Beyond Liberal Peace in Sri Lanka: Victory, Politics, and State Formation

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Abstract
In 2009, the war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ended through a military victory for the government. Features of the post-war peace—including persistent militarization, strengthened nationalism, and communal violence—have commonly been attributed to a failed attempt at liberal peacebuilding followed by an authoritarian backlash. In contrast, this study shows how the post-war peace has been shaped by historical processes of state formation aimed at consolidating the Sri Lankan state. The article takes a long-term approach to analysing peace in Sri Lanka through the lens of state formation. The analysis centres on four key aspects: (1) post-war security, (2) state–minority relations, (3) socio-economic aspects, and (4) electoral politics. We conclude that there are currently few signs of any substantial state reform that would accommodate the continuous demand for social justice and minority rights that has spurred violent conflicts in Sri Lanka.

Keywords
peace, Sri Lanka, war victory, state formation, liberal peacebuilding, state–society relations, nationalism

To many observers, the Sri Lankan government’s military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 was unexpected. Whilst this implied the end of direct violence between the main warring parties, the post-war peace has been characterised by persistent militarization, strengthened Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, strained state–society relations, and hostilities along other conflict lines, including against the country’s Muslim minority (Höglund et al., 2016; Seoighe, 2016). In this article, we set out to analyse peace in the context of Sri Lanka’s war victory through the lens of state formation. The history of state formation in Sri Lanka, and the centralised character of the state, has...
been central to Sri Lanka’s conflict. Rather than crediting features of the post-war peace to a failed attempt at liberal peacebuilding and a resulting authoritarian turn, we argue that the post-war peace has been shaped by processes of state formation aimed at consolidating the Sri Lankan state.

The paper attends to two deficiencies in scholarly and policy writings aiming to understand peace in Sri Lanka. First, many analyses have been grounded in a liberal peacebuilding paradigm that assumes peace to follow a particular war-to-peace trajectory. By focussing on what ought to have happened whilst failing to explain what actually has happened and why, this approach tends to overlook the more complex causes and dynamics of the conflict. Second, thus far much of the literature has focussed on the initial 10-year period after the end of the war and the rule of the Mahinda Rajapakse regime (e.g., Amarasingam & Bass, 2016). When historical developments have not been part of the framework and analysis, post-war peace has been equalled with the politics and policies of this particular regime, instead of recognising these developments as part of more long-term patterns and dynamics.

Although the war in Sri Lanka was manifested as an armed struggle between the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan government and the LTTE as the self-proclaimed representatives of the Tamil people, we argue that it is a misconception to approach the conflict as a primarily ethnic one. Instead, we align with descriptions of the conflict as a state formation conflict. The Tamil demand for a separate state, encompassing two of the spatial units first created during the colonial period, transformed the politics of relations between Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sri Lankan state into a question of state power. From this point, it was difficult to articulate the issue through categories of ethnic identities (Uyangoda, 2011). This understanding of the conflict as one between competing state formation projects has been central to some prominent scholarship on the civil war (e.g., Bastian, 1999; International Centre for Ethnic Studies [ICES], 1996; Uyangoda, 2007). However, this perspective has been less prevalent in analyses of peace in Sri Lanka post-war. With such an analysis, we are able to contribute to an understanding of how processes and dynamics of state formation continues after the termination of a war—in this case in one ending in a military victory—and how this shapes the post-war peace.

Two studies that have been devoted to analysis of post-war dynamics in Sri Lanka in dialogue with a research agenda on conceptualisations of peace are Klem (2018) and Höglund et al. (2016). Klem argues that peace should be understood as an aspiration rather than an actually existing societal condition. From this perspective, he contributes an understanding of Sri Lanka’s post-war transition as one in which the very meaning of peace is continuously contested. Höglund et al. (2016), building on Galtung’s conflict triangle for analysis of peace dynamics, emphasise how the victory war-ending shapes the conditions under which peace in Sri Lanka develops. The authors portray the peace as one of unresolved conflict issues, insecurity stemming from militarization and government domination, and characterised by attitudes of polarisation, injustice, and fear. This article complements studies like these by providing a historical analysis of contemporary contestations and conditions. It contributes to our understanding of post-war peace in Sri Lanka by showing how the peace has been shaped by long-term processes of state formation.

