim to build legitimate and efficient state institutions, and thereby reduce the risk of grievances and new outbreaks of conflict. However, this endeavour too is characterized by contradictions. Although the fight against corruption is prominent in the rhetoric of international and domestic peacebuilding actors, corruption is in practice often tolerated, or even strategically used to 'buy peace' (Le Billon 2003; Cheng & Zaum 2012). Moreover, we often see continuity when it comes to corrupt practices and structures between the war and post-war periods. In addition to this, the post-war situation opens up even more opportunities for corruption, as large amounts of new resources for reconstruction enter societies with weak accountability structures.

Corruption is seen as a major problem by people not only in post-war societies (Gordon et al 2010; Smith 2007). It causes practical problems and frustrations in the day to day lives of people who are unable to access services they are entitled to without resorting to bribery or the use of contacts. Corruption also leads to increased inequality, as resources are deviated away from programs that are to benefit the public. In post-war situations, corruption directs funds away from much needed reconstruction work. However, apart from its material effects, corruption also plays a role as an increasingly dominant discourse in societies around the world. The corruption discourse talks about society being rotten and in decay, and leaders, government officials and fellow citizens as untrustworthy and greedy. This corruption discourse is often politicized and used to mobilize protests or crack down on dissent, and it influences the ways in which people perceive the state, the 'peace' and each other. As Daniel Jordan Smith argues, 'Corruption and the discourse of complaints it generates are at the core of contemporary events, shaping collective imagination and driving social action' (2006, p. xii).

It has been noted that corruption is intimately linked with mistrust and inequality. According to Bo Rothstein (2011) and Eric Uslaner (2008), corruption is both caused by inequality and

mistrust, and causes more inequality and mistrust. Importantly, corruption is encouraged by, and causes, weak generalized trust, while it may contribute to strengthened trust within one's own identity group (Uslaner 2008, pp. 48-50). These findings – emanating from quantitative research – are likely to have particularly important implications in societies that are deeply divided after war. In such situations, corruption would be likely to deepen already existing ethnic (or other) divides, and hence make up an additional obstacle to sustainable peace. We take this as a point of departure for our article. Our aim is however not to show that there is a causal link between corruption and mistrust. Instead, we use our quite extensive empirical material to explore the various ways in which experiences of corruption relate to divides and grievances in a post-war context – or not.

We also build on our own earlier work, where we have explored how corruption is closely interrelated with identity politics. We have shown that corruption may be used for group (rather than only individual) gains, and may thereby increase the grievances of identity groups that are excluded from power and the profits of corruption. Corruption and anti-corruption campaigns can also be strategically used in power struggles between groups, both by disadvantaged groups to gain influence and security, and by dominant groups to put down others or undermine opponents. However, corruption can also be framed as a shared interest – or problem – which can foster collaboration and mobilization across divides (Orjuela 2014).

When we talk about corruption in this article, we are fully aware of the complications of using such a malleable concept as a point of departure in research and academic arguments. One such complication is that 'corruption' often refers to a range of quite different practices, such as bribery, nepotism, favoritism, embezzlement and wastage of public funds, which may be better understood separately. Another is that corruption cannot easily be analytically distinguished from other related phenomena, such as networks, reciprocity and power relations. Here we define corruption as lack of impartiality in the exercise of public power (Rothstein 2014, p. 738). What the corrupt practices listed above have in common is that official power-holders make decisions based on other considerations than what is stipulated in the law or policy (for instance bribes, connections or kinship). It must be noted, of course, that different treatment for specific groups is not necessarily corruption, for instance in the case of affirmative action. Hence, impartiality is not about equal treatment; it is about not favoring some groups over others in *illegitimate* ways, where what is legitimate is stipulated in the policy and/or law (see Rothstein 2014, p. 746). As we will see later in the article, one difficulty with this definition of corruption is that it is not always clear to people (or even to power-holders) what laws and policies say. This means that 'everyday experiences of corruption' may in fact include not only strict cases of corruption but also other practices that are seen as unfair. Moreover, it should be noted that although corrupt practices are widely seen as morally wrong (and are often – but not always –illegal), in many situations corruption is not a deviation from normal procedures, but part of the 'normal' (Smith 2007; Blundo & de Sardan 2006).

The prevalence and prominence of the practices and discourses of corruption in the contemporary world makes corruption central to state-citizen relations; it shapes people's

views of the state, as well as the citizens' concrete experiences of interacting with the state. When trying to understand people's experiences and views of corruption, and particularly how these relate to conflict divides, we need to look at the social positions and linkages that individuals and groups have in relation to each other, state actors and other power holders. Identity is often popularly understood as fixed and used as labels put on or advanced by individuals and groups (ethnic, religious, political etc.) – particularly so when it has been polarized and essentialized during war. Here we understand identity as constructed, relational and shifting (see Hall 1990; Hylland Eriksen 1993). When looking at people's identity positions in relation to the (corrupt) state we see how power relations are central to an individual's experiences, and how several identities intersect – gender, ethnicity and political affiliation may overlap to shape a person's or group's position and agency. A nuanced view of identity in relation to the state – mediated through practices and discourses of corruption – will help complicate the picture of ethnic divides and state-minority relations, and challenge the common story-line of two ethnic groups that are polarized and therefore need to reconcile to avoid further violent conflict.

3. Sri Lanka's Post-war Situation

Throughout the Sri Lankan conflict, two nationalisms have been posed against each other. From the Sinhalese nationalist point of view, the island of Sri Lanka was predominantly Sinhala Buddhist, and to safeguard the Sinhala people and the Buddhist religion, the integrity of the unitary and centralized state needed to be preserved. After independence, the Sri Lankan state went through a process of 'Sinhalesation' as the Sinhala language and the Buddhist religion were given a central place, and leaders in the new democracy tried hard to gain the support from their main constituency, the Sinhalese masses (Spencer 1990; DeVotta 2004; de Silva 1998). The Tamils, who had some prominence in the administration and education during the time of the British, were gradually marginalized, while leaders from the Muslim minority often cooperated with the Sinhalese. A Tamil nationalism grew stronger and focused on self-determination in a historical Tamil homeland in the north-east of the island (Wilson 2000). As the conflict escalated, and subsequently turned violent, the two nationalist positions were further polarized. Brutalities from both sides throughout the years of war further deepened the divide. The Sinhalese-Tamil polarization in Sri Lanka has however not been so much about hatred between people from different ethnic groups, as it has been about dramatically different views of what the conflict is about (terrorism or a freedom struggle), and the politicization of grievances and of the painful experiences of loss along ethno-nationalist lines (Orjuela 2008). The state, rather than ethnicity, should be seen as central in the conflict.

