‘United we stand, divided we fall’: a case study of Sri Lankan youth in citizenship development

Nipunika O. Lecamwasam*

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)-Cultural Centre, 224, Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka

(Received 11 July 2014; accepted 16 February 2015)

Citizenship is essentially a legal formality that denotes membership of a state. However, it should contain an emotional element for individuals to willingly identify themselves with the nation-state. The absence of such emotion often prompts bloody conflicts where people attempt to carve independent entities of power by fragmenting the nation-state. Youth, with their inherent zest for grand ventures, are often keen participants and even initiators of such conflicts. Citizenship therefore should entail an active process of emotional engagement especially of youth in order that sustainable solidarity may be fostered. Sri Lanka stands as an ideal case study in this regard, demonstrating the terrible consequences of the isolation of youth – whether real or perceived – from the collective identity of the state and the equally powerful impact they can have when properly integrated into the state mechanism. This paper discusses Tamil youth disillusionment in Sri Lanka that manifested itself in a vicious ethnic conflict in juxtaposition with the role of Sri Lankan youth as agents of peaceful change in a post-war nation-building context. In drawing a conclusion, the paper discusses the importance of active civic engagement of youth in building ‘One Nation One People’.

Keywords: youth; Sri Lanka; citizenship; conflict; identity

1. Introduction

The language of citizenship is essentially vague, with a myriad of competing interpretations suggesting close, almost overlapping connotations. Nonetheless citizenship today is an element chiefly identified with the identity of an individual especially in terms of his/her affinity to a political community.

Owing to differences in historical contexts within which the concept emerged and later on developed, citizenship signifies a variety of diverse socio-political notions to diverse communities. Its legal implications, however, denote membership of a particular state, specifically a nation-state, as yet the most important political community with the power to award or decline membership to individuals thus providing them with a political identity.

However, the legal factor alone is not sufficient for individuals to feel they are a part of the collective identity of the state either by birth or by naturalisation. For citizenship to be meaningful, the emotion of belonging has to be present. This feeling is usually generated by integrative policies states adopt to accommodate diverse ethnic/religious groups in order to create a shared identity as ‘One Nation One People’. Failure of state mechanisms to generate such feelings of solidarity often constitutes the ideal ingredient for revolutions or in extreme cases even protracted and bloody conflicts.
Youth are often keen participants and even initiators of such conflicts. Youth-led revolutions comprise a compelling case for the promotion of solidarity in the quest to preserve the character of nation-states in ethnically diverse societies.

This paper is chiefly concerned with unearthing the connection between the absence of the emotional element of citizenship and youth-led violent conflict through a case study of Sri Lanka. Towards this end, drawing largely from secondary sources including books, newspaper articles and Internet resources, the paper offers a descriptive historical analysis of the failures on the part of the Sri Lankan state in integrating the Tamil youth into the collective identity of the state, a failure whose consequential isolation and frustration ultimately found violent expression in a bloody ethnic conflict that drained the better part of the country’s resources – human and material – for three decades, and juxtaposes it with the equally powerful impact Sri Lankan youth have as agents of positive change in a post-conflict nation-building context.

The paper first discusses the notion of citizenship within the larger framework of democracy, taking into account the multifarious features of it. Following this is an analysis of the role of youth in identity-driven conflicts and youth engagement in terms of forming peer-networks for the realisation of a common goal perceived to be serving certain collective ends for the group. Next, a discussion on the relationship between youth bulges and domestic armed insurrections will be followed by an analysis on the Integrated Threat Theory in an attempt to understand the psychological underpinnings of youth agitation movements.

In the second section, the Sri Lankan case study is presented as testimony to the decisive role of youth in violent conflicts, complemented by an analysis of how an emotional void with regard to loyalty towards the state is facilitated by exclusionist state policies. This account is contrasted with the role of youth in post-conflict Sri Lanka as agents of positive change dedicated to the cause of building a united country. The concluding observations of the paper emphasise on the meaninglessness of the notion of citizenship unaccompanied by active emotional engagement of citizens, especially the youth who are more easily mobilised in opposition than their elderly counterparts in the face of denial or curbing of their rights. As a final observation, the paper argues that the Tamil youth unrest in Sri Lanka was by no means inevitable, and could have been prevented had policy corrections been made to manage tensions before they spiralled into an ethnic war.

2. Concepts and theories

2.1 Citizenship: policy of inclusion or the art of exclusion?

Citizenship as is commonly understood refers to a ‘personal status consisting of a body of universal rights (i.e., legal claims on the state) and duties held equally by all legal members of a nation-state’ (Marshall, 1964 & Brubaker, 1992, as cited in Somers, 1993, p. 588). It therefore denotes a certain legally recognised condition by which an individual becomes a member of a particular state that makes him/her dependant on the said state for the custody of an identity.