The paper is organised as follows. First, we provide a theoretical framework for an analysis of peace through the lens of state formation. Second, the empirical analysis begins with the history of postcolonial state formation in Sri Lanka. The main part of the paper then analyses peace after the war-ending of 2009 with an emphasis on developments after the 2015 regime shift when the authoritarian Rajapakse regime was overturned by a coalition government campaigning on a reform platform. This raised high hopes that Sri Lanka would make progress towards peaceful change. However, these hopes were never realised, and the elections of 2019 resulted in the return of power to the Rajapakse family. By devoting attention to developments post-2015, we are able to show historical continuities that stretches beyond particular regimes. Considering developments post-war, we conclude that there are currently
few signs of any substantial state reform that would accommodate the continuous demand for social justice in the distribution and access to resources that has spurred violent conflicts in Sri Lanka.

**Peace Through the Lens of State Formation**

We put forth a contextual, history-oriented analysis of the post-war peace in Sri Lanka through the lens of state formation. The Sri Lankan case fits well within what Wallensteen conceptualise as state formation conflicts, which “put a government against an identity-based, territorially-focused opposition, where the key issue is security of a particular group.” Wallensteen (2004) continues that “often such conflicts are tied to a geographical region of an existing state, but they may also involve questions of discrimination in the society at large” (p. 163). The last assertion is also important for analysing peace in Sri Lanka, as it recognises that the conflict goes beyond the LTTE and the separatist demand for a Tamil state, to concern the place for Tamils and other minorities within the Sinhala-dominated state.

In order to understand the process of state formation in Sri Lanka, it is necessary to remind ourselves that states are not “natural or inevitable but are products of specific social processes and political struggles which generate a process of state formation” (Painter, 1997, p. 35). Historically, the state formation process in general has not been a peaceful one (Giddens, 1987; Tilly, 1992). Our understanding of the state in this article fits with the description of Painter (1997, p. 31) who characterises states “as both complex networks of relations among a (shifting) mixture of institutions and social groups, and the product of their own processes of institutional development and historical change as well as important external influences.” These perspectives are lost in the conventional treatment of the state, where it is approached as a concrete self-contained entity that has attained a final status. But the Sri Lankan state is in a continuous process of evolution.

It has been suggested that security and political order are key dimensions for analysing peace in a particular locality (Jarstad et al., 2019). In essence, these dimensions are closely linked to state formation. Staniland (2012), for example, points to interlinkages between the literatures on state formation and wartime political order. He suggests that “If insurgency and counterinsurgency are forms of competitive state building, then we should think of them as a contest over the shaping of political order rather than purely a military conflict to be won, lost, or drawn” (Staniland, 2012, p. 247). This, we argue, is equally relevant for an analysis of political order post-war or in “peacetime.” It directs our attention to how “authority is imposed and negotiated” (Staniland, 2012, p. 253) and to continuities and changes in this regard before and after a war-ending. Gusic also stresses continuities of war as a key aspect of post-war political order. As he puts it, “war might be over yet the socio-political ordering of society remains contested” (2019, p. 2). Seen from the perspective of state formation, peace can be understood as a form of post-war political order which is part of a longer-term process of state formation. It is dynamic and without a clear end-stage. Competition over state formation continues post-war, with authority being imposed, challenged, and (re)negotiated. Building on insights from the literatures on state formation and on peace as political order, we propose a framework based on four dimensions: (1) post-war security, (2) state–minority relations, (3) socio-economic aspects, and (4) electoral politics. These aspects are central to shaping the dynamics and evolution of state formation and are consequently key to analysis of peace in the context of state formation conflicts.

First, post-war security is central to consider in an analysis of peace from a state formation perspective. Conventionally, conceptions of the state involve a recognition of the state as holding a monopoly on the use of violence within defined territorial borders. For state-making purposes, states have strived to “disarm[ed] their populations and lesser power centers” in order to increase their capacity to maintain authority (Holsti, 1996, p. 44). For state-building in the context of civil war, the provision of security is
also commonly stressed as one of the key functions of the state (Paris & Sisk, 2009). Given that security is central to the state formation project and closely connected to authority and control, this draws our attention to security policies in Sri Lanka, including how security issues are framed and how this legitimises certain policies and actions such as continuation of militarization post-war and the consequences thereof.