The post-war situation in Sri Lanka has been shaped and constrained by the way the war ended. The total defeat of the LTTE – who had claimed to be (and violently defended their position as) the sole representative of the Tamil people – led to a silencing of Tamil voices and a weakening of the Tamil bargaining position, while the space for Sinhala nationalism expanded. The post-war government's approach to 'peacebuilding' and the prevention of renewed violence – in a situation where the root causes of the conflict to a large extent remained – was continued militarization, with an unceasing strong presence of the armed

forces in the Tamil areas in the north-east of the country, coupled with economic development and reconstruction which focused mainly on large infrastructure and lacked popular participation (Höglund & Orjuela 2011). The government celebrated its victory over the LTTE extensively (among other things by establishing a yearly 'Victory Day'), and prohibited public mourning of Tamil victims (Ruki 2012; authors' interviews). Simultaneously, however, the government also maintained a discourse and aspirations of reconciliation, mainly as a response to international pressure (predominantly driven by the US, other Western countries and India). The government established a Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), before which over a thousand people – many of them women in the war-affected areas who had lost family members in the war – appeared. The LLRC was criticized for avoiding difficult accountability issues, but did address root causes of the conflict and were used by international actors and local civil society groups to put pressure on the government (Höglund & Orjuela 2013).

The post-war government also engaged in reconciliation initiatives which focused on cultural exchange between youth from the country's main ethnic groups. The Sisu Diriya programme involved youth from war-affected areas in multi-religious gatherings, celebration of traditions of all ethnic groups, arts exhibitions and dancing (Wijesinghe 2013). In 2014, the government announced that it would set up a Cabinet Sub-Committee on 'Social Reconciliation and Coexistence among Communities', led by the president and aiming to implement the LLRC recommendations. President Rajapaksa stated that 'Communities in our country have distanced themselves from each other due to the military background that prevailed over a period of more than three decades…instead of interacting with trust the people are in the process of looking at others in an unfriendly manner' (quoted by Perera 2014). While the recognition of ethnic divides by the president were welcomed by some, it may also have served to divert attention towards people's presumed inability to live together and away from state-citizen relations and demands of accountability, acknowledgement and reparation in relation to atrocities during the war.

The context of this study was the years after the end of the war, a time when the Sri Lankan state developed towards what DeVotta calls 'soft authoritarianism' (DeVotta 2010). The president used the massive Sinhalese support he gained from winning the war to remove checks-and-balances on his power. An understanding of the Sri Lankan state, and of post-war state-citizen relations, would not be complete if we do not also talk about corruption. Sri Lanka was listed as number 85 out of 175 countries in the 2014 Transparency International corruption perception index (TI 2014), and is thus in no way close to being defined as one of the world's most corrupt countries. Despite that, corruption in Sri Lanka can be described as endemic and present at all levels of the government machinery (and also in the private sector and civil society). 'It is a sea of corruption', one of our interviewees, a member of parliament, said when describing Sri Lankan politics. In this 'sea of corruption' we find, among other things, bribe-taking and the use of state resources for personal gain by politicians and bureaucrats at different levels, wastefulness and extravagances paid by public funds, clientelism in the awarding of jobs or political positions, nepotism and irregularities in the granting of contracts and the use of state resources in election campaigns (see Lindberg &

Orjuela 2011, p. 212; Herath et al 2015). Restrictions of and attacks on media, civil society and the political opposition curtailed the space for criticism against the government, including – or particularly – its corrupt practices. The Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption was mostly toothless and selectively used. Thanks to brave journalists, activists and state officials, large corruption scandals have been regularly uncovered – but perpetrators have rarely been brought to justice (authors' interviews). The presidential elections in early 2015 unexpectedly brought the opposition candidate to power on a good governance and anti-corruption agenda. The extent to which this power shift will actually entail a break away from endemic corruption remains to be seen.

4. A note on research methods and data

This paper presents some of the results from a research project on interlinkages and local experiences of corruption and conflict. For the project we conducted altogether 170 interviews between 2009 and 2013 in different parts of Sri Lanka: 38 in the Northern Province (Mannar and Jaffna districts), 34 in the Eastern Province (Batticaloa and Ampara), 46 in the war-affected parts of North Central Province (Polonnaruwa), and 52 elsewhere in Sri Lanka (Colombo and Hambantota). Most of these interviews were conducted with 'ordinary people' in rural areas, while some were with government officials, politicians and civil society representatives locally. We also interviewed academics, civil society representatives and national level politicians, mainly in Colombo (28 out of the 170 interviews). We interviewed both men and women (although a majority of the interviewees were men), with different socio-economic status and of different ethnicity (89 of the interviews were with Tamils, 48 with Sinhalese and 33 with Muslims). The research aimed at understanding people's perceptions and experiences of corruption (and related phenomena), not to identify and investigate actual corruption cases. Statements from interviews thus have to be read as subjective narratives, which point to actual experiences and circumstances, but which cannot be unreflectingly treated as facts. When it comes to post-war social relations, however, perceptions may be as important as facts.

Since corruption and state-minority relations were sensitive topics during the time of the study, we approached the interviewees through already established contacts in the different sites. Building trust and ensuring anonymity for the interviewees were of utmost importance. Some of the interviews were conducted in the local languages, and some with the use of a translator. Our research team consisted of both foreigners and Sri Lankans of different ethnicity, and we made use of our different positionalities in ways that would be as effective as possible in creating rapport with the interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured, and started with general questions about development and change in the area, and later zoomed in on issues of post-war expectations and grievances and experiences of corruption. When possible, we inquired specifically into the interviewees' experiences and perceptions of petty corruption, nepotism, biases in allocation of resources, as well as their contacts with various representatives of the state. Interviews with key informants focused on their view of the role of corruption in post-war Sri Lanka and/or issues particular to their expertise and experience.

5. Ethnic Relations in Post-war Sri Lanka – Some Examples

While the main narrative of the conflict in Sri Lanka has pictured it as being between two main actors and posing two ethnic groups against each other, a closer look at local sites reveals that the actors, conflict lines, contested issues and war experiences are – of course – much more complex than that. To illustrate this, and to look at what ethnic relations may look like locally, we first turn to Polonnaruwa district and the areas which were known as 'border areas' during the war. These are ethnically mixed areas, which were officially under government control, but had a close presence of the LTTE, and where the population experienced insecurity and recurrent violence. The Sinhalese population here consists mainly of poor farmers, some of whom had settled from other parts of the island after receiving land in connection with the Mahaweli irrigation project in the 1960s-1980s. Although no major battles were fought in these areas, people from all ethnic groups experienced displacement at different points in time.

