

**Statement of
Michael K. Jerryson**

**Subcommittee on
Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

Human Rights Concerns in Sri Lanka

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you. Thank you as well for addressing a very important issue facing Sri Lanka, which is also a larger issue of peace and stability for South and Southeast Asia today. I would like to submit this written testimony into the record.

My name is Michael Jerryson. I am a professor of religious studies at Youngstown State University. I have worked on Buddhism and violence for over 20 years (1998 – present). During this time, I have traveled and conducted fieldwork in Asia. Often, my work consists of living and interviewing Buddhist civilians and monks involved in Buddhist-supported violence.

Among my recent publications on the subject matter, I have: authored *Mongolian Buddhism: The Rise and Fall of the Sangha* (Silkworm, 2008), *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford, 2011), and *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics and Violence* (Oxford, 2018); I also co-edited *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford, 2010), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Oxford 2013), and *Violence and the World's Religious Traditions* (Oxford, 2016).

As a scholar of religion, I strive to understand the socio-cultural and political role of religion through a historical lens. My position is not to judge a religion or its adherents, but rather to illuminate the ways in which religious values motivate or influence people and social patterns.

In my work, I have found that religion is one of the most undervalued and misunderstood causes for violence and for reconciliation in the contemporary world. The current problems in Sri Lanka are rooted in strong pervasive identifications. For many Sri Lankan Buddhists, a true Sri Lankan is a Sinhala Buddhist. This is not only a powerful normative influence throughout Sri Lanka, but also within the larger South and Southeast Asian Buddhist societies today. As such, the change necessary in Sri Lanka is not an easy or simple one. It requires a systemic shift in the way Sri Lankans identify themselves and their concept of the nation (and, concurrently, patriotism).

While I draw on my information from scholars, journalists, and NGO workers, the views I express in this testimony are my own.

No Room for Others: Buddhism and National Consciousness

In 2013, A. R. M. Imtiyaz and I participated in a panel at the Association for Asian Studies. His paper was on the persecution of Sri Lankan Muslims in the post-civil war era. Imtiyaz argued that the Sri Lankan flag serves as a harbinger for the Sri Lankan ethno-religious strife throughout the last four decades.

Sri Lanka formally adopted the flag in 1972. In Figure 1 below, we can see the Buddhist symbol of the gold lion in the right half of the flag; the gold lion symbolizes the Sinhala Buddhists. The four golden *bo* leaves surrounding the lion represent the Buddhist principles of loving kindness, joy, and equanimity. In the flag, the lion is holding a *kastane* sword with its blade turned toward two columns of colors next to it: orange and green. The orange column symbolizes the Sri Lankan Tamils and the green column symbolizes the Sri Lankan Muslims.

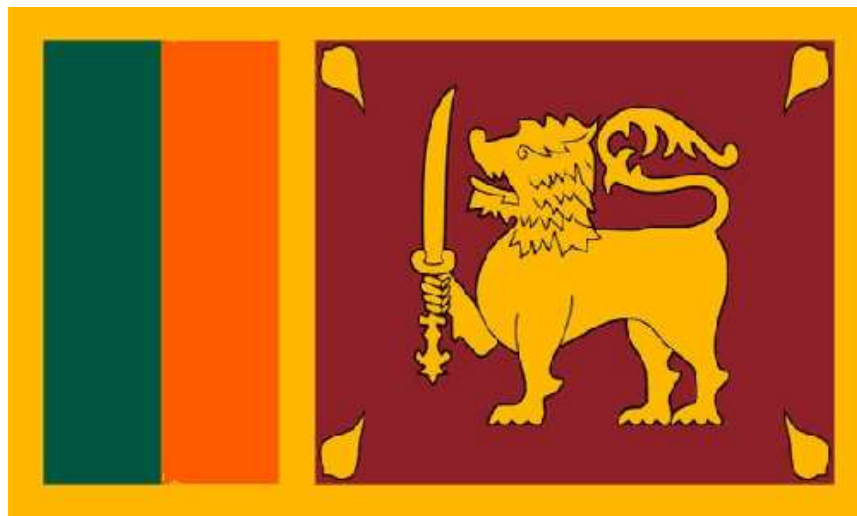


Figure 1: Sri Lankan Flag

In his conference presentation, Imtiyaz explained that the Sinhala Buddhists first turned their “sword” to the Sri Lankan Tamils during the 26-year civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, 1983-2009). After the Sinhala Buddhist government conquered the last strong holds of the LTTE, they turned their “sword” to the next largest minority in their country: the Sri Lankan Muslims.¹

For the last five years, I have heard other Sri Lankans explain the flag’s imagery in similar ways. Beyond this possible rhetorical correlation between the flag and the recent ethno-religious acts of violence, the flag provides us with several key insights into Sri Lankan society. The first is the dominant role Buddhism plays in Sri Lankan national consciousness.