From a socio-political perspective, citizenship can be understood in relation to two aspects. (1) The legal framework that stipulates rights and duties for citizens. (2) The creation of an overarching cultural identity for the citizenhood of a particular state. In democracies that entertain an array of differing opinions, it is of crucial importance to sustain both elements because the idea of citizenship rests upon the attitudes of diverse political subjects whose differing opinions do not ideally affect their identification with the state as its constituent members. Democracies require
... a certain degree of commitment on the part of its citizens ... It requires that its members be motivated to make the necessary contributions: of treasure (in taxes), sometimes in blood (in war); and it expects always some degree of participation in the process of governance. A free society has to substitute for despotic enforcement with a certain degree of self-enforcement. Where this fails the system is in danger. (Taylor, 1997, as cited in Haas, 2002, pp. 1–2)

Therefore it is understood that for citizenship to be meaningful, citizens of a democratic state have to feel loyal towards the political community of which they are members. For minorities, the intensity of this loyalty depends on the degree to which they are content as a minority. In other words, the condition of their rights is the key driving force behind their loyalty, or lack thereof, towards the state. Where minority discrimination is prevalent, whether in a real or perceived capacity, the lack of solidarity towards the state community is particularly evident.

Demand for political autonomy thus becomes the dominant feature of a democratic system that fails to guarantee equal rights to all its citizens irrespective of their religious, ethnic or political affinity. This demand reaches a pinnacle and culminates in violent conflicts if minorities continue to feel excluded from the main body polity for a long time.

2.2 Youth, identity and fuel for conflict: youth engagement in violent conflicts

Youth, a term that refers to a transitional period in human life from childhood to adulthood, has no precise universally accepted definition. It therefore has no fixed age group across regions. For statistical purposes, United Nations defines youth as persons between ages 15 and 24 while leaving space for other regional definitions as well.

The problem in specifying a particular age group for youth lies in its mental aspect. Youth is more of a psychological condition than a statistical category. It refers to a period in life where one transforms from a dependent child to an independent adult, undergoing many emotional and intellectual changes in the process. According to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d.), youth can be defined in relation to education and employment where youth refers to the age group in which people leave compulsory education in search of their first employment opportunity. All these definitions illustrate that ‘youth’ is necessarily a period of transition and as such can involve many frustrations linked to ambiguous identity issues.

Despite the contested nature of the concept, youth are generally viewed as a problem than a solution by policy-makers especially in many developing countries (Fernando & Peiris, 2011), mainly due to the fact that youth impact conflicts as executors of violence. This idea is painfully biased as it disregards the dual dimensional nature of ‘conflict and youth’ in that youth are both perpetrators and victims of conflict/violence. Quoting the works of McEvoy-Levy, Fernando and Peiris (2011, p. 5) further state that youth...

... whether they belong to majorities or minorities in their countries, take part in armed conflict because of economic, social and political exclusion, threats to identity, layers of trauma, and direct and indirect experience of a variety of forms of violence and displacement. Young people’s experiences in war and violence are considered to be highly variable and different according to the context, gender, representative group, individual skills and competencies in negotiating one’s roles within the situation and group etc.

Youth involvement in violent conflicts often takes place in societies with repressive proclivities. When frustrations peak and identity is most easily contested, young people tend to devise solutions to their issues as a collectivity. This collective action also termed as Youth Engagement or the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a...
young person in an activity, with a focus outside of himself or herself (Centres of Excellence for Children’s Well-Being, n.d.), may result in either negative or positive consequences. However, the point to bear in mind is that irrespective of the normative value of consequences (i.e. whether good or bad), sustained involvement of youth for a particular cause whose general focus is on an issue that engages the interest of, and therefore is relevant to, the particular youth involved can be identified as youth engagement. Hence the defining element of youth engagement can be viewed as the sentiment that mobilises a youth to agitate for a particular cause. When youth engagement is driven by ethno-political worldviews of real or perceived injustices against the collectivity, youth tend to facilitate social change through organisational means as a viable option for the redressal of their grievances.

In cases where such injustices are viewed as being too ingrained in the system and, therefore, too powerful to be impacted through mere organisational methods, collective action of youth may find expression in bloody conflicts which are viewed as constituting an effective way of mobilising a group with a distinct identity and common grievances for the realisation of collective justice for the group. However, those likely to take up arms in response to socio-economic injustices too have varied reasons ranging from intensity of their hardships to the availability of stress release mechanisms (Peiris, 2008). It is, therefore, important to study as to from which sections of society armed struggles attract youth and what reasons compel such youth to join armed insurrections.

2.2.1 Youth bulges and domestic armed insurrections

Coined by German social scientist Gunnar Heinsohn in the mid-1990s, ‘Youth bulges’ refers to an unusually high proportion of youth roughly aged 15–25 relative to the total population, whose dense concentration is considered conducive for armed violence. According to Goldstone (2001, p. 95),

Youth have played a prominent role in political violence throughout recorded history: and the existence of a “youth bulge” (an unusually high proportion of youths 15–25 relative to the total population) has historically been associated with times of political crisis.

Examples include the role of youth in the French Revolution and in the rise of Nazism in Germany.

Among prominent historical events that have been linked to the existence of youth bulges is the role played by the historically large youth cohorts (caused by the rapid decline in infant mortality some 20 to 30 years earlier) in the French revolution of 1789, and the importance of economic depression hitting the largest German youth cohorts ever in explaining the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s. (Moller, 1968, pp. 240–244 as cited in Urdal, 2004, p. 2)

Nonetheless, the existence of a youth bulge does not essentially spell conflict. For a youth bulge to become problematic, conditions conducive for depravity, marginalisation and oppression that trouble youth have to be present. According to Urdal (2011), both opportunity and motive play a role in turning a youth bulge violent. Providing further examples he states that opportunity literature often concentrates on the ‘greed perspective’ while motive literature is related to the ‘grievance perspective’.

