

Do Ethnic Divisions Disappear in the Face of State Collapse? A Reflection on Sri Lanka's Internal Crisis

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Summary

Despite deep-rooted ethnoreligious divisions, an extraordinary ambiance of tolerance and togetherness is visible in protest sites in Sri Lanka, where men and women of all ethnicities and religious affiliations have gathered under one slogan #GoHomeGota. While their common intention is to fight the corrupt system and fix it, it is puzzling to see decades-old ethnoreligious divisions suddenly evaporating with the dire economic meltdown. If ethnoreligious polarisation is indeed fading away, how can we explain that? Does state collapse (appearing in the form of economic crisis with near-political anarchy) facilitate the disintegration of ethnic attributes? To find answers to these questions, this paper draws on the available theories of state collapse and ethnic identity change. It will also explain the ways in which ethnic attributes in Sri Lanka are being disintegrated with the deteriorating economy and what that implies for the future of ethnic unity in Sri Lanka.

Introduction: Sri Lankans Maturing with the Crisis

Sri Lanka's economy is in a meltdown, and the state is collapsing. As a result, the public has taken to the streets to engage in a peaceful and apolitical protest under the label of #GoHomeGota in early April 2022. Protesters mainly campaigned against irresponsible and incompetent leaders and their economic mismanagement, nepotism and corruption. Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa stepped down on 9 May 2022, a partial victory for the protestors. Yet, his resignation has been plotted in a manner where the prime minister's loyal supporters were seen attacking the peaceful protestors occupying Galle Face Green in Colombo, creating a public insurgency in the country.

Besides the political instability, the economic crisis is perhaps the worst in Sri Lanka's history since its independence in 1948. The severity of the economic downturn includes the emerging humanitarian crisis: severe shortages of electricity, fuel, essential goods and medical supplies and skyrocketing inflation. The nature of the protest is viewed from the perspective of it being an apolitical and peaceful participation across all identity groups and social strata, by their demands and the creative forms of the protest itself. These include labelling certain locations of the protest as *GotaGoGama*¹ or *MainaGoGama*, and various non-violent forms of protest such as performing arts, music, visual art, and tooting car horns imitating the chanting tune of *Kaputu kaak...kaak kaak...Basil Basil*.² The scale of the protest

¹ *Gota* refers to Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the President of Sri Lanka, and *Maina* refers to Mahinda Rajapaksa, the former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. *Gama* refers to village.

² This chant imitates the sound of crows and Basil is the name of Sri Lanka's former Minister of Finance. See, Raknish Wijewardene and Yolani Fernando, "Why Sri Lankan protestors are chanting an anthem about crows", *Scrill.in*, 5 May 2022, <https://scroll.in/article/1023251/why-sri-lankan-protesters-are-chanting-an-anthem-about-crows>.

is noteworthy, mainly the large numbers of participants, both locally and internationally, and their voluntary nature and endurance. Although the economic crisis is diluting the state, the same crisis has matured Sri Lankans to apprehend that democracy does not start and end by casting a vote every five years, the continuous civic responsibility to demand transparency in all public affairs, the public's right and responsibility to peacefully protest and the manifold freedoms they should enjoy, including the freedom of expression.

Given this context, this short reflection focuses mainly on the ethnic identity factor within the ongoing crisis. The protest has created an extraordinary ambiance and hope for ethnic tolerance in Sri Lanka. Protesters seem to desert the ethnic and religious salience of their identity to unite unconditionally, demanding the overthrow of the corrupt regime and the system. In this context, it seems that centuries-old ethnoreligious divisions have suddenly evaporated with the dire economic meltdown and consequent state collapse. Does a state collapse facilitate ethnic tolerance or underpin ethnic intolerance? Does the ethnic unity we observe in Galle Face Green represent the entire nation? Or is it simply superficial? To answer these questions, this paper will first elaborate on how social scientists, mainly those who explore ethnic identity change, theorise the nexus between state collapse and its impacts on ethnicity. Secondly, it will explore the nature of ethnic unity we observe among the protesters and the available arguments and evidence for and against the prospects of ethnic unity in Sri Lanka. Finally, it will discuss the implications for a united Sri Lanka and the ways in which the ongoing crisis should be utilised in that process.

Ethnicity and State Collapse: What does the Theory say?

In many multi-ethnic entities, the state is crucial in forming and maintaining ethnic identity categories. For instance, by changing membership rules for ethnic identity categories in the national census, states can construct or deconstruct ethnic identities. In some other cases, states create structures of incentives, such as public policies favouring more jobs or services for a selected ethnicity. As a result, people may tend to identify themselves more with the identity favoured by the state to enjoy more benefits. While it is less difficult to understand that stable states produce stable ethnic identity categories, what happens when the state is disintegrating or collapsing?

