

*PRIO REPORT 2/2005*

**THE SANGHA AND ITS  
RELATION TO THE PEACE  
PROCESS IN SRI LANKA**

*A Report for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

Iselin Frydenlund  
*International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO)*  
*January 2005*

© International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO), 2005  
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without permission in writing from the copyright holder(s).

ISBN 82-7288-222-1

# CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| INTRODUCTION.....  | 1         |
| CHAPTER 1: THE SANGHA IN SRI LANKA.....                        | 3         |
| CHAPTER 2: BUDDHISM, NATIONALISM AND THE SRI LANKAN STATE..... | 7         |
| CHAPTER 3: BUDDHIST MONKS IN POLITICS .....                    | 13        |
| CHAPTER 4: 'WE ALL WANT PEACE!' .....                          | 17        |
| CONCLUSION .....   | 33        |
| <i>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</i> .....                             | <i>35</i> |

# INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE INCEPTION of the Norwegian-facilitated peace process in Sri Lanka,<sup>1</sup> considerable criticism has been voiced against both Norway and the government of Sri Lanka. Within that critique, Buddhist monks, *bhikkhus*, have played and continue to play a central role, and many will no doubt recall the images of monks burning the Norwegian flag outside the Norwegian embassy in Colombo.<sup>2</sup> As recently as 24 November 2004, a demonstration outside the embassy in Colombo brought together thousands of Sri Lankans, including many monks, to demand Norway's withdrawal from the peace process. We are thus led to ask, why are the monks so critical of the Sri Lankan peace process? And is this view representative of the Buddhist monastic order, the Sangha, as a whole?<sup>3</sup> In examining these questions, the aim of this report will be to analyse the role of the Sangha in the ongoing peace process in Sri Lanka. The main research questions the report will address are:

- What arguments for and against the peace process and a federal solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka have been advanced by Buddhist monks?
- Who are the most important actors in the ongoing debate about the peace process?
- In what ways can Buddhist monks be peace promoters in Sri Lanka? (This last question opens up for possible policy recommendations.)

Numerous books and articles of a general nature have been published on monks and politics, or on religious nationalism, in Sri Lanka. However, specific facts, names and places are not so easily obtained. Therefore, the present report aims to provide an overview of the crucial actors and the main political themes on the contemporary scene (i.e. during 2004). As a historian of religion, it is not my role to normatively evaluate the Sangha.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the report aims to increase understanding of the plurality of views regarding the peace process to be found among Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka.

The background for this project lies in my own personal academic interest in religion and politics in Sri Lanka, which grew out of a longer period of fieldwork in the southern part of the country at the time when Norway's role as facilitator in the peace process was first made public (2000). This interest coincided with a desire on the part of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to acquire knowledge about the Sangha and its relation to the peace process.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Publicly announced by President Kumaratunga in January 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For example, on 24 December 2002.

<sup>3</sup> While in common parlance the term *Sangha* mostly refers to monks, the term also embraces Buddhist nuns. The female religious order has been revived over the last years in Sri Lanka, but has not been formally accepted by the religious establishment. As they are far less visible than monks in politics, Buddhist nuns have not been included in this study.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Sri Lankan anthropologist H. L. Seneviratne harshly criticizes the Sangha in his book *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), which has become a modern classic in contemporary studies of Buddhism.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to the MFA for funding this project, and to the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) for hosting it. On the ethical challenges of receiving MFA funding for a study so closely related to the MFA's role in a particular political conflict, see my article 'Hør her, du som er fra Norge!' [Listen Here, You Who Come from Norway!], which will be published in a forthcoming anthology, *Kulturvitenskap i felt*, edited by Anders Gustavsson (Oslo: Høyskoleforlaget, 2005).

While I draw upon existing literature on Buddhism and politics in Sri Lanka, this literature does not answer my main concern, namely, how the Sangha relates to the ongoing peace process. The data that underpin this report were gathered during two 14-day fieldtrips to Sri Lanka during 2004. The interviews were conducted in the Kandyan and Colombo regions,<sup>6</sup> with high-ranking monks and laypeople.<sup>7</sup> In addition, I interviewed a number of Sri Lankan monks living abroad, as well as officials at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and activists from relevant Norwegian NGOs. Finally, I have drawn upon sources available on the Internet. Most Sri Lankan newspapers, as well as different Buddhist pressure groups, maintain websites online.

The report falls into two major parts. The first part, which comprises chapters 1–3, presents an overall introduction to Buddhism and politics in Sri Lanka, examining state–Buddhist relations, the issue of the involvement of monks in politics, and the organizational features of the Sangha. This is necessary in order to understand the contemporary scene. The second part, contained in Chapter 4, deals specifically with monastic voices favouring or opposing the Norwegian-facilitated peace process.

Within the report, there is an underlying assumption that religious actors should be viewed as potential political actors who may either spoil or contribute to a peace process. In relation to previous peace processes in Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks have been highly critical both of any concessions made to the country's minority populations and of any moves to modify Sri Lanka's highly centralized political system. However, religious actors seldom operate as a single political unit. The plurality of opinions presented by Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka is a crucial point. My data suggest that the number of monks supporting the ongoing peace process is growing, though they still form a small minority. Some of these monks work within various peace networks in Sri Lanka's fragmented civil society, and the importance of their work cannot be overestimated. However, such monks have little influence among the general Buddhist public. To improve this situation, it would be helpful if Norway – acting as facilitator – could enter into discussions with those leading monks who accept a politically negotiated solution but who are not necessarily active within the peace movement. Here, though, it is important to note that acceptance by monks of negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) does not necessarily imply support for how the peace process is being run at the present time. Nonetheless, these monks, who belong to a cross-section of politically active monks and many of whom have substantial public support for their religious or social activities, could play a vital role in securing public support for future peace talks, as well as in their possible outcome. However, if this is to materialize, the inclusion of Buddhist monks into the peace process would need to be considered, at least at the informal level.

The tsunami disaster that hit Sri Lanka, among other South Asian countries, on 26 December 2004 opened up a new social and political field for the Buddhist monks on the island, namely humanitarian relief work. All over Buddhist Sri Lanka, monks have provided food and shelter in their temples and have run fundraising campaigns to help the tsunami victims. As such, they have further manifested their important role in Sri Lankan society. Moreover, Buddhist monks, together with religious functionaries from other religious traditions, play an important ritual role at funerals, at memorial services and in healing the psychological traumas of tsunami survivors. In addition, several inter-faith memorial services have taken place in the aftermath of the disaster, at which some of Sri Lanka's leading Buddhist monks have participated. Hopefully, the tsunami disaster will bring the two parties in the peace process, as well as the various religious actors, closer to one another, enabling them to set ethnic and religious divisions aside.

---

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview monks located in the southern part of Sri Lanka. For the purposes of this report, then, I will draw upon my previous fieldwork in southern Sri Lanka.

<sup>7</sup> Some interviews were conducted in English, others with translators.

## THE SANGHA IN SRI LANKA

WHILE OFTEN THE SUBJECT OF HARSH CRITICISM, both from academics and from the Buddhist laity, the importance of the Sangha in Buddhist Sri Lanka cannot be underestimated. First of all, monks exercise great influence at the community level. People gather in the temples for *poya* days,<sup>1</sup> and they seek the assistance of monks for blessings and funeral services, as well as for their astrological or medical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, many monks are engaged in social service, such as teaching and community-development projects. And finally, throughout history the monks have been both spiritual guides and advisers to kings and, more recently, to party politicians. Below, I will attempt to explain why and how Buddhist monks are important to lay Buddhists. To understand the special relationship between the two is crucial for any understanding of the monks' role in Sinhala society in general, and in Sri Lankan politics in particular.

The central institutional feature of traditional Theravada Buddhism is the distinction between the laity and the Sangha, which is not a question of separation but rather of mutual dependency.<sup>3</sup> The role of members of the Sangha is to strive for their own spiritual development, and to use their knowledge of the Buddha's teachings, the *Dhamma*, to guide laypeople. However, as Buddhism developed into an established religion, the monks (and nuns) abandoned much of its world-renouncing ideal, and 'the Sangha became the body of literate ceremonial specialists for society'.<sup>4</sup> In this role, the activities of the monks include teaching, preaching (*bana*), the recitation of sacred texts,<sup>5</sup> and officiating at funerals.

At the heart of traditional Buddhism in Sri Lanka stands the village monk, whose primary role is to provide these services to the village.<sup>6</sup> The monk resides in a monastery (*pansala*) attached to a temple (*vihara*). For its part, the role of the laity, including kings, is to provide material support for the Sangha. By supporting the Sangha, laypeople acquire merit, which is crucial for a better rebirth. Merit is perceived as something substantial that can be accumulated: it can be stored up for a better rebirth or it can be passed on to a dead relative for their future well-being, or to the gods in return for help in worldly matters.<sup>7</sup>

*Dana* means a 'monk's meal', and the term refers to the practice of bringing food and gifts to monks (or nuns), the layperson's primary source of merit.<sup>8</sup> Apart from being one of the most important expressions of lay devotion and a meeting place between laypeople and monks, I

---

<sup>1</sup> Auspicious days in the Buddhist calendar, following the lunar system.

<sup>2</sup> This is a sensitive issue, since monks are not allowed to practice 'the occult'. Nonetheless, it is widespread and a good source of income for monks.

<sup>3</sup> This is underlined by the fact that the Sangha is not self-recruiting: it is dependent upon the laity donating their sons and daughters to it.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Carrithers, 'They Will Be Lords Upon the Island: Buddhism in Sri Lanka', in Heinz Bechert & Richard Gombrich, eds, *The World of Buddhism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), pp. 133–146.

<sup>5</sup> In a ceremony called *pirit* in Sinhala, during which particular chapters of the Pali canon are recited to avert evil.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the village monk, the forest-dwelling monk aims at following the monastic discipline's strict ideals of purity, distancing himself from involvement with lay life. In the early 1980s, there were approximately 20,000 monks in Sri Lanka, of whom 600 were registered as genuine forest-dwellers; see Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Richard F. Gombrich, *Buddhist Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> The laity often prefer to give *dana* to hermit monks, because the religious standing of these monks is considered higher due to their spiritual advancement and withdrawal from lay life. Hence, giving *dana* to forest monks is considered more meritorious than giving *dana* to village monks.

would argue that *dana* should also be regarded as a potential political arena. For example, a large *dana* with 100 of the most important monks was held by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse in the prime minister's office in Colombo for Vesak Poya in 2004.<sup>9</sup> A similar *dana* was held by President Kumaratunga a few days later in Kotte. As I will argue later, such ceremonies symbolically express the close relationship between the state and the Sangha, in addition to providing politicians with symbolic justification for their political power.

Conversely, *not* inviting monks to one's house may also be an expression of political dispute. For example, some members of the United National Party (UNP) elites in Colombo stopped inviting the monks who became members of parliament in April 2004 for *dana*. According to one UNP family, monks should stay out of party politics, a point they made clear by no longer making use of the ritual services of the monks who had entered politics.<sup>10</sup>

## The Organizational Structure of the Sangha

In spite of its different hierarchical structures, the Sangha is in fact loosely organized, with no centralized power arrangement. As a result, the Sangha is not a unitary political actor. And while there are no completely accurate statistics on the number of ordained Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, estimates indicate that the total is in the region of 30,000.<sup>11</sup> Below follows an outline of the basic structures within which those monks organize themselves.

The Sangha in Sri Lanka is divided into three main bodies, of which the largest is Siyam Nikaya.<sup>12</sup> Siyam Nikaya is the oldest of the three main bodies and is often regarded as the 'establishment'. It is caste-exclusive, only accepting candidates from the upper caste, the *goyigama*.<sup>13</sup> Siyam Nikaya has two major branches, the Malwatta and the Asgiriya chapters, both situated in Kandy. These are well known in Sri Lanka, because they share custody of the most important Buddhist relic on the island, namely, the Sri Dalada Maligawa, or the Tooth Relic. The Malwatta chapter has jurisdiction over some 5,000 temples, and its current head monk, or *mahanayaka*, the Venerable Thibatuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala, was elected on 20 June 2004 following the sudden death of his predecessor, the Venerable Rambukkulle Sri Vipassi. The considerably smaller Asgiriya chapter has the allegiance of only 600 temples and is led by the Venerable Udugama Sri Buddharakkhita. In addition, Siyam Nikaya is divided into regional branches centred in Kandy, Kotte Kelaniya and Ruhuna, each with their own *mahanayakas*. An estimated 45% of the monastic community belongs to Siyam Nikaya.<sup>14</sup>

The second largest fraternity is Amarapura Nikaya, which has more than 12,000 monks. Amarapura was formed in the early 19th century in the southern parts of the country in an effort to facilitate the ordination of non-*goyigama* persons within the ranks of the Sangha. Its main sphere of influence is the south and southwest of Sri Lanka, including Colombo. After its formation, Amarapura soon split into many subgroups, each with its own *mahanayaka*. This fragmentation into nearly 40 different groups was partly due to caste solidarities (e.g. *karava* and *salagama*) and partly to the decisive consequences of lay support to different temples.<sup>15</sup> During the last few decades, a process of reunification has taken place, and since 1992 the now 21 Amarapura *nikayas* have elected a leader from the ranks of their chief monks (*uttarithara mahanayaka*). The current chief monk of Amarapura Nikaya is the Venerable Dauldena Gnanissara, who was elected in October 2004.

<sup>9</sup> *Vesak* is the most important of all *poya* days, as it is the celebration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Interview at the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, July 2000.

<sup>12</sup> In the 18th century, the monastic order died out in Sri Lanka, but it was reintroduced from Thailand (Siam) in 1753 by the (Tamil) Kandyan King Kirti Sri Rajasingha. Hence the name Siyam Nikaya.

<sup>13</sup> The *goyigama* caste is the largest in Sri Lanka.

<sup>14</sup> Tessa J. Bartholomeusz & Chandra R. de Silva, *The Role of the Sangha in the Reconciliation Process*, Series in A History of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Recollection, Reinterpretation & Reconciliation, No. 16 (Colombo: Marga Institute, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 93.

