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Civil Society in Civil War: The Case of Sri Lanka

This article argues, using the case of Sri Lanka, that what is theoretically lumped together as 'civil society' is not uniform, neutral or necessarily pro-peace. In Sri Lanka, the civil society sphere is shaped by colonial heritage, post-colonial structures of political patronage and the growth of an NGO sector dependent on foreign funding. Civil society is geographically and ethnically divided and comprises struggles both in favour of and against a negotiated settlement to the violent conflict. While popular mobilisation in the war zone is largely controlled by the guerrilla organisation, limited spaces for dissent also exist. Civil society in Sri Lanka, as in other war-torn societies, should not be simplistically understood but be recognised as a sphere with conflicting struggles which can influence peace processes in various directions.

INTRODUCTION

> The other thing is this so-called civil society. I don't believe such thing exists in Sri Lanka. It is also an invented thing, for the NGOs to get money[1].

Civil society has over the last little more than a decade become a fashionable concept, in the world of non-governmental organisations as well as in the academia. While the

power of civil society to promote democratic consolidation, peaceful conflict resolution and economic development has been praised, both researchers and practitioners – such as the Sri Lankan NGO worker quoted above – still struggle to understand what it is. In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, the concept carries positive connotations and promises of a better society, while at the same time being highly contested and criticised. The importance of 'civil society' in peacemaking – providing popular support for peace and promoting dialogue and reconciliation between polarised groups – has recently been highlighted[2]. However, the woolly definition of the concept, and its level of abstraction, complicate the study of civil society and have enabled the adaptation of the term to a variety of political projects and purposes.

This article argues that the proclamation of civil society's virtues runs the risk of simplifying and reifying the concept. To understand what civil society is – especially in a context of civil war – we need to make a thorough analysis of its local context and recognise that there are conflicting interests within civil society. The article explores the case of Sri Lanka in order to understand what civil society is, in a context of civil war. In Sri Lanka, a violent conflict has since over two decades been waged between the Sri Lankan government (dominated by the Sinhalese majority) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who are fighting for self-determination for the Tamil minority in the north and east of the island. A look at the variety of actors and struggles that make up Sri Lankan civil society in such a context is a key to a better comprehension of crucial dynamics of a civil war and its resolution[3].

THE CIVIL SOCIETY CONCEPT

Civil society is a concept and research focus which has gained tremendous popularity and directed the interest of academics and policy makers towards the importance of non-governmental organisations and popular mobilisation. 'Civil society' is used to describe the fact that people meet, organise and act independently of the state and outside kinship and family ties. Civil society is not a tangible actor or organisation, but a space or societal sector where people organise voluntarily to protect or extent their interests and values[4]. The popularity of the term can hardly be explained by its exactness and clarity. Rather, it might be its vagueness – opening the doors for innumerable interpretations and uses – which accounts for its attractiveness. A wide range of political projects with very different aims can be accommodated within the concept and the various theoretical assumptions linked with it. Civil society actors can be seen as a more efficient alternative to the state since NGOs have increasingly stepped in to provide the services and social security that a downsized state fails to grant. Alternatively, civil society can be seen as an important sphere for legitimising and upholding the state, as a promoter of pluralism and democratic schooling – or as a space where protests that undermine the established order can be staged. The elastic civil society concept can thus be filled with a number of contents – democratic and undemocratic actors, professional NGOs acting with a market-logic and grassroots-based social movements, and reformist as well as radical struggles[5].

Peace researchers and policy makers have increasingly turned to the civil society sphere in search of actors who can pressure belligerent parties to respect human rights and pursue political rather than military solutions, drum up popular support for peace

negotiations, promote understanding across divisions created by war and engage in informal diplomacy. The hopes invested in civil society as peace promoter urge for caution when using the concept. There is a risk that 'civil society' is reified and simplified to signify a number of very different actors which are presumed to serve a similar function, and that the conflicts and politics within civil society are played down.

The civil society concept has been criticised as Eurocentric and a product of a specific, Western culture imposed on the rest of the world. The fact that the civil society idea, although originally coined in a Western context, has proliferated across the world and been taken up and reinterpreted in various local settings and struggles partly disarms this accusation. However, the normative use of the concept and its connotations to 'civility' have made it possible to interpret foreign-funded 'strengthening of civil society' as a continuation of a post-colonial Western civilising mission[6]. The confusion of civil society and 'civility' is also problematic because it tends to hide the plurality, contradictions and power relations within the civil society sphere. The associational sphere of civil society encompasses power relations and processes of marginalisation and control. The Sri Lankan researcher Nira Wickramasinghe argues that the civil society concept is 'being imposed upon societies with the purpose of depoliticizing them'[7]. The depiction of civil society as good, democratic and a space for poor people to influence their life has served to play down the conflicting interests – the politics – within the sphere, and the fact that many civil society organisations are run by representatives of an elite. The broad civil society concept risks rendering power differences invisible, unlike another concept used in social sciences to describe popular mobilisation – social movements – which

highlights the struggle of subordinate groups to radically change power relations. Moreover, the civil society concept is problematic if looked at from a gender perspective. As the public sphere (where civic engagement takes place) is traditionally a male realm, while women's accepted place has been in the private sphere, civil society risks being a male-dominated space[8].

In a war situation the space for popular, voluntary and independent organising diminishes as freedom of association and speech is restricted[9]. While civil society is normally defined as (more or less) independent from the state, in a civil war civil society actors have to relate to and organise independently from not only the state but also violent actors challenging the state, such as guerrilla groups and war lords. To study what civil society is in a war situation we thus have to look at the space for mobilisation and organisation available outside of the control of both the state and other military actors, while also exploring how social and political conflicts are played out within the civil society sphere.