State–society relations are a key aspect of the state formation process, and this is connected to the second and third aspects of our framework. State–society relations is linked to the legitimacy of the state amongst its citizens (Holsti, 1996, p. 85). The inability to manage state–society relations peacefully has been a key factor in the political violence that we have witnessed in the postcolonial history of Sri Lanka. State–society relations are maintained through coercion or consent. Those states that are able to manage state–society relation primarily through consent have a greater capacity “to develop and implement policies in order to provide collective goods such as security, order, and welfare to its citizens in a legitimate and effective manner untrammelled by internal and external actors” (Paul, 2011, p. 5). Authority can be earned through coercion and by virtue of a military victory and disarming of the society (Holsti, 1996, p. 85), but to maintain order, local consent and legitimacy is eventually needed (Richmond, 2014). In terms of state–society relations, we focus on two dimensions. This includes relations between the state and minorities, which is the second aspect of our framework and has been the focus of most of the literature on Sri Lanka. The third aspect of the framework is socio-economic aspects of state–society relations, which draws our attention to the legitimacy of the state amongst the majority population. In the case of Sri Lanka, this concerns the social impact of 40 years of economic liberalisation and its impact on relations between the state and the majority Sinhala population.

The fourth aspect of the framework is electoral politics. Richmond and Pogodda (2016, p. 8) emphasise the role of political elites in the state formation process. This is because elites, often “through [. . .] process of shifting alliances and force,” shape state formation in an attempt to facilitate “control over security and capital.” In the case of Sri Lanka, this draws our attention to the role of elite and electoral politics in state formation, including the resilience of majority domination in electoral politics and the vibrancy of nationalism for political mobilisation, and how it has shaped state–society relations and the ability of state reform.

The state formation perspective emphasises how historical processes contribute to shape future developments of the state and society. It has been suggested in the historical institutionalist literature that history usually unfolds through longer periods of “stability and reproduction” but at formative moments, often referred to as turning points or critical junctures, more dramatic change is possible (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 341). The choices made at these moments have great impact also in the long term. Scholarship on conflict in Sri Lanka highlights a number of different turning points in history, and their relative importance differ across studies (Bass & Amarasingham, 2016, p. 5). One turning point often returned to is 1983, which has been described as the moment when anti-Tamil violence transformed the conflict into a civil war (Bass & Amarasingham, 2016, pp. 2–3). We argue that a turning point that is particularly relevant for analysis of peace from a state formation perspective is the 1977 general elections (Bastian, 2018; Stokke, 2011). As discussed below, this (a) signified the challenge of the territorial integrity of the centralised state, and (b) this process came parallel with an opening up of the economy, which has contributed to shape state formation and the efforts to consolidate the Sri Lankan state. Considering this, we pay particular attention to developments in the post-1977 period to inform the analysis of the post-war peace.
We rely on a case study approach and carry out an interpretative analysis guided by the theoretical framework outlined above. To map and analyse key events, processes, and developments, the study is primarily based on primary and secondary source documents, including policy documents, reports from governmental agencies, newspaper articles, scholarly accounts, and reports from NGOs. We have been attentive to source criticism (Dulic, 2011) and triangulation of sources (Stake, 1995) in an effort to create a comprehensive account. The written documentation is complemented with 35 interviews conducted in Sri Lanka in 2019, including with politicians, academics, journalists, and civil society actors, to get additional insights into key events and to capture different perspectives on developments. The analysis is also informed by both authors’ previous research on conflict in Sri Lanka and the second author’s decades-long experience of working with issues related to conflict and development in the country.

**History of State Formation in Sri Lanka**

The colonial conquest by the British marked an important shift in the history of state formation in Sri Lanka. The British captured the Kandyan kingdom, the last stronghold of Sinhala kings, in 1815. The entire territory of the island now came under a single political authority. When Sri Lanka gained formal independence, the local elite secured power in a centralised postcolonial state, which they themselves had been involved in constructing together with the colonial power. Several measures were introduced to the constitution to safeguard the rights of numerically smaller ethnic groups. Through this, it was hoped that the constitution could prevent special privileges being granted to the majority community (see, e.g., Gunawardena, 2008; Parasram, 2017; Sivasundaram, 2013).