The smallest of the three *nikayas* is Ramañña Nikaya, which was founded in 1863, not in caste opposition to Siyam Nikaya but rather as a religious reform movement. Unlike the other two *nikayas*, though organized into regional units Ramañña is unitary in structure and has a single *mahanayaka*, currently the Venerable Weveldeniyē Medhalankara. It has a particular stronghold in the southwest (around Colombo) and is caste-inclusive, though many of its lay supporters are from the *karava* caste, many of whom are wealthy.<sup>16</sup> It is estimated to consist of approximately 8,000 monks.

All three *nikayas* have their own *mahanayaka* and a working committee (*karaka sabha*) that speaks officially for the entire *nikaya*. The leadership appoints a monk to be head of each district level, which is the next organizational identity for the monks of each *nikaya*. The top leaders of the *nikayas* form what is called the Maha Sangha, or ‘The Great Sangha’.

With increasing Buddhist missionary activities abroad, however, monks have also adapted titles to their new surroundings, so that a monk may be entitled the *mahanayaka* of Japan or the UK. Such titles have little significance for the relationship of a particular monk or temple to the hierarchical structures in Sri Lanka.

Despite all the various titles, hierarchical structures and *nikaya* affiliations, there is a large degree of organizational flexibility and local autonomy within the Sangha. In fact, temples are owned not by the *nikayas* but by their head incumbents, who inherit them from their teachers or from their maternal uncles.

This lack of unity within the Sangha – and among the Sinhalese in general – is of major concern to the monks.<sup>17</sup> There is a tendency to look back nostalgically to ancient Lanka, where unity is said to have prevailed. Appeals for unity have great resonance, which is further sanctioned by canonical injunctions against causing schisms within the Sangha. The unity of the Sangha is a crucial question for the monks, as schism is regarded as a morally wrong action. This emphasis on unity makes it somewhat difficult for dissident monks to openly challenge the views of their leaders. However, unity is more of an ideal than a reality and, as I will discuss later, the Sangha establishment has over the years been challenged by various young and radical monks.

For example, the challenge represented by the young and militant monks of the nationalist and Marxist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) in the late 1980s was based not on religious differences but on caste, class and age inequality.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the level of social inequality within the Sangha seems to parallel that of Sri Lankan society in general, and the difference between the poor rural monk and the urban and rich monk is striking. The poor monk depends on the generosity of the laity in his village, while rich monks often get their economic resources from their connections with powerful politicians, from their own businesses or from foreign funding (for example, from Japan). In addition, seniority plays a significant role in the Sangha’s social organization. Younger monks are ritually, socially and economically dependent upon their seniors, which frequently leads to generational clashes. Not surprisingly, since age is decisive for a monk’s position within the Sangha, political differences are often reflected in the different age groups. Issues of seniority and social ranking also come into play when individuals attempt to establish contact with their fellow monks, and it is uncommon for senior monks to visit younger monks in their temples, even if the younger monks are wealthy and politically influential.<sup>19</sup>

While temples are still organized according to caste, caste issues seem to have been downplayed in recent years and cross-*nikaya* activities are frequent – for example, within the monks’ party Jathika Hela Urumaya or within Buddhist pressure groups. New educational possibilities offered by modern educational institutions facilitate cross-*nikaya* interaction, because a monk from one *nikaya* may stay at another temple close to the university at which he is studying.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, a monk’s caste identity is irrelevant for the possibility of rising to national prominence. For example, the late Venerable Madihe Pannasiha, one of Sri Lanka’s most respected monks, belonged to a small ‘low caste’ Amarapura sub-branch. Some monks even try to transcend caste differences by downplaying their own *nikaya* affiliation and dressing according to the

<sup>16</sup> Bartholomeusz & de Silva, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Bartholomeusz & de Silva, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Tambiah, 1992.

<sup>19</sup> Fieldnotes, May and April 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Bartholomeusz & de Silva, 2001.

temple they are visiting.<sup>21</sup> Tri-*nikaya* organization is of political importance, because it strengthens the validity of the monks' political claims as they can then be said to represent a wide section of the monastic community. Tri-*nikaya* groups are often affiliated with political parties, including the major parties like the UNP, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the JVP. Such interest groups are organized at the local, regional and national levels for meetings and rallies. The JVP, in particular, has organized the most successful cross-*nikaya* structures.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, monks have multiple identities and loyalties: they belong to their local temple and to their *nikaya*, as well as to different political, cultural and social organizations. However, up to date no study has shown any long-term correlation between the political preferences and activities of the monks and their differentiated associational identities.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Dress codes vary for each *nikaya*. Siyam monks wear the robe with one bare shoulder; Amarapura monks usually cover both shoulders; and the Ramañña often dress in a darker colour. However, fashion also seems to be an element here, particularly among the younger monks, which means that distinctions are sometimes blurred.

<sup>22</sup> Tambiah, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Tambiah, 1992, p. 93.



## BUDDHISM, NATIONALISM AND THE SRI LANKAN STATE

ACCORDING TO THE 1981 CENSUS, 69.3% of the Sri Lankan population defined themselves as Buddhist, all belonging to the Sinhalese community, which constituted 74% of the total population. Tamils comprised 18.1% of the population, including both Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils.<sup>1</sup> Some 15.5% of the population were Saiva Hindus, all belonging to the Tamil community; 7.5% of the population were Christian, including both Sinhalese and Tamils; and 7.6% were Muslims.<sup>2</sup> Smaller groups constituted 0.6% of the population.<sup>3</sup> In sum, approximately 70% of the Sri Lankan population are Sinhala Buddhists, and Buddhism with its teachings and institutions plays a major role in the social, cultural and political life of the island.

If we define 'religious conflict' as a conflict where religion is the major cause or where the conflict lines strictly follow religious boundaries, then the conflict in Sri Lanka is *not* a religious conflict. For example, many Tamil-speaking Catholic bishops have supported the LTTE's struggle for a Tamil homeland, while Sinhala-speaking Catholics mainly identify as *Sinhalese*. Hence, ethnic and linguistic boundaries are more important than religious identities. Nonetheless, religion has become important in the conflict, as the Buddhist tradition has become a crucial element in Sinhala nationalism. Further, there are indications of a shift towards increasing religious tensions between Buddhist and Christian Sinhalese. Since December 2003, several attacks have been carried out against Catholic churches in Sinhala areas.<sup>4</sup>

### Religious Nationalism

Contemporary political debates among Sri Lankan Buddhist monks are heavily influenced by modern Sinhala nationalist ideology.<sup>5</sup> According to this ideology, which is supported both by monks and by laypeople, the former glories of the Sinhala nation are to be restored. In the view of its adherents, the Sinhala nation constituted a unified Sinhala-speaking people, who were egalitarian in their social relations, farmed their paddy fields, and lived in austere simplicity and in accordance with Buddhist morality. This land of Sinhala unity and Buddhist glory, however, has through the centuries been invaded and devastated by Hindu Tamils, later by Christians and Muslims, and in recent times also by Tamil immigrants of Indian origin. Once independence had been wrested from the alien and decadent West in 1948, it was time once again for the Sinhalese to claim what they held to be their rightful position as rulers of the island, and to restore Buddhism as the leading force in the country.

---

<sup>1</sup> I have decided not to rely on the 2001 census, conducted on 17 July 2001, as no or only partial enumeration was conducted in vast geographical areas in the northern and eastern parts of the country owing to the war. For further details, see the Sri Lankan Department of Statistics at <http://www.statistics.gov.lk>.

<sup>2</sup> Muslims belong to two ethnic groups: the Malay community and the Ceylon Moors. The origin of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka is uncertain. They are probably of mixed Arab, Malay and South Indian origin; see John Clifford Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokite Shvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Nissan, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*, Minority Rights Group International Report 96/1 (London: MRG, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The most recent attack took place on 19 December 2004.

<sup>5</sup> See Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

The charter of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is a sixth-century court chronicle called the *Mahavamsa* ('The Great Chronicle'). This describes the arrival of Buddhism and the Buddha's alleged visits to Lanka, and recounts the fortunes of several Sinhalese kings. The *Mahavamsa* clearly serves the religious and political interests of the Sangha, as well as Sinhalese kings, and contemporary Buddhist nationalist ideology is built on a particular reading of it.<sup>6</sup>

According to the *Mahavamsa*, Sri Lanka is a sacred land, because the Buddha chose the island of Lanka for the Sinhala people to live in and selected them to protect the Buddha's teaching, the *Dhamma*.<sup>7</sup> This provides the foundations for the two core concepts in Sinhala nationalist rhetoric: *dhammadipa* and *sinhadipa*. The idea is that the island (Sinhala: *dipa*) should be guided by *dhamma* and/or the Sinhalese.<sup>8</sup> *Dhammadipa* means the 'island of righteousness', and the term refers to a moral obligation, a duty prescribed by the Buddha, for the Sinhalese to protect Lanka and the 'Buddha Sasana'.<sup>9</sup> The concept of *sinhadipa*, on the other hand, has a more secular connotation, as it emphasizes a territorial claim on the basis of the Sinhalese heritage, *urumaya*.<sup>10</sup> These two concepts represent spatial ideals related to the integrity of the island. They are not part of the Pali canon, but instead part of the ideology found in the court chronicles.<sup>11</sup> (It should be noted, though, that some monks freely reject what has been called the 'Mahavamsic ideology' on the grounds that the *Mahavamsa* is not part of the Pali canon,<sup>12</sup> though it often enjoys a status equal to the latter within Sri Lanka.)<sup>13</sup>

A third relationship between the Sinhalese and the island of Lanka can be identified in the tradition of seeing the island as a Buddhist relic to be worshipped and protected. Consequently, the obligation to protect the country's integrity can be seen as a religious duty.<sup>14</sup> According to the *Mahavamsa*, the Buddha paid three visits to Sri Lanka,<sup>15</sup> and in total there are 'sixteen great places' that are said to have been visited by him. These places are seen as sacred and are popular sites for pilgrimage. The Kelaniya temple outside Colombo is one of these places, and it consequently occupies a central role in the cultural and religious fabric of Buddhist Sri Lanka. Some of these sacred places, however, are located within LTTE-controlled areas, and many Buddhists are concerned that sacred sites in the north and east may be neglected or even destroyed by the LTTE.

The 'Mahavamsic ideology' is a radical reading of the past, made relevant to the present.<sup>16</sup> Although the concepts of *dhammadipa* and *sinhadipa* may not be immediately apparent in the foreground of the contemporary political debate, they provide an ideological explanation for the forceful rejection by many Sinhala Buddhists of a partition of Sri Lanka. As such, these concepts form part of the political and social backdrop for debates about the peace process.

## Buddhism and the Sri Lankan State

Throughout Sri Lanka's post-independence period, a repeatedly expressed grievance has been that Buddhism has not been rightfully restored to the powerful place it occupied in pre-colonial

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Steven Kemper, *The Presence of the Past: Chronicles, Politics, and Culture in Sinhala Life* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991); Richard F. Gombrich & Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter VII of the *Mahavamsa*, translated into English by Mabel Haynes Bode from a German translation by Wilhelm Geiger (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Josine van der Horst, *Who Is He, What Is He Doing? Religious Rhetoric and Performances in Sri Lanka During R. Premadasa's Presidency (1989–1993)* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Buddhism as teaching and as practice.

<sup>10</sup> Hence the name of the Sinhala nationalist party, the Sihala Urumaya.

<sup>11</sup> There is also heated debate among scholars, both lay and monks, about how much of this ideology is actually found in *Mahavamsa* and what are contemporary readings of the text.

<sup>12</sup> Also known as the *Tipitaka*, the earliest collection of Buddhist authoritative texts, written in the middle Indo-Aryan language Pali. The vast number of texts deal with monastic discipline, the Buddha's sermons and philosophical issues.

<sup>13</sup> van der Horst, 1995, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> van der Horst, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> *Mahavamsa*, Chapter I. These visits, so essential to the Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka, have not been verified by historical research.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, most recent literature on religion and politics in Sri Lanka argues along the same lines.

times. Therefore, enhancing the formal role of Buddhism within the state has been an important political project since independence. The rights and expectations of the Sinhala Buddhist populace were most clearly articulated in a 1956 report entitled *The Betrayal of Buddhism*.<sup>17</sup> Simultaneously, the first monastic political group, the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna (EBP), was formed. The EBP supported S. W. R. D Bandaranaike's SLFP populist slogans related to the 'Sinhala Only policy' and the restoration of Buddhism. On that ticket, they won the 1956 elections. Their cause was also aided by the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's passing away, which was celebrated the same year. Those celebrations appealed to popular sentiments about the importance of Buddhism within Sri Lankan society.

Since 1956, nationalism based on religion and language has continued to inform Sri Lankan politics, and in the 1972 Constitution, promulgated by Sirima Bandaranaike, Buddhism was granted 'the foremost place' among religions, and Sinhala declared Sri Lanka's official language.<sup>18</sup> The Constitution of 1978 further enshrined the state's special obligation towards Buddhism, while simultaneously granting each of Sri Lanka's religious traditions – namely, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity – equal protection under the law.<sup>19</sup> This 'Secular Buddhism',<sup>20</sup> combining state protection of Buddhism with freedom to practise any religion, has recently been challenged by a proposed bill to prevent 'unethical conversions' by foreign Christian evangelical groups. Such evangelical movements are of major concern for Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. In fact, many monks are far more concerned about 'unethical conversions' than about the peace process itself.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the 'Anti-Conversion Bill' was perhaps the most important issue for the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) monks elected to parliament in April 2004, and one that also brought them to power. Interestingly, one of Sri Lanka's leading monks, the Venerable Thibbotuwawe Sri Sumangala, one of the two chief monks in Kandy, has voiced opposition to the Anti-Conversion Bill, saying that it is 'not possible to stop Buddhists from converting to other religions through legislation'. Instead, he has emphasized the need to improve standards of living for poor Buddhists.<sup>22</sup> As yet, the Bill has not been passed, but it has created major worries among Christians in Sri Lanka.