CIVIL WAR IN SRI LANKA

The war in Sri Lanka is often conceptualised as an ethnic conflict. It has its roots in a post-independence tendency of democratically elected governments to primarily cater to the majority Sinhalese constituency. Through politics related to language (most importantly the Sinhala Only Act of 1956), citizenship, university admission and development, aimed at discarding the colonial heritage and British/Christian domination, the minorities were gradually marginalised[10]. Protests against the 'Sinhalesation of the state' were staged mainly by Tamils from the north and developed into a LTTE-led militant struggle for Tamil self-determination. Sri Lanka

is currently experiencing its longest cessation of hostilities since the outbreak of the war in 1983. A ceasefire agreement is in place since February 2002 and Norway has facilitated six rounds of peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, before the process was stalled in 2003. Although only the two main adversaries have been directly involved in negotiations, a number of other conflicts complicate the peace process: Sri Lankan society is divided by harsh party political power struggles and opposition parties have a tradition of throwing a spanner in the works of peace initiatives taken by the ruling party; the LTTE's claim to be 'the sole representative of the Tamil people' is disputed by other Tamil political parties, a LTTE break-away fraction and human rights groups; and Muslims protests their lack of representation in peace talks.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN SRI LANKA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Civil society in Sri Lanka has to a large extent been shaped by British colonial rule and the establishment of the modern, democratic state in the first half of the 20th century. In pre-colonial times, grassroots communities organised around the need for collective work in temples and for irrigation. A notion of pre-colonial cooperation and harmony, and an ideal traditional Buddhist society which was lost due to colonialism and modernisation and which should be revived, today forms part of Sinhalese nationalist discourse and of the mobilisation rationale of the large community development organisation Sarvodaya[11].

Colonialism brought modern organisations, many of which sprung from Christian missionary activity and carried out educational and social work to benefit disadvantaged groups, e.g. the Baptist Mission (1802), and in the 1880s the YMCA,

YWCA and the Salvation Army. The Christian organisations were soon mirrored by a similar set of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim organisations, e.g. the Muslim Education Society (1890), the Maha Bodi Society (1891) and the Young Men's Buddhist Association (1898). During the first half of the 20th century, Boy Scout and Girl Guide associations were formed, as were the Rotary Club of Colombo and the Red Cross Society[12].

It has been argued that social movements grew in Sri Lanka as a reaction to the grave social and economic changes brought about by colonial rule[13]. However, most of the movements were not purely indigenous reactions, but largely inspired or instigated by Western movements. The temperance movement (with its precursor in the USA), reacted to increased drunkenness and colonial revenues earned on alcohol, and grew greatly in the first decades of the 20th century. In 1914, the Total Abstinence Central Union had 30,000 members. The cooperative movement started in the early 20th century to provide credit for rural agriculturalists, and expanded to the fields of production and marketing, reaching a membership of over one million. The first rural development organisation, Lanka Mahila Samiti, was established in 1930. In the 1950s and 60s, however, cooperatives, rural development societies and school development societies were co-opted by local government structures and used to implement development policies and influence and mobilise the grass roots on political issues[14].

Jayadeva Uyangoda argues that a public space, where popular organisation and activity were not controlled by religious and political authorities, was created in the wake of the Buddhist revivalist and nationalist movement of Angalika Dharmapala.

With the movement, a Buddhist civil society, independent of the temple space, was formed. In the 1920s, *mahajana sabhas* (people's councils) were founded and fostered a popular consciousness of constitutional rights, franchise and legislative politics. In addition, youth associations, women's clubs, temperance societies and marginalised caste associations thrived in the 1920s[15].

The labour movement came to use the social and political space opened up by these movements. The labour activism was urban-based (the printers of Colombo organised the first labour strike in 1893), initiated by students who had returned from Britain with socialist ideas, and often led by middle-class professionals. The movement and its leadership were closely linked to the religious and political agitation of the independence struggle. The institutionalisation of the labour movement is summarised by Kumari Jayawardena:

> The urban workers, whose first hesitant attempt at trade-union activity in 1893 was branded as sedition, had by 1928 signed a collective agreement with the most powerful group of urban employers in the private sector. From being politically inarticulate and unrepresented in the legislature in the 1890's, the urban working class began to be politically vociferous in the 1920's, obtained universal suffrage by the reforms of 1931, and transferred their hopes to the political leadership of the Ceylon Labour Party, formed in 1928[16].

The left thus abandoned civil society politics for state instrumentalism. As we have seen, civic mobilisation and organisation had been carried out around several different

lines; temperance, rural, caste, democratic, religious, anti-colonialism, and socialist. While the labour movement contributed to the secularisation of civil society politics along class lines, religious and/or nationalist divisions soon came to dominate. Much of the anti-colonial struggle aimed towards the recognition of both Sinhalese and Tamil language and culture, but ended up in post-independence Sinhalese dominance over the state, followed by Tamil nationalist protest and LTTE's separatist struggle. The Sinhalese-Tamil nationalist struggles were fought by actors from both political parties and civil society. The large scale non-violent Tamil protests of the 1950s and 60s were often organised by civil leaders. With the rise of militancy, earlier movements in the north and east, e.g. that of the oppressed castes (which launched considerable campaigns for temple entry in 1968), teachers' associations, progressive writers' associations, as well as the trade unions and left movement, diminished.

NGOs, just as the concept itself, became part of Sri Lanka's civil society in the 1970s. After the turn from socialist to open market economic policies in 1977, foreign NGOs entered the country in larger numbers. This trend, and foreign funding of local NGOs, was reinforced after the outbreak of a full-scale civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE in 1983.