The subsequent postcolonial history of state formation is a history of undermining these rights of minorities (Bastian, 1999). Three mechanisms operated to bring about this result. First was the electoral power of the Sinhala majority. This gradually undermined the checks and balances instituted at the time of independence. Second was the hegemony of Sinhala nationalism as state ideology. This effectively meant that the identity of the state was equated with the identity of the majority Sinhalese. Finally, some aspects of the social policies that were critical for maintaining relations with the Sinhala majority—related to education, health, protecting small-holder peasantry, and rights of labour—had discriminatory elements against the Tamil minority. In addition, land distribution to protect the peasantry that changed the ethnic demography especially of the Eastern Province, university admission schemes that discriminated against Tamil stream students, and difficulties faced by Tamil public servants due to Sinhala being the only official language went against the interest of the Tamil minority (see, e.g., de Silva, 1998). These were the main grievances before Tamils demanded a separate state.

The 1977 general election was a turning point in this history of state formation. On one side, for the first time, a Tamil party contested the election on the basis of a separatist demand, asking for a mandate from Tamil-speaking people to form a separate state encompassing the Northern and Eastern Provinces. On the other side, the election brought into power the centre-right United National Party (UNP), whose main agenda was inaugurating a new period of capitalist development emphasising the private sector, markets, and openness to global capitalism (Bastian, 2018; Stokke, 2011). When the Tamil demand for a separate state escalated into an armed conflict, it became a threat both to the Sinhala nationalist idea of the entire territory of Sri Lanka belonging to the majority and to the stability needed to pursue capitalist growth under the new policies. The institutional structures established in the late 1970s to deal with the Tamil militancy, including enactment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and sending the first troops to the North in 1979, would come to shape state responses to the conflict for decades to come.
The only significant reforms of the centralised state that sought to respond to Tamil grievances came about because of the intervention of India. This led to the Indo-Lanka Accord, enactment of the 13th Amendment to the constitution, and establishment of a provincial council system that provided a limited degree of devolution to the provinces. Subsequent governments attempted to reform the 13th Amendment to overcome shortcomings of the provincial council system (Bastian, 1999; ICES, 1996). However, the process of establishing provincial councils in late 1980s was not a peaceful one. The protests against the Indo-Lanka Accord and provincial system led to violence by oppositional groups, led by a section of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—who saw the LTTE’s Tamil nationalist project as imperialist and opposed the Indian intervention (Venugopal, 2010)—and counter-violence by the state. At the core of the violent insurrection was also opposition to the new policies of economic liberalisation and socio-economic issues. According to some estimates, this resulted in 40,000 dead and disappeared and to the elimination of the JVP leadership (Wickramasinghe, 2014). Thus, violence related to the process of state formation has historically gone beyond that between the state and Tamil militancy, which is important to bear in mind for understanding post-war developments. In this respect, it is also necessary to note that violence included several attacks by the LTTE against the Muslim community. The massacre of 147 Muslim worshipers at a mosque on August 3, 1990, and expulsion of around 72,000 Muslims from the Northern Province in October 1990 are notable events (Haniffa, 2015). But with the focus only on two actors within the liberal peace paradigm that came to dominate the discourse on peace in Sri Lanka, these complexities were largely ignored. Liberal peace came as an answer to Sri Lanka’s problems with liberal market policies being an integral part of the solution. The economic downturn caused by the long-drawn war was certainly a factor that pushed the ruling elite towards the Norwegian-mediated negotiations with the LTTE in 2001, which eventually failed and paved the way for a military victory (see, e.g., Stokke & Uyangoda, 2011).

This brief account of the postcolonial history of Sri Lanka shows the operation of a complex set of factors underlying the Tamil demand for a separate state and the armed conflict that followed. There is no sign of any of these factors disappearing or even minimising their importance within the Sri Lankan polity. We now continue to analyse how these factors operate in the post-war period by considering the key aspects related to state formation, that is, (1) post-war security, (2) state–minority relations, (3) socio-economic aspects, and (4) electoral politics.

**Post-War Security and State Formation**

Security is central to the state formation process, which is reflected in the strategies adopted to serve state-making purposes of maintaining authority and control. When the LTTE was militarily defeated in 2009, the entire territory of the Sri Lankan state, which had been challenged since the late 1970s, once again came under central control. The war-ending was followed by a new security strategy involving several elements. The first step was to reconnect the war-affected area with the rest of the country. This was necessary to ensure the central control of this territory and capitalist growth. This part of the country included vast tracts of unexploited land, beaches that were attractive to investors in tourism, and the strategically important Trincomalee harbour. The regime undertook an infrastructure development programme that included restoring the road and rail network. Assistance came from traditional sources of assistance such as Japan, Asian Development Bank and the World Bank and new centres of capitalist development like China and India (Bastian, 2018, p. 180).

