Buddhist Nationalism, Authoritarian Populism, and The Muslim Other in Sri Lanka

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In this paper I argue that the encounter of early Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka with colonial rule and capitalist modernity uniquely influenced the emergence of an exclusivist, majoritarian politics against ethnic and religious minorities. In its contemporary expression, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) frames the Muslim “Other” as undermining the cultural and economic sovereignty of the “Sinhala-Buddhist nation.” This in turn reinforces the majoritarian and modernization imperatives of the modern Nation-State, manifested most recently in the authoritarian populist politics of the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime.

This paper starts off with a brief review on Islamophobia, generally and in the context of Asian societies more specifically. In the first section, I look at the colonial influences on early Buddhist Revivalism and how this informs the political activism of Buddhist clergy in the contemporary context. In the second section, I deconstruct the discourse on the Muslim ‘Other’ in Buddhist nationalist movements over history, against prevailing socio-economic dynamics. In the final section, I examine how the ethno-religious nationalism of the Bodu Bala Sena intersects with authoritarian populism under the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime.

This paper borrows from a conceptualization of “Islamophobia” that interprets it as more than just individual attitudes or beliefs toward Muslims. Rather it is a process of racial abstraction that misleadingly classifies otherwise diverse groups into a generic Muslim “race” (Meer and Modood 2019). This process is embedded in a system of structural discrimination imposed along racial, religious, and gender dimensions in order to inferiorize the Muslim “Other” (Grosfoguel and Mielants 2006). Such an understanding enables one to challenge the idea that public expressions of Islamophobia are simply a deviation of liberal democracy and argues instead that the former is constitutive of the latter (Ahmad 2013).

Significantly, this contests the idea that Islamophobia is a novel or recent phenomenon, which occurs within a shift in discourse from “nation” to “civilization” in European right-wing populist discourse (cf. Bunzl 2005). Rather, Islamophobia is argued to have its roots in the Orientalist discourse of the colonial era (since the end of the 15th century) (Grosfoguel and Mielants 2006). The Western colonial production of knowledge pertaining to the “Muslim world” as violent, uncivilized, and under-developed (relative to self-referential and constructed European standards) were manufactured to legitimize the political and economic domination of the Orient (Said 1979, 108). These dynamics of racialized colonial modernity continue to be reproduced in contemporary societies (McMichael 2017, 3).

There is a close alignment of the above critique of Islamophobia, as constitutive of liberal democracy, with the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists’ interpretation of the (perceived) contemporary rise of authoritarian populist politics around the world (Abromeit 2018, 4). This alignment is significant for this paper’s examination of the intersection of Islamophobia and authoritarian populism in contemporary Sri Lankan politics. The Frankfurt School Critical Theorists highlight how the European Enlightenment inherently contained authoritarian...
tendencies and the potential for fascism in its drive toward modernity and the rationalization of society (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). Fascism in Nazi Germany was thus a replication of the violence of colonial modernity brought home to Europe, caused not by any “modernization deficit” compared to other Western democracies but springing from some of the deepest, most powerful tendencies latent in modern capitalist societies (Cesaire 1972; Young 2001). To characterize authoritarian populism as a more recent malaise of liberal democracy, therefore, is to reveal both serious historical and theoretical blind spots (Abromeit 2018, 4).

While existing scholarship on Islamophobia in the West evidently involves a critical and evolving discourse, it is important to understand its manifestation in non-Western contexts for both its theoretical and empirical contributions. In most Asian societies the colonial encounter has significantly impacted the reproduction of non-Western hegemonic identities and knowledges against Muslims (Osman 2017). Identifying these continuities and revealing their impact on political power and representation contributes towards disrupting these projects and “decentring” Western hegemony (Meer 2014; Morsi 2017).

This paper seeks to contribute to an emerging literature on Islamophobia in Asian societies by analyzing its historical trajectory in Sri Lanka. The colonial encounter, particularly since the 19th century, is argued to have had a significant impact on the nationalist imaginations of ethnic and religious minorities (Jayawardena 1970; Ali 2015; Keyes 2016). In the aftermath of a protracted civil war by the State against minority ethnic Tamil separatists, the increase in anti-Muslim violence and sentiment needs to be understood against the post-war majoritarian nation-building project (Stewart 2014; Jones 2015; Seoighe 2016; De Votta 2018; Gunatilleke 2018) and evolving forms of militarized neoliberalism (Ali 2014). The 2019 Easter attacks by Islamist terrorists on a series of local churches have further heightened social anxieties among sections of Sinhala and Tamil communities toward the general Muslim community, and their impact on Buddhist and political nationalist movements requires further study. This needs to be considered against the background of Islamophobic movements and new media in the broader region and the West (Jones 2015).

Buddhist Nationalism from Colonial Ceylon to Post-Independence Sri Lanka

The Buddhist Revivalist movement emerged in late-19th-century British Ceylon and was led by a group of local Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists in resistance to the violence inflicted by the colonizer on Buddhism and the economic sovereignty of the Sinhala native (Kemper 2015, 68). In 1815, the British had assumed administrative control over Ceylon (a first for any colonial power on the island) by signing the Kandyan Convention. This agreement acknowledged Buddhism as the religion of the majority native population and committed to protecting its rites and traditions (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 202). It was reneged, however, around 1850 as colonial policy moved to favor Anglican missionaries. Although secularism was formally adopted by the colonial administration in 1880, the dominance of Christian missionaries in the public space was maintained (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 202).