CONTEMPORARY CIVIL SOCIETY

Today, estimations of the number of community-based organisations (CBOs) in Sri Lanka reach the hundred thousands. Included in this number are funeral assistance societies (where villagers pay a small membership fee and in case of death in the family receive help with the almsgiving and funeral), youth and sports clubs, rural development societies and religious societies. The leadership is normally traditional,

typically male, relatively well-off, middle-aged or older, and posts are often held for long periods. Charity organisations, caring for disabled or orphans, are formed by committed individuals and groups and depend on private donations or support from international agencies. Temple societies in Hindu villages engage in social and welfare activities, while the mosque committees of Muslim villages usually provide strong local leadership, coordinate all common activities and grant permission before other CBO activities can be initiated. Buddhist temple societies resemble the Hindu societies, although the Buddhist monks often take on a clearer role as leaders and political actors. There are reported to be over one thousand active trade unions, many of which are strongly linked to political parties[17]. About one-sixth of Sri Lanka's 6.5 million workers belong to a union[18]. One source suggests that there are about 40 professional associations with around 40,000 members, and about 40 chambers for the approximately 30,000 private sector manufacturers and traders in the country[19].

In Sri Lanka, there is a long tradition of external agency encouraging the formation of community-based organisations. Apart from the funeral assistance societies (which exist in Sinhalese villages) most organisations have been formed from the initiative of the government or an NGO coming from the outside. Self-started civil society activity with horizontal (to other villages or districts) or vertical links (except for the funding relationships with government structures and NGOs) is relatively rare[20]. A study of CBOs in three districts revealed that most CBOs had small membership numbers and carried out geographically limited activities, chiefly in the fields of community development, micro-credit, livelihood diversification and sports (activities which are often encouraged by external funders). Seventy per cent of the CBOs in the study

were less than ten years of age. The dependency on external forces has lead to a market-oriented mentality among the CBOs and to a decline of volunteerism:

> the ability to self-fund was not considered and the goal for starting new activities was always the securing of funds from the INGO/NGO sector. The perception is that NGOs are a potential market to be exploited in funding activities as they have more available resources than the state, but that NGOs are only interested in funding relief activities to displaced persons[21].

In the early 1990s, about one fifth of the total foreign aid received by Sri Lanka was channeled through NGOs[22]. According to Wickramasinghe, the decision of donors 'to privilege NGOs rather than political parties or trade unions as intermediaries between the unorganized masses and the state is a calculated one […and] the effect is an inevitable depoliticizing of society'[23]. The growth of the NGO sector has been criticised in Sri Lanka as the attempt by neo-liberal forces to substitute voices in civil society critical to the system. It has been argued that there is 'a direct relation between the growth of social movements challenging the neo-liberal model and the efforts to subvert them by creating alternative forms of social action through the NGOs'[24].

CIVIL SOCIETY, POLITICS AND THE STATE

In contemporary Sri Lanka, the ability to mobilise mass protests is mainly in the hands of political parties. Demonstrations against increased costs of living and against (or in support of) the ruling government can draw tens or even hundreds of thousands of participants, mobilised through the efficient party structures and motivated by the

benefit party supporters get when their politicians seize power. Party politics has come to overshadow civil society in Sri Lanka since early democratisation forced upper-class politicians into an alliance with rural lower middle-class, which gave way to political patronage[25]. In the words of one analyst, a 'feudal culture of authority-centred loyalty transformed into a party-centred or state-centred loyalty'[26]. The expansion of the state sector during the 1950s and 60s put politicians and state bureaucrats in control of the distribution of jobs and the provision of almost any needs of the citizens. This contributed to deeply rooted expectations among ordinary people of themselves as passive receivers of what politicians may deliver. When foreign aid and NGOs came in from the 1970s and onwards, they reinforced these expectations[27]. Marcus Mayer compares the Sri Lankan weak civil society activity with the strong village-based social movements in the South Indian state of Kerala, which like Sri Lanka is characterised by high literacy rates and other favourable social indicators. He concludes that in Sri Lanka 'people have developed a passive "receiving-mentality" rather than the awareness to actively demand the fulfilment of certain needs from the respective authorities', i.e. political patronage substitutes a demanding civil society[28].

The rise of foreign funded NGOs, engaging in social work, paralleled the decline and weakening of the welfare state. The relationship between the state and civil society actors has at times been tense. State repression of popular protests (e.g. the brutal crushing of socialist uprisings in the south of the island, of the Tamil non-violent protests and of the public sector strike in July 1980), and the striving to control (or even restrain) NGOs have characterised this relation. Especially during the right-wing rule 1977-94, the space for civic organisation and protest was limited. NGOs in Sri Lanka have been subject to suspicion by both the state and the general population, and

are often perceived as corrupt entities serving foreign interests which need to be controlled by the state[29]. The small number of state/NGO partnerships is an indicator of this distrust, as is the legislation aiming to control NGOs[30]. In 1980, voluntary service organisations were compelled to register with the Ministry of Social Services and, through that, submit to direct government control. Ten years later, a presidential commission was appointed to investigate the flow of foreign funds into international and national NGOs. The report, which came out in 1993, confirmed allegations of malpractices and misappropriation of funds by NGO staff, as well as deceitful conversions to Christianity by certain NGOs. In the early 1990s, the Sarvodaya movement, and its leader Dr. Ariyaratne were subject to a fierce campaign – including death threats and media attacks – by state actors, most likely motivated by both personal animosity and fear of the power of the popular leader of the large organisation[31]. After the change of regime in 1993 and 1994 the state pressure on civic organisations eased, although subsequent attempts to sharpen registration requirements were made and protested by civil society organisations.

The tsunami disaster of December 2006 brought a drastic increase in the inflow of foreign funds to international as well as local NGOs. Central Bank statistics suggested in May 2005 that between 80 and 90 per cent of the foreign funds that came into the country after the tsunami were channeled through NGOs[32]. NGOs have been accused of corruption in fierce campaigns by Sinhalese nationalist parties and organisations, and cries for increased control of their activities have been raised.