Situating the argument within a structural framework, proponents of the greed perspective argue that structural conditions such as cost of rebellion and unusually low recruitment costs may be an incentive for youth to resort to armed violence especially in the event that there is a large mass of youth willing to take up arms (Urdal, 2011). The
grievance perspective heavily draws from the Relative Deprivation Theory of Ted Gurr in order to map deviant behaviour. According to proponents of the grievance perspective, there could be an array of motives that propel political violence including but not limited to economic deprivation, social discrimination and democratic deficits. Commenting on the grievance perspective, Urdal further states,

Most of the literature on youth bulges and political violence arguably falls into this tradition. It focuses on how large youth cohorts facing institutional crowding in the labor market or educational system, lack of political openness, and crowding in urban centers may be aggrieved, paving the way for political violence. (2011, p. 3)

Most literature that draw a connection between youth bulges and domestic armed conflicts (See Braungart, 1984; Goldstone, 2001; Urdal, 2004, 2011) while acknowledging the impact of education, unemployment, urbanisation and lack of democracy on youth turning violent specifically studies the statistical category of youth between ages 15 and 24 and so on. However, as noted in the preceding discussion, youth do not have a specific age group but rather denote a psychological period of transition from childhood to adulthood. Such transitions and the time they take may differ across time, space, circumstances and even individual characteristics. Youth, therefore, is a socio-cultural category that needs to be given careful attention taking into account context-sensitive trends.

This is especially so when studying countries like Sri Lanka. Peiris (2008) aptly capturing the scenario states,

In several studies ... simple demographic definitions (that vary from one study to another – 18 to 35 years, or 15 to 24 years etc.) based exclusively on the age structure of the population have been employed for the purpose of defining and enumerating the “youth”. The measurement of the youth bulge on the basis of an age-cohort framework, uniformly applied to all countries, though perhaps permissible in large-scale comparative investigations such as that by Urdal, is not devoid of a methodological flaw which stems from the fact that, in reality, youth is a “post-childhood” and “pre-adulthood” phase of life, the duration and characteristics of which vary from one society to another ... in many societies of today “youth” represents “adolescence” extended over many years (even into the fourth decade of life) beyond physiological maturation (usually the early teens) ... Thus, in measuring the youth bulge in countries like Sri Lanka, it is necessary to take into account not merely the age structure of the population but other criteria that pertain to the recognition of “youth” as the transitional phase of life between childhood through adolescence to adulthood.

The succeeding discussion explains in detail how Tamil youth in Sri Lanka were not able to reach the social maturation deemed necessary for adulthood since they felt more agitated than the average Sinhalese youth due to identity issues related to employment, education and marriage. Their age span categorised as ‘youth’, then, extended beyond the typical years associated with youth due to their trying circumstances, resulting in reactionary politics, whereby they pinned all their grievances on the historic process of discrimination exercised against their ethnic group.

2.2.2 Integrated threat theory and youth-led conflicts

Integrated threat theory was introduced by Walter G. Stephan and Cookie Stephan in 2000. It theorises the nature of inter-group exchanges under conditions where one group considers itself threatened by an outside group and hence tends to entertain prejudices regarding said outside group. This theory effectively explains the Tamil youth insurrection in Sri Lanka, and its psychological underpinnings that were prompted by external conditions. Focusing on the state of race relations in the USA, Stephan and Stephan (2000)
argue that four types of threats cause prejudice. One or more of these threats could give rise to prejudice in an identity group regarding outsiders. The threats are as follows:

(1) Realistic threats
(2) Symbolic threats
(3) Intergroup anxiety
(4) Negative stereotypes

The first group of threats consists of threats posed by the out-group. These could manifest in the form of challenges to the survival of the in-group, its political and economic power, and its physical or material well-being. The fact that such threats are perceived by the in-group, however, does not always mean that they are real. The authors are careful to argue that threats can either exist objectively in the external world, or that they may be subjectively perceived by the in-group (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). According to them even the perception of threat suffices for prejudice and has the potential of instigating conflicts even in the absence of an actual threat.

Symbolic threats are threats generated by challenges posed to the in-group’s value system. They are rooted in the in-group’s belief in its own moral correctness and the perception that such correctness can be compromised – or even contaminated – through regular exposure to the out-group. Mere contact with an out-group that has a different value system, then, is perceived as a threat to the sustenance of in-group values.

Stephan and Stephan (2000) explain intergroup anxiety as a form of prejudice stemming from an individual’s personal feeling of threat experienced in intergroup interactions. Such feelings arise primarily because he/she expects negative outcomes for the self (such as embarrassment or guilt) from interactions with the out-group.

Finally, negative stereotypes are defined as negative generalisations about the in-group constructed by the out-group. Such constructions on the one hand cause the in-group to feel threatened by a pervasive sense of discrimination and on the other serve to create conflict on occasions in which the two groups come into contact.

Of these, the realistic threat explanation seems to successfully explain the main reason behind Sri Lankan Tamil youth taking up arms in order to carve an independent political entity for themselves out of the physical territory of Sri Lanka, as will be presented in the succeeding discussion. These realistic threats were expressed in structural failures on the part of the Sri Lankan state that continuously made provisions for the discrimination of a segment of its population for decades following independence. The in-group (the Tamil youth in this case) perceived the systematic discrimination as a threat to their political, economic, physical and material well-being and opted to divorce itself from the nation-state, pursue the creation of a separate state and rectify the historic injustice.