The next element was to maintain the strength of the security forces. A by-product of 3 decades of armed conflict was the expansion of the security sector. What was largely a ceremonial army before the war had, by its end, expanded to a highly powerful institution; by the time the war ended, the armed forces absorbed around 3.8% of GDP (GlobalSecurity.org, n.d.). This has been reduced after the end of military operations. Yet, on average, expenditure for defence and public security from 2015 to 2017
was 13% of the government expenditure (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2018). The position that the security forces occupy within the post-war state in Sri Lanka has changed the entire character of the state. This can be seen in many arenas: Most recently, the security forces have been given a dominant role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kadirgamar, 2020).

Further, post-war security strategies have entailed continuing a significant presence of the army in the Northern Province, the heartland of Tamil politics. There are various estimates of the number of security forces in these areas. One estimate in 2012 put the total number of security personnel in the North as 198,000, which worked out to “1 security personnel for every 5.04 civilians in the Northern Province” (Colombo Telegraph, 2012). An estimate in 2016 put the figure at 160,000 in the North and East (PEARL, 2016). Maintaining military presence in the so-called liberated territories in the North means consolidating control over these territories and is a key part of post-war state formation.

The next element of the post-war security strategy is the continued presence of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which was enacted in 1979. It has been widely criticised by human rights activists who caution against a process of normalising terrorism laws as regular feature of the Sri Lankan society (Chandrahasan, 2018; Gunatilleke, 2020).

Within this framework, the policy of reconciliation becomes a part of a security strategy with the aim of stabilising society. The notion of reconciliation began to be used when the Rajapakse regime established a Lesson Learnt and Reconciliation Commission in 2010. The policy rests on an assumption of the Sri Lankan conflict as one between clashing ethnic identities that need to reconcile in order to overcome animosity. It ignores the institutional framework and political power around identity that have made it difficult to form a legitimate state in a multi-ethnic society. As such, it becomes a means of depoliticising the conflict.

Relatedly, the final item of the post-war security strategy focuses on implementing the 2014 UN resolution on reconciliation, accountability, and human rights in Sri Lanka (United Nations, 2011; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014). After the regime change in 2015, the new coalition government, which was more amenable to co-operation with the UN system, co-sponsored a resolution in September 2015. However, the implementation of various elements of the resolution remains slow. Legislation to establish an Office of Missing Persons was passed in February 2018, and the office was established. Legislation to establish an Office for Reparations was passed, but the office still has to begin functioning. Efforts to establish a truth commission have not gone anywhere (Verite Research, 2019). Critical issues such as comprehensive security sector reform or investigations into war crimes during the last stages of the war with international assistance were not addressed.

There is agreement amongst the two main political parties—the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—on most elements of this security strategy. Whilst those supporting liberal peace agree on new terrorism laws and implementing the UNHCHR resolution, both are opposed by Sinhala nationalist groups. But both these positions are part of a post-war security strategy that needs to be understood as part of a long-term process of state formation.

**Post-War State–Minority Relations**

The place for minorities within the Sinhala majority state has been a key issue in Sri Lanka’s conflict. After the war-ending, there has been no progress in the political process of state reforms to meet Tamil
grievances. The 13th Amendment to the constitution, which provides a limited degree of devolution, has not been implemented fully. Key reforms, like devolution over land and police powers, which are already part of the law of the country, have not been implemented. The only significant development has been the election of representatives to the Tamil-dominated Northern Provincial Council after 23 years. The elected council was dismissed in 1990, and new elections were held in 2013.