SINHALESE NATIONALIST MOBILISATION

In Sri Lanka, voluntary popular mobilisation and associational life have repeatedly taken place along nationalist or even racist lines. Anti-Christian agitations during British control and violent anti-Tamil campaigns in 1958, 1977 and 1983 are some examples, as is the Sinhalese nationalist mobilisation against attempts at negotiating peace with the LTTE. In Sri Lanka, there is an array of Sinhalese nationalist and Buddhist organisations which have grown out of the pre-independence movement for Buddhist revival, independence and temperance. These organisations change name and shape according to issues of the day, and key persons appear under new organisational names. The Buddhist clergy has involved in voluntary associations to stage political protests and stretch their power[33]. Examples of vociferous organisations in the late 1990s and early 2000s were the National Movement Against Terrorism, established after a bomb blast in Colombo in 1998 'to show the actual opinion of the people in this country'[34], the National Bhikku Front consisting of Buddhist monks, and political parties such as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Sihala Urumaya and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). Common for this range of organisations is their mobilisation around Sinhalese nationalism; a commitment to preserving the unity and sovereignty of what they see as a holy Buddhist country, and protests against concessions to the minorities and negotiations with the Tamil militants on the grounds that this is 'a betrayal of the country' and will lead to a division of the island. The notion that Buddhist religion and the Sinhalese race are under threat – a threat coming from Christianity, the West and Tamil terrorism – is present in this discourse. Sinhalese nationalist groups arrange demonstrations and meetings, and commemorate victims of terrorism. The Sinhala Commission, initiated

by nationalist Sinhalese groups, brought up the Sinhalese fears in a widely published report in 2001.

Uyangoda argues that etno-nationalist forces, and identity politics, are now occupying the counter-state political space that had traditionally been a virtual monopoly of the left[35]. Neil DeVotta states that in Sri Lanka 'uncivil groups have triumphed over civil groups'[36]. This analysis hints to the idea of a zero-sum game over public space, which nationalist groups with undemocratic and particularist values fill up at the expense of other groups. However, civil society is not a limited space; organisations promoting non-violent conflict resolution and democratic values exist simultaneously with groups promoting other values, but have to adjust their message to, and challenge, the often dominant discourse of the vociferous Sinhalese nationalists.

CIVIL SOCIETY PEACE ACTORS

A number of non-governmental organisations concerned with peace, human rights and democratic reform were formed in Sri Lanka in the 1970s in response to ethnic riots and government repression. After the 1983 anti-Tamil violence, international attention generated an influx of foreign relief funds, much of which was handled by NGOs. Although civil society actors have been working for peace for decades, a peace movement gained momentum first in connection with the election campaign and subsequent peace process between the government and the LTTE in 1994-95. A wide array of organisations has been working for peace, with activities at national as well as local level. These are professional conflict resolution organisations such as the National Peace Council and Foundation for Co-Existence, research institutions such as the International Centre for Ethnic Studies and Centre for Policy Alternatives,

cultural groups like Centre for Performing Arts, several women's organisations, religion-based organisations such as Centre for Society and Religion, SEDEC, YMCA and the Inter-religious Peace Foundation, and the the Sarvodaya movement, an organisation inspired by Gandhian and Buddhist philosophy and with a large village-level out-reach. In addition, organisations working with development, women's issues, culture and victims of war (e.g. displaced Muslims, disabled soldiers and relatives of soldiers missing in action) have taken part in work for peace and conflict resolution.

Many of the peace groups aim to raise awareness about the causes of the war and the grievances of the other side, in order to counter ethnic polarisation and enemy images created throughout the years of conflict and violence. This is done for instance through the promotion of cultural exchange, dialogue between religious leaders, visits for youth to other parts of the country and trips for journalists or civil society leaders to the war zone. A long-term goal is to build the grassroots support needed to legitimate peace negotiations and political solutions involving power-sharing and increased self-rule for the Tamil northern and eastern parts of the country. Advocacy work is another area of activity; political leaders have been informed about the costs of the war, the popular support for peace, ideas on solutions to the conflict, and civil society groups have pressured political leaders to stop human rights abuses and to opt for and keep up dialogue. Demonstrations and rallies have been used to show the politicians that 'people want peace'. The peace organisations also hope to prevent popular violence and chauvinism through awareness raising, dialogue, political reform and the struggle for a just distribution of resources in society. The peace organisations and activities do however not make up a mass movement for peace in

Sri Lanka. Massive scale mobilisation has proved difficult in a context of ethnic polarisation, deep-rooted nationalism on both sides and ordinary people's primary interest in securing their livelihood and safety. Many of the peace NGOs are highly dependent on foreign funding[37].

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE WAR ZONE

More than twenty years of war has led to a lack of interaction between the northern and eastern war zone and the rest of the country, and a lack of information exchange between the north and the south and across ethnic and language boundaries. Moreover, the war has resulted in a brutalisation of society, where violence, emergency legislation and limited freedom of association and expression have become part of everyday life. This has clearly impinged on civil society, especially in the war zone. The war has led, at a village level, some civic organisations to perished, while others have been strengthened and others created. Many CBOs have been used to implement relief and social service, with a top-down logic. The activities of international and national NGOs in the war zone are often mono-ethnic, since they work at the village-level in a polarised context. Organisations in the war zone have been isolated from civil society in the rest of the country, as well as from organisations in other villages. One exception is however, the better-linked community-based sports groups[38].