While post-independence UNP politicians fronted a secular ideology in which Buddhism was not granted special protection, it was nonetheless the UNP President Premadasa who, in the late 1980s, brought Buddhism to the forefront of national politics. In 1991, Premadasa established the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, through which the state would manage Buddhist affairs. Among other things, this ministry registers monks and temple property. However, it does not exert control over the monks: in reality, the monks enjoy a large degree of autonomy. All the same, a minority of monks choose *not* to register with the ministry, such as the independent monks in Dambulla.<sup>23</sup> Since April 2004, the Ministry of Buddha Sasana has been run by Minister of Buddhist Affairs Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka, who was the former prime minister during the People's Alliance (PA) government.<sup>24</sup>

Although President Kumaratunga has espoused a more secular ideology than her predecessors, her policy has nonetheless been informed by Buddhist pressure groups. For example, the 1997 constitutional draft further enhanced Buddhism's close relationship with the state.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Kumaratunga maintained the Supreme Advisory Council that was established by President Premadasa. The rationale behind the Council was that 'the State shall consult the Supreme Council

<sup>17</sup> See Tambiah, 1992, pp. 30–41.

<sup>18</sup> Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), p. 185.

<sup>19</sup> See chapter II, Amendment 9 in the 1978 Constitution, available at [http://www.priu.gov.lk/Cons/1978Constitution/Chapter\\_02\\_Amd.html](http://www.priu.gov.lk/Cons/1978Constitution/Chapter_02_Amd.html) (accessed 27 January 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Fieldnotes, May and July 2004.

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.asianews.it/view.php?l=en&art=1251> (accessed 6 August 2004).

<sup>23</sup> These monks broke away from the Asgiriya chapter in Kandy during the 1990s; see H. L. Seneviratne, 1999. The Dambulla monks also recognize the ordination of Buddhist nuns.

<sup>24</sup> Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka is also the Minister of Public Security, Law and Order, as well as Deputy Minister of Defence. In addition, he has close contacts with the Organization to Protect the Motherland, whose inaugural meeting he addressed.

<sup>25</sup> Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, 2002, p. 173.

in all matters pertaining to the protection and fostering of the Buddha Sasana'.<sup>26</sup> Initially, the Council consisted of 25 members (of whom 16 were monks), including the *mahanayakas* and the lay leaders of the most important lay organizations in Sri Lanka.<sup>27</sup> It is appointed and governed by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana. It was the hope of many Buddhist monks that the Council would limit politicians' use of individual monks and that it would encourage the *mahanayakas* to speak with one voice. However, the four *mahanayakas* resigned in 1997 in protest against the Kumaratunga government and its proposals for a devolution of power, as well as its alleged neglect of the monks' advice. Since then, the Council has played only a minor role within Sri Lanka.

Kumaratunga's 'secular Buddhism' is now being challenged by her own coalition partner, the JVP, as the latter appeals to the president to protect the country from division and to foster Buddhism. Furthermore, in an attempt to neutralize the influence of the JHU monks in parliament, the government has proposed a competing version of the bill against 'unethical conversions'. In fact, it has proposed several bills in 2004 that 'seek to uplift Buddhism in Sri Lanka'.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the Ministry of Buddha Sasana has been used as a political tool by the government to exclude political opponents within the Sangha. For example, the JHU monks were not invited to important meetings at the ministry during May 2004,<sup>29</sup> at a time when relations between the government and the JHU was particularly poor following several controversies in parliament.

Importantly, neither nationalist ideology nor 'patriotic movements' are identified with one particular political party, but rather cut across party structures. This means that the major political parties – the SLFP, the UNP and the JVP – have associated nationalist pressure groups, both monastic and lay. These groups are fluid, in the sense that members move between various networks and political parties. Such organizational flexibility favours rapid mobilization when necessary. In addition, pressure groups may front a more radical nationalist stance than is possible for political parties represented in parliament. For example, in January 2003 a new Sinhala nationalist organization – the Organization to Protect the Motherland, or Jati Hitaishi Jatika Vyaparaya – was formed. At its inauguration, leading politicians from the SLFP, such as the current prime minister Mahinda Rajapakse and the current minister of Buddhist affairs Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka, met with other radical nationalists from smaller nationalist groups and parties, including Nalin de Silva, Tilak Karunaratne, Gunadasa Amerasekera and Harichandra Wijetunga.<sup>30</sup>

Until the parliamentary elections of 2004, Sinhala nationalist parties had lacked electoral success, largely due to the bipartisan structure of Sri Lankan politics. Hence, the great success of the JHU in 2004 came as a surprise, illustrating the political importance of Buddhist concerns.

## The Importance of Rituals

State–Sangha relations are ritually expressed on a regular basis in Sri Lanka. For example, during inauguration ceremonies for new *mahanayakas*, it is the state president who hands over the 'Act of Appointment'. Moreover, other members of the political elite are also present at such ceremonies. Thus, when the Venerable Dauldena Gnanissara was elected *mahanayaka* of Amarapura Nikaya in October 2004,<sup>31</sup> Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, Speaker in Parliament W. J. M. Lokubandara, opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, President of the Sri Lanka Amarapura Dayaka Sabha Milinda Morogoda<sup>32</sup> and Minister for the Buddha Sasana Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka

<sup>26</sup> From the 1997 draft constitution, quoted in Bartholomeusz 2002, p. 188. The Supreme Advisory Council (Uttarithara Anusasaka Mandalaya) was set up in 1990 by President Premadasa.

<sup>27</sup> These included monks from the different fraternities within the monastic order. The lay organizations were the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, the Young Men's Buddhist Association and the Maha Bodhi Society.

<sup>28</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 5 July 2004; available at <http://www.amarasara.net/jhu/jhunews/jhun-20040705-02.htm> (accessed 5 September 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Interview, May 2004.

<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=8171> (accessed 15 January 2003).

<sup>31</sup> More specifically, he was elected *Maha Nayaka Thera* of Amarapura Nikaya.

<sup>32</sup> Lay people have their own organizations connected to the *nikayas*. A *dayaka* is a layperson providing for temples. Hence, Moragoda represents a lay organization.

all performed the necessary Buddhist rituals as both lay *and* state representatives.<sup>33</sup> Another recent example of the importance granted to ceremonies was the funeral of the Venerable Madihe Pannasiha Thero, the predecessor to the Venerable Gnanissara, in September 2003. On that occasion, all of Colombo's political and social elites gathered to pay their last respects, including President Kumaratunga. Also present were members of the international diplomatic community, including the Norwegian ambassador. Only three months later, another funeral took place after the Venerable Gangodawila Soma – one of Sri Lanka's most popular television preachers and political agitators – passed away. His funeral in Colombo became a major political event, and speeches and rituals in connection with his death were organized by several Sinhala Buddhist nationalist groups. His death breathed life into a Buddhist revival, one that only five months later would bring the JHU monks to parliament.

The close relationship between Buddhism and political power is most clearly expressed in the tradition that all members of a newly elected government (and members of parliament in general) seek the blessings of the chief monks in Kandy. They also seek the blessings of the Buddha's Tooth relic, which is the paramount symbol of the Sinhala Buddhist state. Even JVP politicians, so often in opposition to the Sangha hierarchy, went to Kandy for blessings when they entered the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government in May 2004. On the one hand, it is important to remember that politicians are also laypeople and need the blessings of the monks as much as any others might. On the other hand, meetings between monks and politicians often bolster a politician's Buddhist image. Finally, such encounters can constitute important political spaces, where policies are discussed and later communicated through statements to the public. For example, opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe received blessings for a continuation of the peace process by 'seeking the advice' of the Malwatte Mahanayaka in August 2004, at a time when the peace process was at a critical stage.<sup>34</sup> Symbolic actions are important in Sri Lanka, and some have commented on the fact that 'when Ranil started negotiations, some monks met the Norwegians and the LTTE, but not the *mahanayakas*. This kind of symbolism is missing'.<sup>35</sup> It is reasonable to assume that greater awareness of the importance of Buddhist symbols, rituals and religious actors might have facilitated Norway's relations with Sinhala Buddhist Sri Lanka, though it would not necessarily have eased the negotiations themselves.

Religious rituals are also performed to articulate political opposition. In 1957, the leader of the UNP opposition, J. R. Jayawardene, staged a protest against the devolution of power proposed in the Bandaranaike–Chelvanayagam Pact by going on a pilgrimage to Sri Dalada Maligawa. During the JVP insurgency in the late 1980s, mothers of youths killed during the 'Years of Terror' called for revenge and justice at sacred places, and these places thus became 'sites of resistance'.<sup>36</sup> In March 2001, the UNP organized a *satyagraha* – that is, a large-scale nonviolent protest – at the multi-religious sacred place of Kataragama, in protest against the PA government.<sup>37</sup> Notably, similar political protests are carried out by Buddhist monks. For example, when minister Mangala Samaraweera of the PA government publicly condemned a report written by Buddhist nationalists in the mid-1990s, he was cursed by Buddhist monks in front of the sacred Bo tree. Furthermore, the monks refused to allow the minister to make offerings to the Sangha, causing him a symbolic death.<sup>38</sup> During the Norwegian-facilitated peace process, Buddhist monks have frequently staged protests at Buddhist sacred places, for example in Kandy or in front of Bo trees.

In sum, the symbolic potency of both rituals and sacred places is actively used in Sinhala politics and should not be underestimated. Buddhism is not as visible in daily life as other religious

<sup>33</sup> President Kumaratunga arrived too late for the function, perhaps indicating a lack of real concern for the Sangha.

<sup>34</sup> As reported in the *Daily News*, 7 September 2004; available at <http://www.dailynews.lk/2004/07/09/new04.html> (accessed 7 September 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Interview, August 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Bruce Kapferer, *The Feast of the Sorcerer: Practices of Consciousness and Power* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), p. 253.

<sup>37</sup> Iselin Frydenlund, 'Kataragama in a Time of National Crisis: Diversity and Exclusion in a Sacred Place in Sri Lanka', Cand. Philol. thesis, University of Oslo, 2003, p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> For a more detailed account of this event, see H. L. Seneviratne, 'Buddhist Monks and Ethnic Politics: A War Zone in an Island Paradise', *Anthropology Today*, vol.17 no. 2, April 2001, pp. 18–19.

traditions. Consequently, it is important to pay particular attention to special religious events, such as the funeral of a religious leader like the Venerable Gangodawila Soma or particular rituals carried out before the Bo tree (*bodhi pujas*).

## BUDDHIST MONKS IN POLITICS

THE PRIMARY FUNCTION OF THE BUDDHIST MONK has either been personal spiritual development – the life of the forest monk – or teaching and providing ritual services to the laity – the role of the village monk. During the 1930s and 1940s, however, a new conception of the Buddhist monk developed. According to this view, as most clearly voiced by the internationally renowned Venerable Walpola Rahula (1907–97), the primary role of the Buddhist monk was political.<sup>1</sup> The political monks argue that their political agenda is beyond self-interest, urging social unity in contrast to the aims of self-interested politicians. However, though these monks see themselves as legitimate actors in the political arena and as protectors of Sri Lanka, they often find themselves at a loss when it comes to dealing with the pragmatic realities of day-to-day politics. As a result, they often end up feeling excluded from what they consider to be their duty.

Socially and politically active monks have been heavily criticized, both by other sections of the Sangha and by the laity. In fact, a common criticism levelled at the political monks is that they lack necessary competence in, for example, constitutional affairs or economic policies to play a political role.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the laity overwhelmingly sees the Sangha's role as religious, not political.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, an ideal for many Buddhists – monks as well as laypersons – is the politically 'neutral' monk. In this context, however, 'neutrality' means having no party-political affiliations, not lack of engagement in the 'national issue', that is, Sri Lanka's war and political conflict. For example, the Venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha, one of the country's most respected *bana* preachers, has been one of the most vociferous opponents of any concessions made to the LTTE during previous peace attempts. Through his involvement in various Buddhist pressure groups, he has been a front figure for Sinhala Buddhist interests. Nonetheless, he is regarded as being 'neutral' because he is not seen as allied with any one political party. For example, though President Kumaratunga sought his blessings after her electoral victory in 1994, he later voiced considerable opposition to her devolution proposals and they broke off their relationship. For this, among many other things, he is highly respected among Buddhists.

### Monks and Party Politics

While it might be hard to measure the real political influence of the monks in Sri Lanka, it is a fact that they contribute to political campaigns and are active in various Buddhist pressure groups. In the 1960s and 1970s, a bipolar division occurred within the Sangha, paralleling the divide between the UNP and the SLFP. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Sangha became increasingly differentiated, owing to the participation of many young monks in the JVP.<sup>4</sup> The egalitarian and populist Sinhala Buddhist charter of the JVP appealed to young monks of rural

---

<sup>1</sup> See, in particular, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, which represents a sort of charter for monks to involve themselves in societal and political work: Walpola Rahula, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (New York: Grove Press, [1946] 1974).

<sup>2</sup> H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> H. L. Seneviratne, 'Buddhist Monks and Ethnic Politics: A War Zone in an Island Paradise', *Anthropology Today*, vol.17 no. 2, April 2001, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

origin.<sup>5</sup> However, all of the political parties in Sri Lanka have monks in their ranks, and those monks may be mobilized when public support and religious justification for a party's policy are required. In daily parlance, monks related to the SLFP, the UNP and the JVP are often referred to by the colour of their party, that is, as blue, green and red monks, respectively.

In spite of all attention given to monks and party politics, one could argue that, in general, the role of the Sangha is more linked to ceremonial prominence than political. By this is meant that through visiting famous monks and honouring them on public occasions, politicians pay respect to the monks, nurturing the monks' views of themselves as politically important.<sup>6</sup> Such a relationship, however, is of mutual benefit, since the practice is also of considerable importance for the politicians themselves. By showing respect for Buddhist culture, its rituals and institutions, politicians strengthen their own position with regard to the public. It is therefore a common perception in Sri Lanka that many monks are (mis-)used by politicians. Nevertheless, if we look at the bipartisan structure of Sinhala politics, where Buddhist pressure groups enjoy major political influence, especially when they join forces with opposition parties, we find that Buddhist monks do exercise considerable influence.