The heavy military presence and state surveillance in the Tamil-dominated Northern Province has an impact on the lives of people in this area (see, e.g., Seoighe, 2016; Thaheer et al., 2013, pp. 35–44). Some 10 years after the war-ending, the military continue to occupy private and public land in the North (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Although certain amount of land has been handed over to its original owners in recent years, by December 31, 2018, a total of 30,187 acres was occupied by the security forces (Verite Research, 2019). At least some of the land classified as state land would have been occupied by poorer sections of the population through Land Development Ordinance permit schemes, which is a property right permit within the framework of government programmes for land allocation. During the time of the war, these permits have been lost and land has changed hands. When the military is returning land, the land is sometimes instead taken over by the forestry department and other state agencies, further consolidating territory to the Sri Lankan state (interview with Shreen Saroor, February 18, 2019). Even a decade after the end of the war, there are still people in camps for internally displaced people (IDP). In March 2018, the government reported that there are 2,216 persons from 627 families still in IDP camps. There is no updated information on those IDPs who are outside of camps (Verite Research, 2019).

The prospect of state reforms in the post-war period has become even more difficult due to the emergence of new extremist currents of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, which resemble an ideology of Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy. This is a product of the post-war period. Several organisations espousing a more virulent form of Sinhala Buddhism became politically powerful in a very short period—the main ones being Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Ravaya, and Ravana Balaya. The post-war Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist groups’ attacks especially targeted Muslims and evangelical Christian groups. In addition to campaigns against Muslim religious practices, such as women wearing Hijab or the need for a Halal certificate on certain foods, there were violent incidents attacking mosques and churches across the country starting in 2011. A significant event was the violence that took place on June 15, 2014, at Aluthgama, an area with a significant Muslim population (Sarjoon et al., 2016). This was followed by similar events in Ampara and Kandy districts in 2018. After the tragedy on Easter Sunday in 2019, when a series of bomb attacks orchestrated by Muslim militants involved in the National Tauheed Jamaat and Jamathei Millathu Ibrahim targeted Christian churches and a number of hotels in Colombo, there has been a general reaction against the Muslim population backed by an ideology of Islamophobia, and a demand for security in the traditional sense has dominated the political discussion. As put by Haniffa (2019), “all changes in Muslim religious practices that had occurred in the past 30 to 40 years were discussed as if the inevitable endpoint of all Islamic religious mobilisation was terrorism.” The tendencies to alienate the Muslim population for majority mobilisation have only been reinforced after the November 2019 return of power to the Rajapakse family (Kadirgamar, 2020). Thus, whilst liberal peace largely reduced the conflict to one between the state and the LTTE and Tamil population, these events underline the complexity of the conflict in Sri Lanka and the broader issues of identity politics and nationalism invested in the process of state formation.
Socio-Economic Aspects of State–Society Relations

Socio-economic aspects of state–society relations is another key aspect of the state formation process and central to consider in analysis of peace. In Sri Lanka, this draws our attention to the legitimacy of the state amongst the majority population, which has an impact on the possibility of state reform. Consolidating the territory of the Sinhala-dominated state through military means was an important factor for furthering capitalist development within the period of capitalist transition that begun in 1977. Forty years of liberalisation has resulted in significant changes in the socio-economic structure. This has impacted relations between the state and the majority Sinhala population. There is a significant drop in the importance of agriculture in the economy—the share of agriculture in the GDP at current market prices has dropped from 30.7% in 1977 to 7.9% in 2018 (Special Statistical Appendix in Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2018). The small-holder peasantry finds it difficult to earning an income from the land they own. There is a parallel growth in wage labour, with many being employed in the informal sector with low incomes. Meanwhile, those with higher income have been able to increase their income at a higher rate. The cumulative effect is there is a significant level of inequality. According to data from the Department of Census and Statistics in 2016, the share of income was 50.8% for the richest 20% and 4.8% for the poorest 20% (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2018).

The key question for those interested in state formation and peace is how ruling regimes will manage economic reforms in the future and what the political reaction to this, especially within the Sinhala majority, will be. Economic reform is not a technocratic process but a political process that a regime has to manage. The ability to manage this process peacefully is an important question for peace and stability. The Sri Lankan experience of this process in the post-1977 period has not been peaceful. The strategy of the Jayawardena regime elected in 1977 was to manage electoral pressures that could undermine economic reforms by having a powerful president and maintaining the five-sixths majority that it enjoyed in the 1977 parliament. There was also violence and state repression against opposition to these policies. Significant privatisation, like the privatisation of plantations, began in an environment of state repression. After a change of regime in 1994, it became much easier to manage these reforms because there was a political consensus within the political elite (Bastian, 2007).