3. Sri Lanka: ethnicity, citizenship and politics of exclusion

Sri Lanka, an island off the southern coast of the Indian sub-continent is blessed with moderate climate, scenic beauty, a rich culture and best of all warm and smiling people. It is, therefore, rightfully called the ‘Land of Smiles’. However, the picture is not as bright as these smiles suggest. Sri Lanka has a history marred with ethnic strife that found expression in a protracted armed conflict that endured for a staggering three decades.

Since the scope of the paper only entails the role of youth in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, an exhaustive list of reasons that spurred the conflict will not be discussed. Only a brief mention of historical factors that divided the Sri Lankan society will be made in order to get a basic understanding about the background of the problem. This section will be
predominantly concerned with the lack of assurance Tamils had as rightful citizens of the country and the deadly response it elicited from Tamil youth towards the state.

### 3.1 Roots of the conflict

Even though in popular belief it was the infamous 1983 communal riots that sparked the violent armed struggle between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL), history of communal tensions date as far back as the beginning of British rule in the island. Pre-colonial Sri Lanka despite having had accommodated different ethnic, religious and caste groups holds no record to bear testimony to intense divisions between said groups. The British during their rule from 1796 to 1948 exercised their notorious principle of ‘Divide and Rule’ to fuel communal hatred in order that the imperial agenda may be executed with more ease.

Sri Lankans (then known as Ceylonese) like many other colonial subjects were naive enough to fall into the trap. The introduction of a market economy resulted in the creation of a new social group of elites who were quite different from the traditional ruling elite. This new group consisted of English educated anglicised locals who later went onto assume political office. They were only interested in securing their class interests as opposed to national interests. The election of Ponnambalam Ramanathan as the first Ceylonese representative in the legislature in 1910 shows clearly that class interests prevailed over ethnic interests during this era.

Class politics continued to dominantly inform politics of the island until the introduction of universal adult franchise in 1931. Even though the ruling elite (both Sinhalese and Tamils) opposed this move vehemently, the British granted franchise to the commoner. Seeing the wisdom of supporting this new system that so clearly assured them a continued hold on state power because of the numerical advantage, Sinhalese politicians craftily exploited it, a practice that did much to increase ethnic tensions in post-independence Ceylon.

#### 3.1.1 Politics of post-independence Ceylon

As Thambiah (1986, p. 7) correctly notes ‘... Sinhalaese-Tamil tensions and conflicts in the form known to us today are of relatively recent manufacture – a truly twentieth century phenomenon.’ These tensions owed much to the exploitative nature of the Sinhalese ruling class who fuelled communal tensions to their advantage. The first blow to the collective Tamil consciousness came in 1948 when Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake introduced the Citizenship Act depriving thousands of Up Country Tamils of their Ceylonese citizenship. Next it was the 1956 Language Act by Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike that left distaste in the Tamil mindset. This Act not only forced a notion of Sinhala supremacy into the Sri Lankan consciousness, but also denied generations of Tamils of employment opportunities.

The growing discontent of Tamils due to the isolation from the main body politic led to Tamil demands for more political autonomy. These demands were comprehensively articulated in the Bandaranaike–Chelvanayagam Pact of 1957 and Senanayake–Chelvanayagam Pact of 1965. However, both pacts failed in the face of fierce Sinhalese opposition.

Apart from political blunders, violence instigated by Sinhalese against Tamils engulfed the nation in the years 1957, 1977, 1981 and 1983. The incidence of violence was on the rise since 1977 and such occurrences became more frequent. What is the reason for
ethno-religious riots to become frequent from 1977? What was the response of Tamils to the violence unleashed against them? What role did Tamil youth play in retaliation? are some interesting questions worth investigating in this regard.

Newton Gunasinghe (2004, pp. 99–100) in his essay ‘The open economy and its impact on ethnic relations in Sri Lanka’ provides a detailed list of reasons for the increase of violence against Tamils after 1977.

1. Failure on the part of GoSL to provide a satisfactory political solution to the Tamil Question resulted in an armed struggle by military groups.
2. Violent fights between security personnel and militants being wrongly interpreted by the Sinhala population at large as fights between Sinhalese and Tamils due to calculated misinformation spread by some popular Sinhala press.
3. Mobs with political patronage taking law into their hands due to the general collapse of law and order in the country. These mobs played a major role in the 1983 riots.
4. Organised attempts of some extremist segments of Sinhala society to hit the Tamil entrepreneurial base resulted in pogroms.

What was the Tamil response to these developments? An answer to this question is essentially interlinked with the role of Tamil youth for it was the youth who took it upon themselves to rectify the erroneous situation.

3.2 Tamil youth and their separatist venture: case of the LTTE

Whilst the decline of political cordiality between Sinhalese and Tamils was the driving factor behind the growing ethnic rift, these issues were essentially underpinned by economic and social dynamics. These factors were what actually led Tamil youth to resort to an armed struggle since their presence was more obviously felt in regular life and as such encouraged more than politics did the perception that Tamil youth are unjustly deprived of certain citizenship rights that were in all fairness as much their entitlement as they were of the Sinhalese youth.

