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Structural Causes of the Sri Lankan Civil War and the Limits of International Intervention

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Abstract

The Sri Lankan Civil War is often defined as an eruption of 'ethnic hatred' or explained through the failure of liberal peacebuilding. However, this article instead analyses the conflict as the outcome of a historically produced regime of structural violence. Utilizing the literatures on structural violence, postcolonial state-building and liberal/post-liberal peace, it asks how colonial legacies shaped the structural causes of the war and what limits they imposed on international interventions. First, this study indicates that colonial administrative, territorial and citizenship arrangements formed an ethnocratic state that institutionalized Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony and Tamil marginalization. Second, it demonstrates that Indian, Norwegian and United Nations-led interventions prioritized ceasefires, elections and institutional arrangements while leaving militarization, economic inequality and exclusionary citizenship regimes. Consequently, international interventions tended to stabilize, rather than transform, the underlying structures of violence. The article concludes by arguing for evaluations of peacebuilding that foreground long-term transformations in state-society relations instead of short-term conflict management.

Keywords
Structural Violence
The Sri Lankan Civil War
Colonial Legacy

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Sri Lanka İç Savaşı'nın Yapısal Nedenleri ve Uluslararası Müdahalelerin Sınırları

Özet

Sri Lanka İç Savaşı genellikle ya etnik gruplar arasındaki 'nefretin patlaması' olarak görülmekte ya da liberal barış inşasının başarısızlığıyla açıklanmaktadır. Bu makale ise savaşı, tarihsel süreçte oluşmuş bir yapısal şiddet düzeninin sonucu olarak ele almaktadır. Bu çalışmada yapısal şiddet, postkolonyal devlet inşası ve liberal/post-liberal barış literatürlerinden yararlanılarak kolonyal mirasın iç savaşın nedenlerini nasıl şekillendirdiği ve uluslararası müdahalelerin sınırlarını nasıl belirlediği araştırılmıştır. Çalışma, ilk olarak, kolonyal dönemdeki düzenlemelerin Sinhala-Budist hegemonyasını kurumsallaştıran ve Tamilleri dışlayan etnokratik bir devlet sistemi ortaya çıkardığını göstermektedir. İkinci olarak, Hindistan, Norveç ve Birleşmiş Milletler öncülüğündeki müdahalelerin ateşkeslere, seçimlere ve kurumsal düzenlemelere odaklandığını, ancak militarizasyonu, ekonomik eşitsizliği ve vatandaşlık rejimlerini büyük ölçüde değiştirmediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak, uluslararası müdahalelerin iç savaşın altında yatan nedenleri dönüştürmekten çok bu yapıları sürdürme eğiliminde olduğu belirlenmiştir. Makale, barış inşasını değerlendirirken kısa vadeli çatışma yönetimi yerine devlet-toplum ilişkilerindeki uzun vadeli dönüşümlere odaklanmanın gerekliliğini savunmaktadır.

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INTRODUCTION

Extending from 1983 to 2009, the Sri Lankan Civil War is one of the most controversial cases not only in the island's domestic politics but also in the literature on regional conflicts and peacebuilding. This civil war, which displaced hundreds of thousands of people, has often been explained merely as 'an ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority' (Roberts, 1978; Kearney, 1985; Sabaratnam, 1987; Singer, 1992; Feith, 2010). Such narratives tend to obscure systematic analysis of the historical-institutional structures, power relations, and enduring dynamics of the conflict.

In the literature, three main approaches to understanding the Sri Lankan case can be identified. In the first approach, the studies examine through mobilization of ethnic identities in the nation-building process, the mutual radicalization of majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and Tamil nationalism, and the role of inter-party competition in forming these dynamics (DeVotta, 2004; Uyangoda, 2007). In the second approach, focusing on state-building and colonial legacy perspectives, the studies conceptualize Sri Lanka as an 'ethnicised state' (Venugopal, 2024). These works examine how the regimes of representation, education, and administrative division established under British colonial rule were reconfigured after independence, and analyse the state-building practices pursued both by the central government and by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) within their respective spheres of control (Stokke, 2006; Åkebo, 2021). In the third approach, particularly from the 2000s onwards, there have been debates over the peace process, liberal peacebuilding, illiberal peace, and hybrid peace governance, and analyzes the roles of international and local actors in shaping Sri Lanka's peace structure (Höglund & Orjuela, 2012; Jirasinghe, 2018).

This literature offers a conceptual framework for understanding the Sri Lankan civil war; however, two gaps remain underexplored. First, although there are studies that examine together the institutional legacies inherited from the colonial period and post-independence state-building processes, a substantial part of this literature discusses the production and reproduction of 'structural violence' only at a descriptive level and remains limited in explaining systematic connections between language regimes, citizenship arrangements, center–periphery inequalities, and securitized governance practices (Tambiah, 1986; Wickramasinghe, 2006; Kanapathipillai, 2009; Embuldeniya, 2014; Davis, 2015; Goodhand et al., 2019). Second, while the literature on international intervention and peacebuilding engages with themes such as India's peacekeeping mission (IPKF), Norway's mediation efforts, and United Nations (UN)-led normative frameworks, it often neglects an analysis of how these interventions relate to the structural causes of the civil war (Goodhand & Walton, 2009; Sørbø et al., 2011; Destradi & Vüllers, 2012; Laffey & Nadarajah, 2012; Fowsar, 2020; Wakkumbura, 2021). The linkage between intervention, liberal peace and colonial/postcolonial structural dynamics is brought into analytical focus only in a limited number of studies (Goodhand et al., 2011; Stokke & Uyangoda, 2011; Nadarajah & Rampton, 2015; Rampton & Nadarajah, 2017; Weerawardhana, 2018).

