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Buddhist Civilisational Populism in Sri Lanka: Colonial Identity Formation, Post-War Othering, and Present Crises

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the evolution of Buddhist civilisational populism in modern Sri Lankan politics and civil society. I do this by historicising early forms of Buddhist civilisational populism in the country, during its occupation by the British Empire (1815–1945). As I discuss in this paper, some of the key concepts of “civilisationism” central to leading social and political movements in British Ceylon were a result of the disruptions caused by centuries of European colonial rule. Consequently, issues of identity and belonging have carried on to the post-independence context. In this paper, I discuss what these dynamics could possibly mean for the future of Sri Lankan politics and society, in the wake of the nation’s debilitating economic crisis last year.

Keywords: civilisational populism; Sri Lanka; Buddhist nationalism; anti-colonialism; ethnic conflict

1. Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the evolution of Buddhist civilisational populism in modern Sri Lankan politics and civil society. I do this by historicising early forms of Buddhist civilisational populism in the country, during its occupation by the British Empire (1815–1945). This is important as anti-colonial sentiments provide a powerful vocabulary, which has been observed, as in many other post-colonial societies, to resonate with the masses even several decades after liberation from colonial rule. This makes it important to understand why such political registers continue to have validity in substantially different national (and global) circumstances.

As I discuss in this paper, some of the key concepts of “civilisationism” central to leading social and political movements in British Ceylon (which Sri Lanka was previously known as) were a result of the disruptions caused by centuries of European colonial rule. Much of the colonising discourse to legitimise violent conquest and rule of foreign lands, as in the case of British rule in Ceylon, was performed along the idea of a “civilizing” mission of “lesser-developed” and “backward” colonies. In anti-colonial discourse, the colonial subject was often found to have internalised and to mimic such logics of civilisational superiority. In the speech and thought of the well-known Sinhala Buddhist nationalist, Anagarika Dharmapala, we therefore observe the idea of a superior Aryan Buddhist civilisation juxtaposed against not only the Christian crusader, but also the Dravidian Tamil and the Moor “Other”.

These issues of identity and belonging have carried on to the post-independence context. Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism was institutionalised at the level of the constitution, laws, and state institutions, deeply penetrated social relations, and violently expressed itself in an ethnic conflict of around 26 years between the state and separatist Tamils. In the context of this war, the Sinhalese majority has been characterised in academic and civil society commentary as one with a “minority mindset” due to the much larger Tamil constituency living just over the Palk Straits in neighbouring India. As a post-war society, this tendency of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists to define existential “threats” as coming from outside the nation has continued, this time in the form of fighting global Islamist extremism.



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In this paper, I discuss what these dynamics possibly mean for the future of Sri Lankan politics and society: Will religion and othering of communities along civilisational terms continue to be exploited by politicians? Will more inclusive counter-narratives succeed in the content of its recent and multiple crises? A discussion of civilisational populism is needed first.

2. Civilisational Populism: Religion, the People, and Belonging beyond and within the Nation-State

2.1. Populism, the People and the Enemy 'Other'

The issue of populist politics and leadership is now mainstream. This can be mainly attributed to the highly mediatised and personalistic politics that have been associated with populist leaders, foremost of whom was former US president Donald Trump. Donald Trump's political brand, very different to the traditional types of political leadership previously seen in the United States, was a key moment for debates on political systems and democracy.

The US has long been the champion of liberal democracy, despite ironically fighting "long wars" in its name in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and a number of proxy wars, creating untold human suffering and destruction in these invaded countries. Under Donald Trump, these struggles were, in addition, centred and contested within the United States. The rise of a populist, anti-establishment political leader, who was more explicitly in favour of Judeo-Christian values and less reluctant in "othering" immigrants from parts of the non-European world, brought to the forefront the issue of identity politics and its role in liberal democratic systems. The revival and international solidarity movements, inspired by Black Lives Matter, which are drawing clear connections between struggles against racism, white supremacy, and new and old forms of colonialism, recognise the danger and violence inherent to these expressions of populist politics, i.e., in the form of majoritarianism.

Despite this, scholars have pointed out that populism is not a new phenomenon, and has been an integral part of the process of democratisation in the 19th century (Urbinati 2019, p. 112). However, in the past, it has been characterised as a "subspecies of fascism" (Urbinati 2019, p. 112) or as a result of incomplete processes of modernisation (Minogue 1969); in more positive interpretations of it, it has been viewed as a healthy expression of democracy (Laclau 2005). Its more ubiquitous presence, especially in advanced liberal constitutional democracies, is therefore one explanation of renewed interest in it (Urbinati 2019, p. 112). The rise of populism over the last decade or so is also possibly a result of the failure of democratic political systems to reduce social inequality levels, with the resulting social discontents being mobilised thereafter using identity politics (an integral part of populist politics).

Populism's content varies depending on the context, but there are some common elements to it, such as the division of "the people" and "the established elite" (Mudde 2010, p. 1175), and it thus involves a politics of exclusion and inclusion. Here, the people can refer to a class dimension (such as the ordinary, working class people) and/or a racial-religious dimension (such as a majority racial or religious group). "The people" are framed in such a way as being under threat and facing injustice, therefore deserving political priority (Hall 1985, p. 116). This is done through a narrative of historical injustice or "authentic" claims to nationalness over an alien (often racialised) "Other" group. Rogers Brubaker characterises the polarised "us vs. them" opposition as having vertical and horizontal dimensions: "In the vertical dimension, constitutive of populism as such, the opposition is between 'the people' and 'the elite' [. . .] In the horizontal dimension, the opposition is between insiders and outsiders: between 'people like us', those who share our way of life, and those on the outside who are said to threaten our way of life" (Brubaker 2017, p. 1192).