The Revivalist movement challenged Christian missionaries, calling Buddhism an out-of-date religion and with teachings inconsistent with modern knowledge, by engaging them in a series of historic debates from 1865 to 1899 (Bond 1992, 47). In these debates, Buddhism was presented as a “rational” and “practical” religion, in contrast to Christianity which was depicted as full of “incredible mythology” (Amunugama 1991, 582). These debates have since been referred to as the பஞ்ச மகாவாதாய (Pancha Maha Wadaya or Five Great Debates), of which the 1873 Panadura Debate is most famous—not least for evoking sympathy in the Theosophical Society for the Buddhist nationalist struggle in British Ceylon and for the glorified precedent it has afforded Sinhala nationalists since.
Importantly, these debates are an instance of what the post-colonial theorist, Ashis Nandy, describes as a colonial-sanctioned resistance that functions within the psychological limits set by the colonizer (Nandy 2009, 3). Sinhala-Buddhist anti-colonial nationalists thus creatively appropriated existing discourse on Buddhism and rationality that were promoted by Orientalist scholars, who were able to comprehend Buddhism only through a limited lens of modernity, rationality, and science (Rambukwella 2020). The ideology mobilized by the Buddhist Revivalists has been termed “Protestant Buddhism,” not least because it mimics many of the norms and organizational forms of Protestant Christianity (even in its critique of it) but also in its attack of “traditional Buddhism” practiced by the Sinhalese peasant (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 215). It is closely associated with Anagarika Dharmapala, who was a prominent figure in the Revivalist movement and heavily influenced by the Theosophical Society during its initial presence in Ceylon. The Revivalist movement, and Dharmapala’s evolving thought also continued to be substantially influenced by Sinhala nationalist thinkers (Roberts 2000; Kemper 2015).

Dharmapala’s assertive anti-colonial rhetoric is partly a mimicry of the colonizer. He flips imperial stereotypes on the native, as he substitutes his own stereotype of the Englishman as a barbarian (Amunugama 1991, 585). He also locates the “authentic” self and sovereignty of the nation in the Sinhala-Buddhist peasant and village (Moore 1989). This marks not just the exclusion of the Western colonizer but other native minorities—particularly the Muslims/Moors and Tamils. Dharmapala has since been (somewhat misleadingly) characterized as the “founding father of Protestant Buddhism” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 205). This derives from later nationalist leaders and thinkers appropriating his example and applying it to the social and political sphere, even though Dharmapala’s life goes beyond the nationalist frames imposed on it (Rambukwella 2017, 19). In his later years, he came to view politics and government as a “perfunctory epiphenomenon,” seeing Buddhism as geared more toward spiritual self-government (Kemper 2015, 306). He travelled extensively around the world to carry out Buddhist missionary work, and his “locative pluralisms” were arguably at odds with any real commitment to the idea of a Sinhala-Buddhist nation (Rambukwella 2017, 21–2; Blackburn 2010, 210).

As misplaced as Dharmapala’s appropriation as a nationalist figure may be, the very (mis)interpretation set off a tradition of religious nationalism and the political-activist monk in the post-independence years. This was advocated early on by scholar-activist monk, the Venerable (Ven.) Walpola Rahula, and others from the Vidyalankara pirivena (monastic college). Political activism was ascribed as part of the “heritage of the monk” (Abeysekara 2002, 83). This was in accordance with national historical epics, such as the Mahavamsa, which were often appropriated by nationalist thinkers as fact over myth. Drawing from the Mahavamsa, the narrative that the Sinhala race were the custodians of Theravada Buddhism was legitimized in popular culture over time (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 19–21).

This political activism of the sangha (Buddhist clergy) was at times co-opted by the State for political legitimacy, such as when Buddhism was given a foremost place in the State Constitution of 1972. At other times, this activism was resisted by the State. In the 1980s, a new Sinhala nationalist movement known as Jathika Chinthanaya (national consciousness), comprised of sangha and lay thinkers, emerged in opposition to open economy reforms (Venugopal 2018, 94). Reasons for the opposition were publicly cited in terms of the reforms’ moral conflict with Buddhist ideals of righteousness and moderation of worldly materialism. The reforms also threatened the traditional lifestyle that sustained the sangha’s role in society (Amunugama 1991, 125–6). This opposition conflicted with the State’s neoliberal development agenda at the time and sections of sangha subsequently faced a number of restrictions on political activism (Venugopal 2018, 94).
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, 204)

This 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, 38). With the civil war ended by military means in 2009, the post-war political landscape has further facilitated a majoritarian mindset within State and society (Byrne and Klem 2015, 226). This witnessed the proliferation of a number of extra-parliamentary Buddhist nationalist movements. 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, 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. The following verses appear in a BBS pamphlet as a theme song for its “Protect Buddhism, awaken a Dharmapala generation!” program. 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:

[1] සෙහේ යුක්තිකිෂ්ව සඳහා මිල මගවේ දේව රත්නාවකින් [Hundreds of thousands of eons, been sonorous through the three Sinhala]
[2] ඉවත්තී ගැන අදින්නේ බොහෝ [Now to protect the heart of it carrying arms]
[3] නොයා මෙයින්නේ ගොඩා ගොඩා [To protect with the greatest courage]

[Chorus] යුක්තිකිෂ්ව උවත්තී ... නොයා මෙයින්නේ ගොඩා [Wake up you Sinhalese . . . wake up from your slumber]
[4] යුක්තිකිෂ්ව උවත්තී ... යුක්තිකිෂ්ව [Wake up you Sinhalese . . . wake up]

[2] ගොඩා මෙයින්නේ මඟ මඟ මඟ උවත්මිල [To wipe out our heritage, our nation]
[3] මඟ මඟ මඟ උවත්මිල [Enemy forces all over the world]
[4] උවත්මිල උවත්මිල උවත්මිල [Are setting up camps allying with enemies in this land]
[5] යුක්තිකිෂ්ව උවත්තී ... යුක්තිකිෂ්ව [Wake up you Sinhalese . . . wake up]
[6] යුක්තිකිෂ්ව උවත්තී ... යුක්තිකිෂ්ව [Wake up you Sinhalese . . . wake up]