The Buddhist elements in the flag, namely the *bo* leaves and the gold lion, are remnants of a former flag by the Buddhist kingdom of Kandy (1798-1815). As the kingdom became part of the larger nation-state, it was absorbed into the national flag. We find this connection between

¹ A. R. M. Imtiyaz’s conference paper was converted into a publication with Amjad Mohamed-Saleem, “Muslims in post-war Sri Lanka: Understanding Sinhala-Buddhist Mobilization against Them,” *Asian Ethnicity* 16.2 (2015): 186-202. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2015.1003691>.

Buddhism and the Sri Lankan nation-state is not only in imagery, but also in the Sri Lankan constitution. Under the current constitution, chapter II, article 9, the translation reads, “The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e).”²

The identification of “Buddhist” in the Sri Lankan context has an ethnic marker attached: Sinhala. This is powerfully displayed in the mytho-historical narrative of Sri Lanka’s origins, the *Mahavamsa*. The narrative upholds the Sinhala as the true inhabitants of the island; it also bonds the notion of being Sinhala with being Buddhist. In its twenty-fifth chapter titled “The Victory of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī, the Sinhala king Duṭṭhagāmaṇī fights to unite the island and to protect Buddhism. However, in the process of doing so, he and his soldiers slaughters millions. To pacify his concerns, eight awakened monks (*ārahant*) visit him and explain:

From this deed arises no hindrance in thy way to heaven. Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken on himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts.³

In this section of the *Mahavamsa*, the narrative explains that the killing of the adversaries to Buddhism, were Tamils. This means they were non-Buddhists and thus their deaths were the equivalent to the killing of cattle (*pasu*).

This excerpt becomes more than a scriptural reference point. During the 26-year civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, Buddhists and Buddhist monks invoked the *Mahavamsa*, arguing that the government needed to fight once more against the Tamils to protect the island and Buddhism.

In 1997, Buddhist Studies scholar Tessa Bartholomeusz interviewed a famous Sri Lankan monk Piyadassi about the conflict. Venerable Piyadassi explained, “You have to defend yourself. These are difficult questions. If someone goes to kill my mother, I’m going to stop him. So this could be a condition in which I am forced to kill.”⁴

Piyadassi’s choice of this hypothetical seeks to help people to relate to his Buddhist nationalist vision. For monks like Piyadassi, “mother” is metaphorical for the motherland of true Buddhism in Sri Lanka. This is not an historical aberration, but rather a reflection of historical Othering.

The Buddhist nationalist rhetoric was wedded to violence in the Sri Lanka civil war and in its aftermath. The role of Sinhala Buddhism in the recent anti-Muslim violence suggests that this dominance has a pattern of harmful effects on Sri Lanka’s minority communities.

² <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/lk/lk007en.pdf>, accessed on 17 June 2018.

³ Wilhelm Geiger trans., *The Mahāvamsa or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, (New Delhi & Madras: Asian Educational Services, [1912] 1993), 178.

⁴ Tessa Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 44.

National economic and political instability makes visible the systemic inequality; it also inflames the tensions. This religio-ethno stratification engenders a society easily unmoored by ethno-religious conflict. The recent February 2018 communal violence, which began when four Muslims attacked a Buddhist driver, is but a recent example. Sri Lankan society is also vulnerable to ethno-religious rhetoric. After Buddhist propaganda on Muslim halal conspiracies⁵ and the imminent Islamification of Sri Lanka, widespread riots have taken place.⁶

The Power of Buddhist Monks⁷

The power behind Buddhist propaganda are Sri Lankan Buddhist monks. The more public and vocal conservative monks have stroked Sinhala Buddhist fears and angers of minority and marginalized identities. This behavior is distinctly modern. Prior to British colonialism (1815-1948), Buddhist monks legitimated Sri Lankan governments; however, they did not directly participate in any political system. This historic role explains the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk's symbol as society's moral foundation. When Buddhist monks publicly speak, they do so not only as religious voices, but also as political moral authorities.⁸

Since the early 1900s, there has been a marked rise in Buddhist monastic political participation. Monks in mass became active during the 26-year civil war. In 2004, Buddhist monks formed the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU, the National Heritage Party). Their political candidates were Buddhist monks; nine of them won seats in parliament. This was a historical first time for Sri Lankan Buddhist monks to win seats in their government.