But as we move onto the post-war period, there is no political consensus on economic policies amongst the political elite. During the Rajapakse regime, both nationalistic forces and the authoritarian character of the regime kept a lid on various manifestations of socio-economic grievances. After the change of regime in 2015, we have seen a range of protests, strikes, and various other forms of resistance to some of the economic policies in the southern part of the country. Some of the issues were long-standing grievances and others a fallout from the current economic policies. A wide range of social groups, such as traders, farmers, state sector employees, the unemployed, and professional groups worried about the impact of free trade agreements, was involved in these protests (Ratnayake, 2019). Often the protests have nationalist slogans, but the underlying reasons are socio-economic. A combination of socio-economic issues and identity politics is not unusual for Sri Lanka. The question is what will be the response of the ruling elite in such a context? In the post-war period, the ruling elite has at its disposal a much stronger security apparatus to deal with the situation and a continuation of antiterrorism laws that can be used to quell protests due to socio-economic grievances.

Electoral Politics and State Formation

The fourth element in the state formation process is the role of electoral politics. Liberal peacebuilding places a great hope on liberal democracy to bring about peace. This study argues that there is a need to analyse how democratic institutions have been internalised in the historical context of societies and to focus on political outcomes (Bastian & Luckham, 2003). Within this, a critical question is the nature of
elite political struggles in electoral politics. This has significant bearing on the ability of Sri Lanka to move ahead with key state reforms and in shaping the post-war political order.

The Sri Lankan postcolonial experience of electoral politics has been contradictory. On one hand, it has broadened the base of social classes in politics, changed regimes in power regularly, acted as a safety value in times of political crisis, and absorbed a number of armed groups into a peaceful political process. On the other hand, assertion of the political power of the Sinhala majority through the electoral process has undermined checks and balances that were there at the time of independence to protect minority rights, which has had an impact on state formation.

Political outcomes of the post-1977 period have to be understood in the context of institutions and political outcomes created by the 1978 constitution. A presidency brought in to see through economic reforms is now supported by Sinhala nationalists and many others who see value in a powerful central state. Coalition regimes with large cabinets have become more common, and these are formed and maintained through distribution of various state institutions amongst coalition partners. Crossovers from party to party are common, and there is an extensive system of patronage politics.

The post-war experience of electoral politics has been shaped by Rajapakse emerging as the main leader of Sinhala nationalist politics. Under Rajapakse, the enactment of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution significantly strengthened the power of the president, including by creating the possibility of indefinite rule by one person. However, Rajapakse was defeated in the presidential election of 2015. The voting pattern showed that minority communities voted overwhelmingly against Rajapakse. But there was also a shift within the Sinhala-majority areas against Rajapakse. This shows that nationalism is not the only factor in the voting behaviour of the Sinhalese but also dissatisfaction with unfulfilled policy promises and socio-economic discontent (Bastian, 2016).

An important outcome of the 2015 parliamentary election was consolidation of the electoral position of the main parliamentary representative of the Tamil minority, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). Spatially, the electoral base of the TNA is the same as that of the Tamil United Liberal Front (TULF) in the 1977 parliamentary election when the TULF asked for a mandate to form a separate state. Therefore, the spatial configuration of Sri Lankan electoral politics that has been based on ethnic political space continues.

The coalition regime of the two main parties elected in 2015 was unusual for Sri Lankan politics. Whilst this raised hopes for state reform, political power struggles came to dominate the agenda. Pretty soon it was clear that there were two centres of power, one led by the president from the United People’s Freedom Alliance—a party born out of the SLFP—and the other the prime minister from the main competing party, the UNP. The UNP strategy was to pass the 19th Amendment to the constitution, which reduced the power of the president and to secure control over main areas such as economy, foreign policy, and defence. In October 2018, the president suddenly dismissed the prime minister from the UNP and replaced him with Mahinda Rajapakse. But this was successfully challenged in the Supreme Court on the basis of the provisions of the 19th Amendment (Reuters, 2018).

One of the major outcomes of this divided regime was its inability to move forward with political reforms needed for state formation, including constitutional reforms that would secure minority rights and decentralise power and socio-economic reforms. Instead, the politics of the country came to be dominated by a combination of the need for hard security measures after the 2019 Easter tragedy and virulent Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. The regime change in November 2019, which gave presidential power to Gotabaya Rajapakse and inducted as the prime minister his brother, the previous president Mahinda Rajapakse, strengthened these trends. In October 2020, the 20th Amendment to the constitution was passed in the parliament, which involves a notable strengthening of the power of the president at the expense of other state institutions. A long-term analysis of the nature of elite political
struggles in electoral politics in Sri Lanka shows continuities across regimes circumscribing the ability of state reform.