Debates on populism are therefore often in relation to the quality of democracy, as it involves power being concentrated within a small group of elite, its politics of representation being narrow and exclusive, and the state's coercive apparatus being mobilised to

tighten the establishment's grip on power (Germani 1978; Morelock 2018). Populist politics downplay the value of democratic institutions and processes, as direct relations between the populist leader and "the people" are portrayed as being more effective and responsive to the people's needs (Stockemer 2018).

The irony of populism is that, while legitimising its politics through electoral politics (i.e., showing an electoral majority), in the process it subverts democratic processes or at least seeks to do so, and ends up weakening the very future of populist politics (Urbinati 2019, p. 119). For example, some populist movements direct efforts at weakening key and constitutionally enshrined aspects of liberal democracy (such as the protection of minority communities' rights over majority demagoguery). This is due to the charge that liberal and constitutional democratic systems fail to provide adequate representation for the majority in an overdrive to protect and ensure minority rights in the name of equality: "it questions electoral or mandate representation because of the gap it creates between the people as the principle of legitimacy and the people as an actual social reality, and thus between the electors and the elected" (Urbinati 2019, p. 113).

Right-wing populism is typically considered authoritarian by definition, while left-wing populism may or may not be authoritarian (Morelock and Narita 2018, pp. 140–41). This distinction lies in the exclusionary politics of representation and redistribution in right-wing populism, and of the exclusionary *or* inclusionary nature of such politics in left-wing populism.¹ That is, right-wing populism is often pre-occupied with the defence of a class already occupying a position of relative privilege in society, whereas this is not always the case with left-wing populism (Morelock and Narita 2018, p. 141). A distinction between right-wing and left-wing populism may not always be possible, however, because it "is not an ideology or a political regime, and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content", but rather is a "way of doing politics" (Mouffe 2016).

As Rogers Brubaker points out, there are instances of secularism being criticised by the left and reclaimed by the right, as, for example, the "national-populist right proclaims its liberalism and its commitment to philosemitism, gender equality, gay rights, and freedom of speech" (Brubaker 2017, pp. 1211–12). These contradictions are not too surprising when one observes how there is almost always a gap between political rhetoric that seeks to appeal to as many voters as possible, and implementation that involves negotiating among various interest groups while consolidating power at the same time.

Populist discourse emphasises various issues; some populist movements mobilise discontent by framing religion, the nation, and the civilisation of the majority people as facing existential threat. Not being mutually exclusive, others emphasise centre–periphery and rural–urban disparities, and ideas of modernisation and globalisation against traditionalism and inward-looking, closed economies (Urbinati 2019, p. 115).

2.2. Civilisational Populism

In this article, I use the concept of "civilisational populism" to analyse populist movements and parties in Sri Lanka. In civilisational populism, a civilisational identity becomes the defining element of "the people". This provides a basis for an in-group to define themselves in relation to an out-group who belong to a "foreign" civilization, or elites from the majority group who are ostensibly betraying their civilisation for power (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b, p. 8).

As mentioned in this paper's introduction, the idea of different and competing civilisations providing the basis for political mobilization is not new; it is a defining aspect of the Enlightenment and European colonialism. The social constructs of race, as well as religion, are closely tied to the idea of civilisation. It is not unexpected that populist discourse would take on civilisational dimensions, as many of the forces that impact modern societies are global in nature, and historically, as well as in the present, were never limited to within the borders of the nation-state.

Populism wants to fill that gap and make its people the measure of political justice and legitimacy, because it claims that this is the only strategy to respect the sovereign power

of the nation against its internal and external enemies, such as the powerful few, the establishment, global capitalism, immigration, or Islamic fundamentalism—the determinant factors in today’s successful populist rhetoric (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Urbinati 2019, p. 115).

With the end of the Cold War and the ideological rivalry of communism and capitalism becoming less clear-cut, as well as the events of 9/11, the idea of religious-centric civilisations as the fault line of global politics became mainstream (Lewis 1990; Huntington 1993; Haynes 2017, p. 63). These issues have since taken on the centre stage, with the mainstreaming of right wing and populist political leaders, parties, and discourse, mainly associated with the social forces around the election of President Trump in the USA, but also in European constitutional democracies, such as the politics surrounding France’s Marine Le Pen and Hungary’s Victor Orbán. Its study is important due to the threat that such “anti-democratic” politics holds for the rights and safety of minority communities, who are at the receiving end of populist hate speech and policies of violent exclusion.

In civilisational populism, there is a “clear transnational and international element” (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b, p. 19). The threat is to the nation, but also to a civilisation. Many civilisational populists are nationalists, in that the discourse is about the self and belonging to “the nation” (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022a, p. 24). However, civilisational populism can also be considered as distinct from “nationalism”: “civilisational discourse refers to a different kind of imagined community, located at a different level of cultural and political space, than national discourse” (Brubaker 2017, p. 1211). The populist promise is one of restoration of a civilisation to its former glory (despite its actual implementation being now imagined within the boundaries of the nation state), and “could range from policies that discriminate on the basis of ethnicity and/or religion and which undermine democratic processes and institutions” (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b, p. 2).

Civilisational identity is, as in the case of Ceylon, often co-constitutive with religion. That is, religion was not just one among many identity markers instrumentalised within civilisational populist politics. Instead, the dominant religion of the given civilisation played a “defining role in delineating the boundaries of said civilisations” (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022a, p. 6). Indeed, there are many overlaps in the logics of religion and populism. They both sacralise one group and ideology, and create a (false) dichotomy with an evil or corrupt “Other” and their own political party or movement as righteous, holy and good (Mudde 2004, p. 543; Barton et al. 2021, p. 3). Invoking religion usually generates a very powerful emotional response among the target audience (Moffitt 2016, p. 52). In sacralising politics in this way, a critique of norms closely associated with liberal democracy, such as secularism and religious plurality, is made.

