

**GENDERED
ASSUMPTIONS
AND
WOMEN'S LIVED
EXPERIENCES:**

*Interrogating 'Violent Extremism'
and political violence from
the standpoint of women*

RADICALIZATION PAPER / SRI LANKA



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The Emergence of a New Militant Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism in Post-90s Sri Lanka

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THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW MILITANT SINHALA BUDDHIST NATIONALISM IN POST-90s SRI LANKA

by GEETHIKA DHARMA SINGHE

This essay seeks to delineate the conditions of the production of the recently emerged self-proclaimed “national liberation movement” in Sri Lanka (*jathika vimukthi vyaparaya*), led particularly by Buddhist monks, who demand to represent the sovereign in the country. The groups and organizations within the movement share a precarious collective perception – a constructed imaginary that treats the increasing Muslim population, their business, and cultural practices as a form of Muslim fundamentalist terror. I will look at the political and material conditions and sketch out the rise and fall of some organizations and their organizing mechanisms within the movement. Many scholarly writings that discuss “Buddhist militancy” or “militant Buddhism” have assumed that the groups

and organizations of this movement are either inherently violent or the products of the state’s repressive apparatus. Thus, they see the movement’s emergence as a failure of democratic politics in Sri Lanka. For example, a recent, major work of militant Buddhism edited by John Holt claims that the “actions of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ravana Balaya, and others were simply arms of a repressive state” (2016: 9). This statement does not quite capture the sociality of these movements. Thus, in this essay, I argue that the movement has emerged out of a conjunction of certain strategic conditions of possibility that have played out within the existence of institutional and certain authoritative discourses that are produced and maintained in the political field.

THESE GROUPS and organizations are commonly described in oppositional terms as fundamentalist, extremist, backward, irrational, and more importantly, radical. A definitive feature of radicalism is that it differs from the normal, ordinary, traditionally sanctioned world-view prevalent in any society (Bittner, 1963). By rejecting the traditionally sanctioned world-view, radicals intend to transform the society into one with a utopic outlook. Radical social movements, particularly those that have emerged from the engagement of anti-establishment traditions, are more concerned with the notion of prefiguration. This is not a new phenomenon and it was prominent among anti-authoritarian traditions. For instance, around 1900, the Industrial Workers of the World called to “build a new society in the shell of the old.” The notion expected

an absolute dedication to the cause by sacrificing one's personal indulgences; it is seen as the rational, calculated pursuit of power. However, with the collapse of the classical vanguardism of socialists, the hope to establish a new society took on renewed power. For instance, movements like radical feminism no longer engage with radical or "refusal" politics to use Malathi de Alwis's (2009) word, which include forms of more risk-prone non-cooperation or civil disobedience activism. Rather, their politics has become a mere refusal of operating through institutional structures dominated by the state. Yet it seems a second wave of radicalism is on the rise as the most recent radical groups that are emerging all over the world seemingly embrace the old-fashioned selfless dedication to the cause. They are not dedicated to establishing a classless society in the traditional sense of being radical; rather, they demand absolute authority over state sovereignty as a mode of governance. In other words, their right-wing extremist tendencies oppose the liberal democratic consensus of the modern state.

The unity and coherence of the modern nation state is not given apriori; rather, it is only provided by temporal political forces contesting to reform and remodel the state institutions and fiscal flows. Therein, various forces democratically contest to define what society should be, while excluding certain propositions and political interests. However, the recent radical group views suggest a total negation of existing differences of the society, and it has become the ground principle of the majority of the radical movements, whether in Egypt, France, Spain, Turkey, neo-Nazi movements in Germany, the QAnon movement in the United States, or more recent outbreaks in India and Burma. In fact, it's everywhere. They demand to abolish discursive contestation. It is the formation of this demand of the recent radical groups and organizations in Sri Lanka and the conditions that made it possible that I want to examine in this essay.