Concluding Discussion

This article has aimed to contribute to an analysis of Sri Lanka’s post-war peace using the lens of state formation. Features of the post-war peace—including persistent militarization, strengthened nationalism, and communal violence—have commonly been attributed to a failed attempt at liberal peace-building followed by an authoritarian backlash. In contrast, this study shows how the post-war peace has been shaped by historical processes of state formation aimed at consolidating the Sinhala-dominated state.

First, our analysis shows how a new security strategy post-war fed into the state formation project by consolidating the territory of the state, through reconnecting the war-affected area with the rest of the country and continuing the military presence in the North. Second, there is no progress in terms of state reform to meet Tamil grievances, and state–minority relations in the Tamil-dominated North are maintained through a heavy presence of the military. State–minority relations have been further constrained by the emergence of new extremist currents of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Third, developments after the 2015 regime shift show how socio-economic issues continue to be of vital importance to the southern polity and linked to the legitimacy of the state amongst the Sinhala majority population. Within the Sinhala population, socio-economic issues get politicised to serve nationalist agendas. Fourth, in a country where electorates have changed regime in power regularly, and a system of patronage politics and nationalism plays a significant role, assertion of the political power of the Sinhala majority through the electoral process has restricted possibilities of state reform. It has also continuously reproduced ethnic-based regional political spaces rather than creating a national political space. Considering these developments post-war, there are few signs of any substantial state reform that would accommodate the continuous demand for social justice and equality that has spurred violent conflicts in Sri Lanka.

The paper attends to what we see as deficiencies in several contemporary analyses of Sri Lanka’s post-war peace. Rather than approaching the victor’s peace as a failed attempt at liberal peace and analysing peace from the perspective of what ought to have happened, we take key internal political dynamics as our point of departure and show how these processes have shaped the post-war peace. This allows us to recognise that although the war-ending was a watershed event, there are long-term continuities in state formation that shape the characteristics of the post-war peace. These insights are relevant also to other cases of state formation conflicts and examinations of post-war peace. In addition, we do not delimit our analysis to the features of the Rajapakse regime. By using a long-term approach and focusing our contemporary analysis primarily to post-2015, we are able to show how current developments are grounded in historical events and developments within the Sri Lankan polity that continue beyond particular regimes. We have argued that the post-1977 period is a particularly important formative moment in history for understanding peace post-war. These insights suggest that the so-called opening up of political space after the regime change of 2015 should not be exaggerated. An analysis of peace through the lens of state formation helps us understand why these expectations largely failed, as has happened several times before.

What are the consequences of this analysis for peacebuilding? The main peacebuilding strategies in Sri Lanka post-war are based on pleas for reconciliation and transitional justice. From this perspective,
with the military defeat of the LTTE, the conflict has ended, and Sri Lanka has embarked on a transition into a peaceful society. In contrast to this, this analysis assumes that whilst the end of the war is a watershed event in the history of the conflict, the war was not simply an aberration but signified some deep-seated issues of social injustice and inequalities that Sri Lanka has to tackle. These issues originate from long-term processes of state formation and have to be considered in the search for a peaceful Sri Lanka. This should involve struggles against inequality, promoting a plural society through reforms both at the level of state and society, and democratic politics in order to promote the interest of the marginalised.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Elisabeth Olivius, Lars Waldorf, Lorraine Elliot, and the anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts and the Varieties of Peace research programme and participants at the 2019 Varieties of Peace Asia Conference in Jakarta.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: This study was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (Grant M16-0297:1 and P19-1494:1).

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Notes

1. Examples include reports from the International Crisis Group, which, as stressed by Klem (2018), provide invaluable empirical updates but tend to analyse developments based on expectations of how history should have unfolded.
2. This has been the most important method by which postcolonial state attempted to deal with land hunger. These permits have to be renewed annually. But it is not unusual for families occupy the same plot of land for generations.
3. These events involve Sinhalese mobs attacking Muslim houses and shops, which was largely met with neglect by the government.
4. For an analysis of the Mahinda Rajapakse regime, see, for example, Lewis (2020).

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