People's narratives about their post-war situation reveal ambivalent views and discourses about reconciliation and ethnic relations in the area. In one of the villages we visited, the LTTE had during the war hacked to death 20 Sinhalese and six Tamil villagers. After the incident, the remaining Tamil villagers had fled for fear of retaliation. A Tamil man described the post-war inter-ethnic relations like this:

> When we returned to our village, we had great fear towards Sinhala people. But later we gradually associated with them. Now we are like brothers and sisters. Now there are no problems. But we don't totally trust them. If a problem arises, we cannot completely trust these people. We have some fear in our minds (Tamil man, Polonnaruwa 2013).

A woman in a nearby Sinhalese village said:

> Whatever we do, we and them [Sinhalese and Tamils] have that division between us […].Although we talk to each other, since they killed our people the two sides have bad feelings. Even when we go for a meeting, they sit separately however much we try to sit together. When young people play they keep separate. They maintain that difference. I don't know why. Although the war is over people are not happy with each other.

She goes on to describe how during the war, the LTTE came to the village and attacked the houses inhabited by Sinhalese, but spared the Tamil houses. After the attack, the Tamil villagers fled, abandoning their houses and all their belongings. 'People from other villages looted the Tamil houses after the attack. Perhaps they are angry with us because of that. They tell us "you have taken our lands"' (Sinhalese woman, Polonnaruwa 2013).

These two accounts illustrate that ethnic relations in the area are shaped both by experiences of violence during the war and by unresolved problems regarding land after the war. Another observation from our Polonnaruwa interviews was that most interviewees would at first give statements such as 'now there are no problems', 'we are happy that the war is over', 'we are like brothers and sisters' and 'we all live in harmony'. A bit further into our conversations, however, some Tamil interviewees would allude to the difficulties of being a minority in a

Sinhala majority district. The fact that numerous youth had disappeared during the war and were still missing and that there was no information about their fate surfaced occasionally and in lowered voices. We interpret this as an illustration of how the official discourse of interethnic harmony dominated and (almost) silenced alternative stories about grievances related to state violence.

Mannar district is inhabited by Tamils and Muslims, and their relations were shaped by their different experiences of displacement and return, and centered on land and livelihood issues. 'They had taken our lands and jobs and when we returned we took them back. So their business may have gone down' one Muslim man, who had returned from decades of displacement, said. He continued: 'Some of the Tamils who worked as laborers for us in the past are now *mudalalis* [business owners]. So they may have some problems [when Muslims return]' (Muslim man, Mannar 2013). Both Muslims and Tamils had major grievances due to conflicts and lack of clarity in relation to land. While the Muslim population had endured protracted displacement after the LTTE ordered them to leave on mass in 1990, most Tamils had been displaced and suffered losses and injuries during the last phase of the armed conflict. There was a strong sense among each of the groups that the other was privileged when it came to development and reconstruction – something we will return to later in the article.

Tamil interviewees in different sites saw a number of obstacles to reconciliation. A Tamil village leader said:

> Take Sri Lanka… all ethnic groups should live in unity. That is reconciliation. That sounds good, but nothing happens in reality […] People's rights are not fully given. People who were arrested are not released yet (Tamil man, Mannar 2013).

The strong presence of the armed forces – in businesses, in private and public functions and in schools – was also brought up, as was the occupation of land by the army in Jaffna.

> People thought that once the war was over there would be reconciliation. Look at the army sentry points. No one has lethal weapons in Jaffna, but there are so many solders and camps. When we try to have a protest against the land acquisition or something, they send hooligans or [police/military] people in civil [clothing] and attack. They still want to suppress us (Tamil man, Jaffna, 2013).

> After the war, we expected the state to be more generous. It could have said to Tamil people 'Your children were forcefully recruited. Sorry we failed to protect you. We had to take your land for national security. Here is your land. Please take it and do whatever you want…I am sorry about what happened to you'. Now the government takes what LTTE had already taken by force (other Tamil man, Jaffna 2013).

This type of critical statements were mainly made by persons who were identified as local leaders or politically active, or who were said to be 'fearless' and 'speak the truth'. Most ordinary people did not make critical remarks and many also pointed to the improved situation after the war, such as better roads and access to electricity and water (most visible in formerly LTTE controlled areas). The greatest improvement, however, was the fact that the

war was no longer going on, and that, as several interviewees said, it was now possible to travel freely and 'live without fear'.

However, the lack of freedom of speech was commented on by several interviewees: 'If we speak freely, we will be attacked and they will say that it was by an "unidentified person". If we talk anything we have to face some problems. If we are silent we can live', one teacher said (group interview, Batticaloa 2012).

From these examples, we can note how inter-ethnic relations are shaped both by war-time experiences and new and unresolved post-war conflicts. However, as we can see, grievances are not primarily about the ethnic 'other', but about how the state has handled the post-war situation.

6. Corruption, Politics and Everyday Life

Trying to map people's experiences of corruption is a quite messy and difficult task. Corruption is entangled with a range of life opportunities that relate to employment, housing, land, infrastructure, social benefits, security and conflict resolution. Studying perceptions towards corruption and experiences means studying relations between citizens and the state, as they appear from the point of view of the ordinary villager who encounters the state through the village officer (*grama niladhari*), the local officer in charge of welfare benefits (*samurdhi*), the politicians arriving to campaign before elections, the development projects introduced in the village, as well as through TV images of the President or media reports about corruption scandals. Since 'corruption' has such negative connotations, narratives about it tend to describe the self as righteous and others as corrupt (see Lindberg & Orjuela 2014). A direct question about whether a person has had to pay bribes usually generates a negative answer – however, the same interviewee, further into the conversation, may explain how he/she solved a problem by 'giving something', i.e. bribing. In our interview material we have many stories of corruption, and in this section we bring up some recurrent themes and examples to illustrate how state-citizens relations are played out and what corruption may mean to people's everyday life in post-war Sri Lanka.

> We need political support for anything. You can do anything through politics only. Even to admit a child to a [good] school, you need a letter of a politician. If we want to get a government job, we have to go through a politician. Otherwise they won't give us. Hence, we elect a person from our village so that we can get things done through that person (Tamil man, Polonnaruwa 2013).