Over the past decade, the rise of civilisational populism in the West has been documented and debated by many scholars. They analyse how populists use Judeo-Christianity “to denote a secular, liberal order distinct from Islam, reflecting the culturalization of Christian religion in Europe” (Faber 2018; Hall 2021; Haraszti 2015; Kaya and Tecmen 2019; Vollard 2013, p. 94). This “civilisational turn” in European populism has been identified by some scholars as a (commonly) right-wing response to the immigration of large numbers of Muslims in Europe (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b, p. 4), following the 9/11 attacks and the Allied “war on terror” in the Middle East. There are analyses of the rise of civilisational populism in non-Western societies too, such as on Islamist, Hindu, and Buddhist civilisational populism (Ammassari 2018; Gamage 2021; Hadiz 2016; Lefèvre 2020; Jayasinghe 2021; Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b).

The presence of civilisational populism in politics around the world reveals the global nature of these social struggles. This means that civilisational populism in the Global South is fundamentally informed by the particular histories and structural power relations that they are embedded in in the post-independence context. These struggles are not only over identities and values, but are also deeply rooted in global political economy. Civilisational populism in the Global South is fundamentally informed by historical struggles against exploitation and the centralisation of resources within the elite and colonial metropole, in the

colonies' experience of colonialism and capitalism. These struggles continue in the context of subsequent global capitalist relations, within which the former is deeply embedded.

In many Global South countries, most of which were former colonies of European powers, radical left-wing populists have been observed to instrumentalise civilisation-based identity politics (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b, p. 2). However, civilisational populism in the Global South has been observed to be distinctly different to its politics in the Western world, with Western values and ideas coming under attack, along with ethnic and religious minorities that have inhabited these countries historically, and who do not fit the category of recent immigrants, as in the West (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022a, p. 24).

In British Ceylon, for example, contemporary civilisational populism borrowed extensively from 19th and early 20th anti-colonial discourse that developed in response to colonial rule. At the time, anti-colonial movements were still looking for frames of reference for their nascent nationalism. Because the nation-state was still not final in its form, and independence was yet to come many decades later, populism during this period was often framed in civilisational terms. Because this anti-colonial discourse promised the upliftment of material conditions, with the state playing a foremost role in achieving this social equality and egalitarianism, as opposed to the violence and hierarchy under colonial rule, it was very much aligned with left-wing and social democratic sentiments. As we see in Sri Lanka, religion *and* socialism can be combined with populism, and it is to a discussion on this that I move next.

3. Colonial Rule and Early Buddhist Civilisational Populism

The way in which civilisational populism mobilises support and impacts socio-political dynamics varies across different contexts and periods of time. In this section, I examine civilisational populism as present within a dominant strand of anti-colonial discourse in British Ceylon (1815–1948). This anti-colonial discourse by the Buddhist Revivalist movement in the late 19th century and early 20th century is perceived as providing the broad nationalist framework for post-independence politics in Sri Lanka. I argue that a closer examination of this discourse reveals that its civilisational populism embedded nationalism within a broader civilisational re-imagination. This formatively determined the nature of nationalist politics and post-independence democracy in Sri Lanka.

European colonial rule in Ceylon uprooted the material world of the native peoples, as well as their traditional epistemologies. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Buddhist Revivalist Movement was foremost in mobilizing the masses against colonial rule, and comprised mainly low-country Sinhala Buddhist elites, as part of an educated middle class. A pioneering figure of this movement was Anagarika Dharmapala, who is sometimes known as the “founding father” of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Ceylon (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, p. 205). The movement's Buddhist civilisational populism provided a pseudo-historical framework for dispossessed Sinhala Buddhist nationalists at the time, in order to make sense of their place in the world.

Dharmapala played a leading role in cultivating among the (primarily rural) masses a nationalist awareness of the political, economic, and social issues that determined their impoverished status (Guruge 1965, p. lxvii). His religious- and racial-infused nationalist discourse also resonated with a native sense of lost identity, especially among (majority Sinhalese) rural communities in Ceylon who had been vulnerable to the forces of colonial extraction and capitalist modernity.

Within Buddhist Revivalist thought, Sinhalese ethnicity and Buddhism were conflated as one and the same: “Sinhala ethnicity was integrated into the new conception of Buddhism, so that an affirmation made on behalf of Buddhism became an affirmation of Sinhala ethnicity as well” (Seneviratne 1999, p. 26). This conflation of “Sinhala” and “Buddhist” identities as one made ethno-religious identity the main fault line of nationalist politics, over caste (Gunawardena 1984, p. 41).

Importantly, ideas on nationalist authenticity mobilised within this discourse were immediately tied to the Sinhala Buddhist peasant and village. Invoking a past rural

greatness enabled Buddhist Revivalists to challenge the general colonial myth of the colonised being a “people without history” (Wolf 1982). On one occasion, Dharmapala went so far as to claim that history was cyclical and that a renaissance of Sinhalese Buddhist civilisation must surely follow its present state of oppression (Guruge 1965, p. 31). There is an element of nostalgia here that is invoked through this discourse—a strategy common to many identitarian populists around the world. The imagined egalitarian and democratic, self-sustaining rural order invoked in this discourse is not compatible, however, with the actual feudal and caste-based society found in pre-colonial Ceylon (Morrison et al. 1979, pp. 11–12).

In examining why civilisational populism was mobilized within Buddhist Revivalist discourse, it is important to recognize its historical backdrop. Anti-colonial resistance pushed back against the global structures of colonialism and capitalism, and was therefore not restricted to the borders of a nation state. Anti-colonial discourse was transnational, in that it was part of a broader anti-colonial resistance in colonies around the world. At the turn of the 20th century, this tricontinental (Asia, Africa, Latin America) solidarity was largely seen at the level of the Communist International, whose ideas took off in Ceylon only much later under the leadership of the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), especially in the 1930s. The nationalist version of this anti-colonial, transnational solidarity was later seen in initiatives such as the 1955 Bandung Conference.