### Monks in Parliament

In April 2004, nine monks made a historical entrance into parliament following the electoral success of the recently formed monks' party Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). The JHU's ideology is based on a sense that Sri Lanka is in a state of *a-dharma*, or unjust rule. On several occasions, the JHU has stated that Sri Lanka has become *a-rajika*, or headless. The aim of the JHU is therefore to establish a *dharma raja*, a righteous kingdom: a Buddhist state. The monks resent the fact that they are being shut out of political decisionmaking at the national level, for example in relation to the Norwegian-facilitated peace process. Furthermore, they touch upon a widespread fear among Buddhists that Buddhism is in danger and that Buddhists are being marginalized in what should be a Buddhist state. The peace process is viewed as a threat to Buddhism and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Hence, the JHU monks raise concerns that have been prevalent in Buddhist Sri Lanka for decades. These monks see themselves as the best option available to Sri Lanka, as their ideological basis and practice is indigenous, not some imported Western ideology. The anti-colonialism of the JHU – and Norway is viewed as a colonial power – is clearly expressed in the following statement by JHU parliamentarian the Venerable Udawatte Nanda:

Norwegians come to our country almost every day as if they are our guardians and rulers. They discuss various matters with the Tigers and make all attempts to convince the leaders in the South to accept the viewpoints of the Tigers.<sup>7</sup>

To this extent, then, the JHU is a protest party: against the peace process and the alleged negligence of Buddhism, as well as against political violence and corruption among politicians.

By and large, the monastic establishment was critical of the monks' participation in the 2004 elections, on the grounds that this represented a break with the tradition that monks may advise political authorities but not perform the work of kings themselves.<sup>8</sup> As one of Sri Lanka's most prominent monks explained:

It is not possible to achieve *Dammaraja* [righteous rule] through party politics. JHU gives the wrong interpretation of it.... Buddhist monks can advise, but not be rulers.

In a televised interview with the six most famous JHU monks prior to the elections in 2004, JHU leader Venerable Ellawela Medhananda responded to this criticism by referring to the

<sup>5</sup> Tambiah, 1992, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Seneviratne, 1999, p. 340

<sup>7</sup> See <http://members.tripod.com/amarasara/jhu/jhunews/jhun-20040928-01.htm#04> (accessed 4 October 2005).

<sup>8</sup> In fact, the JHU monks were not the first monks to enter parliament. The Venerable Baddegama Samitha Thera, who took a positive view of the peace process, was elected on a People's Alliance ticket in 2001, though as an individual candidate; see [http://www.priu.gov.lk/news\\_update/EditorialReviews/erev200203/20020308editorialreview.html](http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/EditorialReviews/erev200203/20020308editorialreview.html) (accessed 28. December 2004).



Buddha's own life.<sup>9</sup> In Medhananda's view, the Buddha's denial of caste shows him to have been a political actor. The Venerable Kotapola Amarakitti also pointed to the Jataka stories, which tell of the Buddha's previous lives, when the Buddha-to-be was reborn as a king or adviser. The Venerable Dr Omalpe Sobitha finally argued that 'if we did not change according to the times, then bhikkus too would have been extinct long time ago'.<sup>10</sup> In sum, JHU monks regard themselves as the true defenders of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and they legitimize their political engagement by reference to Buddhist authoritative texts.

The JHU monks received mixed reactions from other monks and the laity. On the one hand, some monks, themselves advisers to political parties, oppose the views of the JHU but have sympathies with the JHU's direct involvement in politics. On the other hand, some lay activists who voted for the JHU hold that 'we still think that monks should stay out of politics!'.<sup>11</sup> In general, many monks are surprisingly mild in their critique, because they wish to avoid giving fellow monks a bad reputation. At the same time, many make it clear that 'the JHU is not representative for all Buddhist monks'.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it should be noted that many monks who are either politically neutral or belong to the UNP opposition show the JHU monks great respect *as members of parliament*. One 'UNP monk' even said of the JHU that 'they are the ones in power now – not us'.<sup>13</sup> This illustrates the great prominence and power accorded members of the Sri Lankan parliament.

A major reason for the JHU's success was that leading figures of the party were nationally famous monks already prior to the elections. For example, the Venerable Uduwe Dhammaloka, the General Secretary of the JHU, was known for his charisma and preaching skills on television and is in fact a 'telegenic monk'. The Venerable Kotapola Amarakirti was famous for organizing pilgrimages to Anuradhapura, where pilgrims offer millions of jasmine flowers to the sacred Bo tree.<sup>14</sup> The Venerable Kolonnawe Sumangala is the well-known leader of the 'Path of the Buddha Movement', an organization that works for parents and schoolchildren, and he also organizes Buddhist rituals like *bodhi pujas*. (Sumangala, however, withdrew from parliament in October 2004 after internal disputes within the party.)<sup>15</sup> And the leader of the JHU, the Venerable Ellawella Medananda, a specialist in archaeology, appeared for a long time on a very popular television show.<sup>16</sup> Medananda's main aim is to prove that the north and east of Sri Lanka have a Sinhala Buddhist past, and he has staged protests when prevented by the LTTE from carrying out archaeological excavations in the eastern province. A number of other monks also rose to national prominence at the beginning of 2004, such as the Venerable Dr Omalpe Sobitha, who went on a hunger strike to protest against 'unethical conversions'.

Importantly, the JHU monks by and large came into prominence outside the hierarchical structures of the Sangha. Instead, the popularity of the monks among the general Buddhist public was the result of public ritual activity and television preaching. Moreover, although many of the JHU monks belong to Amarapura Nikaya, caste is not overly important and all three *nikayas* are represented in their ranks.<sup>17</sup> Finally, votes for the JHU were drawn from Colombo and Kandy, indicating that the present Buddhist revivalism in Sri Lanka is an urban phenomenon. However, many of the JHU monks are of rural origin, like the JVP monks. While the JVP monks are more socially and economically concerned, the JHU monks address the religious concerns of the Buddhist urban middle classes.<sup>18</sup> The Sri Vajiraghana temple in Maharagama serves as a base for

<sup>9</sup> On the national television channel Swarnavahini, 24 February 2004.

<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.sihalaurumaya.org/art\\_kinihara010304.htm](http://www.sihalaurumaya.org/art_kinihara010304.htm) (accessed 6 April 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Interview, May 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, April 2004

<sup>13</sup> Interview, April 2004

<sup>14</sup> In a ritual called *Saman picha puja*.

<sup>15</sup> His seat was taken over by the Venerable Alawwe Nandaloka Thera.

<sup>16</sup> This was entitled 'Sinhala Mahavansa Katava' (The Sinhalese Great History), and was broadcast on Sri Lanka's Swarnavahini television channel, which, I was told, is owned by people with a clear Buddhist agenda.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the Venerable Ellawella Medananda and the Venerable Uduwe Dhammaloka are from Siyam Nikaya; the Venerable Omalpe Sobitha is from Ramañña; and another young and vocal monk, the Venerable Athurliye Rathana, is from Amarapura Nikaya.

<sup>18</sup> I owe a special thank to the Venerable Mahinda Deegalle for the point about the monks' rural origin.

JHU activities,<sup>19</sup> and JHU monks held several of the party's ceremonies there following the electoral success in 2004. The temple forms one of the nerve centres of Amarapura Nikaya, and it was the temple of the late Venerable Madhie Pannasiha and the late Venerable Gangodawila Soma. Posters of the Venerable Soma still adorn the surroundings of Maharagama, symbolically expressing the Buddhist revivalism of the Colombo suburbs.

As predicted by many critics, the JHU had a hard time maintaining its intended political neutrality in parliament during 2004. Moreover, it faced a split over the roles of monks and the laity in the party, and several lay supporters have since withdrawn and joined other parties.<sup>20</sup> The rise and fall of the JHU shows Buddhism as a strong force in political mobilization, but it also reveals how the monks were dragged into 'dirty politics', which they initially hoped to purify. Finally, it should be noted that although as a political party the JHU will most likely be remembered as a short-lived phenomenon, its ideology – including the idea of the politically active monk – will continue to inform Sri Lankan politics in the future.

---

<sup>19</sup> A suburb south of Colombo.

<sup>20</sup> For example, one of the JHU's leading figures, Tilak Karunaratne, joined the UNP opposition. Another of its lay founding fathers, Champika Ranawaka, was removed from his post of secretary.

## 'WE ALL WANT PEACE!'

*To simply ask 'Do you support the peace process?' will not lead anywhere.... Some monks, like the JHU, will answer that they of course support the peace process, but not how it is run either by Ranil or by Chandrika.*

THE ABOVE STATEMENT is taken from a conversation I had in May 2004 with a political adviser to the Sri Lankan government. The adviser's statement points directly to an issue of considerable concern for many Buddhist monks sceptical of the ongoing peace process, namely, how one defines 'conflict', 'peace' and the 'peace process'. All Buddhist monks ultimately want peace, and many resent being labelled 'anti-peace monks' because they are against a federal solution.

A common position is the stand taken by the Venerable Uduwe Dhammaloka of the JHU. In accordance with the dominant Sinhala nationalist view, he argues that no split exists among the peoples of Sri Lanka. Consequently, there is no ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, he points out, in Colombo there are many Tamils and Muslims, and 'we never had any problems in Colombo'.<sup>1</sup> Dhammaloka argues that the core of the problem is in fact terrorism, for which dividing the country is not an appropriate remedy. Indeed, if the country is divided, he believes an internal war will break out. During the interview he granted me, Dhammaloka did not lay out directly his views on how the 'terrorist problem' should be overcome, but others in the JHU as well as other nationalist Buddhist monks argue that the only way to bring peace to Sri Lanka would be to bring the LTTE down and then establish a dialogue. If we take as a starting point the idea that Sri Lanka and Buddhism are seen as under threat, this may resemble Christian or Islamic ideas on the justified use of force (just war ideology). However, such an approach is far more problematic within Buddhist ethics than within some other world religions, since the principle of nonviolence (*a-himsa*) is fundamental to Buddhist teachings. It is therefore interesting to see how a Buddhist just war ideology has developed in Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup> Based on certain interpretations of the *Mahavamsa*, the argument is that in *certain* cases violence might be permissible.

As the civil war has continued in Sri Lanka, this 'Buddhist utilitarianism' has grown.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in my experience it is far more difficult to discuss the use of force with Buddhist monks than with, say, Catholic clerics (particularly since Christianity has an elaborate just war tradition). As nonviolence is one of the basic teachings of Buddhism, outright demands by Buddhist monks for a military solution are problematic. Therefore, monks like the late Venerable Madhie Pannasiha have suggested that the monks prefer to ask the government 'to *protect* the country'.<sup>4</sup> In the current political climate, *protection* of Sri Lanka normally implies opposing power devolution and a federal solution, and often support for military action against the LTTE. In September 2002, the Venerable Professor Bellanwila, one of Sri Lanka's most important scholar-monks, presented a paper at a conference arranged by the Norwegian Buddhist Association in Oslo. He emphasized that 'just war' was an oxymoron, and that under no circumstances is war justifiable

<sup>1</sup> According to the 1981 census, approximately 75% of the population of Colombo were Sinhalese, while the remaining 25 % were distributed among the various other groups.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion, see Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Bartholomeusz, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Bartholomeusz, 2002, p. 124.

on Buddhist grounds. However, Bellanwila nonetheless opened up for the possibility that war is unavoidable under some circumstances. The question about unavoidability is of major concern here. If Sri Lanka and Buddhism are perceived to be under threat, is violence then unavoidable? Other monks, however, are more straightforward in their demand for a military solution. For example, commenting upon the political and military consequences of the LTTE split, one prominent monk from Matara argued that this was a chance ‘to finally crush the terrorists’. Further, he argued that the army should use Colonel Karuna, the leader of the breakaway fraction, for military information.<sup>5</sup>

An even more radical line of thinking about just cause for the use of military force is voiced by the Venerable Athurliye Rathana of the JHU. At a conference on Buddhism and the conflict in Sri Lanka, he argued that

there are two central concepts of Buddhism: compassion and wisdom. If compassion was a necessary and sufficient condition, then the Buddha would not have elaborated on wisdom or prajna. Hitler could not have been overcome by *maitriya* alone. Today there is a discourse about peace in Sri Lanka. It is an extremely artificial exercise and one that is clearly being orchestrated under the threat of terrorist attack.<sup>6</sup>

The comparison between the LTTE and Hitler runs throughout the monk’s paper. The main point being made is clearly that evil cannot be eradicated solely through compassion, the prime Buddhist value, and knowledge is also required. Interestingly, this ‘knowledge’ seems to imply the acceptance of military use of force for a just cause – such as winning the war against Hitler or defeating the LTTE.

The Venerable Athurliye Rathana and other militant monks belong to a monastic minority. However, even monks supportive of the current peace process decorate their temple offices and reception halls with pictures of themselves together with leading army generals. Again, this illustrates many monks’ association with lay life, as well as a general acceptance of warfare. In fact, it is customary for Buddhist monks to bless the army, for example at *pirit* ceremonies at Panagoda Sri Maha Bodhirajaramaya, an army temple on military grounds. Such events are organized by organizations such as the Sri Lanka Army Buddhist Association.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, blessing ceremonies for the protection of the army, conducted by famous Buddhist monks, are often shown on national television. Therefore, while the view is articulated only by a small minority, in ritual and practice a large number of Buddhist monks accept the existence of an army – largely comprised of Buddhists – and hence the use of force in times of danger. Thus, in their views on the use of military force, Buddhist monks range from total pacifism to the acceptance of a limited use of violence as a means to achieving the ultimate goal of peace.

## The Sangha and Previous Peace Attempts

Little systematic research has been carried out on the Sangha’s relations to previous peace talks. But, with its loose organization and cross-cutting loyalties, one would expect to find a plurality in the views and actions of the Sangha in relation to any such attempts at achieving peace.

