

# Spoils of Victory in Sri Lanka: Sinhala extremism finds new targets in Sri Lanka

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URING THE 1990S, the ethnic wars in the crumbling Balkans were often ascribed to what the media called “ancient hatreds”, a self-feeding cycle of fighting and vengeance with its roots deep in history: the Serbs were said to have detested the Croats since World War II and the Albanians since 1389. Deriding the theory, the journalist Stephen Schwartz joked that one might as well trace the animosity back 2,000 years, to a raid described by the Roman poet Ovid, in which the Sarmatians, notionally distant ancestors of today’s Slavs, brutally crushed the distant ancestors of today’s Albanians. So tenuous were the extrapolations that the Balkan wars could even be seen as a natural sequel to the millennia-old battle of which Ovid wrote:

*"Swift, on horseback, the barbarians ride to the attack;  
an enemy with horses as numerous as their flying arrows;  
and they leave the whole land depopulated."*

The theory provided convenient historical ballast for the nightly news, Schwartz argued; even more dangerously, it suggested that the violence was inevitable. Soon after he won the presidency, Bill Clinton read *Balkan Ghosts*, a Robert Kaplan book that subscribed to the “ancient hatreds” model. From *Balkan Ghosts*, the Sarajevo journalist Kemal Kurspahic wrote in his 1997 book *As Long As Sarajevo Exists*, Clinton drew “the comforting thought that nothing much could be done in Bosnia ‘until those folks got tired of killing each other.’” Santayana’s maxim was turned on its head: the Slavs remembered their past too vividly and were thus condemned to repeat it.

Like a show pony, the “ancient hatreds” argument is trotted out of its stable and walked around the paddock during every ethnic conflict. The warring parties themselves are happy to shoehorn their stances into this model, buffing their credentials by claiming to be part of some grander historical purpose. So it was during the civil war in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese nationalists and Buddhist extremists—and these two groups overlapped more often than not—pointed accusing fingers to the past, when armies from Tamil kingdoms in India invaded this peaceful island, their haven of Buddhism. On the other side of the divide, Tamil nationalists contended that many of their ancestors had arrived as merchants and fishermen—perhaps even before Buddhism reached Sri Lanka—and that Sinhalese kings had repeatedly slaughtered Tamil communities and grabbed their land. Living in Sri Lanka, I frequently got the impression that the Sinhalese and the Tamils had fought two wars: the terrestrial one, which began nominally in 1983 and ended in 2009; and an abstract one, which began centuries ago and is not quite finished yet.

Ever since the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009, Sri Lanka’s Tamils have been a cowed, cautious people, living under a crushing military presence in the island’s north and east. For the moment, they present no physical or ideological threat, so Sinhala Buddhist extremists, who had been allowed by President Mahinda Rajapakse to build up a fearsome head of steam in the closing stages of the war, have redirected their attritional energies. Chauvinism can, in the absence of ancient hatreds, easily summon up modern ones to fill the void. Over the last three years, these Buddhist groups have begun to persecute the country’s Muslim minority; one outfit in particular, the Bodu Bala Sena (‘the

Army of Buddhist Power'), formed last July in Colombo, has sought systematically to demonise Muslims, accusing them of eroding Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage. Violence has been promised unto the Muslims; in turn, one Muslim leader has already said that there will soon be "no alternative to taking up arms", although he claimed to have been misquoted after he was arrested in May under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. This is all fresh friction, growing and deepening as we watch.

During the war, the text to which Sinhalese nationalists turned most often in the course of their arguments was the *Mahavamsa*, the Great Chronicle. The *Mahavamsa* is a long Pali poem that, in a mix of facts and legends, narrates the story of Buddhist Sri Lanka between the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. It deals often with historical figures, but it is by no means a watertight history. Buddhist monks worked and reworked the *Mahavamsa* over hundreds of years, tweaking it to suit the political agendas of their kings, and filling in the gaps—of the early years in particular—with the distilled products of their imaginations.

Far more than any other source, the *Mahavamsa* offered 'proof' of the antique enmity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, but it also supplied the country's Buddhists with a moral imperative. Sri Lanka is, as designated by the Buddha himself, the ultimate refuge of his faith, and even violence is permissible in the protection of Buddhism here. This message is embedded most dramatically in the story of King Dutugemunu, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century monarch who feared that the Tamils would push the Sinhalese into the sea, and who fought and slew the army of Elara, an invader "of upright nature" from south India. Late in his life, when he is troubled by the numerous Tamils he has killed on the battlefield, and concerned about his karmic accounting, Dutugemunu receives a delegation of monks.

