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Can Buddhist Values Overcome Nationalism in Sri Lanka?

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Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-Buddhist community should combat global isolation and the recent rise of extremist groups by using their Buddhist faith to strengthen transnational ties.

I. Introduction

Nine years since the end of its civil war, Sri Lanka continues to suffer from ethnic tensions that could derail its fragile transitional justice process and ignite new rounds of conflict. Despite the end of open hostilities, resentment continues to aggravate relations between the primarily Buddhist Sinhalese—Sri Lanka's ethnic majority—and the minority community of Tamils. Tensions are also growing between Sinhalese Buddhists and the Muslim community, who constitute Sri Lanka's second-largest ethnic minority.

Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism has been identified as a major driver of past conflicts and current tensions. Some attribute this nationalism to Sinhalese Buddhists' insecurity about their lack of transnational networks of support, compared to their Tamil or Muslim compatriots. Such insecurity has been compounded by international criticism of the Sri Lankan state and expressions of sympathy toward Sri Lankan Tamils.

Given the critical role that this perception of global isolation plays in Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, addressing it could open up possibilities for better managing this nationalism. One way to accomplish this is by formulating foreign policy messaging that can garner positive international acknowledgement of Sinhalese-Buddhist identity. Since Sinhalese Buddhists identify most with their faith, references to Buddhism would be incorporated into foreign policy messaging.

India and the United States also stand to derive long-term geopolitical and strategic benefits from engagement with this kind of rhetoric. By winning the hearts and minds of Sinhalese Buddhists, both countries could make Sri Lanka more receptive to their strategic concerns regarding the regional activities and investments of China.

II. The History of Sinhalese-Buddhist Nationalism

The roots of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism lie in the Buddhist revival of the late nineteenth century, which began as a response to the marginalisation of Buddhist education under British colonialism.¹ The influential reformer Anagarika Dharmapala contended that the Sinhalese-Buddhists were the true "[owners](#)"² of Sri Lanka's ancient civilisation, that this civilisation had been destroyed by "barbaric vandals" such as Tamils, Muslims, and Europeans,³ and that any appeal to tolerance and interethnic harmony was a ploy by Sri Lankan elites to suppress Sinhalese Buddhists.⁴ These arguments align with the defining features of nationalism: a communal identity based on language and religion that seeks to free itself of external interference—which, in this case, includes Sri Lankan minorities and Europeans.

These ideological currents came to the forefront of national politics following the 1956 electoral victory of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. While the SLFP initially fostered Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism as a political force, electoral compulsions soon forced the rival United National Party (UNP) to promote the same ideology. Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism became a bipartisan force in parliament, promoting laws that have disadvantaged minorities, encouraged violent responses to minority resistance, and hindered governmental efforts to reach compromises.

III. Nationalist Sentiments Among Contemporary Sinhalese Buddhists

Efforts by successive governments as well as by civil society to weaken this nationalism have been largely unsuccessful, [as reflected in the recent rise of extremist groups such](#)⁵ as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya, and Ravana Balaya. Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism is not a phenomenon limited to a few fringe groups but rather a fairly common ideology that enjoys popular support. In a 2016 survey, 70.4 percent of Sinhalese Buddhists said [Article 9](#)⁶ of the constitution, which grants “[foremost place](#)”⁷ to Buddhism and requires the state to protect and foster the *Buddha Śāsana* (Buddhist dispensation), was “[extremely favourable](#).”⁸ Almost half (48 percent) said they were opposed to devolving powers to the war-affected, Tamil-dominated Northern and Eastern Provinces and to the government rebuilding them.

IV. The Minority Mentality of Sinhalese-Buddhist Nationalism

Given the continuing threat to peace and stability posed by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, it is important that Sri Lanka finds a way to weaken the appeal of such sentiment. Doing so, however, requires correctly identifying the key insecurity driving this nationalism. Anthropologist Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah noted the transnational aspect of this insecurity when he described Sinhalese Buddhists as a “[majority with a minority complex](#).”⁹ Despite the clear demographic advantage they enjoy in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese Buddhists are a minority in the region, with no transnational networks comparable to those of Tamils and Muslims. For example, while there are approximately [15 million](#)¹⁰ Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka, there are approximately [72 million Tamils](#)¹¹ in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

This helps explain why many Sinhalese Buddhists feel regionally isolated and why they believe that minorities in Sri Lanka use transnational networks to further their political goals. This nationalist view was expressed in 2016 by the general secretary of the BBS, Dilanthe Withanage, who said that “global forces—political, financial, etc.—working against us, that’s what we interpret as the issue here . . . the Sinhalese [are] something less than 15 million, compared to a 7000 million world population.”¹²

In recent years, this insecurity has been aggravated by the international pressure put on Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the civil war. [The United States, the United Kingdom, and India, as](#)