It is also interesting to note the role of a youth bulge in the case of Tamil youth taking up arms. Sri Lanka’s youth bulge as was mentioned earlier should be understood within a psycho-social frame in that Sri Lanka’s youth are not essentially confined to the age limit of 15–24 but go well past that age and in some cases even extends to the 40s since a person’s entry into a self-supporting adult is conditioned by many cultural factors. Commenting on the importance of the institution of marriage in preparing a person for adulthood, Peiris (2008) notes,

... among the more tradition-inclined segments of society, it is marriage that signifies a person’s entry into fully-fledged adult status. In the case of males, the capacity to be self-supporting, being a matrimonial prerequisite, is, in that sense, an indicator of personal economic independence. In the social ethos of these societies, moreover, it is marriage that invariably represents the end of the post-pubertal psychological stresses that feature the life of adolescents and unmarried young adults.

Presenting statistical evidence, he concludes that a reasonably bulky section of Sri Lanka’s youth remain unmarried well past their 20s.

... (from about the 1960s), among the males, the unmarried ratio has hovered around 50 per cent of the age cohort of 25–29 years, and almost a quarter even of the age cohort of 30–34 years. It thus seems that the genuine youth bulge in Sri Lanka, perceived, not in terms of arbitrary age thresholds of 15 and 24 or 29 years, but as a phenomenon of genuine relevance to
the understanding of social unrest, could well be as high as 40 per cent of the total ‘over 15’ population of the country. (Peiris, 2008)

The psychological pressures of the ‘youth’ in this definition were intrinsically interwoven with larger political and economic grievances, specifically of the Tamil population since discrimination at the state level in all economic, political and socio-cultural levels against Tamils was very much prevalent. The new lack of opportunities was strongly felt in the areas of language, employment and education.

Immediately following independence, Sri Lankan Tamils had more access to civil administration opportunities than Sinhalese as a result of the missionary English education that penetrated Tamil areas more intensely than the Sinhalese areas. Christian missionaries opened schools mainly in the Northern parts of the island either because they found Tamils to be more willing to get educated (Mehrotra, n.d., para 9) or merely to exercise their ‘Divide and Rule’ principle. Whatever their intentions were, the ultimate result was an English educated Tamil class overrepresented in government sector employment figures in proportions quite out of tune with their actual ethnic numbers, a fact that was distasteful to the Sinhala politicians in post-independence Ceylon.

By independence, Tamils accounted for over 30% of government services admissions, a share larger than their proportion in the general population – i.e., Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils have never totaled more than 25%. By 1956, it is estimated that Tamils constituted 50% of the clerical personnel of the railway, postal and customs services, 60% of all doctors, engineers and lawyers, and 40% of other labor forces. (World Bank, n.d., p. 3)

The Sinhala method of reversing this ‘injustice’ was perhaps more damaging than the method that caused the disparity in the first place. Prime Minister Bandaranaike, whose voter base comprised largely, if not entirely, of Sinhala nationalist factions whose support was mobilised and aggregated with the promise of nationalist reforms, made true of his promise and declared Sinhala the sole official language, straining the already fragile relations between Sinhalese and Tamils. The already highly selective and competitive affair of securing state sector employment was thus intensified by intentionally placing a bar that was sure to rule out Tamil participation to an alarmingly high level. As a result, minority figures kept dropping in the state-dominated job market. Rising unemployment figures were a natural reason for youth who were directly affected by the phenomenon to rebel against the state of which they once considered themselves an intrinsic part.

Despite having fair job openings in the private sector which was still English dominated, Tamil youth considered themselves to be relatively deprived because state sector employment was still considered the height of prestige for professionals in Sri Lanka. The drastic drop of Tamil figures in the state sector was quite conspicuous:

While 30 percent of the Ceylon Administration Service, 50 percent of the clerical service, 60 percent of the engineers and doctors, 40 percent of the armed forces, and 40 percent of the labour force in 1956 ... By 1970, they had plummeted to 5 percent, 5 percent, 10 percent, 1 percent, and 5 percent respectively. (DeVotta, 2006, as cited in OBriain, 2012)

It is also important to note that apart from gradually falling employment figures, the introduction of an open economy in 1977 also had a significant impact on Tamil youth discontent. The dawn of the open economy also marked a not-very-healthy politicisation process (one that had begun under the former government anyway) of the state administration sector which required political backing to secure employment. Most Tamils lacked such patronage because they were not properly integrated into the Sinhala-dominated political scene, which effectively kept them out of the sphere of new employment (Gunasinghe, 2004). Added to this, public sector development in the
Northern and Eastern provinces was not on par with the rest of the country, which made
the situation more disadvantageous for Tamils (Gunasinghe, 2004). Youth who were
already agitated with the prevailing situation saw no wisdom in following the footsteps of
their elders who demanded political solutions, lost faith in democracy and decided to take
affairs into their own hands.