While these ideological currents did not significantly inform the Buddhist Revivalist Movement, which was taking form much earlier, towards the second half of the 19th century, the influence of anti-colonial and transnational ideas influenced its core agenda. For example, the Temperance Movement in Ceylon was closely linked to the Buddhist Revivalist movement, but also included other groups, such as the Hindu revivalists who agitated against the educational and societal monopoly of Christian missionaries on the island (Richardson 1997, p. 7). It drew inspiration from the Temperance Movement in America in the 1880s, which soon became a global movement hinged on morality, such as avoiding intoxicating substances, sensual experiences, and profanity (Prothero 1995, p. 291).

Another example of trans-national influences on national movements was the Theosophical Society, which originated in America in 1875. The Theosophical Society had a significant impact on the Temperance Movement in Ceylon, and especially on the Buddhist Revivalist Movement. It emphasised the commonality of religions, with a particular interest in studying and resuscitating Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, towards a “Universal Brotherhood of Humanity”. Despite retaining several of the ideas on liberal modernisation and racialism that were found within the official colonial discourse in Ceylon, the Theosophical Society is thought to have significantly influenced the Revivalist Movement’s framing of a more civilisational, transnational Buddhism in opposition to the colonizer’s attempts at homogeneity and submission to the logics of Christianity or secularism.

Dharmapala’s missionary work during his time in the Theosophical Society was transnational. During his missionary work in India as part of the Theosophical Society, the influence of Bengali society and politics, and ideas such as boycott, *swadeshi* (country made) and *swaraj* (self-rule), on Dharmapala was significant (Amunugama 1991, p. 565). He exhorted the Sinhalese to follow the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, and not to pay mere lip service to them while leading Western lifestyles (Amunugama 1991, p. 588). His nationalist politics in Ceylon, and the anti-colonial sentiments within them, such as the denigration of the British and their culture, is observed to have followed similar politics to those playing out in Bengal at the time (Amunugama 1991, pp. 584–85).

The Anagarika also travelled extensively around the world to carry out Buddhist missionary work, and his speeches were tailored to respective audiences and spaces, which Anne M. Blackburn calls “locative pluralisms” (Blackburn 2010, p. 210). In Ceylon, therefore, the Buddhism that Dharmapala preached was more a social and political formation than a world religion, and was positioned in antagonism to the religion of the col-

onizer (Christianity) *and* of ethno-religious minorities (Hinduism and Islam) in the country. In India, however, his Buddhism was perfectly compatible with Hinduism, just as his British Buddhism was comfortable with Christianity, with a place for both the Hindu Gods and the Christian God (Kemper 2015, p. 427).

A second key feature of Buddhist civilisational populism during this period was its racialism, influenced by European sensibilities of social Darwinism, Aryan civilisationalism, and anti-Semitism (Gunawardena 1984, p. 42). Dharmapala calls the ethnic and religious Tamils and Moor minorities in Ceylon “alien” and “foreign”. He attributes the pre-colonial glories of Sinhalese civilisations to the alleged Aryan heritage of the Sinhala people (reinforced through colonial discourse on the same), framed in antagonism to non-Aryans, most notably the Tamils but also the Moor community (Guruge 1965, p. 207). Consequently, the Sinhalese peasant is portrayed as suffering the unjust imposition of the outside world twice over—first from Europeans carving space for plantations from village lands, and then from immigrant trading communities (Kemper 2015, p. 327). This held within it a “paranoid ethos” of Sinhala Buddhist cultural heritage being vulnerable historically, but more so in the present, in the face of multiple “aliens” (Dharmadasa 1992, p. 141).

Dharmapala’s anti-colonial discourse is also occupied with blaming the impoverishment of the rural areas in Ceylon and the decline of Sinhalese civilisation on the inferiority and cultural degradation of Western civilisation. On one occasion, Dharmapala is observed to turn the coloniser’s stereotype of the native on its head, characterising the (Christian) Englishman as a “barbarian” and referring to the followers of Buddhism as superior members of the Aryan group (Amunugama 1991, p. 585).

The British people today take a pride in calling themselves Aryans. There is a spiritualized Aryanism and an anthropological Aryanism . . . Buddhism is a spiritualized Aryanism. The ethics of the Bible are opposed to the sublime principles of the Aryan Doctrine promulgated by the Aryan Teacher [the Buddha]. We condemn Christianity as a system utterly unsuited to the gentle spirit of the Aryan race. (Dharmapala, as cited in Guruge 1965, p. 442)

A third key feature of Buddhist civilisational populism during this period was a re-modernization of history. That is, contrary to the civilisational populism that resisted modernisation, industrialisation, and capitalism, Anagarika Dharmapala’s discourse was more aligned with the logics of liberal modernisation. Buddhist Revivalist discourse advocated explicit paths of modernisation, in terms of “rural development”. This included support for “manual training schools” (vocational schools) for rural youth to be well-positioned in the industrial economy, rather than overfilling the capacity for government jobs (Roberts 1997, p. 1021). Such measures were claimed to create a rural capacity for enterprise, rather than remaining dependent on the metropolitan centre as an agricultural colony. This shares similarities with other instances of civilisational-related semantics of the self and the other in the West, having “internalised liberalism—along with secularism, philosemitism, gender equality, gay rights, and free speech—as an identity marker of the Christian West [the “self”] vis-a-vis putatively intrinsically illiberal Islam [the “other”]” (Brubaker 2017, p. 1208).