The above quote illustrates how certain 'important persons' are seen to be gatekeepers to services and resources. Politicians or officials in the position to distribute jobs do so either to persons they are close to or to those who pay considerable sums of money. In all the places where we did our study, certain persons were pointed to as playing these roles. In Mannar, it was said that 'nothing can happen without a word from Rishad', referring to Rishad Badurdeen, minister in the Rajapaksa government (Tamil man, Mannar 2013). Employment, houses and development projects are seen to come to the supporters or those close to these

key persons. ‘In this village we have no one who is really close to [the] minister. That is why we have not received any help’ said a Muslim man in another village in Mannar. During election campaigns, villagers sometimes get involved in campaigning for certain parties or politicians, with the expectation to gain benefits later: ‘If you work for a party, and that party wins the elections you will get help’ (Tamil man, Batticaloa 2012). In some villages, the *samurdhi* officer was pointed to as a key person who makes decisions on who will receive welfare benefits. Many of our interviewees alleged that ‘the *samurdhi* officer helps only his relatives’ (Muslim man, Polonnaruwa 2012) or that ‘it is the people who are rich who receive *samurdhi*, not the poor’ (several interviews, 2012). In Polonnaruwa, the Mahaweli authorities were central in dealing with land deeds and distribution of land and the possibility – or need – to pay bribes to receive land or sort out land title problems was repeatedly mentioned. The distribution of resources and services were thus seen to be governed not by equal access and impartiality, but by connections and ability to pay bribes. While being a system that many interviewees saw as flawed – at least when they were excluded from its benefits – it was at the same time considered ‘normal’ and unavoidable.

Corruption was also reported in relation to local development projects and reconstruction. Multiple stories were told about individuals who had embezzled money, about waste of resources, contracts awarded in suspicious ways and flawed distribution of benefits. One interviewee said:

> There is a situation of about 50-50. Fifty percent of the people who were affected by the war received assistance, and fifty percent of those who were not affected by the war also received. The District Secretariat helped relatives and known people, and the chairman of the Pradeshya Saba [local council] also helped relatives (Tamil man, Batticaloa 2012).

Another person said:

> In road constructions, the TO [technical officer] will say that you have to use 0.5 inches of gravel, one inch of stone and a quarter inch of gravel again. That is how you have to construct the road. But the contractor uses big stones and shows that to the TO. From that, the contractor gets some profit and shares that profit with the TO. Then the TO gives approval to the road. That is how corruption happens (Tamil man, Mannar 2013).

A former employee in an NGO told about his experience of working with a housing project where he had reported some problems:

> My director called me upstairs and told me ‘your reports are not correct’. I asked why. He said ‘because you are writing the truth. You have to write that the housing project is good and that people are happy. […] Then only I can keep you as my staff’ (Muslim man, Mannar 2013).

The possible consequence of corruption in development and reconstruction is poor quality – indeed many interviewees complained about houses, bridges and roads of questionable quality – but also weakened legitimacy for the broader process of reconstruction, and for the state.

The way people are treated when approaching the authorities also shape their views of the state. There were various opinions about this – many asserted that their local government official was good, while many others told about arrogant treatment, delays and confusing processes. 'Normally if you ask people, they would say that corruption is about money. But doing something in a hard way when it can be done in a simple way is also corruption', a local official said (Mannar 2013). Many interviewees had spent considerable time going to the authorities to ask for assistance or sort out some matter, only to be asked to return later. 'I went this morning also to ask [for a job for my daughter] but we are poor so it is difficult to get anything. Only special people get good treatment', a Sinhalese woman, who had hoped her husband's canvassing for a politician in the last elections would pay off, said (Polonnaruwa 2012). A Muslim man told about his problems making a living from sand extraction:

> I cannot bring sand. The police capture us. No one tells us how to get a sand permit. [..] When we go to the forest office, they tell us to go to the geology office, there… they tell us to go to the forest office. There they tell us to go to the police. So we give up. I don't have enough incomes. […] There is no other job to do (Polonnaruwa 2012).

The stories of our interviewees suggest that corruption – or what was perceived to be corruption – affected people's life opportunities and livelihoods in many ways. In some cases, people made time-consuming efforts to build the right contacts or strained their economy by paying bribes. In other cases, bribes and contacts enabled people to solve bureaucratic issues faster and to access resources and services. Sometimes, people found themselves caught in a corruption trap. For example, one family in Mannar made a living as carpenters. To run their carpentry machine they needed a permit – which would cost 100,000 LKR. Half of this sum, they understood, was a bribe to be shared among the officials. As the family could not afford this cost, they kept the machine indoors and used it only at odd hours. When forest guards or officials from the forest department came to check if they had the permit, the family paid bribes to make them look the other way (Tamil woman, Mannar 2013).

Corruption was also frequently talked about in relation to the police. A very common experience of corruption was bribes to police officers who stopped someone for speeding or driving a motorbike without a helmet. Bribes to the police influenced their involvement in enforcing the law and dealing with conflicts in other ways too. Two interviewees said:

> I went to the police because someone had troubled me. But those people gave money to the police. Then the police scolded me and remanded me. That is how the […] police behave. If the other party goes first and bribes the police then we would face problems (Muslim woman, Polonnaruwa 2012).

> To get something done you need to pay the police. If person A wants to do something bad to person B, he will give a bribe to the police to trouble B (woman from Jaffna, interviewed in Colombo 2012).

One interviewee described how a victim of a crime has to bribe the police to make an entry – while at the same time the police received bribes from those who had committed the crime

(Tamil man, Batticaloa 2012). Some talked about increased criminality after the war, and that criminals were often supported by or well connected with the police or important politicians. Illegal production of and trade with alcohol, sand mining, hunting and cutting of trees were among the many activities that were said to continue with the help of powerful contacts and bribes to the police. Basically, 'whoever is getting caught [for doing illegal activities] has not paid his bribes' (academic, Colombo 2012). The ships that left the east coast to take asylum seekers to Australia also, according to interviewees in the area, functioned with the help of corruption. While the migrants had to pay a fee first to the person (illegally) organizing the journey, in the middle of the sea, authorities were said to stop the ship and ask for further money to let the passengers carry on (Tamil woman, Batticaloa 2012). Contacts and money were also often necessary for anyone taken by the police (for whatever reason) to get released.