Added to these was the issue of access to education. Education underwent a process of
ethnicising since the 1970s that limited Tamil students from accessing education as freely
as their Sinhalese counterparts. A standardisation policy adopted in 1971 introduced new
criteria for university entrance, according to which the number of students qualifying for
university entrance from each language was to be proportionate to the number of students
who sat for university entrance from each language (World Bank, n.d.). Thus for the first
time in the history of independent Ceylon, university entrance too was conditioned by
ethnic politics. In actual terms, this policy meant that Tamil students had to score higher in
order to get into university. Prior to the introduction of this policy, university entrance
depended purely on merit, and thus Tamils who had a better secondary education, thanks
to the advanced system of schooling in the Northern parts of the country, maintained
impressive figures at university entrance. Commenting on the adverse effects this
standardisation policy had on Tamils, the World Bank (n.d., pp. 3–4) observes,

Prior to this, individuals entered universities on the basis of national competitive examinations
marked on a uniform basis. Those who scored highest, gained access to different faculties in
universities irrespective of their ethnicity or districts from which they came. While there was
no inherent bias, Tamils from Jaffna and Colombo did particularly well – e.g., in the 1969–
1970 intake to science and engineering courses, Tamils constituted 35% and over 45% of the
intake in medical faculties ... Tamil representation in the science-based disciplines fell from
35% in 1970 to 19% in 1975, while Sinhalese representation in all disciplines increased quite
dramatically.

Though the policy was abolished in 1977, Tamil youth considered this to be a
calculated move against Tamils at large since Tamil representation in the higher education
system was severely hampered by this policy.

While an array of other reasons including issues pertaining to land distribution and
political discontent were adding one glum colour after another to the fabric of ethnic
rivalry, Tamil youth in particular were directly affected in the spheres of language,
education and employment, results of which had a tremendous impact on radicalising
some of them. Language, education and employment are three areas that play a crucial role
in preparing youth for adulthood, especially in the traditional-male dominated Tamil
society where a young man is typically expected to be self-sufficient enough to look after
his wife and also a brother was expected to provide his ‘soon to be bride’ sister’s in-laws
with a substantial amount of gold.1 Psychological pressures were so high that any man who
fell behind these expectations would naturally be frustrated and seek avenues (be it
peaceful or aggressive) to overcome this misery.

While the percentage of people endorsing terrorism in any country is less compared to
the numbers that oppose it, the youth is likely to comprise the majority of supporters
because of the impulsive nature of their age that demands prompt – if idealistic – actions
to undo prolonged processes of systematic discrimination as has been the case in Sri
Lanka. Although development practitioners in general consider youth engagement as a
positive phenomenon, given the nature of the activity the youth usually engages in and the
need to constantly re-emphasise on the positive ends towards which the youth resource
could be deployed, it should be noted that youth engagement may in some instances mean
something negative. Overlooking this crucial fact might cost the opportunity of studying
the reasons for and preventing the re-emergence of such harmful tendencies among the youth. The Sri Lankan case stands as a classic example of negative youth engagement that did much harm not only to the youth who were directly involved but also to generations of youth who followed them.

The ethnic conflict instigated by short-sighted Sinhalese politicians and fuelled by a minority of extremist factions of the Sinhala population did not until the 1980s transcend the boundaries of macro politics, essentially existing in the form of political bargaining between leaders of the two ethnicities. By the 1970s, Tamil youth began to feel that their leaders were not able to protect their rights as lawful citizens of Sri Lanka and to accord them their due place in the land they call home. Frustrated with the existing conditions, a compelling youth by the name of Velupillai Prabhakaran whom most discriminated young Tamils viewed as their saviour mobilised the disgruntled sections of Tamil youth towards the dear aspiration of a homeland where they could live with dignity. Hence the fight for a separate Tamil Eelam within the sovereign boundaries of Sri Lanka was started by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an organisation that was to grow muscle in years to come and become one of the world’s deadliest terrorist organisations.

Interestingly, it was not only the motives stemming from actual grievances as explained above that played a role in Tamil youth resorting to armed violence. They also had the opportunity to rally a huge mass of supporters mainly due to the fact that there was a bulk of unemployed youth (a result of a population boom in the 1950s leading to an exponential increase in the youth population in the 1970s) who perceived the state and its majority ethnicity to be the perpetrators of their misery. Their willingness to subject themselves to tremendous suffering in the course of a long fought liberation war as was demonstrated by many suicide attacks carried out by young LTTE cadres, a lifetime pledge that would only be ended with death in combat or in the event of being captured by taking their life through a cyanide capsule, bear testimony to the fact that the grievances they experienced as a young group of people were very real and needed immediate remedial action. Their failed quest for a separate state, however, came at the cost of life and property damage of untold proportions.

Sri Lanka’s case thus was not so much the problem of the absence of a youth policy but of the presence of discriminatory ethnic policies. However, given the absence of a youth policy that targets specifically youth with answers to their issues, it could be persuasively argued that the chances of the Tamil youth not resorting to violence were curtailed.

The Tamil youth had a myriad of grievances inextricably interwoven with their ethnicity that went unanswered. While the Sinhalese youth too were disgruntled with the state in the 1970s and 1980s that led to two bloody youth insurrections, both suppressed by the state, Tamil youth were able to garner greater local and international support on ethnic grounds that legitimised their struggle to a greater extent than that of the Sinhalese youth.

The Tamil struggle thus became a classic example of real threats branching from actual grievances at work in inter-group relations. Restricted access to education and employment, two key determinants of the transition to adulthood, inevitably resulted in a downward turn in the growth of Tamil youth as responsible adults. For instance a drawback in education can hinder matrimonial prospects, and also harm the self-esteem of the individual in a decisive manner. When this happens on a large scale to a noticeably specific group, collective action to counter the trend among members of the in-group will be inevitable. In Sri Lanka, the duty of countering discrimination was assumed by the Tamil Youth, and the particular method they opted to fight the growing threat was armed struggle.
3.3 Youth in post-conflict Sri Lanka

Three decades of wasted prospects, lost opportunities and thousands of deaths later, Sri Lanka today is on the path of reconciliation, with youth playing a major role to propel the country there. The terrible expression of youth discontent and its staggering cost have made policy-makers today realise the crucial role of youth as potent forces of change. With an aim to engage this potent dynamism for positive change and to construct an inclusive notion of citizenship by cultivating strong bonds between youth from different ethnic groups of the country, post-conflict Sri Lanka finds herself more concerned about empowering youth communities as a future investment for sustainable peace than ever before.