[well as the UN Human Rights Council](#),¹³ have criticised the government and military (which are dominated by Sinhalese Buddhists) for their conduct in the civil war and for delays in post-war transitional justice. These same critics have expressed sympathy expressed for the struggles of Sri Lankan Tamils—and, recently, Muslims—reinforcing the Sinhalese Buddhists’ belief that minorities are leveraging transnational links to steer domestic political outcomes while they have no comparable allies overseas. Withanage expressed this sentiment when he said, “[If something happens to the Muslims and Tamils all the embassies will raise their voices](#). But if something happens to the Sinhalese, no one is there to protect [us].”¹⁴

Sinhalese Buddhists lack, and consequently desire, transnational support and sympathy. Weakening the appeal of their nationalism requires an initiative to make them feel positively acknowledged by the international community. Integrating Buddhist references into Sri Lankan foreign policy is a potential means to this end.

V. Referencing Buddhist Values to Win Domestic and International Support

While interests such as national security and economic prosperity might be seen as the drivers of foreign policy, norms-based discourse—articulated in foreign policy messaging—is how countries and communities are [recognised as good and strong international citizens](#).¹⁵ Support for norms such as freedom of speech, the rule of law, and sustainability tend to inspire international approval and support. To address the Sinhalese Buddhists’ insecurity, the government could consider foreign policy messaging that integrates Buddhist references to popular values in order to make Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists feel that they too have international sympathy and recognition.

These references should garner positive reactions from foreign governments, media, and civil society while concurrently promoting Sinhalese-Buddhist identity. Values found in the Pāli canon—the religious texts of Theravāda Buddhism that serve as scriptural authority for Sinhalese Buddhists and other Theravāda Buddhist communities in Thailand and Myanmar—such as nonviolence,¹⁶ compassion for all life,¹⁷ and freedom of inquiry¹⁸ would be positively received by most countries and cultures in the world.

An initiative to incorporate references from the Pāli canon into Sri Lanka’s foreign policy messaging could therefore win positive international acknowledgement for Sinhalese Buddhists. It would also highlight their place in the broader transnational community of Theravāda Buddhists. References to the Pāli canon would not only resonate with Sinhalese Buddhists, but also with Thai, Laotian, and Cambodian Buddhists, serving as a platform for stronger multilateral cooperation with other predominantly Theravāda Buddhist countries.

VI. Ceylon at the San Francisco Peace Conference

If the rationale for foreign policy messaging that includes Buddhist values is clear, the question arises of what it would look like in practice. The experience of Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known) at the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference offers one example of Buddhist foreign policy messaging.

The peace conference convened to determine the status of Japan in the post–World War II international system. While some countries argued for [strict terms to suppress Japanese nationalism](#),¹⁹ the delegation from Ceylon, headed by then finance minister J.R. Jayawardene, argued for a freer Japan and rejected war reparations. This reconciliatory stance integrated nonviolence and compassion into policymaking through references to Buddhism. Jayawardene stated, “we do not intend to [seek reparations] for we believe in the words of the Great Teacher [the Buddha] whose message has ennobled the lives of countless millions in Asia, that hatred ceases not by hatred but by love.”²⁰ Ceylon made its Buddhist-inspired case for a free Japan along [with Pakistan and the Buddhist-majority Laos and Cambodia](#).²¹

Employing Ceylon’s Buddhist heritage had a specific political purpose: supporting a Western-backed liberal peace for Asia, which later came to be known as the [San Francisco System](#).²² At the same time, Jayawardene’s reference to Buddhist values was couched in language that did not weigh the message down with inaccessible dogma and connected religious principles to the secular humanist value of compassion. He refrained from making religion the primary focus of his message. By implicitly promoting Buddhism’s relevance to contemporary political issues (as opposed to presenting these values as all-enveloping truths), Jayawardene helped make the religious aspect of the message more relatable to the international audience at the conference.

VII. What Buddhist Foreign Policy Messaging Should—and Should Not Be

The San Francisco Peace Conference example provides insight into how values from the Pāli canon can be incorporated into Sri Lanka’s foreign policy. Just as Jayawardene focused squarely on Buddhism’s universally relatable values, the Theravāda Buddhism followed by Sinhalese Buddhists can also be communicated in a way that highlights its humanist elements. To be effective, references to these values must be integrated into messaging that is subtle and understated. Buddhism does not need to be, and should not be, the central theme of foreign policy. Rather, messaging should allude to the Buddhist origins of Sri Lanka’s stance on particular issues.