[3] සෙහේ යුක්තිකිෂ්ව සඳහා [We shall defeat the challenges, the propaganda]
[4] සෙහේ යුක්තිකිෂ්ව සඳහා [Penetrate through the darkness]
[5] සෙහේ යුක්තිකිෂ්ව සඳහා [So sharpen your swords on the Dharmapala touchstone] (emphasis added)
In April 2019, a series of coordinated suicide bombings were carried out in a number of churches by a local militant Islamist group—National Thowheeth Jama’ath (NTJ), killing 259 people. The attacks were later claimed by the Islamic State (IS) as part of their global jihad and triggered pre-existing “majority with minority” anxieties for the Sinhalese. These were expressed in mob attacks and the boycotting of Muslim homes and businesses, and increased intolerance of the visible markers of religious identity (Slater and Farisz 2019). Under the State Emergency law, the burqa and niqab (Muslim face veils) were banned, citing security reasons, and certain politicians called for a single law within the country, negating the existing customary Muslim law for the Sri Lanka Muslim community (BBC 2019; SLBC 2019). Buddhist nationalist groups as the BBS found themselves uniquely positioned as their concerns about Muslim “extremism,” previously dismissed by certain media and sections of the public as divisive and extremist, now found new relevance:

The media was preoccupied with chasing us and labelling us as extremists. We raised our voice in 2014 because we knew what was happening. Our monks faced aggression from Muslim extremists. In 2014, there was information that some local extremist Muslims had joined IS fighters in Syria. This was ignored. Now everything we have said has [happened]. Hundreds had been killed and still we are being blamed and called racists.

(Gnanasara Thero, in Bulathsinghala 2019)

Framing of Muslim “Other” in Buddhist Nationalist Movements

The Buddhist Revivalist movement during colonial Ceylon attributed the violences inflicted on the Sinhala-Buddhist “authentic” self and sovereignty—located in the Sinhalese peasant and the traditional rural economy—to not only the British colonizer but also to what it deemed “alien” minorities, particularly the Muslims and Tamils (Rampton 2011). Antagonism directed at Muslims was particularly marked around this time, with its most violent expression in the 1915 anti-Muslim riots. In this section, I look at how the framing of the Muslim Other and local dynamics during this period informs an understanding of contemporary anti-Muslim sentiments.

The 1915 anti-Muslim riots occurred over local Muslims using the Police Ordinance (under British colonial law) to their advantage, demanding that Buddhist processions cease “tom-tomming” (drumming) in front of specific mosques (Roberts 2000, 1025–6). Sinhala nationalists explain the altercation in terms of Coast (Indian) Moors, who were more recent immigrants than the Ceylon Moors, appealing to a colonial legal system that discriminated against historical and customary practices (that the Buddhist processions embodied) in favor of secularism (Chandrasena 2016, 182–9).

Accusations of historical and cultural insensitivity by these nationalists are almost invariably linked with perceived economic injustices. Global economic conditions at the time were precarious due to World War I, and the local context was marked by growing labor unrest and union activism (Jayawardena 1970). There was growing resentment among the sections of the Sinhalese, influenced by Buddhist Revivalist discourse, that Muslim traders were (allegedly)
exploiting this situation in their favor, in complicity with the capitalist system and colonial “divide and rule” tactics (Chandrasena 2016). The charge was that Muslims deliberately raised food prices in times of austerity, forcing the Sinhalese peasants into debt and to lose their lands (Chandrasena 2016):

The situation of the Lankan Muslims is similar to the situation of the Jews in Russia. They take money and do not associate with the public. In every instance they exploit the [Sinhalese] farmer . . .


The growing antagonism toward Muslims tapped into an existing paranoia within Sinhala consciousness of being submerged by Indians. In Buddhist nationalist discourse, the enemy was identified in the “Indian trinity” of “the Chettiar exploiter, the coolie who was at once slave and faithful servant of the English planter, and the prospering kangani, potential expropriator of the villagers” (Meyer 1991, 56). For Dharmapala, as a prominent figure within the movement, his prejudice against the Muslim looms larger than his criticisms of either the British colonizer or Hindus of India for their part in the decline of Buddhism:

Of all the destructive religions Mohammedanism is the worst. Then comes Christianity and Brahmanism. Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Brahmanism; Brahmanism was partially successful in destroying Buddhism.

(Dharmapala 28 May 1903, in Roberts 2000, 1024)

Buddhism in contrast, according to Dharmapala, was largely free from war, and even when fought by Buddhist kings were radically different in their “humane laws and effects” (Gokhale 1999, 37). It is to this inherent heritage that he attributes the “resilience” of this faith and its people:

A thousand years ago the Mahomedan invasion swept like a hurricane over the greater part of India, destroying all the old institutions; and on the sites of the destroyed ancient greatness were built new creeds and alien faiths. But the glorious inheritance of Aryan ancestors, uncontaminated by Semitic [emphasis added] and savage ideas, though lost to India, has been preserved by the Aryan [emphasis added] Sinhalese in the luxuriant isle of Ceylon.

(Dharmalapa, Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon 1908, in Guruge 1965, 486–7)

The invocation of Aryanism in Dharmapala’s discourse is notable, being a common practice among colonized native populations (like the Sinhalese) for the pride of place it gave them with the colonizer and the distinction it allowed them from other local immigrant communities like the Muslims and Tamils (Kemper 2015, 325). Important too is Dharmapala’s anti-Semitic reference, in which Muslims are compared to the (mis)portrayal of Jews in Europe at the time. It reveals the economic and racialized nationalism that underpins the 1915 anti-Muslim riots, and which continues into the present day (Roberts 1997; Jayawardena 1970).