Youth being in a transitional stage are impressionable and as such are easily influenced by certain notions passed onto them by older generations. In a post-conflict context such as in Sri Lanka, such identities are necessarily informed by ethnic demarcations which can have adverse effects on sustainable peace. Therefore, a healthy youth population is paramount to reverse the vicious cycle of hatred that plagued the country ever since independence.

Interestingly, the current post-conflict situation in the island bears testimony to the growing tendency of Sri Lankan youth to actively participate in constructive societal transformation through youth-led organisations dedicated to reconciliation. This is perhaps due to the fact that youth who were born into war and had witnessed the terrible consequences of it have realised the futility of such violent ventures that result only in destruction. They, therefore, have become the most ardent proponents of peace and demonstrate a promisingly strong need to avoid taking a path back to violence at any cost. Many initiatives are being taken all around the country displaying the willingness of youth to be dedicated to post-conflict reconciliation and standup as ‘One Nation One People’.

However, the state should take care not to take such feelings of common citizenship for granted and fulfil its role in order not to risk a relapse into armed conflict. Since policy blunders were chiefly responsible for the violent insurrection of Tamil youth in the 1980s, remedial initiatives have to be made at the highest level to negate the effects of lingering bitterness and successfully construct and promote reciprocal trust as well as inclusive citizenship in the collective mindset of all Tamils especially youth in general and radicalised segments of Tamil youth in particular. For this to be realised, the government has to generate viable livelihoods for youth and embark upon a process of case-by-case healing especially when dealing with ex-LTTE cadres who were directly exposed to a hateful picture of the Sinhalese. The state has to guarantee rights of all her citizens as equal, sovereign subjects irrespective of their ethno-religious affiliation. If this is not realised, the passions of youth might yet again be unleashed in favour of destruction instead of positive change as is now the case.

On a positive note, Sri Lanka taking stock of her current position quite recently, specifically in February 2014 formulated a Youth Policy³ with the intention of inculcating a feeling of civic consciousness among the youth and addressing pressing concerns of the local youth. This step, taken apparently through an appreciation of the dreadful consequences of youth alienation, is commendable as a first step towards grooming a generation of responsible youth. For Sri Lanka, youth empowerment or lack thereof, was and continues to be the driving force of social change.

4. Conclusion

This paper has presented the nexus between youth unrest and the absence of citizenship feelings through a case study of Sri Lanka. Despite being legally recognised as lawful
citizens of a country, certain segments of society might resort to violence if state mechanisms continue to exclude them from the full range of benefits they are entitled to by virtue of their membership in the nation-state.

Sri Lanka stands a monumental example that illustrates how youth-related issues are directly linked to the strength of a nation and how, if not properly integrated into an inclusive citizenship, youth can be a destructive force that might challenge and even destroy the very foundation of a nation. Youth, therefore, have to be ensured equal access to employment, education and political opportunities so as to prevent their grievances from intensifying enough to crack the integrative cement of a nation.

The creation of the LTTE illustrates the failure on the part of the Sri Lankan state in facilitating genuine fraternity between and equal opportunities for all her ethnic communities. Discrimination specifically in the areas of language, education and employment that had direct and adverse effects on the Tamil youth indicated how their political leaders had sadly failed in winning them equal status as Sri Lankan citizens. In response, they embarked on a secessionist movement of which the ultimate goal was the creation of a separate state where they would be at liberty to exercise their own free will for the benefit of Tamils and to provide the Tamil identity with a respectable status.

The Integrated Threat Theory under its ‘realistic threats’ criterion comprehensively explains the above scenario. The systematic and sustained discrimination against the Tamils exercised by the Sri Lankan state for decades following independence constituted a ‘real’ threat that challenged the former’s political, economic and social well-being. The structural flaws marginalising Tamils perpetuated by the Sinhalese ruling class and endorsed by a fraction of its people thus provided an incentive strong enough for the Tamils, particularly Tamil youth who faced the challenge of claiming an acceptable standard of life amidst such discrimination, to retaliate violently. The fact that such retaliation found expression in a terrible war that drained the better part of the island’s resources for nearly three decades stands testimony to how horribly things could go wrong if a state fails to constructively manage its youth resource.

The militancy of Tamil youth also brings to fore the importance of youth bulges in causing political violence and the psychological stresses youth incur due to discriminatory state policies. Lack of economic and educational opportunities and the failure of state mechanisms to address such pressing issues make a compelling case for youth to get frustrated with prevailing mechanisms and to channel their frustrations in aggressive manners.

Youth in post-conflict Sri Lanka, however, have assumed the role of agents of positive change and boarded the cause of creating a united Sri Lanka devoid of ethno-religious hatred.

Numerically larger and more significant participation of youth in all spheres of society as active citizens is therefore pivotal in the attainment of sustainable peace. State mechanisms have to be more accommodative to realise this ideal. Unity within diversity in such instances will make a more telling case for emotional citizenship.