While the stories about petty corruption were many, much less was said in our interviews about grand corruption, or corruption by national leaders. Although many villagers followed the news and sometimes even watched television programs where corruption scandals were exposed, grand corruption seemed to be something distant, irrelevant or something that was not good to talk about. Some said that 'yes, it may happen', others that allegations of corruption against top leaders were false and motivated by jealousy, or that it is not the president but lower level leaders and bureaucrats who are to blame for corruption. One interviewee explained that 'Due to the war, people love the country. They think it is okay that they [the president and his brothers] are robbing a little. It is okay since he eliminated Prabakaran [the LTTE leader]' (Muslim man, Hambantota 2009). When asked about whether people in the north speak about corruption, a Tamil politician said that 'it is not one of the main topics. They are aware [of it] but that is not the reason why they do not approve of the government' (Colombo 2012).

Although it is a bit hard to get an overview of people's experiences and views of corruption, some general findings can be highlighted. First, corruption (i.e. lack of impartiality in the exercise of public power), is prevalent all over Sri Lanka. What has been particular to the war-affected areas, and the post-war time period, is that it also has permeated reconstruction efforts, which are linked to influx of large sums of money (not only to the war-torn areas, but also for instance to the president's native area in southern Sri Lanka), and has also complicated land problems. Second, we note that corruption is not seen as a deviation from the normal, but as part of 'normal politics'. Lack of impartiality takes many forms in the day to day experiences of people, and is deeply entwined with bureaucracy, patronage, contacts, marginalization, unfair treatment and uneven distribution of resources. Due to poor information it is sometimes difficult for people to understand if payments are bribes or normal fees, and if delays and uneven distribution of resources are regular or corrupt. The idea of what is corrupt hence tends to be broader than a strict definition of corruption as lack of impartiality in the exercise of public power. Third, our focus in this section, and in the interviews, has been on people's perceptions of practices of corruption. We found many corruption stories, but less of a shared discourse on corruption (like what Daniel Jordan Smith talks about in Nigeria, see Smith 2007), in which 'corruption' is used by people to express grievances about society and their own situation. Villagers we interviewed in Sri Lanka did

not strongly despise corruption, but approached it in a more matter-of-factly way, saying that 'this is how it is'. While corruption has figured prominently in national political discourse, at village level it seemed less politicized. Interestingly, the election campaign which brought Sirisena to presidential power in 2015 managed to popularize an anti-corruption discourse and open up space for critique of grand corruption.

7. Corruption and Ethnic Divides

We now turn to the question of how corruption is interrelated with, or may have a bearing on, interethnic relations. We first look at how people's perceptions of uneven or corrupt distribution of resources are linked with ethnic grievances. Thereafter, we discuss who are vulnerable to corruption, looking at how ethnicity, gender and class shape people's position and agency in relation to the (corrupt) state.

7.1 Ethnic grievances and uneven distribution of resources

> They will not give good jobs for Tamils in good places.
> Q: Why?
> The ministers are only Sinhalese.
> Q: What about Karuna [a Tamil minister]?
> He is only giving jobs for his relatives (Tamil woman, Batticaloa 2012).

This quote illustrates the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which corruption-related uneven distribution of resources and opportunities relate to ethnic divides and grievances. On the one hand, the interviewee takes an ethnic perspective on the distribution of jobs, saying that Tamils are excluded because they do not share ethnic identity with powerful gatekeepers. On the other hand, Tamil persons with power are seen as untrustworthy and corrupt. This suggests that ethnicity is seen to have major importance, but that in practice, it may not be the most crucial factor that determines access to powerholders and resources.

Our interview material contains multiple examples of interviewees who express that because of their ethnic identity, they are excluded from access to jobs, benefits and development. In Mannar district, many Tamils believed that they had not received assistance because they were Tamils, while many Muslims thought that all reconstruction resources went to Tamils.

> In our village, we have so many needs. But when they [local authorities] get assistance, they always think about Tamil villages. There are some [village officials] who discriminate Muslims and work only for Tamil people (Muslim man, Mannar 2013).

> This is an area where they have not still implemented development projects, while in all surrounding villages they have done the housing programs. The road to the village is neglected. The bridge has been damaged for a long time and no one cares about it. Many people here think that our village is ignored because there are fewer Muslims in the village (Tamil woman, Mannar 2013).

> The government has not done any project to empower the Tamil people. Development benefits do not go to people.

> Q: Then, who gets the benefits of development?
> It is the richest people: it is Sinhalese and Muslim people. I tell this openly to you. Tamil people do not get any benefits. We have lost our house, property, jewelry but could not get any compensation (Tamil woman, Mannar 2013).

Houses, jobs and land were among the main resources that our interviewees complained were unjustly diverted to the ethnic other. The distribution of resources and opportunities on ethnic grounds was often explained by the need for connections with 'big people'. One of the Tamil women above said:

> If you take this village, on that side you have Muslim people and they are very close to the minister. They can even call him on the mobile. They have got facilities due to that relationship. Water, roads, electricity. Tamil villages have not got anything. They have not received houses either. They live under very poor conditions. Muslim people can go to the [district] office and can get their needs [met] but Tamil people cannot do that (Tamil woman, Mannar 2013).

A Muslim woman similarly told us about what she saw as ethnically biased treatment:

> Officials do not care about this village because of our ethnicity. […] When Muslim people came back [after displacement], Tamil people did not return the lands. Muslim people went to court. The court ruled that Tamil people have the right to live in that place. The judge was Christian Tamil. So he ruled in favour of Tamil people (Mannar 2013).

Some interviewees believed that resources were diverted from Tamil to Sinhalese areas.

> The government tells foreign governments that Wanni [Tamil area in the north] people are living in poverty and with difficulties and we are going to develop Wanni. They are getting money and using that to Sinhala people's development. If they use that money for Tamil people we can stay in better houses (Tamil woman, Mannar 2013).

Also in the border areas in Polonnaruwa district some interviewees believed others had received more resources. 'All aid that comes goes to the Sinhalese villages', a Tamil woman said (Polonnaruwa 2013). However, several Sinhalese villagers recognized the different needs of the two communities: 'People from [a Tamil village] receive more assistance from the government, NGOs and other private organizations. They need to be given such support, because they are more affected [by the war] than us', a Sinhalese man stated (Polonnaruwa 2012). A Sinhalese woman said: 'Tamils face more problems than us, so they need to be treated like that. It is good to give relief to them' (Polonnaruwa 2012). Different treatment observed by the interviewees – which is not necessarily due to a lack of impartiality, as discussed above – is hence sometimes seen as justified, while other times it is interpreted as corrupt and discriminating.