Roger Petersen identifies six stages of state disintegration, and consequent changes to ethnic identity.³ In Stage 1, relatively stable ethnic identity categories exist before state disintegration – before the state disintegration, individuals identify themselves with the existing ethnic categories. In Stage 2, a variety of factors come into play to diminish and destroy the state – economic decline and crisis, institutional factors, the end of ideology, changes in the international security system, and other factors that may drive the state toward disintegration. Compounding the matter, changes in the identities themselves may help bring down the state. In Stage 3, ethnic attributes that create ethnic identity categories begin to loosen – by ethnic attributes, Petersen refers to either descent-based or non-descent-based elements such as skin colour, language, religion or wealth. For instance,

³ Roger Petersen, 'Identity, Rationality, and Emotion in the Process of State Disintegration and Recognition', in Kanchan Chandra (ed.), *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 387-421, <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199893157.001.0001/acprof-9780199893157-chapter-11>.

while African American is an ethnic identity category, dark skin colour is only one of the many ethnic attributes that constitute the category. With the state's collapse or disintegration, ethnic attributes can also start to lose their meaning and disintegrate. The attributes that form ethnic categories can become available for recombination into new categories. Also, new attributes or attributes not formerly part of old categories become part of the mix. In Stage 4, identity entrepreneurs string 'floating' attributes together. In Stage 5, individuals in the general population choose the best possible category to enhance their goals. In Stage 6, the categories become relatively stable once again.

Are Strong-held Ethnic Attributes Disintegrating in Sri Lanka?

When applying Petersen's schema in the Sri Lankan context, the country has passed Stage 2. The state has collapsed mainly due to the severe economic downturn and resulting political instability and is entering Stage 3. Here, state collapse refers to the incompetence and ineffectiveness of the state in providing most of its basic services to the populace due to debt unsustainability, the rapid decline of foreign reserves, rising poverty and inflation. In Stage 3, along with state collapse, ethnic attributes that underpin ethnic categories begin to loosen. Upon closely observing the protest sites, people were seen holding umbrellas over Muslims breaking fast to enable them to eat undeterred by the rain⁴. A photograph of a young Muslim lady holding a cardboard sheet over a Buddhist monk protecting him from the rain⁵ was widely shared on social media as was Muslims organising almsgiving for Buddhist monks celebrating Ramazan.⁶ The national anthem was sung in Tamil at Galle Face Green,⁷ and many protesters holding posters and banners in Tamil. Tamil students from the University of Jaffna were also seen taking part in organising the protest in Colombo.⁸ One witnessed religious-nationalist and pro-government protests fading away⁹ with little support from the public. While the list is not exhaustive, do these attest to the disintegration of ethnic attributes that compose major ethnic categories in Sri Lanka?

Unambiguously, the protest does not provide any clue to support the argument that Sri Lankans have completely abandoned the attributes that constitute their ethnicity. The disintegration of ethnic attributes does not mean abandoning the identity. In Sri Lanka, multiple attributes constitute an ethnic category. Although the main attributes one encounters such as language or religion, signify eligibility for membership in one category, those alone do not constitute it. For example, by simply speaking the Sinhala language or following Buddhism or Christianity, one does not necessarily become eligible for the

⁴ Janani Vithanage, "7 Things you should know about Gotagogama", *Yamu*, 23, April 2022, <https://www.yamu.lk/highlights/7-things-you-should-know-about-gotagogama/>.

⁵ Taken from a Twitter post by 'Sri Lanka Tweet'. <https://mobile.twitter.com/SriLankaTweet/status/1511397922273099777>. Retrieved on 7 May 2022.

⁶ "Ramazan celebrated at Galle Face", *Daily News*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.dailynews.lk/2022/05/04/local/278240/ramazan-celebration-galle-face>.

⁷ Janani Vithanage, "7 Things you should know about Gotagogama", *op. cit.*

⁸ Anbarasan Ethirajan and Neha Sharma, "Sri Lanka: The protests unifying a nation where ethnic fault lines run deep", *BBC*, 9 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-61373192>.

⁹ "Pro-govt. monks show the 'Sinhala-Buddhist' card again!", *Sinhala News*, 12 April 2022, <https://thesinhalanews.lk/2022/04/12/pro-govt-monks-show-the-sinhala-buddhist-card-again-pics-video-breaking-news/>

Sinhalese ethnic identity category. Some additional attributes such as descent matters. Thus, in Sri Lanka, ethnic identity is not one blunt concept, rather a combination of many.