"Ruler of men, we have been sent ... to comfort you," one of the monks tells Dutugemunu.

"In truth, venerable sirs," Dutugemunu says, "how can there be comfort to me in that I caused the destruction of a great army of myriads of men?"

"There is no hindrance on the way to heaven because of your acts," the monk responds. Only the equivalent of one-and-a-half men died at Dutugemunu's hands, according to the monks' arithmetic, because the Tamils "were heretical and evil and died as though they were animals. You will make the Buddha's faith shine in many ways. Therefore, Lord of Men, cast away your mental confusion." Being thus exhorted, the *Mahavamsa* goes on, "the great king was comforted"; his kill rate never disturbed him again.

For Buddhist nationalists, the ancient hatreds embodied in the *Mahavamsa* were extrapolated into the 20<sup>th</sup> century's troubles between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. In discussing the civil war with me, one of the founding monks of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhalese nationalist party, did not dwell too much on the state's various discriminations against the Tamils in the 1950s and 1960s—the proximate cause of the war. Instead, he preferred to peer further back into history, to answer the sort of questions one might encounter in a school playground. Who was here first? "There are thousands of inscriptions from 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE in Sinhalese, but there isn't a single inscription in Tamil," he said, quite inaccurately. Who started the fight? "Not Buddhists. But if one's enemy comes to you, you have to fight back. Not to kill him, necessarily, but to protect yourself. Buddhists, all through history, if they have fought, they have fought for self-protection." Whose land was this? "There is no traditional homeland here for the Tamils," he said, his shaved head gleaming in the afternoon sun. "This is the homeland of the Sinhalese. The Sinhalese are the people who created this culture, developed this country, created this lifestyle and this nation."

The JHU and its monks proved useful, during the war's twilight, to Rajapakse as he consolidated Sinhalese Buddhist support, first to throw massive resources into finishing the war brutally, and

then to win the elections of 2010. That base of support still props Rajapakse up, so Buddhist extremists have, in their harassment of Muslims, been quite unhindered and even goaded on by the government. In January, members of right-wing groups stormed into the Law College of Sri Lanka in Colombo, claiming that its examination results were doctored to favour Muslims. They have called for mosques and dargahs to be razed, ostensibly for being situated too close to Buddhist temples; in the ancient capital of Anuradhapura, during one of these demolition drives, a photographer captured a monk burning a green Islamic pennant that he had pulled out of a dargah's rubble. The Bodu Bala Sena has closed down Muslim-owned butcheries, attacked a popular Muslim-owned clothing store in Colombo, and forced the government to ban the certification of halal meat; other groups have painted pigs on the walls of mosques. In the town of Dambulla last year, when the chief priest of a local Buddhist temple led a protest to "relocate" a mosque, he warned in the process: "Today we came with a Buddhist flag in hand. But the next time, it will be different."

Soon after, in a spiky interview in the *Colombo Telegraph*, this Dambulla monk, Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero, tried valiantly to invent historical reasons to resent the Muslims. "The Muslims came to Sri Lanka by sailboats to trade in groceries. Only males came," he said. "Having come like visitors they robbed the Sinhala and Tamil women. They fooled our Sinhala and Tamil women and married them." This is nothing but desperation. There is, in truth, no hoary history of Sinhalese-Muslim dust-ups, no old tensions to plunder and jam into a new theory of ancient hatreds. As a community, Sri Lanka's Muslims have historically kept a low profile, conscious of being the country's third-largest ethnic group, and thus careful about maintaining cordial ties with the Sinhalese majority as well as the Tamils. The Muslims have never posed a demographic threat either. Less than 10 percent of Sri Lanka is Muslim; since the Buddhist population is seven times larger, no sensible person today could share King Dutugemunu's fear that the Buddhists will be pushed into the sea.

In their hounding of Muslims, the Buddhist extremists have shown themselves up. They can no longer insist—as they did during the civil war—that they are acting according to the precedents in the *Mahavamsa*, marching to martial bugles because they are trying to protect a vulnerable, fledgling faith. As an institution, Buddhism in Sri Lanka is wealthier, stronger and more sheltered by the government than it has perhaps ever been in the history of the island. The attacks on a weak Muslim minority form a way to extend the influence and power of these Buddhist factions, proving in the process that the appetite of religious extremism, once whetted, is difficult to sate.

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