Indeed, much of the circumstances that surround the 1915 anti-Muslim riots continue to inform contemporary Buddhist nationalist discourse. At the same time, they are distinctly shaped by political and economic developments in the post-independence landscape.
The open economic reforms since the 1980s opened the national economy and society to the commercial imperatives of neoliberal capitalist development. This was met by a resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, in the form of the Jathika Chinthanaya movement, against its moral and economic impact on society. In my conversations with some locals (Sinhalese and Muslims) in August 2019, a common response to the probable origins of prevailing Islamophobic sentiment in Sri Lanka was the 1980’s economic reforms. Although there is reason to believe that post-9/11 global Islamophobia has significantly influenced nationalist framing of the Muslim Other, it is important to understand why the 1980s are commonly referred to as a turning point. Some of the common reasons offered were the labor migration of locals to the Middle East, where non-Muslims were allegedly exploited by Muslim employers there (Jones 2015, 78). Moreover, returning local Muslims were resented for the wealth they acquired overseas and accused of assuming increased markers of piety and practices of Islamic orthodoxy, such as the rise of Islamic madrasahs and the veiled dress (Ali 2014, 304). These were seen as a betrayal of the local culture and an alignment with what they perceived as a foreign, “Arabic” one.

One way to interpret locating present-day Islamophobia in the 1980s neoliberal economic reforms is to identify the increasing social and economic inequalities these reforms contributed to, particularly affecting marginal and vulnerable urban and rural poor. These tensions of capitalist modernity are 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, 116). It inadvertently detacts attention from the elite (local and foreign) ruling and capitalist class that benefit from neoliberal development practices onto a religious minority already persecuted in neighboring States and in the broader West. These dynamics are reminiscent of the 1915 anti-Muslim riots, when communal divisions were used by nationalist elite as a deliberate scapegoat to avoid the critical need for land reform (Meyer 1991, 50). These economic tensions further intensified in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter attacks, when Islamist suicide bombers blew up a series of churches across the island. Unofficial discourses around the need to boycott Muslim local businesses were heard even in remote Sinhalese villages that were not directly affected by the attacks (Gamage 2019).

Buddhist Nationalism and Authoritarian Populist Politics

The rise of Buddhist nationalism in post-independence Sri Lanka has influenced various attempts at the construction of particular Buddhist conceptions of the State, authority, and legitimacy. Buddhism is accorded foremost place according to State constitutional law, with Section 6 of the 1972 Constitution stating that:

The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by section 18 (1) (d).

(in Gunatilleke 2018, 372)

The privileging of Buddhism by constitutional law is in accordance with the means of agitation that Dharmapala pushed for. He prioritized petition and litigation over Gandhian-styled non-violence or self-suffering (Kemper 2015, 315): “I have to be active and activity means agitation according to constitutional methods” (Dharmapala 1905, in Guruge 1965, 753). In more contemporary Buddhist nationalist movements such as the BBS we see this commitment reinforced, although extended to more forceful agitations as well:
According to the Constitution of this country, freedom of religion is practised. But the Constitution does not grant the freedom to build mosques everywhere. It is also made clear that Buddhism should be given priority. But it is not being implemented properly. Most of us think that the state religion of this country is Buddhism. But we have explained to the people of this country that this is not the case. The Bodu Bala Sena is fighting to make the country’s state religion Buddhism . . . The institution responsible for this is the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs. However, the Bodu Bala Sena had to go to the relevant ministry and question why the necessary steps for the upliftment of Buddhism were not being carried out.

(“Kathikaawaka arabuma [Start of a dialogue],” BBS n.d., 6, 53)

The populist sentiments that the BBS appeal to in this excerpt are evident.

Authoritarian, right-wing populist politics typically alleges that a section of the population are “the pure people,” mobilized against “the corrupt elite,” which are held hostage by a “foreign” Other (Mudde 2010, 1175). Resolution of this constructed “crisis” is framed in terms of a return to an ideal, socially homogeneous past, tapping into a sense of nationalistic pride and (real or imagined) loss of community (Sombatpoonsiri 2018, Abromeit 2018). This legitimizes ambivalence toward institutions of democratic restraint, in a move toward extra-parliamentary mobilization and/or greater aspects of presidentialism (Stockemer 2018). These legitimize increased State coercion (both legal and armed force) against the “foreign” Other, and power concentrated within a privileged few, often under a charismatic leadership (Germani 1978; Morelock 2018).

The nationalist politics of the BBS appropriates many of these populist elements, and emerges alongside authoritarian populism at the national level, closely associated with the Presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–15). The BBS is argued by some to have enjoyed impunity under the Rajapaksa regime following the appearance of then Defence Secretary (now President) Gotabhaya Rajapaksa as Chief Guest for the opening ceremony of Meth Sevana—The Buddhist Leadership Academy of the BBS (Gunasekara 2013). In the final section, I examine the intersection of contemporary Buddhist nationalist movements with authoritarian populism at the national level. Particularly, I look at the tensions and convergences of the Islamophobic discourse of the BBS and the authoritarian populist politics of the Rajapaksa regime (2005–15).

Ethnic Homelands and Erasure of Minorities

Within BBS discourse, the notion of ethnic homelands is evident. This discourse rejects prevailing multiculturalism models as Western-centric, and calls for a return to an idyllic past, with a “single, overarching Sinhala-Buddhist culture” where minorities were respected, provided they accepted “the norms of the dominant culture as their own” (Gunatilleke 2018, 371). Invoking historical (and pseudo-factual) national epics such as the Mahavamsa, contemporary Buddhist nationalists argue for constitutional privileges for the majority Sinhala race and Buddhism based on (contested) indigeneity vs. later waves of immigration. These sentiments intersect with right-wing, populist movements globally and in the region which call for “ethnopluralism”—fixed homelands for different ethnic communities (Jones 2015, 38). The rise of such right-wing, populist movements at a transnational level hints at common historical origins located in the global capitalist system and colonial and neo-colonial structures.