The idea of a return to a pre-colonial, village-centric economy alongside an advocacy of liberal modernisation was likely influenced by colonial discourse of a harmonious and prosperous “dual economy”—where capitalist and pre-capitalist economies supposedly co-existed and flourished side-by-side (but independent of one another) under British rule in Ceylon. In reality, while semi-feudal aspects remained in many rural settings, they were firmly embedded within the global capitalist system (Silva 1992, pp. 89–90). Sinhala nationalists since, however, have drawn from this false dichotomy to call for a return to a self-sufficient, pre-capitalist economy, although with elements of modernity and technological prowess borrowed from the present:

He [Dharmapala] dreamed of the day when Ceylon would be independent, the religion of the people restored to its pristine glory, the simple unaffected ways of Sinhala culture recognized and upheld and the people made enlightened

participants in the scientific and technological advancements of modern times. (Guruge 1965, p. xxxvii)

Yilmaz and Morieson (2023, p. 9) argue that “when civilisational populism empowers religious fundamentalists, the result is often an attack on scientific institutions if not the scientific method itself”. This was not really the case in Ceylon during colonialism, as Dharmapala claimed to be more scientific and rational than the colonizers and their faith. Arguing that ideas of European rationality and science aligned with original Buddhist teachings, Dharmapala attempted to portray Buddhism as the higher truth (relative to other “religions” and “civilisations”) (Guruge 1965, p. 325).

The idea that Dharmapala (as a pioneer of the Buddhist Revivalist Movement) was a man of action and fought on behalf of the less well-off is significant for the socialist undertone it carries. This is important as Dharmapala and his political thought have been appropriated by nationalist leaders since as part of their (ostensible) socialist politics. Dharmapala’s ascetic-like renunciation of personal wealth and donning of a simple white garb, in the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, partly earned him the reputation of rejecting materialism. A popular conflation of personal lifestyle (which rejected materialism) and political views (which actually promoted liberal modernisation) as one of austere moralism resulted.

A close examination of Dharmapala’s writings and speeches reveals that he very rarely talked about “class”. In the few instances he talked explicitly on class, he did so in relation to Buddhist civilisationism. On one occasion, he claimed that the basics of Buddhist doctrine were to relieve human suffering, and therefore, one found no labour and capital (class) conflict in Buddhist societies, unlike in Europe, where capitalism was practised with unmitigated greed and sensuality (Guruge 1965, p. 394). Kings within ancient Buddhist societies (apparently) ate the same food and wore the same kind of dress as the ordinary layman:

The prince and peasant sat together, ate together, conversed together, and from the centres where the Bhikkhus congregated love was diffused east, west, north and south. (Dharmapala, as cited in Guruge 1965, p. 70)

This (apparent) absence of a class struggle in Ceylon was, according to Dharmapala, a result of the two basic tenets of Buddhism: philanthropy and karma. That is, Buddhist doctrine stipulates that the well-off should devote a quarter of their wealth to the poor and perform public welfare (and this was extended to mean building rural public hospitals and roads) to accumulate good karma. In this manner, the notion of philanthropy, embedded within a civilisational cultural–religious paradigm, was framed as part of the solution (over structural challenges) to conditions of inequality. Individualism and democracy were also claimed as inherent to early Buddhist teachings, much before these liberal democratic values were discovered by Western societies (Guruge 1965, p. 428). This contrasts with the more explicit populist anti-democratic agenda found within more contemporary civilisational populism in Sri Lanka.

In this section, I have discussed three key aspects of Buddhist civilisational populism in Ceylon during anti-colonial struggles against British rule. These are the transnational reach of this political project, as well as of the transnational influences on its thought and practice; the racialised logics that informed this discourse; and its commitment to the nostalgic promise of a return to a past rural civilisation that was simultaneously democratic and egalitarian, while also exhibiting elements of modernity and technological advances much prior to these landmarks being reached in “the West”. In the following section, I examine the more contemporary manifestation of Buddhist civilisational populism in post-independence Sri Lanka.

4. Religion, the Nation, and Civilisational Populism in Contemporary Sri Lankan Politics

In the immediate years after independence in Sri Lanka, the political leadership was dominated largely by a Westernised Sinhala Buddhist elite. This is partly attributed to the crackdown of colonial forces on the Buddhist Revivalist Movement following the

anti-Muslim riots in 1915, following which the role of the Westernised Sinhala Buddhist elite became more prominent. This group went on to form the Ceylon National Congress in 1919, which later became the United National Party (UNP) in 1946. This is the party that came into power upon independence. With the main opposition Trotskyist Party, the LSSP, unable to perform well at elections, the main reactionary force that emerged against the UNP and its politics was the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The SLFP was led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who campaigned on a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist platform that drew heavily from the Buddhist civilisational populism espoused by Dharmapala and the Buddhist Revivalist Movement.

In the post-independence context, this tradition of religious nationalism and the political activist monk was reproduced within the two main monastic colleges (pirivenas) in Sri Lanka: the Vidyalankara pirivena (founded in 1875) and the Vidyodaya pirivena (founded in 1873) (Seneviratne 1999, p. 57). Drawing on popular historical–mythological texts, political activism was ascribed as part of the “heritage of the monk” (Abeysekara 2002, p. 83). The activist role of the sangha continued unabated in the context of a protracted civil war against Tamil separatists, where it assumed a historical role in protecting the Dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha):

Since the early 1980s a variety of Buddhist discourses began to authorize a particular Buddhist image of the “fearless” young monk who would march to the “battlefront” and lay down his life to rescue and lead the Buddhist nation facing the threat of “terrorism”. (Abeysekara 2002, p. 204)

A key Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movement that mobilised during the 1980s and onwards against the influx of the open economy and liberal, cosmopolitan ideas, under the UNP government led by the J. R. Jayawardene from 1977, was the Jathika Chinthanaya (National Ideology). It was led by urban-based Sinhala intellectuals such as Gunadasa Amarasekera and Nalin de Silva (Dewasiri 2010, p. 77). The solution proposed by Jathika Chinthanaya to the country’s state of dependence and neo-colonialism, fostered by the ruling elite, was a Sinhala Buddhist “civilisational state”, comprising a village-based agricultural economy and pre-colonial social relations (such as communal ownership of land, mutual aid, and caring for nature) (Matthews 2004, p. 63). It also entailed “a revolution by way of thinking” (*chintanaya viplavaya*), i.e., an epistemological challenge that rejected Western “extreme rationalism” and reinvigorated a specifically Sinhalese way of understanding and learning (Matthews 2004, p. 63).