What is new in these radical groups is not necessarily their presence itself, but their role in constituting a new legitimate order in the Sinhala Buddhist tradition. This involves the absolute superiority of Sinhalese Buddhists and constrains the political and cultural life of ethnic and religious minorities within the island. What is noticeable is that the Sangha, with their established monastic authority within the tradition (though indeed contested), and certain lay groups led their new political struggle to be sovereign, establishing a totalitarian imaginary. This is a collective perception based on a pure, homogeneous, unified state with the absence of divisions and differences among the people, as in the Nazi notion of *Volk*¹ and as a possibility for the contestation for political power. They justify their struggle based on a contingent collective perception that treats an increasing Muslim population, their businesses, and cultural practices as a form of Muslim fundamentalist terror and they demand the eradication of their "difference." The unquenchable

1. For a sophisticated analysis of the nature of totalitarian Nazi Germany and how it organized the masses through totalitarian propaganda, see Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*. 1968, see also Enzo Traverso, *Totalitarianism Between History and Theory* (2017) in *History and Theory*. Vol. 55. pp. 97-118 for a detailed analysis on the trajectory of the idea of totalitarianism as a concept and as a form of governance throughout history from the Great War.

urge to create a uniform society is the drive that governs their politics; those who do not adhere to this drive are enemies and are to be eliminated. It is this enemization that carries the totalitarian imaginary propagated by recent radical groups, particularly led by monks.

Lest I be misunderstood, my point here is not about a totalitarian regime and its exceptional sovereign power that suspends the law and social order of Sri Lanka and, as in Agambenian terms,² that reduces its inhabitants' political life – a form of life (bios) – into a bare life (life without rights), nor do I suggest that there is a regime as such. Rather, it is about the past and the present, a history of an anthropological present of certain groups and organizations in which monks take an unprecedented turn in politics by competing to become sovereign in the country. This essay aims to discuss how these radical groups' claim concretizes a totalitarian imaginary, revealing the possibility (though not always), to interrupt and redefine state sovereignty. The indifference of state agents to the violence is explicit, as the Police or the Army who witness the violence rarely interfere to prevent it. Thus, the monks' and the militant lay people's presence reminds us of the existence of "de facto sovereigns" beyond the parameters of canonical state apparatus grounded in formal ideologies of rule and legality that marked the monopoly of state violence (Stepputat & Hansen, 2006).

In my view, what is distinctive about the era that makes possible these radical groups' claim to sovereignty is the new electoral representation arrangements,³ a democratic attempt to include the voice of the numerical minorities. Ironically, this democratic initiative of the Sri Lankan constitution rooted in conceptions of secular governance – that sought to ensure the presence of non-Buddhist minority voices in parliament – ultimately works to enable the radical militant groups through the electoral success of parties allied to Buddhist "militant" organizations. Monk-led groups and organizations, as well as certain lay groups and organizations – for instance, *Sihala Urumaya*, *Jathika Hela Urumaya*, *Bodu Bala Sena*, *Sihala Ravaya*, *Ravana Balakaya*, *Mahason Balakaya* and *Nava Sinhale* that are numerically small – mushroomed in this context. Their emergence was a largely unintended by-product of this larger political strategy directed primarily at incorporating numeric minority voices into the legislature. In other words, it was a constitutional response to the haunting return of the excluded forces that constitutes the formation of any democratic polity, in a Laclau and Mouffe sense.⁴

2. See Agamben (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. California: Stanford University Press for a discussion on his notion of modern sovereignty.

3. In 1978, the system of electing representatives to the national legislature changed from first-past-the-post (FPP) to a proportional representation (PR) system, with the expectation that there would be "cross-ethnic coalition building" (Shastri 2006: 35). The United National Party, in 1988, further reformed the proportional system of representation for the members of the legislature; with a cut-off point of as low as five percent of the votes of the population, a candidate can gain representation in the Parliament. This arrangement altered the previous political terrain in which a single person who succeeded to obtain the majority of votes entered the legislature. See for detailed analysis on both these political systems and its political outcomes in Sri Lanka Minna Thaheer (2010) "Why the Proportional Representation System Fails to Promote Minority Interests? A discussion on contemporary politics and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress," in *Power and Conflict Democracy* 2(1), 95-118.

4. Cf. Butler (2000: 11-13), *Restaging the Universal*. Further, In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe argue that democratic polities are necessarily incomplete as they are predicated upon exclusions. However, when the excluded forces return or their hauntings become successful, they can rearticulate basic premises of democracy itself.