All the same, by and large the most vocal representatives of the Sangha have been those who have been against any concessions to Sri Lanka’s minority groups and have opposed previous peace talks. For example, when we look back at the Bandaranaike–Chelvanayagam Pact of 1957, we see that prominent monks were among those who were most critical of the idea of a federal solution. The pact was in fact spoiled by Buddhist pressure groups, led by the monks of the Kelaniya temple.<sup>8</sup> The federal solution presented in the 1957 pact was also opposed by the UNP, which at that point had joined hands with Sinhala Buddhist nationalists, starting off the trend in Sinhala politics whereby the party in opposition joins forces with radical nationalists in order to

<sup>5</sup> Interview in Sinhala and English, May 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ven. Athurliye Rathana, ‘A Buddhist Analysis of the Ethnic Conflict’, paper presented at Bath conference on Buddhism and conflict in Sri Lanka, Bath, 28–30 June 2002.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, [http://www.army.lk/News\\_Reports/october/161.htm](http://www.army.lk/News_Reports/october/161.htm) (accessed 2 December 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

topple the government. In 1965, the Senanayake–Chelvanayagam Pact was similarly abandoned, having been opposed by leading *bhikkhus*, among them the Venerable Madhie Pannasiha. Similarly, in alliance with the SLFP, the Venerable Palipane Chandananda, the head monk of Asgiriya, 'offered powerful resistance to the peace accord' during the Thimpu talks in 1985.<sup>9</sup> The talks failed, as both parties were 'reluctant negotiators' who had been pressured into coming by India.<sup>10</sup> During the talks, a number of prominent monks held separate discussions with the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) party, although the outcome of those meetings remains unclear.

In 1987, the Indian and the Sri Lankan governments negotiated a bilateral agreement to send Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) to disarm the LTTE.<sup>11</sup> This Indo-Lanka Accord was strongly opposed by many leading Buddhist monks, on the grounds that it would endanger the sovereignty of Sri Lanka and because it made concessions to the minorities (for example, it stated that 'the northern and eastern provinces have been areas of historical habitation of the Sri Lankan Tamil-speaking peoples').<sup>12</sup> Gangaramaya, one of Colombo's rich and famous temples, with well-known UNP sympathies, became a symbol of the resistance to the Accord. Some members of the Jayawardene family (which has links to Gangaramaya that stretch back over a long period of time) broke off relations with the temple when its famous head monk, Podhi Hammudorovo,<sup>13</sup> hoisted black flags at the temple in protest against President Jayawardene.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as seen time after time, sacred places are used to articulate political protest, in this case a protest based not on class and caste divisions within Sinhala society but on differences of opinion regarding foreign intervention and the national conflict.

After years of intensified civil war in the early 1990s, Chandrika Kumaratunga won the 1994 presidential elections on the background of a promise to create peace. President Kumaratunga's 1997 devolution proposals – known as 'the Package' – were strongly criticized by many leading Buddhist monks, most notably the monks of the Jathika Sangha Sabhava, as well as by the Organization for the Protection of the Motherland.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, as discussed above, leading monks resigned from the government's Supreme Advisory Council.<sup>16</sup>

It is more difficult to identify monks favouring power-sharing and constitutional reform than to identify vocal monks from the various Buddhist pressure groups. However, there are signs of peace activism within the Sangha in the early 1980s, when the military conflict expanded in the northeast. At that time, efforts to achieve peace were made by President Kumaratunga's late husband, the famous actor and leftist politician Vijay Kumaratunga. A delegation was sent to Jaffna to try to settle the conflict, though without success. Here, we should note that the delegation comprised of ten Buddhist monks, among them some of the peace activists we see today in Sri Lanka.<sup>17</sup>

Owing to government change and the provision of international development aid, Sri Lanka's fragmented peace movement grew in the mid-1990s.<sup>18</sup> During Kumaratunga's election campaign, a small group of monks travelled around the country to explain the idea of devolution.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Buddhist monks participated in various anti-war activities. For example, in 1997, the Voice of Youth peace forum brought together 1,500 monks for an anti-war rally at Vihara Maha Devi Park in Colombo.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Peace talks mediated by India were held in the Bhutanese capital without success; see Tambiah, 1992, p.83.

<sup>10</sup> Ketheshwaran Loganathan, quoted in Rohan Edrisinha, 'Constitutionalism, Pluralism, Ethnic Conflict', in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> This was not a peacekeeping operation in the normal sense of the term, as it was not endorsed by the United Nations; see Chris Smith, 'South Asia's Enduring War', in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Tambiah, 1992, p.76

<sup>13</sup> This nickname means 'little monk'. His real name is the Venerable Galeboda Gnanissara.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Mavbima Surakime Samvidhanaya (MSS).

<sup>16</sup> See also Bartholomeusz, 2002, p. 189.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Camilla Orjuela, 'Civil Society in Civil War: Peace Work and Identity Politics in Sri Lanka', 2004, doctoral dissertation, Dept of Peace and Development Research, Göteborg University, 2004, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> H. L. Seneviratne, 'Buddhist Monks and Ethnic Politics: A War Zone in an Island Paradise', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 17 no. 2, April 2001, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Bartholomeusz, 2002, p. 131.

## The Sangha and the Norwegian-Facilitated Peace Process

In January 2000, Norway's role as facilitator in the Sri Lankan conflict was announced, following at least a year of secret contacts between the parties. As expected, many Sinhala nationalists reacted with suspicion and antagonism. In their view, the LTTE has to be militarily crushed before a political solution can be reached.

### The Response of the *Mahanayakas*

While suspicion and criticism were widespread among the Sinhalese population in 2000, the *mahanayakas* were more moderate in their criticism. Later, they stated that they felt it incumbent on them 'to allow the new Government [elected in December 2001] to translate its pledges into action'.<sup>21</sup> In a similar fashion, some of the other leading Buddhist monks were less critical than expected, a point to which I shall return later.

On 22 February 2002, the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) – which has been under great pressure throughout 2004 – was signed by both the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. The agreement was greeted with criticism by Sinhala nationalists, but was celebrated by the majority of the Sri Lankan population, including peace-activist monks like the Venerable Madampagama Assaji of the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (IRPF). The *mahanayakas* also expressed their satisfaction with the ceasefire.<sup>22</sup>

However, the optimism surrounding the ceasefire diminished when LTTE leader Prabhakaran made a number of ambiguous statements on 10 April 2002, creating confusion about the extent to which the LTTE had given up its separatist claims. In response to Prabhakaran's statements, the leading monks of all the *nikayas* wrote a letter to President Kumaratunga (SLFP), Prime Minister Wickremesinghe (UNP) and members of parliament, rejecting the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the government and the LTTE, arguing strongly against a de-proscription of the LTTE, and rejecting any federal solution or proposals of interim administration for the north and east of the country.<sup>23</sup> In the eyes of the *mahanayakas*, the 'peace process ... is primarily aimed at the Establishment of Eelam rather than achieving real peace.'<sup>24</sup> Although this statement, entitled 'The Ceasefire Agreement Rejected', criticizes the peace process and communicates the *mahanayakas*' deep concern over the possible division of the country, it is nonetheless less critical than previous statements, expressing the monks' 'deep commitment to peace' and further recognizing the rights of the Tamil people.<sup>25</sup>

Between September 2002 and April 2003, six rounds of peace talks were held, but negotiations came to a halt when the LTTE withdrew from the talks in April 2003. On 23 October 2003, the LTTE's proposal for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) in the northeast of the country was submitted to the Sri Lankan government. Not surprisingly, and as will be discussed below, most monks are critical towards the ISGA, on the grounds that it will lead to separation of the country. Others argue that the ISGA should be treated as a starting point for negotiations and not as a final solution.

In response to the ISGA proposals, President Kumaratunga took control over three ministries in November 2003. The newly established monks' organization Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya expressed its support for this move, which it viewed as an act 'to save the country from being divided through peace talks between the UNP government and the LTTE'.<sup>26</sup> As early as September 2002, the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya requested the president take control of the defence ministry and use her executive powers to prevent the de-proscription of the LTTE and the setting

<sup>21</sup> See 'The Ceasefire Agreement Rejected', 18 April 2002; available at <http://www.sinhaya.com/mou-rejected.htm> (accessed 5 October 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Chandra de Silva, 'Response to Venerable Akuratiye Nanda's Paper "An Analysis of Statements Issued by the Mahanayakas on the North-East Problem of Sri Lanka"', paper presented at Bath Conference on Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka, Bath, 28–30 June 2002.

<sup>23</sup> See 'The Ceasefire Agreement Rejected'.

<sup>24</sup> See 'The Ceasefire Agreement Rejected'; see also the analysis of this statement in de Silva, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> See 'The Ceasefire Agreement Rejected'.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=7424> (accessed 28 December 2004).

up of an interim administration in the northeast province.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the 'soft' response of the *mahanayakas* to the peace process was strongly challenged by other sections of the Sangha, mainly comprised of younger and more radically minded monks.

There are indications that the moderate scepticism of the first years of the peace process has been radicalized as a result of the forceful criticism expressed in the media (including claims that too many concessions were made to the Tamils, or that the LTTE is simply using the CFA to build up its supply of arms). The UNP was elected on a strong pro-peace vote in 2001, but was voted out of office only three years later in the 2004 elections. In those elections, the two political parties most sceptical of the peace process, the JHU and the JVP, did surprisingly well. Although the UNP's poor election performance was the result of not meeting people's social and economic grievances (though the economy did improve in the years following the signing of the CFA in 2002), effective anti-peace process campaigns in Sri Lanka also contributed to the election result.

Moreover, it seems that the rather vague or ambiguous signals from the Sangha hierarchy to the peace process later opened up a space for radical voices outside the traditional hierarchy, such as the JHU. It remains an open question, therefore, whether a peace process that had included top monks from the very beginning would have created a stronger base for pro-peace activities later on in the process. All the same, it should be noted that both the JVP and the JHU have refused to meet Norwegian facilitators, though the Norwegians have requested meetings on a number of occasions.<sup>28</sup> This is not generally known in Sri Lanka, where the media often allege that Norway is unwilling to listen to the south.

### Monastic Voices Critical of the Process

The monks who figure in this report are those who are the most visible in the public, political arena. To date, no broad survey has been conducted among Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka about their views on the peace process. In fact, we know relatively little about the political views of 'the average monk'. However, one highly qualified informant estimates that 'the majority of the monks are suspicious about the peace process – let's say about 75%. They think that by negotiating peace the Sinhala people and Buddhism will be betrayed.'<sup>29</sup> But why do these monks think that the peace process will betray Buddhism?

Not one single monk is against peace. But, when at the negotiation table, we have to think again. It is unfortunate if the peace process goes down. It should proceed. But we do not want peace at any cost. We do not want a federal system, but devolution of power.... It is crucial to understand the difference between 'united', which is when different states get into one state, and 'unitary', one state. For example, the United States were separate states later united. In Sri Lanka, we never had separate states – we only have had Sri Lanka. Therefore, the state has to be unitary.<sup>30</sup>

This extract from an interview I had with one of Sri Lanka's most prominent monks sums up the concerns of the majority of Buddhist monks with regard to the peace process, namely, the spatial division of Sri Lanka. To them, the idea of a Tamil homeland – which, according to their views is a colonial construction – is unacceptable. Most of the monks favour a unitary state and are consequently sceptical towards a federal solution. This is one of the reasons why the JHU did not contest the provincial council elections of July 2004, arguing that the provincial councils were only 'a burden on the people', helping 'the separatist elements'.<sup>31</sup> In its election manifesto, the JHU is highly critical of power devolution, but it nonetheless favours 'decentralization' of

<sup>27</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>28</sup> For example, both the JVP and the JHU refused to meet the Norwegians in May 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, May 2004

<sup>30</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>31</sup> *The Island*, 12 July 2004. However, I would suggest that the real reason is that the JHU is a small party, with little support in rural areas. The United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won these elections, though with less votes than in the parliamentary elections in April.

various administrative tasks to village-level communes.<sup>32</sup> This ‘decentralization’ is to take place within a unitary Buddhist state.

As previously discussed, ‘unity’ is important within the monastic order, although it is far more of an ideal than a reality. Moreover, unity in the Sangha is equated with political unity in Sri Lanka.<sup>33</sup> As a result of this, a federal solution to Sri Lanka’s conflict is difficult (if not impossible) to accept for the majority of the monks. Decentralization of power, however, was favoured by all of the monks and lay Buddhists with whom I discussed the matter. Even the JHU, with its strong bias against devolution of power, is favourable to decentralization of the highly centralized Sri Lankan state. This is important to note, because in this regard the JHU might contribute to a reform of the Sri Lankan constitution.

Many monks are sceptical of Norway’s involvement, without necessarily associating themselves with the radical elements demonstrating outside the Norwegian embassy in Colombo. But, even some of the monks in favour of Norway’s involvement and the peace talks think that Buddhists in general have been marginalized within the peace process.<sup>34</sup> The following complaints were expressed by a monk relatively friendly towards Norway in response to a question about how he felt about Norway’s involvement:

It is not a pleasant experience, and people still think that Norway is pro-LTTE. They haven’t proved so far that they are neutral. They always listen to the LTTE demands. The Norwegian delegation is not ready to listen to the views of the people of the south. They only report the views of the LTTE to the government of Sri Lanka. Once, I went to the embassy. We suggested why don’t you go and see other groups?<sup>35</sup>

The feeling of being excluded from the political process was a common complaint, as it has been throughout Sri Lanka’s modern history. Already in 1995, a monastic organization called Jathika Sangha Sabhava (the National Sangha Council) emerged in response to President Kumaratunga’s peace talks with the LTTE and proposals for power devolution. One of its major objectives was to create a national organization of monks that could play a part in national policy-making while remaining independent of the political parties: ‘The aim was ... to make people aware of the truth about what will happen with the national issues.’<sup>36</sup> The Jathika Sangha Sabhava was formed by some of the country’s leading monks, among them the Venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha, who is regarded as one of Sri Lanka’s most talented and revered monks. Other famous monks in the organization were the Venerable Bellanwila Wimalaratana, the Venerable Murutthettuwa Ananda and the Venerable Athureliye Rathana.