For example, Sri Lanka could use the Saptā Aparihāni Dhamma (the Seven Conditions of Welfare) to support key norms in liberal democratic discourse.²³ Conditions 1 and 2 (frequent public assemblies, and meeting and dispersing peacefully) reflect liberal norms like freedom of speech and assembly.²⁴ Condition 3 (enacting nothing not already established, and

abrogating nothing that has already been enacted) relates to the rule of law, a quintessential liberal value.²⁵ Sri Lanka's government could use these norms as justification for recent initiatives, such as joining the U.S.-led Open Government Partnership, which seeks [to promote transparency, empower citizens, and fight corruption](#).²⁶

Another key area in which Buddhist values can be incorporated into foreign policy messaging is Sri Lanka's transitional justice process and its interactions with the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and other international actors. Here, Sri Lanka could portray its commitment to advancing post-war reconciliation and [accountability as an affirmation of the Buddhist values of tolerance and compassion](#)²⁷ (for example, by referring to the Buddha's involvement in settling a dispute between kinsmen and neighbours).

The integration of Buddhist references into foreign policy messaging would be qualitatively different from Sri Lanka's current Buddhism-based actions. These are exemplified by initiatives such as the [Seventh Buddhist Summit of the World Buddhist Supreme Conference](#),²⁸ held in November 2017 in Colombo, and Indian Prime Minister [Narendra Modi gracing Sri Lanka's celebration](#)²⁹ of International Day of Vesak as its chief guest.

These recent initiatives limit Buddhism to the cultural plane rather than incorporating it into issues of political importance, such as climate change or nuclear non-proliferation. Previous initiatives have been more dogmatic in promoting Buddhism than the rhetoric advocated here. For example, the Kandy (Mahanuwara) Declaration from the International Vesak Day celebrations in 2017 emphasised that Sri Lanka was "[the only country blessed with the visit of Buddha,](#)" [despite there being no evidence whatsoever to support this claim](#).³⁰ This hints at a more parochial Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism that the approach proposed here seeks to diminish. Such expressions of Buddhism, based on non-verifiable claims, would have little resonance with international political discourse and would therefore not give Sinhalese Buddhists the positive international recognition they seek.

VIII. Buddhist Rhetoric and International Acknowledgement

The above discussion broadly outlines what Buddhist messaging in foreign policy might look like in practice. The question that remains is whether it could win the desired international reception and relieve nationalist insecurity.

Ceylon and J.R. Jayawardene's defence of Japan at the San Francisco Peace Conference received overwhelmingly positive attention. His speech was "cheered long and enthusiastically by the delegates" and "[dominated the conference \[that\] morning](#)."³¹ More significant was the subsequent effect of his speech on relations between the two countries. While some have claimed with exaggeration that Jayawardene [earned the eternal gratitude of the Japanese for his statesmanship](#),³² he was honoured with a monument on the [premises of the Kamakura Buddhist monument](#)³³ in Japan and Tokyo remains Sri Lanka's largest sponsor of [official](#)

[development assistance](#)³⁴ today. These facts support the argument that employing Buddhist foreign policy at the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference earned Sri Lanka longstanding Japanese support. While Japan arguably would have been appreciative of Sri Lanka's reconciliatory stance with or without Buddhist references, the emphasis on the shared Buddhist heritage of the two countries ensured that the subsequent growth in their relations was rooted in cultural factors more enduring than shifting geopolitical realities. Relations have remained strong despite the collapse of the bipolar Cold War order against the backdrop of which Jayawardene's speech was made.

Japan's long-term policy of engaging positively with Sri Lanka has also earned it the trust of Sinhalese Buddhists. It was one of the major countries involved in Sri Lanka's peace process from 2002 to 2006.³⁵ Japan engaged with the government during the civil war and after its end in 2009. In the post-war context, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Norway denounced the Sri Lankan government's conduct during the war and applied [diplomatic](#)³⁶ and [economic](#)³⁷ pressures on Sri Lanka. By contrast, [Japan acknowledged the government's efforts](#)³⁸ in post-war reconstruction.

Japan nevertheless consistently urged the government to pursue reconciliation and accountability, and it offered to act [as Sri Lanka's liaison in rebuilding ties with the West](#).³⁹ Japan's policy of support without appearing to threaten the sovereignty of Sri Lanka has led to it being perceived as a neutral, trusted country by Sinhalese Buddhists as well as by other Sri Lankans. For example, Minister of Megapolis and Western Development Champika Ranawaka, when in a previous ministerial post, told former Japanese special envoy to Sri Lanka Yasushi Akashi in 2013 that he hoped a neutral country such as Japan could let the world know the "[truth](#)" [about the war](#).⁴⁰ In addition, a review of bilateral ties published by the government's news portal also noted that Japan [stood by](#)⁴¹ the democratically elected government of Sri Lanka (in this case, the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist government of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa) when the UNHRC passed a resolution criticising the country.