As I would suggest, however, it not only produced a new constitutional space for these groups and potential ideological and political appropriations of it, but it also revealed the problematic implications of the reliance on a rationale based on “number” in the state of affairs within the terms of the liberal democratic project as David Scott (1999) has aptly shown.⁵

Without denying the importance of the constitutional arrangement for the emergence of these radical groups, I want to suggest that there is another story worth telling that has a more critical purchase on our present. It is the story of changes that took place in the political field at certain conjunctures⁶ through which their totalitarian imaginary is constructed that I will turn to in the rest of this essay. What we need to understand is how – through what discourses and through what mechanisms – the present of Lanka has been produced. In this story, my primary concern is to show briefly how radical groups, organizations, and parties come into existence, fade from the view and become reconstituted through new movements due to the dynamics of changing political field.

With the promise of establishing a new society and ending a protracted war, the third Bandaranaike government came into power in 1994, ending 17 years of J.R. Jayewardene’s United National Party governance. The new government’s initiation of constitutional adjustments— devolve central power to the north and the east—marked a significant advance in the emergence of the monks’ claim to be sovereign in the political landscape. This political attempt, reputed as a Devolution Package, was to redress Tamil grievances and devolve power to the Tamil regions by accepting their autonomy to govern.⁷ The constitutional draft proposed to define Sri Lanka as a “union of regions” and abandon the concept of the “unitary state” (the 1978 Sri Lanka Constitution mentions Sri Lanka is a “unitary state”).

These constitutional reform attempts caused an outcry among the Sinhala Buddhist community. As a response to the State’s attempt to reform the Constitution to change its unitary structure by the suggestion of devolving power to the north, a body of Sinhala Buddhist intellectuals formed a Sinhala Commission in 1996 to report how it would affect the Sinhalese socially, politically, and economically, if the Devolution Package were to be passed. The entire Commission campaigned to Sinhala-Buddhists to come before the Commission and reveal their grievances as Sinhalese of how their culture had been oppressed by colonial and post-colonial politics, and how the great

5. See Scott’s *Refashioning Futures* (1999). Through the process of inscribing the liberal project of democracy into the colonial and post-colonial state, a whole new game of politics was introduced. One aspect of this new game, and in particular its “democratic” political rationality, is its reliance on ‘number’— on the principle, that is to say, of majoritarianism” (p. 163). One of the assumptions behind this paradigm of modern political thinking – especially with the Donoughmore Constitution, the first institutional attempt to inscribe the majoritarian principle into the country – is that it can abolish communal representation and it will create a national unity. It was also their belief that democracy is the best governing principle of politics. But this attempt actually creates the minority/majority distinction to begin with, revealing its own paradoxical nature when political rationales rely on numbers.

6. See Kannangara, Vidarshana & Hemantha (2014). *Rajapakshavadaya Hegamoniyaka sita Dadambimata nohoth Dadaballanage Budu Pissuva* [Rajapakshism: From Hegemony to Hunting Ground] for an excellent analysis of the recent emergence of “militant Buddhists” in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka: Author published. They argue that the emergence of these groups and their violence is a strategic political move of the then Mahinda Rajapaksa government losing the ideological hegemony within the country.

7. For a discussion of this package, see Jayadeva Uyangoda, “The Package and Its Politics,” *Pravada* 4 (July/August 1995): 5–7.

Sinhalese Buddhist civilization was dismantled and made “voiceless” by their own “pro-white man” (*suddanta gathi*) representatives. Their rhetoric was able to refine the decades-long notions of “natural,” “eternal,” and “essentialized” “Sinhala Buddhist culture” that was at stake in the hands of the two main political parties. More importantly, they were able to advance signature slogans: the devolution package as a Western conspiracy to divide the country, an extension of colonialism that gives prominence to minority elites, minorities becoming “king-makers,” and the Sinhalese heritage being under threat.