The paper concludes by juxtaposing the different roles played by Sri Lankan youth in the initiation of the three decades long bloody conflict and in attaining peace in a post-conflict scenario. It hints that youth should not be ignored when negotiating citizenship ideals since they have the potential to have a heavy impact on society, negative or otherwise. Since they comprise a large portion of society, their impact on citizenship, and everything else, is very much felt and thus they need to be mobilised to have a feeling for ‘One Nation One People’, the attainment of which will only be possible where there is genuine commitment to address their grievances be they political, economic or social.
Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes
1. For a detailed analysis of the dowry system in Tamil society including conservative ideas on marriage, see Forum on Dowry System in Tamil Society (2006).
2. For a brief overview of Sri Lanka’s population dynamics, see Abeykoon, 2011 at http://www.ihp.lk/publications/docs/Successtory.pdf.
3. Full text can be accessed online at http://www.wcy2014.com/pdf/nyp-english.pdf. (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development, 2014)

Notes on contributors
Nipunika O. Lecamwasam works as a Research Coordination Assistant at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) – Cultural Centre, Colombo, Sri Lanka. As an independent researcher she carries out research pertaining to youth politics, democratisation and post-conflict reconciliation.

References
Abeykoon, A. T. P. L. (2011). Sri Lanka’s success story in population management: A lesson for other programmes Retrieved from http://www.ihp.lk/publications/docs/Successtory.pdf
Braungart, R. G. (1984). Historical and Generational Patterns of Youth Movements: A Global Perspective. Comparative Social Research, 7, 3–62.
Centres of Excellence for Children’s Well-Being. (n.d.). What is youth engagement? Retrieved from http://www.engagementcentre.ca/files/Whatis_WEB_e.pdf
Fernando, M., & Peiris, S. (2011). From agents of violence to agents of peace. Colombo. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. Retrieved from http://www.flict.org/publications/Youth.pdf
Forum on Dowry System in Tamil Society. (2006). In Tamilnation.org. Retrieved from http://tamilnation.co/forum/dowry/index.htm
Goldstone, J. A. (2001). Demography, environment, and security. In P. F. Diehl & N. Petter Gleditsch (Eds.), Environmental conflict (pp. 84–108). Boulder, CO: Westview.
Gunasinghe, N. (2004). The open economy and its impact on ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. In D. Winslow & M. D. Voost (Eds.), Economy, culture and civil war in Sri Lanka (pp. 99–114). Retrieved from http://books.google.lk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=DLWHfMsLipAC&oi=fnd&pg=PA99&dq=citizenship%20failures%20and%201983%20riots%20in%20Sri%20Lanka&ots=ewinLbuOp&_sig=DjKgK3JLiOh270LdO7OiMmSH2mQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false
Haas, C. (2002). What is citizenship: An introduction to the concept an alternative models of citizenship. Retrieved from http://www.epice-net.org/grundtvig/docs/citizenship%20haas.pdf
Mehrotra, O. N. (n.d.). Ethnic strife in Sri Lanka. Retrieved from http://www.idsa-india.org/an-jan-9.html
Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development. (2014). National youth policy Sri Lanka. Retrieved from http://www.wcy2014.com/pdf/nyp-english.pdf
OBriain, D. (2012). Sri Lanka, ethnic conflict, and the rise of a violent secessionist movement. e-International Relations. Retrieved from http://www.e-ir.info/2012/11/28/sri-lanka-ethnic-conflict-and-the-rise-of-a-violent-secessionist-movement/
Peiris, G. H. (2008). Sri Lanka: Youth unrest and inter-group conflict. Faultlines, 19. Retrieved from http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume19/Article5.htm
Somers, M. R. (1993). Citizenship and the place of the public sphere: law, community, and political culture in the transition to democracy. American Sociological Review, 58, 587–620. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/209627710.2307/2096277
Stephan, W. G., & Stephan, C. W. (2000). An integrated threat theory of prejudice. In S. Oskamp (Ed.), Reducing prejudice and discrimination (pp. 23–45). Retrieved from http://books.google.lk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=aOyFEy-yzMoC&oi=fnd&pg=PA23&dq=
integrated + threat + theory + stephan + and + stephan + 2000 & ots = oJLGbWrMoK & sig = _Vt409s8QCet6NFkZhlItH1n-dM & redir_esc = y & v = onepage & q & f = false

Tambiah, S. J. (1986). *Sri Lanka: Ethnic fratricide and the dismantling of democracy*. Retrieved from http://books.google.lk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=3V2xRnKcOEAC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&q=+citizenship+failures+and+and+1983+riots+in+Sri+lanka&ots=62l0nb7wY&sig=_5dTgCi8zhAK8IT58n7wRsTZ-mQ&redir_esc=y&v=onepage&f=false

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (n.d.). *What do we mean by 'youth'?* Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/youth-definition/

Urdal, H. (2004). *The devil in the demographics: the effect of youth bulges on domestic armed conflict, 1950–2000*. Washington, DC. World Bank. Retrieved from http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2004/07/28/000012009_20040728162225/Rendered/PDF/29740.pdf

Urdal, H. (2011). *A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence*. New York, NY. United Nations. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/egm-adolescents/p10_urdal.pdf

World Bank. (n.d.). *The root causes of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka*. Retrieved from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTSRILANKA/Resources/App1.pdf