What the economic downturn (and resulting humanitarian catastrophe) has done to these ethnic attributes is that it has created an environment where both salience and resurgence of ethnic attributes have become meaningless. Here, salience refers to the incentives associated with certain attributes, and resurgence is the recognition of various undercurrents encouraging extreme loyalty or affiliation to certain ethnic attributes. The public is realising that the incentives (that is, allocation of resources or services) associated with speaking a particular language or following a particular religion are no longer meaningful as the state apparatus is completely dysfunctional in maintaining such incentives. Similarly, we observed several unsuccessful attempts to fabricate religious resurgence in the form of extremism by a small group of Buddhist nationalists marching towards the anti-government protest sites in April 2022. The majority Sinhala-Buddhists rejected this attempt by not participating in it. Meanwhile, some politicians attempted to spread anti-Muslim mob violence in Negombo¹⁰ soon after the resignation of the Prime Minister on 9 May 2022. Yet, we did not see widespread public support and engagement in both attempts.

One of the reasons why religious resurgence is unsuccessful so far is the protest itself. The protest has been a strong instrument of public cognition by creating discursive frameworks of ethnic unity.¹¹ The abundance of these discursive mechanisms has created a strong sense of ethnic tolerance than previously encountered. These discourses have questioned the meaningfulness of ethnic salience and resurgence. Thus, Sri Lanka is currently in Stage 3, where the meaningfulness of ethnic attributes has been substantially wobbled by the collapsing state.

The Sustainability Questions

To what extent the protests will sustain ethnic tolerance in Sri Lanka is questionable. One of the major uncertainties among the learned community is whether ethnic unity, ostensible among anti-government protesters, is temporary and superficial. Some raise concerns that the majority of Sinhalese who took the streets are economically disillusioned by politicians but are substantially unaware of the decades of hardships of Tamils and Muslims of North and East, including government imposed economic embargoes during the war.¹² Others point out that the majority of the southern Sinhalese and the international community are either unaware or insensitive to the long protests by northern Tamils and Muslims demanding justice for the disappearances of their family members and human rights violations during the war.¹³ Another concern is to what extent the communities in the northern and eastern provinces are participating in this campaign, and to what extent their

¹⁰ Taken from a Twitter post by 'JDS', <https://twitter.com/JDSLanka/status/1524054568732184576>.

¹¹ See Twitter using hashtags such as #gohomegota, #ProtestLK for discursive frames created by the protesters.

¹² Vindhya Buthpitiya, "In Sri Lanka, a perpetrator state demands non-violence", Urban Violence Research Network, 3 May 2022, <https://urbanviolence.org/perpetrator-state/?s=08>.

¹³ Nick Marsh, "Sri Lanka: The divisions behind the country's united protests", *BBC*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61295238>.

demands have been mainstreamed by the protesters occupying Galle Face Green. Some Tamil activists note that even though anti-government sentiments run deep in the north and east, protests are rare as they fear security forces will not exhibit the same kind of restraint that has been afforded to protesters in Colombo.¹⁴

Implications for a United Sri Lanka

Despite all these uncertainties about the sustainability of ethnic unity, many Sri Lankans are optimistic about the emerging ambience of communal unity in Sri Lanka.¹⁵ Yet, until Sri Lanka manoeuvres a new system of governance to fix the economy, to de-institutionalise ethnic identities with no corresponding incentives and to redesign the electoral system to prevent politicians from usurping and mobilising the ethnic identities for narrow electoral gains, ethnic unity in Sri Lanka will be an elusive reality. Most importantly, as Buthpitiya notes, “it is necessary to remember that demands for accountability cannot be selective. They must not start and end with economic mismanagement and shortages of essential items and corruption tied to a vague call to send the Rajapaksa’s home. Instead, these demands must begin with accountability for the regime’s mass atrocities, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed against Sri Lankan citizens, as they should have years ago when there was little to no domestic pressure for justice.”¹⁶

In Stage 3, Sri Lankans have two possible options for Stage 4. The first option is to address the above prerequisites, which will eventually encourage identity entrepreneurs to string ‘floating’ attributes together to create a new, overarching and inclusive ‘Sri Lankan’ ethnic category. The second option is to ignore the above prerequisites, which will eventually encourage identity entrepreneurs to string ‘floating’ attributes together to reinvent the old repertoire of ethnic identity categories. The choice will be historical. That is why the popular struggle under the slogan of *#GoHomeGota* cannot be oversimplified. It is not simply ousting one corrupt regime but perhaps the last golden opportunity to build a more prosperous, inclusive and transparent society in Sri Lanka.

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¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Anbarasan Ethirajan and Neha Sharma, “Sri Lanka: The protests unifying a nation where ethnic fault lines run deep”, op. cit.

¹⁶ Vindhya Buthpitiya, “In Sri Lanka, a perpetrator state demands non-violence”, op. cit.