Although corruption was often perceived to be an expression of ethnic discrimination, it was not a main theme for mobilization along ethnic lines. Tamils often saw other problems as more urgent. 'We never think about corruption. What we want is a solution [to the ethnic conflict]' an academic in Jaffna said (2013). One Tamil man, however, made connections to armed conflict when talking about how jobs went to Sinhalese with political connections:

‘Tamil people started this war because of such injustices. If they let it happen again, then there will be a war again’ (Ampara 2009; see also Lindberg & Orjuela 2011, p. 224). Some interviewees saw the need for political power-sharing as interlinked with the fight against corruption and injustices: ‘We need self-administration for the Tamil people. Then only Tamils can get the benefits’, a Tamil man, concerned with unfair distribution of job opportunities, said (Tamil man, Colombo 2012). ‘If the government can delegate power to the provincial level, then we can get water’, a farmer stated after having narrated how his area had been deprived of water due to corruption in the Sinhalese dominated irrigation department (Tamil man, Ampara 2009).

The political system, and who held power, was hence seen as crucial for access to resources and opportunities in a corrupt state. With the demise of the LTTE, the war-affected areas had experienced a dramatic shift in power dynamics. Earlier, the LTTE had had full or partial dominance over the administration, and had, many believed, been a strong force against both corruption and discrimination of Tamils. Many Tamils had a romanticized picture of the LTTE rule: ‘If corruption takes place [in LTTE areas] the punishment is very high, so people are scared of that. Here [under government control] the person who commits corruption is outside [the jail] and the people who are innocent are inside’ (Tamil woman, Ampara 2009). Post-LTTE, it was the military and politicians who were the powerful actors to turn to in cases of unfair distribution of resources. One interviewee talked about how Muslims returning to Mannar after decades of displacement had felt that Tamil government officials opposed their return and discriminated Muslims in land allocations:

> Officers told us that lands would be given to those who left in 2008 [i.e. Tamils] and not for those displaced in 1990 [Muslims]. So we went to the army. They called the civil officer [and asked] ‘Are you asking Tamils to eat rice and Muslims to eat mud? Give lands to everyone’. After that we went to the *Kachcheri* [District Secretariat] and the matter was resolved (Muslim man, village leader, Mannar 2013).

The same interviewee continued: ‘Earlier Indian housing was not to be given to us, but Rishad [Badurdeen] fought and got us also the same housing […] We [the Muslims] have become politically powerful’.

The systems for resource allocation were often parallel, and sometimes overlapping or competing. In Jaffna, this had very clear links to Tamil grievances – although the local government was run by the main Tamil party, Tamil National Alliance (TNA), resources were distributed through political parties allied with the government, and TNA development initiatives were often blocked. Similarly, one interviewee in Mannar said: ‘In a village there are two political parties [one Tamil and one Muslim]. When one tries to help his known people the other opposes.’ He continued: ‘There is a certain amount allocated for the *Kachcheri*. In the *Kachcheri* the government officials are Tamil. They use that to help their Tamil villages. If the minister has some allocation he gives that to Muslim people’ (Muslim man, Mannar 2013).

Ethnicity was by many interviewees seen as a relevant and often important aspect of the patronage relations that governed resource distribution. However, the picture was not always clear-cut. Many expressed disappointment that powerful persons failed to distribute resources and jobs to people sharing their ethnicity, and were disillusioned with their corrupt leaders. For instance, one interviewee complained that the Tamil Chief Minister of the Eastern Provincial Council would not give jobs to Tamils without receiving money (Tamil man, Batticaloa 2012). Patronage linkages that cut across ethnic divides were also found. Some Tamils were 'close to' the Muslim minister from Mannar. Through these 'brokers' or gatekeepers, Tamils could access resources and benefits that came through the minister. Some Tamils complained that these links served to 'divide the Tamils', diverting the Tamil support from TNA to the ruling party (Tamil man, Mannar 2013). A Tamil woman alleged that the minister gave jobs to Tamils in order to 'convert' them from TNA to the governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) (Mannar 2013).

It should also be noted that while many of our interviewees connected unfair distribution of resources to ethnicity, many others did not. Particularly in the southern Hambantota district, people instead emphasized the party political divide between SLFP and United National Party (UNP) as a main cause of unjust treatment and resource allocation. 'Since we are with the UNP and the present government is SLFP we do not get any facilities', a woman declared, accounting a case where cattle had been given to households supporting the ruling party (Sinhalese woman, Hambantota 2009). A Muslim interviewee in Polonnaruwa told that his village did not get anything, while another Muslim village nearby got concrete road and a health clinic, 'because they [the authorities] believe we are UNPers' (Muslim man, Polonnaruwa 2012).

Despite these caveats, our research shows that ethnic discrimination in allocation of resources and opportunities is one important lens through which state-citizen relations have been interpreted in post-war Sri Lanka. Experiences of corruption and perceptions that resources are distributed based on connections and ethnic belonging hence risks not only undermining state legitimacy, but also feeding into the ethnic 'othering' and divides entrenched during the war. The perceptions of lack of impartiality and unjust allocation of resources may or may not reflect a reality of corruption and bias. Investigating how resources and opportunities are actually distributed fairly is important, but beyond the scope of this article.

7.2 Identity position and vulnerability

This section looks at who is vulnerable – or perceived to be vulnerable – to corruption, and how that may relate to ethnic divides in a post-war context. While the former section focused on resource distribution and perceptions of bias based on ethnic groups, we here look at individuals and their identity position, vulnerability and agency in relation to state actors.

'If you are a Sinhalese your work will get done soon' one interviewee said (Muslim family, Polonnaruwa 2012) about the Mahaweli authority, in charge of land administration, irrigation and agriculture, whose officials were all Sinhalese. The village official, also a Sinhalese, however, treated everyone equally, they said. Several of our interviews contain examples of

(real or perceived) ethnic discrimination as well as assertions that there is no ethnic discrimination. This indicates that experiences and perceptions are multiple and varying. Possibly these two story-lines could also be interpreted as illustrations of how the citizens relate to (and contribute to) two different discourses: on the one hand, the government's discourse on post-war harmony, and on the other, alternative discourses on grievances, which are enhanced by actual experiences that negate the government's discourse.

From our interviews we found that Tamils often saw themselves as having a more vulnerable position, stemming from their minority status, the legacy of armed conflict, but also local conflict dynamics and majority-minority relations. When asked if certain groups are more affected by corruption, on interviewee said:

> The helpless, those who are really a minority. People come and use you. There are one or two Tamil families in Hambantota. If people come and tell them, immediately they will pay, because they want to be safe. Some will keep on paying. If you are a Tamil in Jaffna, that is a different thing, there you are not a minority. In Hambantota, the Muslims are here in a bigger way, so they do not see themselves as a minority, [and face] no such problems. If there are two Tamil shops out of 500, the Tamils will look for ways to always give something to somebody (Muslim man, Hambantota 2009).