This praise of and trust in Japan means that it is able to play an active role in making Sri Lanka's transitional justice commitments more acceptable to Sinhalese Buddhists. Western commentators have already noted that [Japan's engagement with Sri Lanka has been effective](#),⁴² for example, in pushing Rajapaksa to hold provincial council elections in the Tamil-dominated Northern Province in 2013. This suggests that Japan's approach has been more effective than Western attempts to weaken Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism.

Other countries also stand to benefit from Sri Lanka promoting Buddhist messaging in foreign policy. In particular, India would gain much, given its consistent advocacy for a political solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict that addresses Tamil grievances (formally embodied in the [Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of 1987](#)).⁴³ Any weakening of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism would facilitate a more reconciliatory stance towards Tamil grievances and would therefore be to India's benefit.

Considering Buddhism's origins in India, positive relations would strengthen the Sinhalese-Buddhist perception of the country as a cultural and spiritual ally, which was a model for relations in the past. It would also signal that India is equally concerned for and respectful of the Sinhalese-Buddhist community as the Tamil community.

Prime Minister Modi struck the right note in this regard in 2015 when he [visited and paid homage](#)⁴⁴ to the Sacred Bodhi Tree in Anuradhapura, one of the holiest sites of Sri Lankan Sinhalese Buddhists. In addition, India has started integrating Buddhist messaging into its own [foreign policy](#).⁴⁵ During visits to [Nepal, Bhutan, Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia](#),⁴⁶ Modi visited ancient Buddhist temples and stupas, and made reference to the shared cultural heritage of Asian nations. By further supporting and reaching out to Sri Lanka through Buddhist diplomatic initiatives, India could advance its own political and strategic interests in the country and simultaneously strengthen its initiatives across the region. For example, India could partner with Sri Lanka in convening a summit of Buddhist-majority and Buddhist-heritage nations. Participating states could examine issues such as climate change, sustainability, and nuclear non-proliferation through a Buddhist lens, highlighting the contributions that Buddhist-humanist values could provide.

Countries such as the United States would broadly benefit from a reduction in Sri Lanka's ethnic tensions. Given the country's strategic location at the heart of the Indian Ocean—an increasingly contested geopolitical space—it is important for the United States to ensure that Sri Lanka is responsive to Washington's strategic concerns in the region. Positively receiving Sri Lanka's Buddhist foreign policy messaging would help the United States win the hearts and minds of the Sinhalese Buddhist population over the long term, given that the country has consistently ranked as one of the [world's most religious ones](#).⁴⁷ More importantly, such acknowledgement would allow the United States to occupy a public diplomacy space that could otherwise easily be taken over by strategic competitors such as China.

IX. Conclusion

Much stands to be gained for Sri Lanka and other countries through the successful integration of Buddhist references into Sri Lankan foreign policy messaging. Besides the notable example of Jayawardene's defence of Japan in 1951, some guidance can also be taken from other unofficial Buddhism-inspired foreign policy stances, such as those of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, which include issues such as [climate change](#),⁴⁸ [democratic governance](#),⁴⁹ [and support for scientific research](#).⁵⁰ These issues can be seen as low-hanging fruit through which Sri Lanka could easily articulate its policy by referencing Buddhist scriptures.

This integration of Buddhist values into foreign policy messaging should involve Buddhist monks, who could point out areas of convergence between values from the Pāli canon and contemporary global issues. However, given the significant role that monks have played in sustaining Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, their involvement in the above task should be overseen by a secular, multi-ethnic body. Such a body could review the monks' proposals to

determine whether they are consistent with Sri Lanka's other foreign policy stances and do not promote a nationalist reading of Buddhist scripture, as was the case with the Kandy (Mahanuwara) Declaration.

Apart from this obstacle, the integration of Buddhist values into Sri Lanka's foreign policy messaging does not present substantial challenges. Buddhism enjoys constitutional protection and the government has already enacted various (albeit flawed) projects in Buddhist diplomacy, so an initiative to integrate Buddhist references into foreign policy messaging would likely receive legal and financial support from the Sri Lankan state. Considering whether such an initiative might face resistance from non-Buddhist Sri Lankans, the adoption of more cosmopolitan Buddhist messaging in foreign policy would at least signal a shift toward a more liberal interpretation of Buddhism that is welcoming of minorities, in stark contrast to the ethno-nationalist Buddhism that currently pervades government institutions.

While much remains to be decided about how such an initiative can be implemented, this new—and perhaps counterintuitive—approach to addressing Sri Lanka's ethnic conflicts may lay the foundation for more substantive transitional justice measures by first addressing a key insecurity of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists. Buddhist foreign policy messaging cannot substitute for substantive domestic reform and transitional justice processes. However, by mitigating Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, it could pave the way for further reforms.

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