Most educated and economically better off persons and most youth – the traditional recruitment base for civil society organisations – have fled the war zone, especially the LTTE-controlled area. The local NGO economy has instilled a brain-drain of a smaller scale: from CBOs to national and international NGOs[39]. Fear and violence in

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the war areas discourages engaging in leadership roles in civic organisations, as no one wants to 'put his or her head over the parapet' and risk being seen as a government or a LTTE supporter. Persons who do take on leadership roles keep a low profile[40]. Liaising with the rebels is often a prerequisite for continued existence for civic leaders in areas controlled or semi-controlled by the LTTE.

The main impediment to civil society activity in the war zone has been military control and repression. In government-controlled areas, a Civil Affairs Coordinator or intelligence representative – typically a military officer who is in control of movement passes, food supplies and transportation – has seen to that no independent civil society activity is allowed[41]. Emergency regulations and threats of violence have put associational rights out of the running, especially for the Tamil community.

LTTE has tried, in the areas under its control, to monopolise the state, private sector and civil society, and strived to achieve this in areas outside of its direct control[42]. In the LTTE-controlled Vanni, the LTTE has fabricated its own 'civil society', using wording fashionable to the donor community. LTTE's Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) controls a number of Local NGOs, through which all international aid is to be channeled. CBOs, to the extent that they still exist, are more or less controlled by the LTTE, and there are examples of organisations which worked relatively independently which have been liquidated. There is no freedom of speech or association in the Vanni, and the guerilla movement can punish those who do not behave by closing down businesses or denying people food rations. However, the LTTE administration is not consistent, but full of contradictions – what is allowed can vary considerably between areas and times, depending on who is in charge[43]. One

civil society actor, which has a certain extent of integrity and freedom to function in LTTE areas, is the Catholic Church. The Church has gained credibility for its long-term commitment to working with the people also during the war, providing relief as well investigating and informing the international community about human rights abuses, and individual priests are protected by the strong international institution of the Church[44]. Religious leaders have been able to raise issues of child recruitment with the LTTE, and under the auspices of the Church, people have been able to gather for activities that are not entirely LTTE-controlled. One Church representative explained:

> There are resenting voices inside the LTTE-controlled area. Once, a priest staged a *satyagraha* protesting that the LTTE had put up their propaganda in the church area. He took a *cadjan* mat and sat down in the street in front of the church, and declared that he would sit there until they take away their propaganda from the church premises. It did not last long until LTTE did take away their propaganda. So Fathers can do something, they can oppose something if it is linked to the church. So there are certain places where we can oppose them. With a concerted effort we can influence them, but not as individuals[45].

Another story about opposition to the LTTE was set in a village in the Vanni, possibly in 2000. Thirty border guards, all recruited from one village[46], were killed by Sri Lankan military. The villagers protested to the LTTE and a prominent LTTE leader had to come to the village to calm the protesters down[47]. The participation of 8,000-9,000 people in the funeral procession of the murdered Jaffna mayor Yogeswaran in

1999 has also been interpreted as a silent popular protest against LTTE violence. The mass popular greetings of the government's delegation as it arrived in LTTE-controlled Jaffna for peace talks in 1995 were a display of support for that peace process[48]. After the start of the 2002 peace process, it was told that people were less willing to accept the LTTE's harsh rules and extortion of taxes, and that there was more space to protest and win the case against the LTTE[49]. In November 2002, the Sub-Committee on Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs (under the government-LTTE negotiation team) demanded all NGOs and other institutions to report their activities. This was motivated by the ambition to avoid duplication of work, but was criticised by NGOs as an extension of LTTE's wish to control civil society. Efforts at coordination and control of NGOs in LTTE-controlled areas were continued in the wake of the post-tsunami increase of international support in 2005[50].

Jaffna, the heartland of Tamil culture in the north, with its educated population, had a strong civil society and civic leadership before the war. Violence and military control (by the LTTE 1990-1995 and then by the government's military administration) has restricted the space for free expression and civil society action. Local organisations cooperate in the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies regarding relief, information dissemination and mobilising in protests[51]. However, they tend to not raise issues that are incompatible with LTTE 'policy'. In eastern Sri Lanka, the Tamil leadership has been weak, and the associational sphere largely inhabited by relief and development organisations supported by international agencies. Poverty, alcoholism and a lack of education are common among Tamils in the east, many of whom belong to lower caste groups[52]. NGOs have been accused of being liaised with or controlled by the LTTE, and have been powerless against child conscription, according to the

University Teachers for Human Rights[53]. The Muslims of the east have a stronger leadership, both through their mosque societies and their political leaders.

Non-violent popular mobilisation has become more common in the Tamil areas over the last few years and especially since the 2002 ceasefire. A space has opened up which enables popular protest against the government and its forces, and numerous demonstrations, sit-ins, and *hartals*[54] have been staged – to pressure the government to negotiate with the LTTE in 2001, to protest against the Army occupation of so-called high-security zones, the failure to implement the ceasefire agreement in 2002, killings of LTTE leaders in the east in 2005 and on various other issues, all of which converge with LTTE security interests. Although not explicitly stated, it is generally understood that the LTTE, or groups linked to them, have been behind the protests. These mobilisations, which often involve students and school children, have served to attract the attention of the government, and have sometimes resulted in action from the government administration[55]. In other instances however, provocative protests have lead to violence, as was the case in October 2002 when villagers protested outside a police camp in the east against police assaults on LTTE members[56].

The political and cultural manifestations called Pongu Tamil (Tamil uprising), which started at the University of Jaffna in January 2001, are another example of the new possibilities for popular mobilisation. Students and teachers frustrated over the disappearances, mass graves and abuses under the government's military rule held a series of discussion meetings at the university as well as with village people, before planning a first mass rally for 17 January 2001. The authorities did not permit the rally, as told by one of the organisers:

On the 14th, the Police told that if the masses come we will shoot. The students said 'even if you shoot we will do this'. [...] But this was a victory for us: we were non-violent, but the Army had said they will use violence[57].