Just after the end of the war, we came across stories of how Tamils were exploited due to their potential connection with the LTTE.

> The police station is full of Tamils now, who have been taken in as suspects. They ask money for their release. […] The police also come to houses asking for money or things. Like, give me so and so many thousand rupees, give me the motorbike, the television set and so on (Tamil woman, Colombo 2009).

In a survey from 2007, 8.5% of the 3,500 respondents stated that they had paid bribes during the year (a figure that may be too low to reflect reality, as people are often reluctant to speak about their own involvement in bribery). Of the Tamils surveyed, 40% said that they had paid bribes during the same time (CPA 2007). This resonates with some of our findings. For instance, some interviewees told us that Muslim and Tamil traders were asked to pay higher 'commissions' to the customs when importing goods than Sinhalese traders. One interviewee said: 'If they see that it is a Tamil or Muslim they expect something. If you don't give, they say that there is a new rule, you need to do this or that' (Tamil man, Colombo 2012). Another interviewee said: 'If they [customs officers] know that it is a Muslim they hound you. Tamils is also the same. I have seen how Sinhalese are allowed to take [in goods]' (Muslim woman, Colombo 2012). When inquired about it, another businessperson said: 'That is there. Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese country, so that is there, but it is not nice to tell [talk about it]' (Tamil man, Colombo 2012). A senior customs officer told us that 'commissions' and taxes are always fixed, but commented on the issue of ethnicity and corruption like this:

> Most of the importers are Muslims […] If we have 100 court cases, 80 per cent of them concern a Muslim importer. In terms of fraud Muslims top the record followed by Sinhalese and then Tamils. This thing about ethnicity is a part of our society. When

> customs implements the law against the Muslims, they think customs harass them because they are Muslims. When we do it against Sinhalese businessmen they complain that customs favor Muslims (customs official, Colombo 2013).

Although we cannot draw conclusions from our study about whether people are indeed treated differently based on ethnicity, it is noticeable that there was a perception of ethnic bias, and a sense of being vulnerable based on ethnicity, particularly among the minorities, in the post-war context.

We also have a couple of examples of interviewees who believed that Tamils had to pay higher bribes. A Tamil woman in Colombo said about the local official: 'He is not ill-treating [Tamils] but treating people equally. Everything is for money – if you give money they provide what you need.' Just after that, however, she claimed that there are differences in how much money one has to give: 'If it is a Sinhala person, the cost will be 100 rupees. If it is a Tamil person, it will be 1,000 or 2,000 rupees. […] It is not only the [village official], all government officials are the same. They will ask money if you are a Jaffna Tamil. Jaffna Tamils cannot speak Sinhala' (Tamil woman, Colombo 2012). Another interviewee also stressed the difference in treatment between Jaffna and Colombo Tamils:

> The GN [*Grama Niladari*, village official] has always been Sinhala. Sometimes Muslim also; they also take bribes. They treat Tamil people [poorly], especially if you are a Jaffna Tamil. If you are a Colombo Tamil they are willing to help. […] If it is a Jaffna Tamil they will ask something, they will expect something (Tamil woman, Colombo 2012).

In her view, this was connected to class: Jaffna Tamils, she said, tend to have houses and save money, and the demand for bribes from them was because of jealousy. Having children in Western countries – more common among Jaffna Tamils – was another sign of wealth, which could determine how they were treated.

> When you approach GN, the GN will ask how many of your children are abroad. Then only he will decide how much you have to pay. The doctor will do the same, he/she will ask how many children are abroad, and only after that he/she will write the medicine. For a normal fever, at least you have to pay 950 rs (Tamil woman, Colombo 2012).

However, the ways the socioeconomic position of a person influenced their contact with the state varied. For instance, the educated and well to do were less likely to be asked for bribes.

> There is of course a difference in who is asked for bribes. It has to do with class. A medical doctor is not asked. We are professionals, so therefore we are not asked for bribes. We can speak a bit of Sinhala. We could report them (Tamil academic, interviewed outside Sri Lanka 2009).

A Tamil owner of a small eating place said that ethnicity did not really matter when it came to dealings with health inspectors:

> It is not about who you are, it is about how you treat them. It depends on how you treat them, if you know how to act nicely.

> Interpreter to researcher: You understand that nicely means how much [money] you give, don't you? (Tamil man, Colombo 2012).

A man said about contact with authorities: 'If a person comes with some minister's level or some good contacts they get treated in a different way. [When it comes to] ordinary people, everybody are treated the same' (Tamil man, Colombo 2012). In several of the corruption narratives we collected, the interviewees believed that they were poorly treated because they were poor. 'If someone is poor they always try to put you down' a Sinhalese woman in Polonnaruwa (2012) said, after having told us about trouble she had had with authorities regarding a building permit and the cutting of trees. Corruption is for all ethnic groups, one Muslim man said (Hambantota 2009), only 'if someone has power the police would be afraid to ask'. We were also told about how poor and uneducated people were targeted by police officers who wanted to extract small bribes for minor (alleged) offences. In other cases poor people were not expected to be able to pay bribes. 'Even if they would want money they would not ask from people like us' a poor Tamil woman said when talking about the local government office (Hambantota, 2009).

People also felt marginalized and discriminated by authorities based on lack of language skills. An interviewee said about the Mahaweli authorities:

> If a Sinhalese person goes, the work will get done quickly. Sinhalese people always get prioritized, it is the same in all government authorities. If Tamils speak Sinhala they can also get [fast service] but if they only know Tamil they have to wait for a long time before someone asks them what they want (Tamil man, Polonnaruwa 2012).

Similarly, one person said about the armed forces' interventions in conflicts:

> Any group who is fighting, if one person speaks Sinhala, no matter if he is right or wrong the army will be on that person's side. It is impossible to get justice even from the police, unless you speak Sinhala (Muslim woman, Colombo 2012).