This is to an extent also reflective of the influences of early Buddhist Revivalism, which argued that Buddhism was a “philosophy” and not a “religion.” This tendency has been interpreted by some scholars as a means to cope with the phenomenon of religious pluralism, as it
enables labeling other “religions” as micchaditti (false doctrines) (Roberts 2000, 125; Gombrich and Obeysekere 1989, 222). These logics have continued into contemporary Buddhist nationalist movements in the face of globalization that invoke the populist trope of “go back home” if unwilling or unable to assimilate to the majority culture:

To the Muslim community, we invite those who want Arab culture, Wahabism, and Shariah law to leave to Saudi Arabia. The rest [moderate Muslims] can come with us. We are firm on this stance, and we not willing to mollycoddle them [implied: as some politicians do].

(Thero 2019)

At the same time, post-independence Buddhist nationalism is a departure from the Revivalist movement, which sought to internationalize the “Buddhist struggle” for missionary ends. Contemporary nationalists largely internationalize religious struggle for mostly nationalist ends (Kemper 2015, 426).

The convergence of this status assigned to minorities by Buddhist nationalism and authoritarian populism is notable. Both the BBS and the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime have a shared agenda to subsume the notion of “minorities” under a broader majoritarian ethic. During post-war victory celebrations, President Rajapaksa famously declared that there were no longer any minorities in Sri Lanka, only those who love the country and those who do not (Byrne and Klem 2015). The post-war landscape and the majoritarian elements it fosters are evidently used to re-contest and re-shape the tenets of representative democracy in its own image. This action is paralleled by the view of the BBS that there are no ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka, only “Sinhala Buddhists, Sinhala Hindus, Sinhala Catholics, Sinhala Christians, and Sinhala Muslims” (Jayakody 2014, as cited in Jones 2015, 54). This contrasts with historical evidence of a measure of religious tolerance and pluralism (“fuzzy communities”) in the Kandyan Kingdom, and which only later transformed into more rigid ethnic identities after the colonial encounter (Rampton 2011, Roberts 2000).

In refusing to acknowledge the plurality of identities, the social hegemonic impulses of these political and religious nationalist movements mimic the totalizing and hegemonic worldviews of imperial rule. This is in line with Sen’s (2007) critique of “exclusivist identities,” of the “illusion” of a single culture or religion constituting any kind of “destiny” (Chakrabarty 2009, 149).

In BBS discourse, it portrays itself as at the brunt of a strategic campaign by opportunistic and traitorous politicians driven by capitalist interests that seek to undermine its mission by labeling it as “racist” and “fundamentalist”:

People who don’t understand the facts or those who deliberately want to undermine the national liberation movement, many of those who deal with the enemies of the nation, [and are] a group of international conspirators interpret the Bodu Bala Sena varyingly as a racist organization, an extremist organization, and a Buddhist fundamentalist organization . . . These opportunists driven by extremist capitalist interests, became the pawns of traitorous politicians [that betray race and nation] in corrupting the social consciousness.

(BBS n.d., 59)

Moreover, the BBS claims that it is accused of racism over isolated incidents that happen to involve Sinhala and Muslim individuals or discourses characterized as just
“nationalism”, glossing over its exclusivist tendencies (Stewart 2014, 249). In doing so, its Islamophobic discourse avoids being identified as part of an enduring majoritarian and modernizing “nation-building” exercise that conducted a protracted civil war against Tamil separatists (1983–2009), and continued to feature in the authoritarian populist politics of the Rajapaksa regime. It instead portrays the alleged “encroachment” of the Muslims as a totally new and complex threat that calls for a more authoritarian response. We see this dislocation of accountability in the following BBS statement:

The separatist cohorts who claim that Sinhalese are involved in an ethnic genocide against Tamils must understand that the real threat for them comes from the Tamil speaking Musalmanus who initially joined them in their separatist campaign . . . When a Sinhala army soldier erects a small Buddha statue at the foot of a Bodhi tree to offer flowers to Lord Buddha, these anti-Sinhala separatist politicians loudly claim that this is a Sinhala expansionism. But they do not realize that the real threat to them comes from Islamic quarters.

(Liyanage 2014, 10, in Jones 2015, 47–8)

Asserting a growing popular mandate, the BBS sees itself as not beholden to any political or religious authority. In an interview with the Ven. Gnanasara this August in Colombo, I asked how the BBS intends to address the apparent conflict, which it claims as inevitable, between the Sinhalese and the Muslims (Thero 2019). His response was to treat the issues as

A religious problem, not a political problem. We cannot fight because the world then accuses the Buddhists of violence. The best method for us to solve this problem then is the Buddhist path—to come and debate. We have started this by taking the Quran and referring to particular verses, and asking the Islamic clergy how they are practised and interpreted.

(Thero 2019)

He invokes next the Pancha Maha Wadaya (Five Great Debates) conducted during the Buddhist Revivalism as a historical precedent. Glorification and “mythologization” of these historic debates in their appropriation for the Buddhist nationalist cause is evident:

The Sinhalese were weakened and they [the Christian missionaries] thought that Buddhists could be converted to Christians. But there were monks like us who stood against this. They did not go fight or ask an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose. Instead, they invited them for a discussion on whether the Bible or Dhamma was correct. There were five debates organised and all were won by us . . . The same threat that came from the Bible then has now come from the Quran.