When some of its members became ‘softer’ in their response to the Norwegian-facilitated peace process, a new ‘extra-*nikaya*’ organization was formed, bypassing the Jathika Sangha Sabhava. This organization, the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya, was formed in May 2002, and it is a fore-runner to the JHU.<sup>37</sup> It is led by a group of active educated monks, including the Venerable Ellawela Medhananda, the Venerable Nagoda Amarawansa, the Venerable Dharanagama Kusaladhamma, the Venerable Akuretiye Nanda, the Venerable Athureliye Rathana and the Venerable Omalpe Sobitha. Many of its members are leading JHU figures, though the Venerable Dharanagama Kusaladhamma is closer to the president and has been appointed to various presidential committees.<sup>38</sup> Their main aim is ‘to protect the Buddha Sasana. To stop the division of

<sup>32</sup> See Mahinda Deegalle, ‘Politics of the Jathika Hela Urumaya Monks: Buddhism and Ethnicity in Contemporary Sri Lanka’, *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Chandra de Silva, ‘Categories, Identity and Difference: Buddhist Monks (Bhikkus) and Peace in Lanka’, paper presented at the panel on ‘Social Cleavage, Hierarchy and Difference’ at the conference on ‘Sri Lanka: Dynamics of Violence, Challenges of Peace’, Cornell University, 7–8 February 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Field notes and interviews, May and July 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with a leading member of Jathika Sangha Sabhava, July 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Both the Jathika Sangha Sabhava and the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya are referred to as JSS in the media. In addition, English translations of their names vary. To avoid confusion, I use the Sinhala names and no abbreviations. Jathika Bhikshu Sammelanaya (JBS) seems to be another name for the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya.

<sup>38</sup> Together with the Venerable Bellanwila Wimalaratana, the Venerable Dharanagama Kusaladhamma is a member of the Advisory Committee on Crime. He is also a member of the National Committee on Peace and Reconciliation.



the country'.<sup>39</sup> The Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya was created as a direct response to, and protest against, the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the two parties in the peace talks. The monks who are members of this organization are radical nationalists and see themselves as the only true defenders of the nation and Buddhism. At a meeting held in 2003, the Venerable Ellawela Medhandanda went so far as to accuse the *mahanayakas* of being 'indifferent to the threat faced by the Country and the Sinhala Buddhists', adding that 'if necessary the Sangha Sammelanaya would not hesitate to appoint a Sangharaja to protect the Nation'.<sup>40</sup> However, this 'extra-*nikaya*' organization cannot simply be explained as opposition to the Sangha establishment – which is seen as being too soft on 'the national issue' – because some sections of the Sangha hierarchy in fact support its cause. Indeed, several leading monks from Amarapura Nikaya have participated at its meetings.<sup>41</sup>

The Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya has staged various protests outside the Norwegian embassy in Colombo. For example, together with the National Movement Against Terrorism, it arranged a protest outside the embassy at which the Norwegian flag was burned and a questionnaire handed over to embassy officials. In the questionnaire, 14 questions were raised regarding Norway's alleged support for the LTTE.<sup>42</sup>

The Venerable Athuraliye Rathana, the JHU's parliamentary group leader, has on a number of occasions stated that the JHU will oppose the ISGA proposals as the basis for future peace talks. In his view, the government must go for unconditional and open talks with the Tamil Tiger rebels.<sup>43</sup> This anti-ISGA stance was repeated in early October 2004, when the JHU refused to support a revival of the peace process through President Kumaratunga's newly established National Council on Peace and Reconciliation (NCPR) 'since the talks would be based on the ISGA'.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Venerable Ellawela Medhandanda argued that the 'only advice they could give the President was for her to annul the "ceasefire agreement" and act according to Sri Lankan law'.<sup>45</sup> The ISGA proposals were also opposed by other sections of the Sangha. For example, the Venerable Bengamuwe Nalaka and the Deshapremi Bhikshu Peramuna (Patriotic Bhikkhu Front), arranged a seminar for Buddhist monks against the ISGA proposals at the University of Kelaniya in October 2004.

Another monastic organization that stages protests against the peace process is Jathika Bhikshu Peramuna, (JBP, or National Bhikkhu Front), a platform for hardliners from the JVP and the SLFP. For example, on 23 April 2003 members of this organization handed over a letter to the newly installed Norwegian ambassador Hans Brattskar, demanding the removal of Tryggve Tellefsen, chief of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, on the grounds of alleged impartiality.<sup>46</sup> Active monks in the Front are the Venerable Dambara Amila Thero, the Venerable K. Daminda and the Venerable Kalawelgala Chandaloka.

During the autumn of 2004, another anti-peace process group came into being. On 24 November, a large demonstration was organized outside the Norwegian embassy by the newly formed Forum Against Political Killings and Abductions.<sup>47</sup> Among those present at the demonstration were JVP leader Wimal Weeravansa and JBP leader the Venerable Kalawelgala Chandaloka. Given the fierce antagonism between the JVP and the JHU throughout 2004, their cooperation in

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items02/210702-3.html> (accessed 16 December 2004).

<sup>40</sup> This statement was made at a meeting held in 2003. Later, in 2004, the JHU established a Supreme Sangha Council, thus bypassing the traditional Sangha structure. See <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items03/250903-2.html> (accessed 30 December 2004).

<sup>41</sup> For example, the Venerable Weligama Gnanrathana and the Venerable Davuldena Gnaniswara, the *mahanayakas* of the Amarapura chapter; see <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items03/250903-2.html> (accessed 30 December 2004).

<sup>42</sup> The questionnaire is available at <http://members.tripod.com/amarasara/jhu/jhunews/jhun-20040910-02.htm> (accessed 10 September 2004).

<sup>43</sup> *The Island*, 8 July 2004; available at <http://www.amarasara.net/jhu/jhunews/jhun-20040708-06.htm> (accessed 5 October 2004).

<sup>44</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 5 October 2004.

<sup>45</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 5 October 2004.

<sup>46</sup> See [http://www.dailymirror.lk/2003/04/25/caption\\_story.html](http://www.dailymirror.lk/2003/04/25/caption_story.html) (accessed 28 December 2004).

<sup>47</sup> The JVP, the Eelam People Democratic Party (EPDP), the Tamil Eelam United Liberation Front (the newly formed party of LTTE breakaway leader Karuna), Jathika Hela Urumaya, Students for Human Rights, the National University Teachers' Alliance, the Patriotic National Movement, the JBP and Janatha Kalakaruwo also participated at the forum.

the Forum, even with Tamil anti-LTTE parties, indicates a new trend of cooperation among critics of Norway and the peace process.

The Forum is also an important example of the cooperation between monks and laypeople to be seen in many patriotic organizations. Although radical nationalist monks are regarded as extremists by the majority of monks, the alliances that are being built between such monks and lay political organizations should not be underestimated. Another monk–lay organization is the nationalist organization known as the National Patriotic Movement (Deshahithaishi Jathika Vyaparaya). This movement is a *tri-nikaya* and lay–monk organization, and it is closely linked to the JVP. Its most eminent monk is the Venerable Elle Gunawanse, one of Sri Lanka’s ‘militant monks’, who first became popular through the songs he wrote for the military and only later became a political figure. The Venerable Elle Gunawanse was for some time very close to President Premadasa, and under Premadasa’s presidency he received valuable government property on Bhaudaloka Mawatha in Colombo. After the April 2004 elections, several JVP and SLFP politicians were known to have sought his advice and blessings, although many doubted the sincerity of their religious agenda.<sup>48</sup> The Venerable Elle Gunawanse has displayed shifting political loyalties, but he always remains in close contact with radical nationalist politicians.

Other important monks in the National Patriotic Movement are the Venerable Dambara Amila (Sri Jayawardenapura University and the Jathika Bhikshu Peramuna) and the Venerable Wilegoda Ariyadeva (University of Ruhuna). In addition to scholar-monks, the organization’s members include lay intellectuals like the famous writer Gunadasa Amarasekara and the JVP parliamentarian Wimal Weerawansa. Arjuna Ranatunge, a former Sri Lankan cricket captain and SLFP parliamentarian, was also a member of the founding committee. The movement mixes leftist ideology with strong anti-colonial and anti-Western feelings, criticizing the former PA government and later the UNP government for the ‘disintegration of the country’. Joint functions have been organized with other organizations concerned with ‘national and patriotic issues’. These groups share much the same nationalist ideology, and have also voiced criticism of the peace process and Norway’s involvement. In fact, one of the major strengths of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists is their loose and flexible organization.

### Norway as Anti-Buddhist?

There is a long list of criticisms that have been directed against Norway. In addition to allegations of impartiality and support of the LTTE, a recurring theme is that Norway is ‘anti-Buddhist’. According to Dinesh Gunawardane, a prominent Sinhala nationalist,<sup>49</sup> the Norwegian peace mediators would not be able to be fair to the Sinhalese Buddhist community as they had clearly shown ‘anti-Buddhist tendencies’ in the past. Indeed, he has argued that ‘when the Sri Lanka government proposed to the United Nations to declare Vesak Poya Day a universal holiday, Norway was the only country in the world that opposed it’.<sup>50</sup> This allegation, however, has proved to be false. In fact, together with a number of other countries, Norway is recorded as being a sponsor of the draft proposition.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, though, the Norwegian embassy in Colombo and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were unable to successfully counter these types of allegations, which were widespread in the early phase of the peace process.

In order to improve their relationships with various Buddhist actors, Norwegian authorities have sponsored a range of activities, both in Sri Lanka and in Norway. For example, the Norwegian foreign ministry sponsored a conference on ‘Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka’, arranged by the Buddhist Federation of Norway and the United Kingdom Association for Buddhist Studies and held in Bath in June 2002. ‘The purpose of the conference was to explore the potential of Buddhism in creating peace, harmony and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.’<sup>52</sup> Over three days, Bud-

<sup>48</sup> Interviews, April 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Leader of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP).

<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=6876> and <http://www.dailymirror.lk/2002/04/24/News/dinesh.html> (accessed 28 June 2004).

<sup>51</sup> UN Press Release GA/9686, 15 December 1999.

<sup>52</sup> The Venerable Mahinda Deegalle, quoted at <http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/10/deegalle-proceedings-sri-lanka-conf.html> (accessed 27 March 2004).

dhist monks and Sri Lankan and Western Buddhist scholars discussed textual resources within the Theravada tradition related to peace. The conference resulted in a book, which was translated into Sinhala and later published in Colombo. Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, the book was highly criticized by nationalist Buddhist monks.

In addition, the Norwegian foreign ministry organized and financed a visit to Norway by a delegation of leading Buddhist monks in October 2003. One of the objectives of this visit was to establish contacts between the foreign ministry and the monastic community in Sri Lanka. The monks who took part were the Venerable Muruttettuve Ananda, the Venerable Banagala Upatissa, the Venerable Kirama Wimalajothi, the Venerable Tiniyavala Palitha, the Venerable Panaluwe Pannarama, the Venerable Horawela Dhammajothi and the Venerable Kadhihigala Ariyawansa, who all belonged to Siyam Nikaya. They met with members of parliament, local politicians and Norwegian scholars,<sup>53</sup> as well as with members of the Sinhalese community in Norway. It should be noted that participation in the Oslo delegation did not necessarily imply political sympathies in favour of the Norwegian political project in Sri Lanka. Indeed, the monks differed greatly in their views on the peace process.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the delegation was met with criticism and suspicion in Sri Lanka. Among the monks most critical of the delegation was Podhihamodurovo of the Gangaramaya temple, who has repeatedly argued against foreign influence in Sri Lankan politics.<sup>55</sup>

### Monastic Voices in Favour of the Peace Process

We work to stop the war and to promote coexistence. The important issue is coexistence: religious and ethnic, as well as political. Unless we have that, there will be no peace.... We stand for one ideology, regardless of government: equal rights and sharing of political power. Sometime, they should be implemented in the Constitution. We need Constitutional changes.... The idea can be sent out to the country by religious leaders.... I think the federal system is the best. Not many Buddhist monks think like this! I favour a decentralized political system.<sup>56</sup>

Groups of pro-peace monks have on several occasions visited the Norwegian embassy in Colombo to show their support for the Norwegian-facilitated peace process. This might lead one to believe that the number of those who support the process is considerable. However, such a conclusion would be unwarranted. In fact, the number of monks who actively support the ongoing peace process is small, and the monks who have declared their support for Norway outside the embassy in Colombo belong to a very small minority. On the other hand, the same could be said for the radical nationalists themselves. But, notably, the monks disapproving of the current peace talks are far better organized than those who are supportive. The vast majority of Sinhalese, including the Buddhist monks, do not support the burning of the Norwegian flag, though they are very sceptical both of Norway's role in the peace process and of the idea of a federal solution to the conflict. Nevertheless, as I shall discuss below, there have been some positive developments in this regard.

The views of the head monks, or *mahanayakas*, play a significant role in the shaping of public opinion in Buddhist Sri Lanka. Therefore, their reactions to and public statements regarding the peace process are important. As previously discussed, statements issued by the *mahanayakas* in the period 1999–2002 were moderately sceptical or plainly negative towards the peace process. In those statements, the head monks' criticism of Norway, the LTTE and the peace process in general were clearly expressed.<sup>57</sup> However, as already noted, the *mahanayakas* softened in their

<sup>53</sup> The present author participated at one of these meetings, which was held with the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO).

<sup>54</sup> Field notes and interviews, October 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, May 2004.

<sup>56</sup> Interview, May 2004.