While some Sri Lankan monks have called on more pluralistic policies and rhetoric, there has been a political consolidation of conservative Buddhist monks (such as the JHU). In its inaugural year of activity, the JHU called on the extermination of the LTTE.

Shortly after the civil war, two Buddhist monks broke off from the Jathika Hela Urumaya and formed a new organization called the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force). Within a year, the Bodu Bala Sena had focused on a new nationalist threat—Muslims.

When I interviewed the founders of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) in the summer of 2014, it had been only two weeks since cofounder Gnanasara Thero had delivered an emotionally intense speech that triggered Buddhist riots and attacks on Muslims in Aluthgama. Gnanasara Thero's

⁵ See Farzanna Haniffa, "Merit Economies in neoliberal times: Halal troubles in Contemporary Sri Lanka," in *Religion and the Morality of Markets*, edited by Rudnyckyj D. & F. Osella, forthcoming.

⁶ For an example, see Mark Hay, "Meet the Violent Buddhists Starting Riots in Sri Lanka," *Vice*, June 27, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/av4jye/meet-the-violent-buddhists-starting-riots-and-killing-muslims-in-sri-lanka, last accessed 17 June 2017.

⁷ I draw some information in this section from my chapter, "Buddhism, Conflict, and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, edited by Michael Jerryson, 546-564 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 553.

⁸ A recent editorial by Rohana R. Wasala exemplifies this. Rohana writes, "Buddhist monks feel compelled to respond to what they perceive as aggressive acts by non-Buddhist religious extremists that adversely affect the rights of the exceptionally tolerant, accommodative Buddhists. "Anti-Buddhist propaganda with an academic veneer – III," *LankaWeb*, June 11, 2018, <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2018/06/11/anti-buddhist-propaganda-with-an-academic-veneer-iii/>, 17 June 2018.

colleague, Dilanthe Withanage, explained the BBS's reasons for their fears of Muslims and Islamification:

We want Sinhalese united and a Sinhalese government. We want protection; we were protecting Theravada Buddhism for the last 2,300 years, and today Theravada Buddhism is in the West and [with] the Sinhalese. But the Sinhala race may be around [only] for the next 40 years.⁹

For Dilanthe, the Sinhala Buddhists may enjoy a 69 percent majority compared to the 8 percent Muslim minority, but Sri Lankan Buddhism is a global minority. He and his organization consider their efforts to defend Sri Lankan Buddhism necessary to its very survival.

The followers of Sri Lanka's BBS share this view and collaborate with pro-nationalist Burmese Buddhist monks, such as U Wirathu. In September 2014, U Wirathu addressed thousands of Sinhalese Buddhists and met with the BBS. There were international outcries over the invitation and U Wirathu's anti-Muslim rhetoric.

One of the monastic cofounders of the BBS, Kirama Wimalajothi, responded, "This is not a multireligious country. This is a Sinhalese country."¹⁰

The Sri Lankan government has taken very little action against the Bodu Bala Sena. On June 14, 2018, a Sri Lankan court jailed Gnanasara Thero for inciting violence against Muslims. Reuters journalist Ranga Sirilal reports Gnanasara Thero told reporters as he boarded the bus to take him to prison, "I have done my duty towards the country. Why should I regret?"¹¹

Conservative Buddhist monastics, such as Gnanasara Thero and the BBS, see themselves as true to Sri Lanka because of protecting Sinhala Buddhism. Their decisions require a heightened level of accountability.

Recommendations

Recent human rights abuses in Sri Lanka are a result of a larger and more historic systemic ethno-religious problem. In order to reduce the potential for devolving into another period of civil strife, I recommend that U.S. Congress support the Sri Lankan government: to increase efforts to identify its democratic processes with pluralism; to commission a neutral party's comprehensive review of the public educational materials (from the national to the local) for ethno-religious biases; and, as Buddhist monastic become more political, to increase support of its judicial branch to police their actions.

⁹ Personal communication with Dilanthe Withanage at the Bodu Bala Sena's headquarters in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 25 June 2014.

¹⁰ Dharisha Bastians, "Radical Monk in Myanmar Pledges to Protect Global Buddhism," September 28, 2014; <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/29/world/asia/radical-monk-in-myanmar-pledges-to-protect-global-buddhism.html>, accessed on 17 June 17, 2018.

¹¹ Ranga Sirilal, "Sri Lanka jails extremist Buddhist monk for six months over threats to woman," *Reuters*, June 14, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-monk-sentence/sri-lanka-jails-extremist-buddhist-monk-for-six-months-over-threats-to-woman-idUSKBN1JA1B4>, accessed on 17 June 2018.