(Thero 2019)

A display of Cartesian “instrumental rationality” is apparent in this discourse and the misplaced sense that subjective, plural knowledges can be debated according to an apolitical, singular standard of “reason.” By equating the Bible with the Quran, for instance, the power politics behind Christian missionary zeal and a persecuted Muslim minority are conflated as one. Moreover, the practice of religious debate as a solution in contemporary times has been critiqued by the likes of Sen (2007) of having
the effect of magnifying . . . the voice of Islamic clerics . . . on matters that are not in the
domain of religion, at a time when the political and social roles of Muslims in civil
society, including in the practice of democracy, need emphasis and much greater support.
(Sen 2007, in Chakrabarty 2009, 150)

Rural as Authentic Sinhala-Buddhist Self and Sovereignty

Both the BBS and the Rajapaksa regime, in the tradition of earlier Sinhala-Buddhist
nationalists and leaders, locate the “authentic” self and sovereignty of the nation in the Sinhala
peasant and village. President Rajapaksa tapped into this imagery of Sinhala “authenticity” in
political campaigns and to legitimize his political rule amidst allegations of war crimes, nepo-
tism, and increasing national debt to GDP ratio:

I am a Sri Lankan nationalist. I come from the south, from a rural background. I believe
in the Buddha and the Dharma, and in the Middle Path. But when the Middle Path is
closed on me by force then I must fight to regain that ground.
(Mahinda Rajapaksa 2009, in Ariyarathna 2014)

Constructing the rural as the embodiment of Sinhala-Buddhist authenticity draws from
a longer tradition of the Buddhist Revivalist movement, which depicts the village as the last
bastion of an “authentic” and prosperous Sinhala-Buddhist pre-colonial civilization maintained
by the proactive role of the sangha (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 250). This conceptual-
ization of the rural in contemporary Sri Lanka is in certain ways a continuation of its unequal
relationship with the metropolis since the colonial period (Spencer 2000). It is also informed
by certain preconceived ideas in Europe at the time about the countryside and its inhabitants,
in an “admiration of pre-capitalist society; hatred of commercialism . . . and a vision of a future
society that would recuperate certain medieval values” (Brow 1999, 78). For Dharmapala, this
“backwardness” is blamed as much on the Sinhala peasant as on the Muslim trader and colonial
ruler (Gokhale 1999, 39). In turn, he promotes modernization and bourgeoisie values that
appeared to a new class of Sinhala urban entrepreneurs and village elite at the turn of the 20th
century (Roberts 2000).

In the more contemporary Buddhist nationalist discourse of the BBS, the exploitation
of the Sinhalese villager by the Muslim Other is a common, often gendered, theme (Jones
2015, 79). The capital city Colombo is denigrated for its multiculturality, which according to
the BBS is symbolic of the Sinhala majority being held hostage by minorities:

Cities in Sri Lanka including Colombo are only parasitic economic centres. They are
sustained by neighbouring rural communities. It is rural labourers that work in urban
factories . . . We watched optimistically as educated, business-savvy Sinhalese left the
village for the cities. But what is the fate of the cities today? Colombo is the capital of
Sri Lanka. But while all major business and economic centres are concentrated in
Colombo, the chart below summarizes the demographic composition of the Colombo
Divisional Secretariat.11

(BBS 2019, 11)

Just like Dharmapala, the BBS locates the problem not in the dislocations that result in
the encounter with capitalist modernity, but in the absence of this “progress” in the village—
allegedly dominated and experienced by the minorities (particularly Muslims) that “occupy”
the city. These logics align with the State’s alignment in many ways with a neoliberal development agenda since the 1980s, which opened up rural land and labor for neoliberal initiatives in the name of “development.”

In November 2019, new President-elect Gotabhaya Rajapaksa chose the location of his swearing-in ceremony as the rural heartland of Anuradhapura, in opposition to the usual practice of doing this in the commercial capital Colombo (Herald 2019). Clearly, the rural space and ethno-nationalisms will continue to have powerful symbolism in authoritarian populist discourse as a means of creating a collective will in support of State politics.

“Official Policeman Against Muslim Extremism”

The BBS, in its populist discourse, claims to fight for justice for the Sinhala-Buddhist people that the “democratic” State institutions are unable or unwilling to deliver, being allegedly held hostage to minority and/or foreign interests. It portrays itself as above narrow political interests in this moment of urgency in fulfilling its historic task against Muslim “encroachment”:

Every single second wasted will drive our country to a great danger. Opportunistic political agendas, disguised as pseudo-patriots, further complicate our responsibility. The opportunists who try to manipulate the present crisis to achieve narrow nationalist objectives make our exercise more difficult. But, in spite of all this, it is our prime responsibility to eradicate fanatic religious terrorism from the country with unfailing purpose. Present social anxieties must not be allowed to be captured for narrow political objectives.

(BBS 2019, 5)

In a similar vein, the BBS accuses the State police of corruption and of not being able to protect Sinhala interests for fears of being labeled “racist” (Jones 2015, 75). The BBS’ General Secretary Gnanansara Thero calls for its support base to proactively take on the role of “an official policeman against Muslim extremism,” and not rely on “so-called democrats” to protect “Sinhale’s” Sinhala-Buddhist sovereignty (De Votta 2018, 291):

Dear venerable monks, if you get assaulted, no need to go to the police—let the law of the jungle take over.

(Jones 2015, 82)

Calls for unofficial justice are reminiscent of Buddhist nationalist discourse during the 1915 anti-Muslim riots when police were accused of being unreceptive to the cultural sensitivities of Sinhala Buddhists and instead beholden to the colonial government and its secular law (Chandrasena 2016, 185–6).