This narrative of “Sinhalese under threat” was primarily charged with the economic interests of a certain Sinhala Buddhist elite section of the island. The financial backing for the Sinhala Commission and its political slogans were coming from well-organized political organizations that committed to the “promotion of Sinhalese commercial interests as a way of redressing the supposed threat of competing Tamil and Muslim business in the country” (Abeysekara 2008: 180). For instance, the *Sinhala Veera Vidhana* (SVV) [Order of the Sinhala Heroes] was formed the same year with the leadership of seven successful Sinhala-Buddhist middle and upper-class businessmen. They were entrepreneurs in industrial production such as textiles, rubber products, consumer durables such as gas and fuel, and in the banking sector that competed for domestic market dominance with their Muslim and Tamil counterparts.⁸ These Sinhala Buddhist businessmen from the deep south arrived in the capital Colombo in the 1980s. It is important to note this territorial character as it has seemingly been made into a territorial patronage, with their financial support going into the groups and organizations led by monks who came from the south as well.

It is also important to point out that the SVV’s emergence accompanied the State’s neoliberal economic policies that rapidly privatized state-owned industries. For instance, in the mid-1990s, there were certain attempts taken to privatize the Paddy Corporation, which was established to buy paddy directly from farmers at a fixed price so as to save the farmer from losing his livelihood even if he/she doesn’t make a profit. There was resistance from farmers to the privatization. Amidst this political economic scenario, the SVV went to villages, for instance, Mahiyangana in the Uva Province, Polonnaruwa in the North Central Province, and Anuradhapura, the main city of the ancient royal Kingdom of Anuradhapura, with a plan to buy paddy directly from farmers.

These steps were significant in the actual concretization of the recent wave of the “national movement” not only among the rural peasants who constitute a large majority of the population, but also the urban-centred middle class. At the levels of city, region, and state, they worked to bring influential entrepreneurs, politicians, and monks together on platforms of rebuilding the nation economically. While mobilizing the underrepresented Sinhala Buddhists in rural areas for this cause, they organized several “Trade Fairs” (Salpila) in Colombo, expecting to bring rural entrepreneurs and Colombo wholesale businessmen together. Their objective was to create a

8. See for a brilliant discussion on the relationship between the 1977 economic liberalization process of the island and its impacts on ethnic entrepreneurs, Newton Gunasinghe, 2004, *The Open Economy and Its Impact on Ethnic Relations in Sri Lanka*.

space for local farmers to sell their products “at a legitimate price” (*Divayina* October 15, 1997). The mediators of the supply chain were discarded from these villages and the paddy market as a whole. The aim was to establish a direct relationship with the farmers and the SVV members. Though these organizing mechanisms were designed to produce material benefits for both sides, they were also carrying an ideological project for the farmers: farming was not only an income, but something more than that; it is a service to their village, their society, and the country.

Amidst the political turmoil created by deteriorating economic conditions and the discourse around a political solution for the North (*uthurata deshapolana visandumak*), in April 2000, the Sinhala Urumaya (SU) (Sinhala Heritage Party) was formed, arguing the need for a Sinhala-only party as both the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP) did not represent Sinhalese interests. It was financially backed by the SVV businessmen, with two other main Sinhala organizations ideologically supporting it – the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT) and the Jathika Sangha Sabha (National Buddhist Monks’ Council). In this context, the SU’s 2000 parliamentary election manifesto included promises to protect the *Sasana* by suppressing all the forces that were against it.

A series of socially progressive, farmer-centric proposals included in the Sinhala Urumaya manifesto assumed a stance of anti-privatization and anti-commodification of natural resources. Also, their manifesto contained pro-Sinhala Buddhist and anti-Tamil proposals. For example, they proposed to restrict the singing of the national anthem to the Sinhala language; provide citizenship to Indian Tamils (the majority of the estate workers brought to Sri Lanka during British colonialism) only under the regulations related to Sirima-Shasthri and Sirima-Indira agreements; and provide state patronage to Buddhism, upholding Sinhala culture over other cultural practices. They were pushing the discourse towards an extreme direction in which Sinhalese Buddhists have absolute superiority over other ethnic communities. It embodied a vicious totalitarian social vision.

However, the totalitarian vision is not a one-time achievement, but a gradual outcome of the power plays among the leadership of the party. At its origins, the party was syncretic in nature as not everyone was a Sinhala Buddhist in their leadership. The president of the party was a Christian and there were three other Christians out of 17 members in the party leadership. However, the party was not able to maintain this syncretic nature as some of the Sinhala Buddhists in the leadership were competing for the chairman position of the party based on the Sinhala Buddhist identity, and not simply the Sinhalese identity. The move towards this totalitarian vision was achieved with practices of thuggery within the party itself. More importantly, they were able to establish themselves as fearless masculine bodies that are able to run the government as opposed to the “impotent” and “weak” political parties that were already in power.