<sup>57</sup> The Venerable Akuratiye Nanda, 'An Analysis of the Selected Statements Issued by the Mahanayakas on the North-East Problem of Sri Lanka', paper presented at Bath Conference on Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka, Bath, 28–30 June 2002.

response when the LTTE indicated it would give up its separatist goal and work within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. Significantly, this shows not only that there are alternative voices to those of the radical nationalists, even at the top of the monastic hierarchy, but also that the political position of the head monks is not fixed. For example, the Venerable Palipane Chandananda, the previous head monk of Asgiriya who was well known for his SLFP sympathies, played an active role in the Movement for the Protection of the Motherland, as well as in the protests against President Jayawardene and the Indian Peace Keeping Forces in 1987. However, the current head monk of Asgiriya seems more moderate, and the present head monk of Malwatte is also supportive of the peace process. Hence, it is the personal opinions and attitudes of individual monks that determine their views on the 'national question', not simply the position of being a head monk in Kandy. It should be noted, however, that the *mahanayakas* are regarded as being close to the country's political elites, and for that they are often criticized by JVP monks.

As discussed above, rituals are often used to give expression to political views in Sri Lanka. In March 2003, an important symbolic act of dialogue and reconciliation took place when the Venerable Banagala Upatissa and the Venerable Palita Thiniyawala met with the LTTE. In the view of the Venerable Banagala Upatissa, the importance of such reconciliatory action is clear: 'We have to meet the Tamils, and sit under one tree in Jaffna, so for people to see us together'.<sup>58</sup> This particular event received considerable media coverage – and created an outcry among nationalists.

Both the Venerable Banagala Upatissa and the Venerable Palita Thiniyawala have made public their support for the peace process. And, in their view, coexistence is the only solution. They represent good examples of the socially and politically engaged cosmopolitan monk who travels widely and has international contacts. The Venerable Banagala Upatissa, for example, is based both in Japan and in Sri Lanka. He elaborates on the monk's traditional role as teacher by running a wide network of primary schools,<sup>59</sup> and his wish is to create a new, peaceful society through education.

Both the Venerable Banagala Upatissa and the Venerable Palita Thiniyawala are known to be close to the UNP establishment and to have actively supported Ranil Wickremasinghe's peace efforts. Their close connection to Wickremasinghe facilitated their meeting with the LTTE. Moreover, the Venerable Banagala Upatissa in particular has been at the forefront in terms of advocating support for Norway. He has visited the Norwegian embassy on a number of different occasions and has met with the Norwegian facilitation team. In his position as president of the Maha Bodhi Society, he also invited the Norwegian diplomats to the society's headquarters in Colombo in a symbolically significant display of interaction between the Norwegian facilitators and Buddhist monks and institutions.

Here, a note should be made in regard to the Maha Bodhi Society, which was founded by the reformer Anagarika Dharmapala in 1891.<sup>60</sup> The Society was originally a lay movement,<sup>61</sup> working for religious reform and Buddhist revivalism, and voicing strong anti-Western and anti-colonial sentiments. Now, the Venerable Banagala Upatissa and his supporters within the Society represent a shift towards greater political flexibility and inclusiveness, redirecting the nationalist ideology of the organization's founder. However, the Maha Bodhi Society is regarded as having little influence at the present time and is not seen as a leading Buddhist voice.<sup>62</sup> One of the Society's activists has even suggested that it only 'adds to the spectrum of organizations and

<sup>58</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>59</sup> These schools are run by the Yoshida Foundation, which is named after the Japanese couple that created the foundation. The schools were established in 1979 and celebrated their 25th anniversary in 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Its primary goal was to regain control over Buddhist sacred places in India, such as Bodh Gaya. At the heart of the society stand Buddhist missionary activities around the world. Sending out Buddhist missions to the world and taking care of Buddhist historical sites in India continue to be the two main activities of the organization. The Maha Bodhi Society is divided into a Sri Lankan branch (based in Colombo) and an Indian branch (based in Sanchi), both claiming the historical legacy of Anagarika Dharmapala. Until now, the leader in India has had to be Sri Lankan, and the present leader is the Venerable Revata.

<sup>61</sup> Until recently, none of the life members of the board were monks.

<sup>62</sup> However, its temple, the Agra Sravaka Maha Vihara, draws thousands of devotees during the pilgrimage season for worship of relics from two of the Buddha's disciples. These relics were preserved in England until 1947, when they were transferred back to India. During the early 1950s, the relics were divided between India, Burma and Sri Lanka.

opinions'.<sup>63</sup> It should also be noted that although many of its monks have travelled to Norway, the Maha Bodhi Society's support for the peace process is not a fixed position, and the support given by the president and the Society to the peace process is the subject of internal debate. Nevertheless, the Maha Bodhi Society could come to play an important role in the future.

Some of the Venerable Banagala Upatissa's critics within the nationalist camp regard his Lankaji temple in Japan as the 'most politicized Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple in the world outside Sri Lanka'.<sup>64</sup> In any case, the overseas monastic missionaries represent a plurality of views, ranging from pro-peace monks like the Venerable Dr Mahinda Deegalle at the University College of Bath Spa in the UK to the nationalist stance of the late Venerable Soma, who was based in Australia for decades.

As discussed earlier, the bipartisan structure of Sri Lankan politics has had an influence on the political preferences of the monks, meaning that any government that has engaged in efforts to establish peace has been supported by its own monks only to be opposed by monks loyal to other political parties. However, immediately after the inauguration of the new United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA)<sup>65</sup> government following the April 2004 elections, monks like the Venerable Palita Thiniyawala and others gave assurances that they 'will work hard for peace regardless of whatever government in charge'.<sup>66</sup> This represents a new and positive trend, whereby monks with clear political loyalties (in this case to the UNP) have voiced their support for resuming the peace talks regardless of the government in charge. This was certainly followed up by the Venerable Banagala Upatissa, who in 'An Analysis of the Current Scenario' issued before the elections in April stated that 'as the President of Mahabodhi society I wish to suggest [that] Norway should continue the dialogue with both the Government in power and the Opposition.' He also made a number of recommendations aimed at helping the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) in its efforts to monitor the ceasefire. The document ends with a clear petition to the LTTE to publicly reinforce its commitment to the 'Oslo Declaration', whereby the goal of creating a separate state was abandoned, 'as it will have far-reaching impact on their credibility and will also help neutralize the extreme elements in the South'.<sup>67</sup>

To my knowledge, equally clear policy recommendations have not been made by the *mahanayakas* in Kandy, though positive signals observed in 2002 have been further strengthened by the new head monk of Malwatte, the Venerable Tibbotuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala, who has made repeated moves in support of the peace process since his inception. For example, in November 2004 he received Hans Brattskar, the Norwegian ambassador to Sri Lanka. During their meeting, the ambassador and the Malwatte Mahanayaka discussed the peace process, as well as Norway's support to various cultural projects in Sri Lanka. The Mahanayaka communicated to the media the need for the 'peace brokers to act impartially'.<sup>68</sup> A few months earlier, in August, he was paraphrased in the media as having told opposition leader Wickremesinghe that

[a] solution for the national problem could never be found if the two main political parties engaged in an eternal tug-of-war divided into two opposing camps. As to who should take leadership in seeking a solution to the national problem should not be an issue. The essential thing was for all parties to join hands and support the peace effort.<sup>69</sup>

In September 2004, a controversy blew up in the Sinhala press regarding a possible visit by the Malwatte Mahanayaka to the LTTE headquarters in Killinochi. Interestingly, in nationalist-oriented newspapers like *The Island* such a move was seen as being 'in keeping with the noble teachings of the Buddha', but still rejected because the monk was seen as having been lured into his actions and misused by the LTTE for purely strategic reasons.<sup>70</sup> However, though the Killinochi

<sup>63</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>64</sup> See <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items04/110504-1.html> (accessed 18 December 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Alliance led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her party, the SLFP.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, May 2004.

<sup>67</sup> I am grateful to the Venerable Banagala Upatissa for sharing this document with me.

<sup>68</sup> See <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2004/11/28/sec04.html> (accessed 28 November 2004).

<sup>69</sup> As reported in the *Daily News*, 7 September 2004; available at <http://www.dailynews.lk/2004/07/09/new04.html> (accessed 7 September 2004).

<sup>70</sup> *The Island*, 24 September 2004; available at <http://members.tripod.com/amarasara/jhu/jhunews/jhun-20040924-01.htm> (accessed 28 January 2005).

visit was called off, the Malwatte Mahanayaka later received members of parliament from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) on 11 October 2004.<sup>71</sup> While this meeting was able to take place, a similar meeting scheduled to take place with the Asgiriya Mahanayaka was called off at the last minute – most probably as a result of the considerable protests against the *mahanayakas* prior to the meetings.<sup>72</sup> And, after the Malwatte meeting, the TNA members were attacked by monks opposed to the meeting and Sinhala nationalists.<sup>73</sup> The events surrounding the various arrangements reveal the internal conflicts and political differences within the Sangha. On the one hand, Buddhist pressure groups like the JHU and the JBP criticized the Malwatte head monk heavily. On the other hand, the meeting with the Malwatte Mahanayaka received great support from peace activists, among them several monks who regarded this as one of the most important steps taken by the Sangha in support of the peace process in 2004.<sup>74</sup> The reception of the TNA members sparked off a discussion about the Malwatte Mahanayaka's political views. The head monk responded by saying that, as a Buddhist, he could not refuse to listen to people who wanted to speak with him.<sup>75</sup> The heated political climate also forced him to clarify his views on the ISGA proposals. He was reported as saying that he could not 'agree to Interim Administration as it stands under the current proposals and that on principle the Maha Sangha cannot agree to any suggestions that will do harm to the nation and the country'.<sup>76</sup> However, this should not be understood as a statement against negotiations with the LTTE, but rather as an acknowledgment of the proposals as a *starting point* for further negotiations. In fact, *none* of the peace activists I interviewed, including Buddhist monks, accepted the ISGA proposals in their present form. However, they did accept negotiations based on the ISGA. Not surprisingly, the idea of a separate Tamil state is unacceptable to all monks. The views of many were summed up by one monk in the following manner:

Most of my friends would support a negotiated, federal solution to the problem. Jaffna could not be independent, but be under one government. They could not have an independent Tamil Eelam, not own currency, own military etc.... We should have like India, with independent provincial councils, but under one government. This island is too small to be divided.<sup>77</sup>

This position, advocating devolution of power within a united Sri Lanka, has been facilitated by the 'Oslo Declaration', whereby the LTTE leader Prabhakaran publicly renounced the movement's demands for a separate state. This opened up a space for the 'soft-liners' in the south to advocate a negotiated solution.

The Venerable Madampagama Assaji is one of Sri Lanka's grassroots peace activists, representing the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (IRPF). He is highly visible in the media, at different inter-religious functions and on travels to Jaffna. Furthermore, he is deeply involved in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Together with Reverend Anura Perera (a Methodist priest) and others in the IRPF, the Venerable Madampagama Assaji has also staged pro-peace demonstrations outside the Norwegian embassy, particularly in the wake of anti-Norwegian demonstrations. In September 2004, they handed over a Norwegian flag to Erik Solheim, the Norwegian peace envoy, as a symbolic token of their support for the Norwegian facilitation. While such symbolic actions outside the embassy might seem insignificant, particularly since their organizers represent a tiny minority of the population, such activities nonetheless play an invaluable role in counterbalancing the harsh criticism of the peace process. Appearances by pro-peace activists outside the Norwegian embassy have been turned into media events (though they admittedly receive far less attention than demonstrations involving the burning of the Norwegian flag).

<sup>71</sup> The TNA is close to the LTTE.

<sup>72</sup> There were even unconfirmed rumours that the *mahanayakas* had received death threats.

<sup>73</sup> See <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=13116> (accessed 11 November 2004).

<sup>74</sup> Interview, September 2004.

<sup>75</sup> However, if he had been really opposed to the meeting, he could have 'turned the bowl'.

<sup>76</sup> See <http://www.dailynews.lk/2004/10/11/new03.html> (accessed 11 November 2004).

<sup>77</sup> Interview, July 2004

The Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (IRPF) is a small but active organization linked to the National Anti-War Front (NAWF), a network of civil society organizations that actively work to end the civil war in Sri Lanka. The IRPF was founded by a Buddhist monk, the Venerable Wellawatte Gnanavivanse. It is engaged in various activities, such as work with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, peace education, public statements and religious functions. The IRPF has organized several inter-faith functions in Jaffna and Killinochi, bringing groups of Buddhist monks from the south and the interior of the country up to the Tamil areas. During such visits, Buddhist monks have visited ruined mosques and Hindu temples, as well as Buddhist sites ruined by the war. In Badulla, in particular, inter-faith cooperation seems to be promising.

As mentioned above, IRPF members the Venerable Madampagama Assaji and Reverend Anura Perera have become well known for their tireless efforts to bring about peace. Although they do not support all of its terms, they have invested considerable energy in explaining the ISGA. During June–July 2004, Reverend Perera and the Venerable Madampagama Assaji had four meetings with Buddhist monks in the south (in Tissa, Matara and Galle). In their view, a dialogue with the southern monks is crucial, as opposition to the peace process and the ISGA proposals is voiced by many young, radical monks from that region. At the meetings, monks expressed their concerns that the ISGA proposals will ultimately lead to separation of the country, that the LTTE is not the sole representative of the Tamils (and consequently not the only party that should be negotiating on behalf of the Tamils), and further that the LTTE has a hidden Christian agenda. The view of the IRPF and the NAWF, however, is that the ISGA is not to be fully accepted by the Sri Lankan government, but to be negotiated over.<sup>78</sup>

How then, do some of the monastic peace activists understand their own role and position? Even among the most vocal peace activists, the analysis is negative. As one monk explained: '98% of the monks feel that the country will be betrayed by the peace process, although all will agree that they want peace.' This comment was followed by a harsh critique of the Sangha: 'Building peace is the primary goal of the Sangha, but not so for the Sangha in Sri Lanka!'<sup>79</sup>

Regardless of the hegemonic position of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism within the Sangha, it is puzzling that so few monks engage in pro-peace activities. On the other hand, some monks with important contacts within their own *nikaya* have chosen to support the peace process 'behind the scenes'. One such 'silent monk' argued that 'those in favour are silent due to fear of insults and enemies'.<sup>80</sup> Such an approach was dismissed as 'cowardice' by other monks who have taken great risks through their support for the peace process. However, it should not be forgotten that favouring the peace process has in some cases led to questioning of an actual monk's 'Buddhistness', and some have even been labelled 'half-Christians'. This has happened, for instance, to well-known monks who have travelled to Jaffna for inter-religious functions. Such monks have also been called 'artificial monks' or even 'false monks in robes ordained by the NGOs' by famous JVP politicians. These types of very personal attacks caused at least one potential peace activist in the Sangha to withdraw from the public scene during the autumn of 2004.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the present anti-peace and anti-NGO climate in Sri Lanka makes it difficult 'to get people to cross the border', as one peace activist put it.