These claims to extra-State authority are also extended to the regulation of the Buddhist sasana (monastic order). In pre-colonial times, rulers had the task of “purifying” the sangha of ill-disciplined elements (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 225). Under the modern Nation-State and the constitutional mandate of religious pluralism, however, State leaders could no longer play this role (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 225). Upholding the vinaya (discipline) of the sangha now became the responsibility of the monastic order itself but was not implemented as it lacked central authority. The Buddhist Revivalists of the early 20th century later established a lay movement called the Vinayavardhana Samitiya (Association for the
Improvement of Buddhist Discipline) (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 233). Mimicking the model of the historic debates between Buddhist nationalists and Christian missionaries in British Ceylon, the association would “challenge monks to public debate and attempt to belittle both their knowledge of canonical doctrine and their purity of conduct” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 233).

The BBS has called for a version of such monastic surveillance, through the establishment of a separate court system that holds the sasana accountable to a standard of Buddhist ideals and values. In the meantime, the BBS claims to have taken matters into its own hands:

Relieving the darkness of the sasana: The Bodu Bala Sena has to take some action against those who pretend to be monks and destroy the sasana. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of a sangha-related Court system in Sri Lanka. There is no other structure present to handle legal matters relating to the sangha. It should be recalled that the Bodu Bala Sena was compelled to reluctantly intervene to disrobe about fifty persons disguised as monks, from various parts of the country.

(“Kathikaawaka arabuma [Start of a dialogue],” BBS n.d., 51)

In August 2018, when Gnanasara Thero was sentenced to a six-year jail term for contempt of court, Minister Champika Ranawaka, General Secretary of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist political party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party), called for the establishment of a special court to hear cases concerning Buddhist monks (Kanakarathna 2018). He suggested that this should be done in consultation with the Mahanayake Theros of the relevant Chapters. Such calls for a special court system occurred amidst public debate on the Thero having to wear ordinary prison garb according to the Prisons Ordinance, over Buddhist robes. According to the Buddhist disciplinary text (Vinaya Pitakaya), however, a bikkhu who spent seven days out of the robe could lose his status as per the rule cheevara vip-pavaasi (residing out of the robe) (The Island 2018).

A special court for Buddhist monks would arguably provide an institutional basis for the extra-democratic role that Buddhist nationalists call for in their populist discourse, as well as consolidate their majoritarian sentiments (perceiving themselves above common law). Its advocacy by Sinhala nationalists also contradicts their call for a single law in the country in their mobilization for the abolishment of Muslim customary law (SLBC 2019). The populist discourse of the BBS and the extra-democratic role it advocates for the Buddhist sangha converge with disregard for some democratic institutions and processes during the Rajapaksa regime—the most prominent and controversial among these being the unconstitutional impeachment of the Supreme Court Chief Justice in 2013 (De Votta 2013). It set the stage for the regime’s authoritarian politics, legitimized by a majoritarian “mandate” that it claims to fulfill.

Mediatization of Misinformation Campaigns

A significant feature of contemporary Buddhist nationalism has been the role of misinformation campaigns in relation to the Muslim Other. This was paralleled by the appropriation of national myths by the Rajapaksa regime in order to consolidate its majoritarian “nation-building” exercise.

The invocation of historical myths by nationalist leaders is not uncommon in Sri Lanka’s post-independence history. It lends legitimacy to the politics of personality and the rigid hierarchical concentration of power under such a leader, as portrayed to be the case in pre-colonial society. One such common myth invoked by nationalist leaders, especially during the Rajapaksa
regime, has been that of King Dutugemunu. The famous second-century BCE king allegedly vanquished the Tamil King Elara and united the country under single rule (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 430–2). In the aftermath of the civil war in 2009, President Rajapaksa was dubbed as a reincarnation of this king for his military campaign against Tamil separatism, reinforcing the logics of majoritarian “nation-building.”

These acts of “historicization of myth” and “mythicization of history” are interpreted by some scholars to be a reaction to the conditions of modernity, where the rapid pace of change has been met with an acceleration in the invention of tradition (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1989, 444). The emergence of a regime of neoliberal capitalist development since the 1980s appears to have continued this trajectory.

Meanwhile, misinformation campaigns on various social media platforms by Buddhist nationalist groups, such as the BBS, foster 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 (Jones 2015). This has found expression in a number of conspiracy theories: from mosques having targeted socio-economic plans to support higher Muslim birth-rates to concealed sterilization chemicals in Muslim-owned eateries, cloth stores, and more recently Muslim doctors accused of sterilizing Buddhist women (Jones 2015, 90). This latter incident occurred against an increased climate of paranoia in the aftermath of the April 2019 Easter bombings.

In May 2019, Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen was alleged by a leading local newspaper to have conducted a mass sterilization of 4000 Buddhist women after cesarean deliveries (Ulmer and Rajaratnam 2019). He was later arrested on charges of illegally acquired wealth. Although these charges were subsequently dismissed as politically motivated and the doctor released, it is important to note that the verdict remains rejected by some sections of society: “People here believe that Muslims are capable of such a thing. Even now [after the verdict] this opinion has not changed” (Gamage 2019). The consumption of such misinformation campaigns is common in Sri Lanka but in the global context as well and interpreted by some scholars as likely performing a symbolic assertion that the accusations could have been true and that this recognition is more important than whether it is proved so (Jones 2015, 120).

Popular receptivity to such misinformation campaigns emerge amidst a growing intolerance for evidence, particularly that which contradicts a prevailing opinion. The rejection here is not simply of another “opinion” but of the basic rules of engagement, which likely mirrors the rejection of democratic processes led by populist-nationalist movements. Indeed, Allen (2010) argues that Islamophobia should not be understood solely in terms of power struggles institutionalized within the modern State. Rather, new media influences (and is influenced by) the everyday relationships of power in society (Allen 2010, 188). In their expression, however, these misinformation campaigns often have discriminatory material implications.