Establishing themselves with this totalitarian vision, promising to find the culprit responsible for the death of Soma Thero, a well-loved and highly revered Buddhist monk, and using the Sinhalese-

centric platform that they had already made with the SU, a breakaway group of the SU formed the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). It was the “apogee of political Buddhism,” as they compromised the image of the Bhikku and Sangha for political purposes at a level that took an unprecedented turn, as Neil Devotta correctly pointed out (2008: 33). Within two months, before the election in April 2004, the JHU launched their campaign and successfully built a rhetoric “*rata jathiya anathure*” (Country and Sinhalese are in danger) that touched the nerve of the Sinhala Buddhist masses. A significant number of 252 monks stood as candidates in 21 of the country’s 22 electoral districts. During this period, the JHU mass-produced slogans alluding to the weakness of the two main parties to safeguard the country from “Tamil terrorism.” Following on from the SU they claimed those parties “divide the country,” “pamper minorities,” and “conspire against the country for Western interests.” These slogans became widely used in the years to follow.

In the years after the 2004 election, the JHU did not mobilize monks to contest the elections and their reputation faded away, though its leadership prevailed in politics. However, what is important here is not why they collapsed, as it is part of the contingent nature of the political field, but their authoritative claims and the aspirations that they were able to establish, which had a cumulative effect on the grounds of politics. In other words, what is important to note here is not that the JHU was not able to win again in the same manner that they won in 2014, but that they were capable of establishing and concretizing the idea that a party for and of “Sinhala Buddhists only” is possible on the most exclusive grounds of politics. Furthermore, the most conspicuous characteristic of this movement is the association of the Sangha in the fascist claims against their “adversaries” – Muslims, evangelical Christians, and Tamils. More importantly, they cleared the political grounds for many other groups like them to emerge.

Galagodaatthe Gnanasara, the leader of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), who has won not only a local but also an international name for being militantly vocal against Muslims and evangelical Christians, is a former member of the JHU. He is a pioneer instigator of the monks’ new demand to be sovereign in the country. When I asked him his reason for leaving the JHU, he said “the JHU was not nationalist enough, it was not serving the interests of the Sinhala Buddhists, so we had to take the leadership to continue the national movement” (Interview, June 20, 2019).

While the BBS was organizing around the imaginary of Muslim expansionism, there were many other monk-led organizations that came forward to do the same. Their presence became public whenever they attacked Muslims or evangelical Christians, as the media gave them widespread coverage. These monk-led organizations published leaflets and newspapers to publicise their ideology and attract members. For example, the Sinhala Ravaya organization started by Akmeemana Dayarathana Thero, elected to Parliament from the JHU in April 2004, had an official newspaper in the same name. Almost all the newspaper articles were on “Muslim extremism” or “Muslim expansionism.” The articles were raising the issues of “land grabbing” by Muslims, the burqa, Muslim colonialism, pronatalism, the womb theory, Islamic banks, and Islamic law. The Sinhala Ravaya organization is of great interest because of its leadership that gave rise to

many other splinter organizations that rally on the same ideological grounds. The icon of “Sinha Le” (literally, “Lion’s Blood”), an ultra-nationalist group that goes by that name, has appeared with increasing prominence in public spaces (T-shirts, bumper stickers, pilgrimage sites, TV, videos, Facebook posts), and members of the organization have been vociferous in denouncing the visibility of Islamic cultural practices like the halal certification, the hijab, and animal slaughter. Its president was Madille Pannaloka Thero, who was once the secretary of Sinhala Ravaya. Sinha Le organized around the idea that a “Sri Lankan” identity does not exist, that it is a curse that happened to the country with colonialism. They claim the country belongs to the Sinhala Buddhists and no one else. Sinha Le is different from the BBS or any other previous organizations, who argue that only some Muslims are bad. They publicly claim that the majority of Muslims are extremists.

The Ravana Balaya organization is another splinter group of Sinhala Ravaya. Magalkande Sudathta Thero, who was a chair of Public Affairs of Sinhala Ravaya, is its president. There did not seem to be much public support for this group, but this monk and a few lay people confronted Muslims publicly on many occasions, thus appearing in the media quite often. They also carry out protests on issues that are not often a part of the public discourse. For example, they protested that Muslims have a higher entrance rate in the Law College entrance exam.