Even though the students decided to dissuade people from coming, approximately 4,000-5,000 students, teachers and religious leaders took part in the rally at the university grounds. Riot police closed the area, yet people jumped over the walls to be able to take part in the short and peaceful meeting. More large manifestations have been organised in northeastern Sri Lanka and by Tamils abroad. Pongu Tamil played an important role expressing the Tamil demands to be recognised as a nation, with its own homeland and right to self-determination to audiences in both southern Sri Lanka an the rest of the world, according to organisers[58]. A LTTE representative described Pongu Tamil as 'a milestone in the history of Tamils'[59]. LTTE symbols (red and yellow colours, pictures of its leader, Tiger flags, Tamil Eelam maps) have been used in the manifestations, and it is said that ordinary people do not always come voluntarily but because of fear[60].

This LTTE sanctioned popular mobilisation in the northeast indicates that the LTTE, especially since the ceasefire put a stop to the use of violence, has turned to non-violent protests. This strategy was used in the Tamil struggle before it turned violent and was given up as inefficient[61] and might now be useful to put pressure on the government. It is feasible that this new space for mobilisation eventually can encourage also popular protest independent of the LTTE and against LTTE rule. The

possibility of a popular uprising against the LTTE – especially if it spoils the peace process – has been hinted to by civil society leaders in the north[62].

THE PEACE PROCESS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The commencement of the peace process after the change of government in December 2001, the signing of the ceasefire agreement in February 2002 and the six rounds of peace talks between government and LTTE representatives during 2002 and 2003 lit a hope for peace. The factors which made this peace attempt possible were the change of government to a party not involved in the last failed peace attempt and subsequent escalation of war in the mid-1990s, strong international support and pressure for a non-military solution, Norwegian facilitation and the fact that both sides considered negotiations more strategic than continued military confrontation. The role played by 'civil society' in setting this process in motion was a highly contradictory one.

The contribution of civil society peace work was neither obvious nor easily pinpointed. Although other factors were clearly more important, the peace work carried out by civil society organisations played an indirect role. Popular support was a key component in enabling the coming to power of the United National Party (UNP) in late 2001 and thus enabling the start of the peace process. Civil society actors had struggled to build popular support for peace negotiations through peace education, exchanges, study visits, media campaigns etc. for many years. Although we cannot prove how much this work mattered in forming people's opinions, we can assume that people who had positive experiences of awareness raising projects and events were more positive to negotiations and third party involvement than they would otherwise have been. Moreover, the arguments advanced by civil society peace actors through

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the media and in advocacy work were taken up and used by key actors, in a situation when they found the peace path strategically advantageous. The urge by civil society actors for political solutions and third party intervention also served to legitimise international involvement. The contacts between civil society leaders and representatives of the international community are likely to have encouraged and facilitated international interest in conflict resolution in Sri Lanka.

The environment for civil society peace work changed considerably from December 2001, as peace workers found themselves 'fighting a winning battle'. Key actors, who were earlier the target of civil society peace advocacy, had now taken over the initiative in talking and acting for peace, leaving civic groups at the rear. Vasuki Nesiah argued, in a convincing article in the Daily Mirror, that civil society had 'a role that is domesticated into service of the process'. Civil society had become a 'variable that can be strategically plugged-in to legitimate the peace process rather than challenge or re-negotiate its terms'[63]. The peace process was between two main actors, representing the two sides in the conflict (the government and the LTTE). Civil society peace groups took on (or were given) the role of mobilising support for this process and raise awareness among the masses about the need for it. Some peace organisations suggested how to best take the process forward, and in times of stalemate urged the parties to continue. NGO press statements advised the government and opposition not to let their power struggle obstruct the process. Most peace groups were praising the peace process in 2002 and 2003, and were reluctant to bring up criticism against it and its leading protagonists, fearing that criticism could threaten the whole peace attempt. As time passed however, more and more organisations debated and raised concerns about for instance human rights.

While a number of civil society representatives – mainly the peace NGOs – acted in support of the peace process, others mobilised protests against it. Sinhalese nationalist groups condemned the Norwegian involvement in Sri Lanka's internal affairs, Norway's perceived bias towards the LTTE, the government's concessions to the LTTE and LTTE's violations of the ceasefire agreement and of human rights in the northeast. The Sinhalese nationalists feared a division of the country ('a betrayal of the motherland') and an acceptance and expansion of LTTE terrorism. Vociferous protests (including the burning of the Norwegian flag) have been organised with Buddhist monks and political parties (the JVP, JHU) playing a central role. These protests have often been larger and more visible than the demonstrations in support of the peace process. That the Sinhalese nationalist fears are met with a response among the Sinhalese masses was indicated by the results of the parliamentary elections in April 2004. The UNP government, which had been in charge of the peace process, was rejected, and the opposition came to power on an election manifesto which was critical to the way the UNP had led the peace process. This change of government contributed to the stalemate in the peace process. Sinhalese nationalist protest has been curbing the process, not least since the JVP has been part of the government since 2004. Hunger strikes staged by prominent monks were a major factor to take into consideration as the government and the LTTE negotiated a mechanism for cooperation regarding tsunami aid.

The ceasefire agreement to some extent broke the isolation of the war-torn northern Sri Lanka and enabled meetings between Tamils from the north and Sinhalese from the south and exposed southerners to the devastation of the war zone. The cross-ethnic

and cross-geographical contacts within Sri Lanka's divided civil society thus increased somewhat. However, the conflict between the pro-peace process civil society actors and the critics of the peace process intensified.