In the post-war context, there has been a proliferation of Buddhist nationalist groups relying on claims of historical ownership to reclaim lands in the North and East or to call for mosques built on “sacred land” to be demolished (Seoighe 2016, 460). These re-contestations of “physical authorship” by Buddhist nationalist groups as the BBS legitimizes its own discourse that portrays other religions as transitory and alien (Seoighe 2016, 460; Jones 2015, 45). 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, 41). It is also reminiscent of Dharmapala’s continued campaign (and subsequent failure) to restore Buddhist control of the Maha Bodhi Temple at Buddhagaya, to which he dedicated the most of his life’s efforts:
Buddha Gaya, though now neglected and allowed by the Buddhists without an indignant protest to be desecrated and usurped by those who care more for its destruction than its preservation . . . The glorious picture of a mighty past is before us, and with a united effort Buddha Gaya could be made in a few years to appear what it had been before . . . The work that is before us therefore is one of supreme importance and is worthy of the sacrifice of even our lives. (Dharmapala, in Guruge 1965, 826–7)

Moreover, the invocation of historical claims by Buddhist nationalist groups to legitimize land ownership parallels the preoccupation of the post-independence State with land-grabbing, both in the interests of capitalist productivity and expanding the Sinhala “homeland.” These are evident in State land “colonization” policies in the Dry Zone since independence and post-war land-grabbing incidents by the military in the North and East (Seoighe 2016, 448).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argue that the encounter of early Buddhist nationalism with colonial rule and capitalist modernity uniquely influenced the emergence of exclusivist, majoritarian politics against ethnic and religious minorities. In its contemporary expression, the Bodu Bala Sena frames the Muslim “Other” as undermining the religious and economic sovereignty of the “Sinhala-Buddhist nation.” This in turn reinforces the majoritarian and modernization imperatives of the modern Nation-State, manifested in the authoritarian populist politics of the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime from 2005 to 2015.

Early Buddhist nationalism in British Ceylon was fundamentally influenced by its encounter with colonial rule and capitalist modernity. These legacies continue to inform contemporary Buddhist nationalist movements such as the BBS. In the post-war years, the BBS has been predominantly occupied with constructing a Muslim Other.

In its populist, nationalist discourse, the BBS inadvertently reinforces the majoritarian, authoritarian populism of the Rajapaksa regime, which marginalizes the role of minority ethnic and religious groups in its “nation-building” exercise. This discourse within both electoral and religious movements deflects criticism from the modernization imperatives of neoliberal capitalist development since the 1980s. In the post-2019 Easter attacks, Islamophobic sentiment has further penetrated the social fabric. Under the current Gotabhaya Rajapaksa administration, many of the dynamics analyzed in this paper are reproduced. As the political leadership faces mounting public discontent over the economic and health fallouts of the pandemic, the government is playing up these sentiments of Islamophobia in order to retain legitimacy – whether through seeking the imposition of a permanent burqa ban or banning burial of bodies in accordance with Islamic rites during the first year of the pandemic. The implications of this for Buddhist nationalist discourse, authoritarian populism politics, and ethno-religious minorities are many, and only some of them have been examined within this paper. There is a need for further research to critically examine these issues.

ENDNOTES

1 The concept of “Buddhist Revivalism” is used to analyze colonial-period Buddhist activity (Blackburn 2010, 197).

2 The Theosophical Society was a movement formed in the United States in 1875 and led by Colonel Henry Steele Olcott. Its agenda was studying and resuscitating Eastern religions. It played a fundamental role in the Buddhist revivalist movement in British Ceylon.
Key characteristics of Protestant Buddhism include the rise of lay activism and authority with the attendant decline of the Buddhist sangha (clergy); emphasis of the rational, scientific character of Buddhism; critique of Christian and Western influences, while adopting norms and forms of organization of Protestant Christianity; and a deeper focus on the “scriptural” textual authority (Blackburn 2010, 199).

The Moors are an ethnic minority group in Sri Lanka, initially comprised of Ceylon Moors and Coast Moors, although this distinction collapsed under a common Muslim identity following the 1915 anti-Muslim riots (Ali 2014, 303).

“Locative pluralisms” refer to the deployment of discourse tailored to respective audiences and spaces. In Ceylon, the Buddhism that concerned Dharmapala was more a social and political formation, than a world religion; in India, 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, 427).

Ancient Ceylon was divided into three regions: Ruhunu, Maya, and Pihiti.

These anxieties were formerly in relation to the ethnic Tamils in Tamil Nadu.

We see this feature later as well, in the context of the civil war between the State and ethnic Tamil separatists. Nationalist discourse played up the proximity of the large capitalist State of Tamil Nadu and its Tamil demographics, which essentially made the Sinhalese a minority in this extended geography.

Ali (2014) locates several waves of anti-Muslim attacks in the post-independence years, including the 1976 Puttalam riots, expulsion and massacre of Muslims from the North by the LTTE in 1990, and incidents of sporadic anti-Muslim violence in the 2000s.

These refer to the Hindutva movement in India and Myanmar’s 969 Movement.

The pie chart referred to here shows the demographic breakdown as Muslims—29.73%, Tamils—33.43%, Sinhalese—24.99%, and Others—1.86%. This, however, only applies to the Colombo municipality, and not the larger Colombo district, where the Sinhalese remain a majority in numbers.

“Sinhale” refers to a new name for the country that Buddhist nationalist groups like the BBS are pushing for. Sinhale represents an imagined State where the nation and the Sinhalese race are synonymous (Jones 2015, 39).

A Buddhist Chapter refers to a grouping of the monastic order. In Sri Lanka there are three main Buddhist Chapters: Siam Nikaya, Amarapura Nikaya, and Ramanna Nikaya, although the latter two merged as the Amarapaura-Ramanna Samagri Maha Sangha Sabha in August 2019, making it the biggest Buddhist fraternity in Sri Lanka.

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