The effectiveness of this kind of propaganda demonstrates one of the chief characteristics of these organizations. Unlike the JHU, all the other organizations that followed it seem to have a large popularity among the rural lower-class constituency. They possess an unerring instinct for anything that the propaganda of the two main parties did not care or dare to touch and proceed to organize around them. Among them, issues such as drug addiction among Sinhala Buddhists, migration of Sinhala Buddhist women to Middle Eastern countries as labourers, and Bhikkunis not having identity cards were prominent.

Indeed, the recent mass propaganda wave of the Sinhala Buddhist Nationalist movement did not invent their themes, but their techniques of organizing perfected them. One of the common features of these organizations is that they use pictures of Soma Thero, a prominent monk that was instrumental in forming the recent radical movement, in the places at which they organize, be it the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), temples and community centres (*praja shala*) and in political rallies. They repeat his preaching on the importance of protecting the Sinhala Buddhist country. Furthermore, certain exhortations that were claimed to be made by Anagarika Dharmapala can be seen on the doorsteps of the YMBA or some temples in Beruwala – surrounded by Muslim majority villages – and Maharagama.⁹ These exhortations, unlike in the

9. For instance, the YMBA doorstep in Beruwala reads, “One day white men leave this country. But they will leave only after producing twenty-thirty thousands of *kalu suddo* (Brown Sahibs). They will hate the Sinhala language and manners. They will teach your children to condemn racial and religious divisions. They will say that Tamils, Moors, Cochchies and Hambayas are all equal. Then they will crown the English. Kovils will be constructed near Buddhist temples. You will be waiting for your saviour, Prince Diyasena [according to a folk story, the prince who rescued the country]. Remember that these Brown Sahibs are capable of killing Diyasenas before they are born. They will entice our monks as well. Then your children will have nothing else to do other than watching it with regret and resentment.”

past, are commonly seen in many places, publicly revealing their anger against all the other ethnic and religious communities.

Among a host of competing anti-Muslim groups that followed the trend that the “Sinhala Only Party” was possible, the Mahason Balakaya (Mahason Brigade) established on June 26, 2016, is unique not only in its rhetoric against Muslims but also in its actual organizing mechanisms that seeks a totalitarian vision for the society. Their motto is “We are demons who have been tamed by Buddhism” (*Api Budu banata heela unu yakku bolauw*). Though it is mainly led by lay people, the secretary of the organization is a monk – Vaga Aththadassi Thero. Mahasona is a demon in Sinhalese folklore who carries out unexpected and clandestine attacks on people at night. Interestingly, the Sri Lanka Army has a covert operation unit of the same name, formally called the Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP). During the war, it was established to carry out assassinations of high-level commanders of the LTTE. Though it is difficult to make a connection from the formal military unit to the one in our discussion, the Mahason Balakaya’s unique organizational mechanisms seemingly share the former’s nature of carrying out secret tasks and represent the symbolic strength of Mahasona.

It is my contention that the Mahason Balakaya is the apogee of those who explicitly carried out the imaginary of a totalitarian movement – the absolute superiority of the Sinhala Buddhists, where other ethnic communities should not have equal rights in politics. The chief problem of the country today is “Muslim expansionism” according to Mahason Balakaya beliefs. It is the lens through which they see all the other issues the country faces. However, when Amitta Weerasinghe, the leader of the Mahason Balakaya, was arrested as the mastermind behind the March 2018 violence in Digana that saw 98 Muslim-owned houses and businesses attacked, four Muslim religious spaces destroyed, and two Muslims killed¹⁰ The State imposed a ten-day emergency and deployed the military with police to control the violence. Facebook, WhatsApp and social media were blocked for five days. After 13 months, Weerasinghe was granted bail. When I interviewed him, he rejected all the accusations: “I am 29 years old, I have 29 court cases. But I do not regret being a patriot. It is my duty to protect the country until I die. My life is in danger and I always think that a Muslim will kill me when I am on the way. But I won’t give up.”