The December 2006 tsunami initially produced a massive show of solidarity with the affected – who were of all ethnic groups. Ordinary people and local civil society organisations quickly responded with relief which was given without concern about the victims' religion or ethnic background. These hopeful civil society connections across ethnic divides however soon evaporated, as political and military leaders and international NGOs increasingly took control over the relief and rehabilitation efforts[64]. The massive influx of money from abroad has contributed to changing the dynamics within civil society in the tsunami-affected coastal areas. While many community-based organisations and local NGOs have grown as they engage in foreign-funded relief and reconstruction work, there is also a substantial brain-drain of personnel from local organisations to wealthier international organisations, and a feeling that large international organisations disregard the work of local civil society groups.

The tsunami has prompted both peace NGOs and Sinhalese nationalist groups to work concretely with relief and reconstruction, something which has made possible increased credibility among ordinary people. But the large gap between the pro-peace process civil society groups and the Sinhalese nationalist groups remains and has been amplified with the influx of recourses following the tsunami. Likewise, LTTE maintains its aspiration to control the civil society space in the north and east, while

structures of political patronage in many cases have been strengthened in the wake of tsunami reconstruction.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has aimed to unravel the politics within civil society in Sri Lanka, by highlighting the conflicting interests and variety of actors within the civil society sphere. An analysis of popular mobilisation and non-governmental organisations in Sri Lanka clearly shows that 'civil society' is neither uniform, neutral nor inherently pro-peace. 'Civil society', in a context of a civil war, comprise, as we have seen, an array of local level organisations, a history of large scale popular movements (religious, temperance, labour movements) and the creation of increasingly professional NGOs. In civil society, we find struggles in favour of a negotiated political settlement to the violent conflict, as well as struggles against such efforts. We see that mobilisation in civil society is largely dependent on funding from foreign donors, and curtailed by structures of political patronage. Moreover, we can conclude that popular mobilisation in the north-eastern war zone is to a large extent controlled by the guerrilla organisation, but that small spaces for dissent simultaneously exist.

The conflicts that characterise Sri Lankan society are played out or mirrored in the civil society sphere. Civil society in Sri Lanka is divided ethnically and geographically, as well as between moderates and hardliners. The ethnic and geographical divisions – between Sinhalese and Tamils and between the northeast and the rest of the country – have been reinforced by the lack of contact and frightful experiences during the war, language barriers and lack of information. They are a result of the war and at the same time factors that complicate conflict resolution. The

shrunken space for civil society in the war zone, and the need for civil society actors to liaise with the guerrillas, contributes to the ethnic/geographical divide. The polarisation between hardliners (nationalists on both sides) and moderates (e.g. the peace NGOs) also divide civil society. Foreign donors tend to support the moderate representatives of civil society and to conceptualise them as 'civil society in Sri Lanka', something which can contribute to a deepening of the moderate-hardliner divide. Sri Lanka's civil society is inescapably shaped by the civil war and its various actors engage in a battle over war and peace and contribute to shaping the future of the island and its people.

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[1] Interview 25.

[2] DAC Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation (Paris: DAC/OECD 1997), John Paul Lederach, Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press 1997), Kumar Rupesinghe (ed.), Conflict Transformation (New York: St. Martin's Press 1995), Kumar Rupesinghe with Naraghi Anderlini, Civil Wars, Civil Peace: An Introduction to Conflict Resolution (London: Pluto 1998), Mary Kaldor, Global Civil Society: An Answer to War (Cambridge: Polity Press 2003).

[3] The article is based on findings from research carried out for my PhD thesis Civil Society in Civil War: Peace Work and Identity Politics in Sri Lanka (Göteborg: Padrigu 2004), including 122 interviews carried out in Sri Lanka 1999-2002 with representatives of civil society organisations, political and religious leaders, media representatives and academics.

[4] See Gordon White, 'Civil Society, Democratization and Development (I): Clearing the Analytical Ground', Democratization 1/3 (1994).

[5] See Jean L. Cohen & Andrew Arato, Civil Society and Political Theory (Cambridge MA/London: The MIT Press 1992), White (note 2), Kaldor (note 2), Alison van Rooy (ed.), Civil Society and the Aid Industry (London: Earthscan 1998).

[6] H. Islamoglu, 'Concept and History of Civil Society' in International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, www.sciencedirect.com /science/referenceworks/0080430767, Kaldor (note 2) p.9.

[7] Nira Wickramasinghe, Civil Society in Sri Lanka: New Circles of Power (New Delhi: Sage 2001) p.168.

[8] Vivienne Jabri, Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered (Manchester/New York: Manchester UP 1996) p.47.

[9] Kaldor (note 2).

[10] The Sinhalese (most of whom are Buddhists) make up 74 per cent of the population, the Tamils (who are Hindus and Christians) 18 per cent and the Muslims, or Moors, 7 per cent (according to the last all-island census from 1981).

[11] See Richard Gombrich & Gananath Obeysekere, Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1988) pp.243-55, James Brow, 'Nationalist Rhetoric and Local Practice: The Fate of the Village Community in Kukulewa' in Jonathan Spencer (ed.), Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict (London/New York: Routledge 1990).

[12] Wickramasinghe (note 7) pp.76-7, Vijita Fernando & J. Henry de Mel, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Sri Lanka: An Introduction (Colombo: NGO Water Supply and Sanitation Decade Service 1991) p.6.

[13] Ibid. p.3.

[14] Ibid., Forut, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Sri Lanka (a Typology). Appendix 7, Forut civil society project. Unpublished manuscript (Colombo: Forut 2000).

[15] Jayadeva Uyangoda, 'Sri Lanka's Left: From Class and Trade Unions to Civil Society and NGOs' in Rajan Philips (ed.), Sri Lanka: Global Challenges and National Crises (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association 2001) p.203.

[16] Visakha Kumari Jayawardena, The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon (Colombo: Sanjiva Prakashana 1972) p.xv.