These ideological currents later coalesced in the rise of Buddhist nationalist political parties, such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU or National Heritage Party), which played an active role in opposing the 2002 Peace Process (De Votta and Stone 2008, p. 38). With the civil war ended by military means in 2009, the post-war political landscape further facilitated a majoritarian mindset within state and society (Byrne and Klem 2015, p. 226).

The Sri Lankan state has always had a deeply complicated relationship with religion, which has mostly involved the official patronage of Buddhism in its constitution since 1972. In the post-war context, the Rajapaksa regime focused on the popular idea of pre-colonial Sinhalese kings receiving legitimacy from the Buddhist monastic order in exchange for patronage in the form of status, land, and wealth (Roberts 2015). One consequence of such official rhetoric on the state as protector of the Sinhala race and Buddhist religion was the political impunity with which extra-parliamentary Buddhist nationalist movements, such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), the Sinhala Ravaya, and Ravana Balakaya, operated during the Rajapaksa regime, which was in power at the time (Goonewardene 2020, p. 295).

The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS or Buddhist Power Force) is the most prominent amongst these. It was formed in 2012 as a breakaway faction of the JHU, and is led by Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero (De Votta 2016, p. 78). It advocates for establishing a “Sinhale” nation, in which the Sinhala race and Buddhism are granted foremost status. While the BBS, like other Buddhist nationalist groups, locates the enemy in a wide variety of actors—from Western States, to NGOs, and ethnic and religious minorities—its discourse is predominantly focused on constructing a Muslim Other. A theme song in a BBS pamphlet was titled

“Protect Buddhism, awaken a Dharmapala generation!” It signals a Sinhala Buddhist “war cry” against the enemy Other, and reveals the continuing influence of Dharmapala’s nationalist thought on contemporary Buddhist nationalist movements (Gamage 2021, p. 135).

The civilisational populist politics of Buddhist nationalist groups go hand-in-hand with the kind of populist politics most closely associated with, in the recent past of Sri Lankan politics, the Rajapaksa regime. One example of the BBS enjoying impunity during the Rajapaksa regime followed the appearance of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa as Chief Guest for the opening ceremony of Meth Sevana—The Buddhist Leadership Academy of the BBS (Gunasekara 2013). Overall, the Rajapaksa government did not take any steps to address the issues of anti-Muslim (and anti-Christian) hate speech by these nationalist groups (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022a).

Much of the populism of the Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015) and Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (2019–2022) regimes was of the majoritarian, “nationalist” kind. There were elements to this nationalism that drew from the idea of a lost, past great Sinhala Buddhist civilisation, of an agrarian society where minorities lived under the benevolence of the majority Sinhalese, ruled by a just Sinhalese king.

For example, Mahinda Rajapaksa successfully cultivated an image that was both humble and king during his time as President. The “son of the soil” (as deemed by the “common man”) was then publicly denoted, within political propaganda, as a reincarnation of the valorous 2nd century BCE Sinhalese King Dutugemunu, after the state’s military triumph over Tamil separatists in May 2009 (Ismail 2009). Anti-elitism and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism were the two key pillars of his populist politics, and they defined the in-groups and out-groups—those who belonged and those who did not—within the post-war nation state. During “victory” celebrations in May 2009, the President famously declared there were no longer any minorities in Sri Lanka, only those who love the country and those who do not (Ismail 2009). Such discourse polarised public debate over political allegiance to the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime (conflated as “the nation”) based on the language of “patriots” and “traitors”.

During the more recent Gotabhaya Rajapaksa regime, populist politics entailed, foremost, anti-establishment, technocratic populism embodied in civil society movements comprising professionals, such as *Viyathmaga*. The regime’s electoral mandate was for bringing about a more efficient and disciplined mode of governance, wherein decisions are based on expertise and technical competence, in the form of a “coalition between the military establishment as well as business and professional elite” (Dissanayake 2020, p. 9). This was offered as a solution to the politicised and inefficient nature of governance under the Yahapalana administration, which was in power from 2015 to 2019. The poor governance under this regime was blamed on its liberal democratic credentials, which were said to betray the interests of the majority and ordinary Sinhalese Buddhists.

In addition, President Gotabhaya’s campaign also drew on the rural-centric Sinhala Buddhist nationalism more closely associated with his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa, with a narrative of him also being a key part of the war “victory” (Dissanayake 2020, p. 30). His presidential campaign took off in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Bombings by Islamist extremists, blaming the then-government for its lapses in national security and intelligence, in contrast to the Rajapaksa’s alleged capability on these fronts during the civil war (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022c, p. 9). Nationalist groups in civil society provided support for Rajapaksa’s campaign, foremost of which were groups such as *Yuthukama* (Dissanayake 2020, p. 31). In promising to achieve the lost national glory of the Sinhala state through a modernist, developmental narrative of technocratic populism, many similarities emerged shared with Dharmapala’s civilisational populist discourse, examined in the previous section.

The populism associated with the Rajapaksa regime and Buddhist nationalist movements such as the BBS entails aspects of civilisational populism in the following ways:

First, since the end of the civil war, anti-Muslim sentiment within these political movements tapped into the broader Islamophobia following the 9/11 attacks and rise of international jihadism, as the latter provided a ready framework and vocabulary of

othering for Sinhala Buddhist nationalists that sought to attack Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka (Gamage 2021). This global Islamophobic sentiment is indicative of a broader civilisational populism mobilised in Europe against immigrant Muslims and closer to home in India, as part of the Hindutva characterisation of its Muslim minorities as alien and other. Even as the former civilisational threat (for the Sinhala Buddhists) came from India (minority with a majority mindset), the Tamils (Gunaratna 2018, p. 2), now, the civilisational threat has changed to incorporate a community with a much larger global presence. This transnational element was perhaps most evident in the synergies between Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movements in Sri Lanka and Buddhist nationalist movements in Myanmar.