He is not planning to organize on a larger scale anymore as it could make him face legal consequences, but he has moved to a guerrilla form of organizing where only around ten people come together and carry out propaganda work secretly. He said they just organize with the people they trust. He explained: “We ask a family that we know very well to find ten people, then we have

10. Amitta Weerasinghe’s Police B report.

the discussions. We don't lie to people, we show them facts," he asserted. For instance, he gave me a 10-page document explaining that it was a fact that the Muslim population is increasing and their growth rate is 2% higher than the Sinhalese.¹¹ He further said, "We invite one member of that group to organize ten more families, so we make sure that no one who does not need to know about us isn't included." His remarks reminded me of the organizing rules laid down by the Nazi regime that adapted "the principles of secret societies without their secretiveness and to establish them in 'broad daylight'."¹² It is in this sense that "the totalitarian movements have been called "secret societies established in broad daylight" (Arendt 1968: 74; Koyre 1945). The 25,797 votes that Weerasinghe received contesting the 2020 General Election is an indicator of the success of their organizing model, though they could not enter the parliament as it is less than 5% of the voter base of the Kandy district. The true goal of totalitarian propaganda, Arendt writes, is not persuasion but organization— the "accumulation of power without the possession of the means of violence (1968: 59)." Mahasohon Balakaya's new strategies for moving forward seem to be moving in this direction.

According to Arendt, one of the main characteristics of a totalitarian agenda is that it can be repeated indefinitely and maintain a liquidated nature of the organization so that anyone can insert their presence as a part of it. Thus, the history of the Nazi party, she claimed, can be told in terms of the new formation of the Nazi movement (Arendt 1968: 66). Similarly, the history of emerging totalitarian imaginaries can be told in terms of the different factions that later came into being, organized against Muslims. The prominent character in these factions is the presence of the monks and their leadership in representing an almost exclusive social vision. These groups, on the contrary, do not claim that they are different from the Sinhala Buddhist movement. They cite Anagarika Dharmapala, Migettuwaththe Gunananda, Walpola Rahula, and Hikkaduwe Sumangala, the father figures of the Sinhala Buddhist national movement. It is their belief that it is a historical duty that they are adhering to. Though they mentioned some these historical leaders and their ideological stances, the reason for the success of these groups is that they don't have a coherent political centre (Dewasiri 2017) and that again is a characteristic of a totalitarian movement.

11. It is close to the actual numbers. The population growth of the Sinhala Buddhist Community is 1.1% while the Muslims' is 1.9%. See Izeth Hussain, "Islam, Contraception and Myths on Muslim Population Growth in Sri Lanka," Colombo Telegraph, September 20, 2014, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/islam-contraception-and-myths-on-muslim-population-growth-in-sri-lanka/>

12. See Alexandre Koyre "The Political Function of the Modern Lie" in *Contemporary Jewish Record*, June 1945. "During a discussion with the General Staff in May, 1939, Hitler laid down the following rules, which sound as if they had been copied from a primer for a secret society: '1. No one who need not know must be informed. 2. No one must know any more than he needs to. 3. No one must know any earlier than he has to'" (Arendt 1968: 74)

CONCLUSION

I have been concerned with the formation of recent radical movement and monks' demand to be sovereign in the country and how it produced and enabled a totalitarian imaginary as a political possibility of Sinhala Lanka. It has been my aim to present the specific inaugural moments of this discourse and its primary Buddhist actors, practices, and acts. I have periodized and thematized them in terms of the patterns and processes I saw as emerging from my chosen perspective. Since there is no elite political formation that has taken this ideology fully into a political possibility, the full form of terror is very limited. However, the common rhetoric, despite different leaderships and the exclusion of both major political parties, justifies the deportation of Muslims and labelling them as outsiders, is characteristic of the totalitarian imaginary whose seeds have been planted from the mid-1990s by different organizations and groups. Yet their roots are the same. Gnanasara Thero and Athuraliye Rathana Thero contested the 2020 general election from a party called the Ape Jana Bala Pakshaya. The party received 67,758 votes island-wide (0.58% of the total votes) and gained a parliamentary seat. This election result shows their lack of popularity among people for them to actualize their imaginary, and they seem far behind their goals. However, it shows they have a considerable voter base, who are not just voters, as a majority of them represent their membership in the organization and therefore the organization's reach within the country.

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