Vulnerability in relation to the state and corrupt practices also has gender dimensions, although we have less interview data on that. Women are in some cases not the primary persons to be in contact with authorities, and therefore gain less direct experiences of corruption. For instance, when we asked two young women about their experience of approaching the local authorities they said 'We did not go [to them]. If a problem arises usually it is the man heading the household who goes' (Muslim women, Polonnaruwa 2012). Widows are particularly vulnerable in society in general, as well as in relation to authorities and resource distribution. Widows we interviewed talked about difficulties in getting benefits they were entitled to. Widows were also commonly expected to give 'sexual favours' to local officials in return for services, and were not in a position to complain or take action against harassment, since the blame would often fall on them instead of on the perpetrators. One of our interviewees worked for an NGO with counselling, and said, based on her experience with widows in the village: 'Widows get sexually harassed by men […] Those big people who do the harassment have links with the police or people with weapons, which means that they can

hide their faults' (Tamil woman, Ampara 2009). In Hambantota, we interviewed a widow who had been cheated by the constructors building her house. When asked whether she had gone to complain she says she would not do that 'because I am alone' (Sinhalese woman, Hambantota 2009). Not having a husband meant being more vulnerable to and less able to do anything about issues of corruption and other wrongs.

Most interviewees expressed an overwhelming sense of powerlessness when it came to protesting against or complaining about corruption, poor treatment or biased distribution of resources. A resigned 'What to do?' was a recurring comment. This lack of agency related to vulnerabilities determined by ethnicity, class etc. 'People are angry, but they do not reveal that they are angry' one interviewee said (Muslim man, Polonnaruwa 2012). '[People] are angry but they cannot express their anger, because that will stop future assistance' (other Muslim man, Polonaruwa 2012). 'Who will complain? If you do, next time you will get nothing' (Tamil man, Mannar 2013). One interviewee recounted how some villagers had attempted to protest against corrupt officials:

> They gave a letter to the higher authorities. But then these persons were told that if you continue this, you will face some problem, so by fear they stopped. […] The school principle is one of them [who protested]. He is a government employee, so when he was threatened [he stopped]. The relevant authority said 'we will complain to the police and take action [against you]'. It is all about bribes. If you give a bribe they can accept anything (Muslim man, Polonnaruwa 2012).

The few examples we collected about attempts to fight corruption locally had ended up being futile, often due to the connections corrupt persons had with important actors. We also noted that Tamils felt that they were in a particularly vulnerable position, because of experiences during war, and a continued sense of insecurity.

> We start to experience corruption now in development and politics. But unlike in the south [the areas not affected by war] we are not in a position to expose corruption due to the political and security situation here (Tamil man, Jaffna 2013).

> Tamil people cannot protest; only Sinhalese are doing like that. If Tamil people protest, they will shoot them. There was an incident in 2005, Tamil people went to protest, and the army shot one man. […] We cannot do anything, we cannot speak. […] During the war, if something wrong was done to us, we would go and tell the LTTE. Now if we do anything they will punish [us] (Tamil man, Batticaloa 2012).

As we have seen in this section, people's identity positions are seen to be important in determining how they are treated by the state, how they are affected by corruption and what agency they have. However, it is not only ethnic identity that matters in state-citizen interactions. Instead, ethnicity is intertwined with socio-economic position, level of education, language skills, gender and social networks.

8. Conclusions

We chose the title 'Corrupt peace?' for this article to draw attention to the fact that people's perceptions and experiences of corruption in the post-war period shape also their experiences

of peace and of post-war ethnic relations. It was clear from our study that corruption – and resentment or resignation over it – forms part of people's day-today-lives in Sri Lanka. Indeed, corruption in Sri Lanka is part of a complex of injustices and grievances in relation to power, the state and its representatives. Repeated experiences of being cheated and marginalized, and perceptions that others receive undue benefits or embezzle money are intertwined with other grievances and feed into a sense of injustice held by many people. Ethnic divides, which made up the conflict lines during the war, continue to be a main frame for interpretation of post-war inequalities and wrongs. Although corrupt practices – or practices perceived to be corrupt – were prevalent in all parts of the country and affected all groups, they were often interpreted as instances of ethnic discrimination. Problems related to a general weakness of the state were thus incorporated into a discourse of complaint about unfair treatment on the basis of ethnicity. Corruption therefore risks not only undermining state legitimacy, but also feeding into ethnic divides and enemy images entrenched during the war, and deepen the sense of vulnerability of ethnic minorities – but also other marginalized groups – in relation to the state.

Our research findings can help to nuance the conclusion from large-scale, quantitative research that corruption decreases trust in the 'other' and increase trust within the group (Rothstein 2011; Uslaner 2008). Although our study indicates that experiences of corruption and injustices decrease trust in the state and society more broadly, it is not certain that only the ethnic 'other' is seen as untrustworthy. On the contrary, several of our interviewees expressed disillusionment with corrupt leaders from their own ethnic group. Our findings also point to the importance of intersectionality – we have seen how for instance class overlaps with ethnicity to position people in relation to the (corrupt) state. Moreover, language skills were often seen to matter more for how individuals were treated by government officials than ethnicity.

This study contributes to the policy and academic debate on corruption in post-war societies through an in-depth and nuanced understanding of what corruption actually means for people in a society that have gone through war. One insight that emerged from this has to do with the corruption concept itself. Even with a clear and reasonable definition – we defined corruption as lack of impartiality in the exercise of public power – it remained a blunt analytical tool to capture local dynamics and experiences. From the perspective of 'ordinary people', life consisted of numerous encounters with confusing bureaucratic procedures and demands, recurring feelings of maltreatment and injustice, as well as experiences of resources and opportunities being distributed in unclear and/or unfair ways. Not all these experiences were examples of corruption according to our definition – but this did not make them less important to people. This suggests that those interested in understanding – and fighting – corruption in post-war societies as a way to build state legitimacy and social trust would benefit from taking a broader approach. Studying grievances and injustice – real or perceived – rather than narrowly focusing on corruption, would capture the broader, conflict-relevant context in which corruption is embedded.

An on-the-ground study of people's experiences of post-war life also speaks to the debate about how to build sustainable peace in war-affected, divided societies. Studying how people interact with and perceives the state sheds light on how grievances are formed and articulated, and draws the attention to the role of the state in maintaining ethnic divides and grievances. We understand ethnic relations as being more about relations between minorities and the state, than between citizens of different ethnic identity. A study of these relations can contribute to a critical reading, or 'unpackning', of peacebuilding both as a concept and a post-war project. A focus on everyday experiences and perceptions reveals how state-citizen relations are very much seen through the lens of ethnicity in post-war Sri Lanka – but also that other identity position, linked to party political affiliation, gender and class, shape these relations.

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Corresponding author

Camilla Orjuela, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Email: camilla.orjuela@globalstudies.gu.se

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