The fight over who are 'real Buddhists' is certainly not new, and it is a struggle that took a physical form during the JVP insurgency and President Premadasa's violent counterattack in the late 1980s.<sup>82</sup> Then, as now, opposing parties tried to label each other 'un-Buddhist'. In such circumstances, monks who are in favour of the peace process play an important role, often providing an alternative discourse on the subject of what 'true' Buddhism is, in contrast to those who work against the peace talks in order, as they see it, to protect Buddhism. Nevertheless, the questioning of a person's religious sincerity seems to be a problem for all religious leaders who openly engage in peace activities, support a negotiated solution and engage in inter-faith work in Sri Lanka. Even in Christian communities, pro-peace activists are often not accepted by the

<sup>78</sup> Interview, August 2004.

<sup>79</sup> Interview, May 2004.

<sup>80</sup> Interview, May 2004.

<sup>81</sup> Interview, October 2004.

<sup>82</sup> Ananda Abeysekara, 'Saffron Army, Violence, Terror(ism): Buddhism, Identity, and Difference in Sri Lanka', *Numen: International Association for the History of Religions*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2001, pp. 1–45.

general public. As one peace activist summed up: 'If I get too involved, I'll be marginalized'.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, some peace activists have even felt threatened by sections of the militant monks, though they have refused to give up their work.

During the process of gathering material for this report, I was surprised to note that few of the monks supportive of the peace process provided a strong religious rationale for their views. Nearly all of the discussions I have had with Buddhist monks concerning the peace process have been clearly political in nature, but I had assumed that a larger number of monks would make references to the Buddhist concepts of nonviolence or loving-kindness during such discussions. However, with a few notable exceptions, the monks replied to political questions by giving *political* answers, answers that any politically minded Sinhalese might have given, regardless of his or her political affiliation.

The Venerable Dr Mahinda Deegalle, a lecturer at the School of Historical and Cultural Studies, Bath Spa University College, UK, is another Buddhist monk supportive of the peace process. He publishes widely on issues related to Buddhism and peace, and is co-editor of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. His activities have taken a different direction than the 'peace movement monks' in that he is not clearly involved in NGO or political work, although he collaborates with the Norwegian Buddhist Federation in its peace work in Sri Lanka and has been in contact with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Rather, his writings aim at contributing to the religious discussions about what Buddhism is – and what it should not be. He has been crucial in advocating a reconciliatory Buddhism, emphasizing the basic Buddhist teachings of nonviolence and compassion, and through a series of articles and papers he has attempted to challenge the nationalist discourse within the Sangha. For example, at a meeting held in Oslo in 2003,<sup>84</sup> he challenged nationalist readings of the *Mahavamsa*. Furthermore, he was also one of the organizers of the Bath Conference on Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka that was held in the UK in 2002. In the Venerable Mahinda Degalle's view, nonviolence, dialogue and political negotiations are the only solution to Sri Lanka's protracted civil war.

Since the inception of the Norwegian-facilitated peace process in 2000, some of Sri Lanka's most famous nationalist monks, the Venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha and the Venerable Muruttettuwe Ananda, have been quiet. Sri Lankans have theorized about their 'silence' – that is, their lack of criticism – and some have argued that the UNP government of 2001 managed to keep them silent through economic or by other means. A far more relevant question relates to the extent to which their 'quietness' represents an ideological and political shift among important monks in Sri Lanka. This would not necessarily imply support for the process as it has been run since 2000, but would suggest that monks who previously were clearly antagonistic seem to be less so now. For example, the Venerable Professor Bellanwila, who was one of the founders of the Jathika Sangha Sabhava, has lately been increasingly involved with the inter-faith network the Congress of Religions, which cooperates with Norwegian inter-faith networks. Members of the Congress of Religions travelled to South Africa in May 2004 with the aim of building up inter-faith dialogue and learning more about the South African experience in reconciliation and peacebuilding. Although members of the Congress of Religions have expressed differing views concerning deproscription of the LTTE, they have clearly indicated 'that the solution to the ethnic conflict should be found through peace talks',<sup>85</sup> and a statement to that effect has been signed by influential monks like the Venerable Professor Bellanwila and the Venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha. This would seem to indicate an important shift from nationalist activity to moderate scepticism, or even to low-key pro-peace work. These monks represent a valuable resource in terms of giving a negotiated solution increased legitimacy, because they have economic resources and political influence, and above all they are greatly respected by their Buddhist constituencies. As such, they are in a position to exercise great political influence. However, it should be emphasized that if such a shift is taking place, this implies neither total acceptance of the peace process as it has been run by the Sri Lankan government and Norway nor acceptance of the ISGA proposals. In addition, it should be noted that some of these monks still favour a military solution. As one

<sup>83</sup> Interview, July 2004.

<sup>84</sup> The meeting was organized by the Centre for Conflict Management, a Norwegian NGO.

<sup>85</sup> See <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=7362> (accessed 28 December 2004).



monk put it, 'At the moment, a military solution is the way, but the government is not prepared, due to internal disputes. It could have been done before, in the beginning.'<sup>86</sup> He was thus in favour of a negotiated solution to the conflict given that the government was unable to wage a successful war. It remains open whether he would support the peace process in the event of future military strength. However, as long as military force is not an option at the present time, pragmatic acceptance of a political solution should be regarded as a strategic possibility that would enable the inclusion of Buddhist monks in discussions on Sri Lanka's political future.

---

<sup>86</sup> Interview, July 2004.

## CONCLUSION

**I**N LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA, many Buddhist monks have voiced considerable hostility towards the Norwegian-facilitated peace process in Sri Lanka, because they fear that a political solution to the conflict will ultimately result in a division of Sri Lanka into two separate states. Equally, Norway's role in the peace process is viewed with suspicion, as Norway is considered to be pro-Tamil. In the opinion of many monks, a decentralized political structure – for example, along federal lines – would contradict two basic tenets of Buddhist teaching: Sri Lanka as a sacred land and the Sinhala people as the protectors of Buddhism.

This Sinhala Buddhist ideology is powerfully promoted by Buddhist pressure groups, which represent a numerically small yet influential part of the Sinhala electorate. The present study shows that previous peace processes in Sri Lanka have been spoiled by various Buddhist pressure groups that have opposed all attempts to devolve power and to make concessions to the ethnic minorities. Such groups are of considerable importance owing to their easy access to the privately controlled Sinhala media, and furthermore because they are organized across internal divisions within the Buddhist monastic order, the Sangha. In addition, several of the pressure groups draw their members from both monks and laypeople, and they are often associated with particular political parties. (It is important to note that all of Sri Lanka's major political parties have Buddhist nationalist groups or networks attached to them, which can be mobilized when needed. The ongoing peace process has not changed this situation.)

Furthermore, although radical Buddhist groups are small in number, many of their ideas regarding the endangered state of Buddhism and fear of a physical division of the country resonate deeply within the Sinhala Buddhist public at large. This was manifested in political terms in the historic entry of Buddhist monks into the Sri Lankan parliament in 2004. Consequently, radical opposition to the peace process – and Norway's role within it – cannot simply be dismissed as coming from 'fringe groups'.

Importantly, however, Buddhist monks do not act as a monolithic body on political issues. Indeed, several important Buddhist monks have voiced strong support for the peace process, among them the Venerable Tibbotuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala, one of the head monks in Kandy. Moreover, it seems that more Buddhist monks support the peace efforts now than was the case in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, two contradictory trends can be discerned since the inception of the Norwegian-facilitated peace process. On the one hand, anti-Norwegian protests have increased: the moderate scepticism of the first years of the peace process has been radicalized through forceful media criticism following the stalemate and lack of progress since 2003. On the other hand, a new political space has developed for monks who favour a political solution and who publicly support the peace process. This is partly due to the fact that both of Sri Lanka's two leading political parties have been engaged in the Norwegian-facilitated peace process while in power, meaning that monks affiliated with each of the parties have been involved in the process. And, in a new and positive development, a number of influential opposition monks have continued to support the peace process even while it is being managed by the rival party. Another reason for the increased number of monks supportive of the peace process is the general growth in Sri Lanka's peace movement. This has created a new space for anti-war activities, also for Buddhist monks. Therefore, in spite of the negative climate during the autumn of 2004, it does seem that a positive shift has taken place within some sections of the Sangha. However, it is too soon to assess whether this represents a major trend, moving the Sangha away from the dominant Sinhala nationalist discourse.

In sum, the Sangha represents a great variety of political opinions. And, despite major attempts to establish unity, the relatively loose organizational structure of the order prevents it from having a common policy towards political issues. Moreover, it is hard to identify distinctive social and geographic differences between the monks who have opposed the peace process and those that have promoted it. While caste is an important element in the organizational outlook of the Sangha, it seems to be of less importance now than in the past, as modern education provides for new kinds of meeting places. Furthermore, caste seems irrelevant for political influence or national prominence, as well as for an individual monk's view of the peace process. Rather, the age and social class of monks are important. Elderly head monks linked to the political establishment seem to be more inclined to support the peace process than young monks in opposition to Sri Lanka's social, economic and political elites in general, and to the Sangha elites in particular.

Lack of political consensus in the south and opposition to the various peace processes by nationalist and Buddhist pressure groups have time and again made peacebuilding difficult in Sri Lanka. How, then, could opposition to the peace process by religious actors be transformed into a constructive dialogue about Sri Lanka's political future?

*First*, while it is essential to empower the minority of courageous Buddhist monks engaged in peace work, it might be even more important for the Norwegian foreign ministry to approach and hold discussions with politically influential monks that are *critical* of Norway and the peace process. Hopefully, this would result in a fruitful dialogue, one that would also be symbolically significant for concerned Sinhala Buddhists. There is a widespread feeling among monks that they are excluded from the decisionmaking process in Sri Lanka. Indeed, many of the so-called political monks feel it is their duty to serve as 'advisers to kings' and 'guardian deities' of the nation. If left out of processes aimed at determining Sri Lanka's future, they may easily become spoilers of the entire peace process, casting themselves as the only true defenders of Sri Lanka and Buddhism against the alleged dangers of federalism or a devolution of power. While still being critical of Norway's role or the way in which various Sri Lankan governments have managed the peace process, these monks could play an important role in communicating acceptance of a *politically negotiated* solution, as opposed to a resumption of war. However, as both political and monastic unity are of major concern to the monks, this dialogue should be as inclusive and open as possible (round-table conferences, for example).

*Second*, as a facilitator in a conflict with important religious overtones, Norway would benefit from building up networks with Buddhist actors and becoming more visible on the 'Buddhist scene' through participation in public ritual events. This is particularly important for Norway, which is often accused of having a hidden Christian agenda behind its engagement in Sri Lanka. Thus, although the provision of financial support to Christian-based inter-faith networks may play an important role within the peace process, there is a risk that such networks will simply be viewed as having been 'bought off by the Norwegians' and not necessarily taken seriously by larger sections of Buddhists. One possible strategy for supporting pro-peace actors might be to encourage support from countries with less Western or Christian identities. Indeed, as an Asian and partially Buddhist country, Japan already plays a significant role in this regard, while Thailand – which, like Sri Lanka, is also a Theravada Buddhist country – might be another suitable source to draw upon.

*Third*, a negotiated settlement between the two parties that does not address Buddhist concerns will not be sustainable. While Buddhist ideals of nonviolence and compassion can easily be applied in a reconciliation process *after* a political solution has been reached, recognition of some of the Buddhist monks' demands should be considered during the peace process itself. If dialogue and informal inclusion in the peace process are not followed up by real concessions on the part of the government or the LTTE, the monks will simply withdraw and use their influence even more forcefully against a political solution. One important concern among the Sinhala Buddhist public is fear of spatial disintegration of the island, leading to a threat to Buddhism in general and the destruction of the Buddhist heritage in the north and east in particular. Therefore, ways of guaranteeing access by the Sangha to Buddhist historical sites in the north and east should be addressed in order to soften the criticisms voiced by radical Buddhist groups.

*Finally*, what is needed in the peace process are public figures of good 'Buddhist standing' – individuals who are regarded as taking Buddhist concerns seriously while at the same time advocating core Buddhist values such as nonviolence, compassion and universalism.

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|      |   |
|------|---|
| CFA  | Cease Fire Agreement                              |
| EBP  | Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna                           |
| EPDP | Eelam People Democratic Party                     |
| IPKF | Indian Peace Keeping Forces                       |
| IRPF | Inter-Religious Peace Foundation                  |
| ISGA | Interim Self-Governing Authority                  |
| JBP  | Jathika Bhikshu Peramuna (National Bhikkhu Front) |
| JHU  | Jathika Hela Urumaya                              |
| JVP  | Janatha Vimukti Peramuna                          |
| LTTE | Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam                  |
| MFA  | Ministry of Foreign Affairs                       |
| NAWF | National Anti-War Front                           |
| NCPR | National Council on Peace and Reconciliation      |
| NGO  | nongovernmental organization                      |
| PA   | People's Alliance                                 |
| SLFP | Sri Lanka Freedom Party                           |
| SLMM | Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission                      |
| TNA  | Tamil National Alliance                           |
| TULF | Tamil United Liberation Front                     |
| UNF  | United National Front                             |
| UNP  | United National Party                             |
| UPFA | United People's Freedom Alliance                  |