In Myanmar, the 969 movement and the MaBaTha movement identified the Muslims as an existential threat to Buddhism, not just in Myanmar, but as part of a wider religious struggle between Buddhists and Muslims in Asia (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b, p. 17). In 2015, the monk leading the 969 movement, Ashin Wirathu, and the General Secretary of the BBS, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, signed an agreement to respond to “the ground realities of subtle incursions taking place under the guise of secular, multicultural and other liberal notions that are directly impacting on the Buddhist ethos and space. These incursions are being funded from overseas and have made its impact globally and are subtly spreading into the local situations” (Colombo Telegraph 2014). Committing to forming a “Buddhist International”, this would entail, among other things, that they “carry out researches [sic] on Buddhist philosophy and subsectors such as economic, social, educational, political derivatives of Buddhist civilisation and culture” (Colombo Telegraph 2014). Since 2014, no new developments have occurred on this front, and the importance or durability of transnational religious populism, as evidenced by this partnership, is therefore questionable to a considerable extent.

In Sri Lanka, this anti-Muslim agenda of the BBS has taken on many forms. Misinformation campaigns on various social media and mainstream media platforms by Buddhist nationalist groups, such as the BBS, have fostered a climate of paranoia and social anxiety among non-Muslims. These campaigns draw on popular Islamophobic stereotypes to validate false and divisive propaganda of the Muslim Other, resorting to underhand tactics to undermine the Sinhala majority, culturally and economically (Jones 2015). This has found expression in several conspiracy theories: from mosques having targeted socio-economic plans to support higher Muslim birth rates, to concealed sterilisation chemicals in Muslim-owned eateries and cloth stores, and more recently, Muslim doctors accused of sterilising Buddhist women (Jones 2015, p. 90). This latter incident occurred following an increased climate of paranoia in the aftermath of the April 2019 Easter bombings (De Silva 2022).

Under the Gotabhaya Rajapaksa government, these sentiments of Islamophobia were further played up—whether through seeking the imposition of a permanent burqa ban following the Easter bombings, or banning the burial of bodies in accordance with Islamic rites during the first year of the pandemic (Al Jazeera 2021). This claim did not have the backing of international scientific evidence, but was only lifted in February 2021, when the government faced increasing international pressure for accountability on human rights violations. The arrest and detention of human rights-defender and lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah for 22 months under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and of poet Ahnaf Jazeem for 2 years, are all considered to be driven by similar impulses. Hizbullah was and is a vocal advocate against discrimination and violence against religious and ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka, and his arrest in April 2020, citing links to the Easter Sunday attacks, was widely considered to be politically motivated, as no conclusive evidence against him was found (Frontline Defenders 2022). Likewise, Ahnaf Jazeem was arrested in May 2020, and detained for 18 months under the PTA on grounds that *Navarasam*, a book of his poetry, promoted extremism and was linked to the Easter Sunday bombings (Haran and Perera 2021).

Second, the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movements tapped into a discourse of civilisational heritage and destiny. The “framing of this process as continuous with the political traditions of pre-colonial Sinhalese civilisation” has been argued to feature structurally in the national constitution and concentration of power within the centre and executive

office (Dissanayake 2020, p. 30). This provided the pretext for the establishment of the civilisation state in place of the Western nation state (Welikala 2020), and for populist discourse to define who the “original” inhabitants of the land (the Sinhalese) are and who the “outsiders” are (minority communities and those whose values are aligned with Western culture) (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022c, pp. 7–8).

The desire to ensure the protection of the Sinhala people and Buddhism constitutionally is arguably tied very strongly to material struggles over land and resources. The attack of Buddhist nationalists on the liberalisation and “opening up” of the national economy since the 1980s is indicative of this. In BBS discourse, it portrays itself as at the brunt of a strategic campaign undertaken by opportunistic and traitorous politicians in collaboration with capitalist interests that seek to undermine its mission by labelling it as “racist” and “fundamentalist” (BBS 2019, p. 5). These nationalist groups describe the “law” and its claims to equality, as a fundamental part of democracy, ending up discriminating the majority. This is followed by the promise to fight for justice on behalf of the Sinhala Buddhist—a justice that the “democratic” state institutions are unable or unwilling to deliver, being allegedly held hostage to minority and/or foreign interests within the global capitalist system and religious communities, which form a “majority” worldwide (BBS 2019, p. 5).

The increasing social and economic inequalities these economic reforms contributed to, particularly affecting the marginal and vulnerable urban and rural poor, were likely dislocated by nationalists onto an “easy” scapegoat of the Muslim Other, who is accused of acquiring “unjust” wealth by allegedly exploiting the isolated and vulnerable Sinhalese villager (Jones 2015, p. 116). The Muslim Moors provided an easy target in Sinhala-speaking areas, as they were a more visible and scattered minority than the Catholics and Tamils, and were undergoing a religious revivalism around this period too (Rogers 1987, p. 592). They were also typically engaged in trade, and were accused within Revivalist discourse of artificially inflating the prices of goods and imposing exorbitant credit rates, in order to obtain the lands of vulnerable Sinhala peasantry who were unable to honour their debts (Chandrasena 2016, p. 179). Similar dynamics could be attributed to mob attacks and the boycotting of Muslim homes and businesses, as well as the increased intolerance of the visible markers of religious identity (Slater and Farisz 2019). These dynamics are reminiscent of the 1915 anti-Muslim riots, when communal divisions were used by the nationalist elite as a deliberate scapegoat to avoid the critical need for land reform (Meyer 1991, p. 50).