[17] Forut (note 14), see also Udan Fernando, NGOs in Sri Lanka: Past and Present Trends (Nugegoda: Wasala Publications 2003).

[18] Chamat Ariyadasa, 'Sri Lanka Union Battles "Peace Dividend" Reforms' (Reuters 24 February 2003) http://sg.biz.yahoo.com/030224/3/385fq.html

[19] Forut (note 14).

[20] Forut, Capacity Building of Civil Society in the Most Conflict Affected Areas of Sri Lanka. Unpublished report (Colombo: Forut 2001) p.14.

[21] Ibid. p.22.

[22] Wickramasinghe (note 7) p.75.

[23] Ibid. p.94.

[24] Uyangoda (note 15) p.188.

[25] Kristian Stokke, 'Sinhalese and Tamil Nationalism as Post-Colonial Political Projects from "Above", 1948-1983', Political Geography 17/1 (1998).

[26] Interview 95.

[27] Siri Hettige, 'Dilemmas of Post-Colonial Society after 50 Years of Independence: A Critical Analysis' in Siri Hettige & Markus Mayer (eds.), Sri Lanka at Crossroads: Dilemmas and Prospects After 50 Years of Independence (Delhi: Macmillan 2000).

[28] Markus Mayer, 'Life Opportunities and Youth Conflict in Sri Lanka. Challenges for Regional Development Planning' in Siri Hettige & Markus Mayer (eds.), Sri Lanka at Crossroads: Dilemmas and Prospects After 50 Years of Independence (Delhi: Macmillan 2000) p.167. The National Youth

Survey, carried out in 1999-2000, indicates that rural youth do not associate with village-based institutions or organisations and hardly participate in civil or political activities, or form groups among themselves. Ibid. p.162.

[29] Uyangoda (note 15) p.193.

[30] Wickramasinghe (note 7) p.100, Fernando (note 17).

[31] Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, 'Sri Lanka: Civil Society, the Nation and the State-building Challenge' in Van Rooy (note 5) p.119, Wickramasinghe (note 7) pp.84-5, Jehan Perera, Charika Marasinghe & Leela Jayasekera, A People's Movement Under Siege (Ratmalana: Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha 1992).

[32] Jehan Perera, 'NGOs on JVP's Firing Line Primarily Due to Support for Peace'. Article distributed by e-mail, 9 May 2005.

[33] Peter Schalk, '"Unity" and "Sovereignty": Key Concepts of a Militant Buddhist Organization in the Present Conflict in Sri Lanka', Temenos: Studies in Comparative Religion 24 (1988), Iselin Frydenlund, The Sangha and Its Relation to the Peace Process in Sri Lanka, PRIO Report 2 (Oslo: Prio 2005).

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[35] Uyangoda (note 15) p.211.

[36] Neil DeVotta, The Good, the Bad, the Ugly: Associational Life, Unsocial Capital, and Illiberal Democracy in Sri Lanka. Paper presented at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 13 December 2002 p.13.

[37] See Camilla Orjuela, 'Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?', Journal of Peace Research 40/2 (2003).

[38] Forut, Capacity Building of Civil Society in the Most Conflict Affected Areas of Sri Lanka (note 20).

[39] Ibid.

[40] Jonathan Goodhand, Nick Lewer & David Hulme, NGOs and Peace Building: Sri Lanka Study (Bradford/Manchester: Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford/Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester 1999) p.21.

[41] Forut, Capacity Building of Civil Society in the Most Conflict Affected Areas of Sri Lanka (note 20) p.15, field notes November 2003.

[42] The expansion of the LTTE court and police system to government-controlled areas in the wake of the 2002 peace process is one example of this, as is the fact that LTTE maintains close contact with civil society organisations in those areas.

[43] Field notes November 2002.

[44] Interview 33.

[45] Interview 52.

[46] Each family in some LTTE-controlled areas was demanded to mobilise one person to serve as a boarder guard 10-12 days per month.

[47] Field notes November 2001 and November 2002.

[48] Interview 38.

[49] Field notes April 2003, see also UTHR-J, The Plight of Child Conscripts, Social Degradation and Anti-Muslim Frenzy. Special Report no. 14 (Colombo: UTHR-J 2002) p.43.

[50] See UTHR-J, A Tale of two Disasters and the Fickleness of Terror Politics. Information Bulletin no. 37 (2005).

[51] Interview 51.

[52] Field notes November 2002.

[53] UTHR-J, The Plight of Child Conscripts, Social Degradation and Anti-Muslim Frenzy p.72.

[54] The world *hartal* signifies a broad struggle of the masses, which causes society to come to a standstill. The first major hartal carried out in Sri Lanka was a one-day strike in 1953 protesting the taking away of rice subsidies and the raise of prices. See Wesley Muthiah & Sydney Wanasinghe (eds.), We Were Making History: Saga of the Hartal of August 1953 (Colombo: Young Socialist Publications 2002).

[55] Interview 51.

[56] Tamilnet, 'STF fire on demonstration – 5 killed, 15 wounded', 9 October, 2002, www.tamilnet.com.

[57] Interview 63.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Interview 122.

[60] Field notes April 2002, UTHR-J, The Plight of Child Conscripts, Social Degradation and Anti-Muslim Frenzy p. 29.

[61] Rajan Hoole, Daya Somasundaram, K. Sritharan & Rajani Thiranagama, The Broken Palmyra (Claremont: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute 1990) p.380.

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[63] Vasuki Nesiah, 'Politics of Peace Talks: Framework of Conflict Resolution', Daily Mirror 26 November 2002.

[64] Simon Harris, 'The Role of Local Solidarity in Sri Lanka's Tsunami Disaster Response', Polity 2/3 (2005).