Several Buddhist nationalist groups also contested ownership of land and minority religious sites in the newly opened North and East after the war (Seoighe 2016, p. 460). These groups claimed historical ownership over “sacred land”, based on the argument that precolonial Sinhalese kings had gifted large amounts of land to the Buddhist sangha (monastic order) (Jones 2015, pp. 43–44). In the post-war context, the military has been involved in occupying increasing amounts of land, especially in former conflict areas (Sri Lanka Campaign 2022). In response to criticisms of such actions as state-backed colonisation, Sinhala nationalist groups claim that they have the “right” to live in any part of the country, and that it is the majority Sinhala Buddhist community that is being discriminated, as the international community does not speak on behalf of their rights being violated by the undue place given to “minority rights” (Amarasuriya 2015, p. 52). This preoccupation with land among contemporary Buddhist nationalists has been attributed partly to the paranoia of Muslim “no-go” zones in the West (Jones 2015, p. 41). Through such campaigns, minority religions and ethnic groups were portrayed as foreign, while reinforcing the Rajapaksa regime’s exclusionary nationalist populism.

Importantly, key elements of the populism of the Gotabhaya Rajapaksa administration have supported this call for a rule of law that does not “favor” ethnic and religious minorities, and pandered to the economic nationalism that was advocated by nationalist movements (though not limited to just them), such as the BBS. In October 2021, President Gotabhaya appointed the BBS General Secretary to chair a 13-member national task force titled “One Country, One Law”. The grouping was tasked with coming up with

proposals for implementing “one law” applicable for all Sri Lankans, and abolishing other religious and regional laws that do not come under the purview of a common national law ([The Times of India 2021](#)). The material implications of the regime’s majoritarian nationalism coupled with inward-looking economic nationalism, from tax cuts to anti-IMF rhetoric, are important, as they were foremost among the reasons for the dire economic crisis that the country is undergoing at present.

Finally, it has been observed that religious populism draws on the idea of a distinct civilisational past, not only when it comes to consolidating power domestically, but also in foreign policy ([Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b](#), p. 7). In Sri Lanka, the international politics surrounding the civil war have led many nationalist governments and groups to define themselves in antagonism to the foreign other, often on civilisational grounds. In the context of the current economic and political crisis as well, anti-Western discourse is observed to justify the increasing authoritarianism and mismanagement in governance that have led to the crisis, and which are being used to manage the current crisis ([The Island 2022](#)). However, there are limits to this influence as well. For example, in 2017, when a group of Buddhist monks led a mob attack against Rohingya refugees that were sheltered in a Colombo suburb, the government condemned the attack. A Buddhist monk was remanded, along with several others involved in the attack, and charged with creating communal disharmony and damaging property ([Reuters 2017](#)).

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I examined the evolution of Buddhist civilisational populism in modern Sri Lankan politics and society. I did this by examining the emergence of Buddhist civilisational populism in British Ceylon, and its impact on contemporary forms of Buddhist civilisational populism deployed by nationalist groups and political parties, the Rajapaksa regimes (2005–2015 and more recently 2019–2022) being the most closely associated with its politics of late. Historically grounding contemporary civilisational populism in this manner allowed me to examine why its politics continues to have relevance over time in Sri Lanka.

Among the key arguments I made in this paper was that the idea of a superior Aryan Buddhist civilisation was deployed within anti-colonial Buddhist nationalist discourse during British colonial rule in Ceylon. This was used to denigrate not just the Western, Christian imperial power, but also the Dravidian Tamil and the Moor minority communities. This reference to a superior civilisation is observed in more recent populist and nationalist politics, found among Buddhist nationalist movements and the Rajapaksa regimes that have been in power since 2005. A detailed elucidation of these politics was carried out in this paper.

In addition, I discussed the prevailing social science debates on populism, and more specifically, civilisational populism. I ascertained the distinct elements of “civilisational populism” and discussed the importance of examining its manifestation in non-Western, Global South countries such as Sri Lanka. I argued that the presence of civilisational populism in politics around the world reveals the global nature of these social struggles. I further argued that civilisational populism in the Global South is distinct to its expression in more advanced Western democracies, as it is informed by historical struggles against the exploitation and centralisation of resources within the elite and colonial metropole, in the colonies’ experience of colonialism and capitalism.

For example, in the Sri Lankan context, anti-colonial civilisational populism promised the upliftment of local people’s material conditions, with the state playing a foremost role in achieving this social equality and egalitarianism, as opposed to the violence and hierarchy under colonial rule. As a result, this civilisational populism was not only infused with Buddhist majoritarianism (in rejection of the Christian other), but was also very much aligned with left-wing and social democratic sentiments.

In closing, the question is asked: Will religion and the othering of communities along civilisational terms continue to be exploited by politicians? Will more inclusive counter-narratives succeed in the context of multiple recent crises? Last year, mass protests,

comprising Sri Lankans from different ethnic and religious groups, erupted in response to the nation's ongoing and debilitating economic crisis. These protestors rejected not only the poor policy decisions made by the Gotabhaya Rajapaksa government, which directly led to the current crisis (such as its fertilizer policy and tax cuts), but also, to some extent, the political elite's embrace of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka since its independence. The potential for civilisational populism may therefore be reduced to some extent.

Nevertheless, as the economic crisis shows little signs of abating, there is still room for divisive nationalism to be mobilised by political movements to hold power. In fact, the mass protests were largely driven by economic issues, and as the crisis is unlikely to stabilize or turn towards recovery any time in the immediate future, the threat of civilisational populism being used by political actors to stay in power arguably remains strong.

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Note

- ¹ Politics of representation and redistribution refer here to the politics of identity and the (re-)distribution of material resources in a given political movement.

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