This article addresses these gaps by asking research question: 'What are the structural causes of the Sri Lankan civil war, and what limits have international interventions encountered in attempting to transform these structural dynamics?' Specifically, the study asks, first, how the institutional legacies of British colonial rule (particularly ethnicised state-building, language and citizenship, and inequalities) shaped the structure of the conflict; second, in what ways India's intervention (IPKF), Norway's mediation efforts, and UN-centered initiatives have an impact on these structural causes; and third, through which mechanisms sovereignty discourses, securitized state practices, and regional/international power rivalries constrained the scope of international interventions.[1]

The main argument of this article is that the Sri Lankan civil war cannot be reduced to tensions between ethnic identities. Rather, it ought to be understood within the context of a 'regime of structural violence' produced by a set of factors.[2] These factors include the ethnicised state form constructed under colonial rule and reconfigured after independence. The structural violence in Sri Lanka consists of variables such as language and citizenship regimes, regional development inequalities, and a militarized security. The concept of 'structural violence,' introduced by Johan Galtung (1969) into the peace research literature, is of central importance for showing those institutional arrangements. Even in the absence of direct physical violence, these are defined as arrangements that systematically erode certain groups' access to basic needs, possibilities for political representation, and sense of ontological security[3] (Galtung, 1990; Farmer, 2004; Mitzen, 2006). From this perspective, language policies, practices of exclusion from citizenship, centralized development strategies, and prolonged states of emergency in Sri Lanka appear as constituent elements of the structure of violence that undermines both the physical and ontological security of minority communities (Bigdon, 2006; Wickramasinghe, 2014; OHCHR, 2015; Venugopal, 2018).

The article's argument calls for a reframing of the evaluation of international interventions. The article examines India's IPKF mission, Norway's mediation efforts, and UN-centered initiatives not merely as short-term ceasefire and crisis-management practices, but also in terms of how they interact with the existing structural violence. And, in doing so, the study argues that these

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[1] The article uses 'international interventions' as an umbrella term but analytically distinguishes between India's regional interventionism —primarily constrained by sovereignty sensitivities, domestic Tamil Nadu politics and military friction— and Norway/UN-led liberal peacebuilding, whose limits lay in the technocratic, top-down design of liberal frameworks and their weak engagement with deeper structural inequalities.

[2] This article does not claim to introduce structural violence as a new concept; its contribution is to specify a regime of structural violence as the causal mechanism linking colonial institutional legacies (ethicized citizenship, center–periphery inequalities, militarization) to the concrete limits encountered by different forms of international intervention. While existing studies discuss these dimensions largely in parallel, the novelty here lies in explicitly integrating colonial state-formation and liberal/regional peacebuilding literatures within a single explanatory framework.

[3] In this article, ontological security refers not to individual psychological comfort but to the state's struggle to sustain a coherent Sinhala–Buddhist self-narrative. Once Tamil (and, at times, Muslim) claims to territory, language and equal citizenship were framed as disrupting this narrative of a unitary Sinhala–Buddhist nation, they were recast as threats to the state's very 'being.' Language laws, exclusionary citizenship regimes, emergency legislation and militarization thus functioned as techniques for restoring ontological security: they did not simply accompany physical security practices but helped reassert a hierarchized order in which the 'other' could only be accommodated through structurally inferior, contingent forms of belonging.

interventions remained confined to the design of negotiations between the ethnic groups, the institutionalization of ceasefire arrangements, and a post-war 'normalization' agenda, while playing a limited role in transforming structural factors such as ethnicised citizenship, regional inequalities, and the securitization of the state (Sriskandarajah, 2003; Jayasundara-Smits, 2011; Ruwanpura et al., 2020). In this way, Sri Lankan becomes a case study for conceptualizing the limits of peace, particularly in debates on 'liberal peace' and 'illiberal peace' (Stokke, 2009; Piccolino, 2015; Subedi, 2022).

For this purpose, this article brings three theoretical approaches together. Firstly, the literature on structural violence is utilized to conceptualize ethnic hierarchies, practices of exclusion from citizenship, and center-periphery inequalities in Sri Lanka as the underlying conditions that enable violence (Munasinghe & Celermajer, 2017). Secondly, a postcolonial theoretical approach is employed to analyze how British colonial policies of census-taking, representation, education, and administrative division were reproduced after independence in the form of 'majoritarian democracy,' and how Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil nationalisms were co-constituted through their mutual interaction (DeVotta, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2007; Spencer, 2008). Third, a critical security studies perspective is also used to analyze how the Sri Lankan state's security discourses of 'indivisible sovereignty,' 'counter-terrorism,' and 'national unity' have framed both domestic political arrangements and debates over international intervention, particularly in relation to the illiberal forms of peace that emerged in the post-war period (Hyndman, 2015; Klem, 2018; Craven, 2022).

The first part of the article elaborates the theoretical and conceptual framework. The second section analyses the structural causes of the Sri Lankan civil war, while the third examines the limits of international interventions. The fourth of the article relates the findings to both the theoretical literature and other cases of regional conflict. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the answers to the research question and outlines the implications for international organizations and regional actors.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this part of the article, the concepts used to analyze the Sri Lankan civil war are organized around three main theoretical frameworks. Initially, the analysis adopts a conception of structural violence that does not reduce the 'causes' of the conflict to actors' intentions or events. Secondly, the formation of the Sri Lankan state is conceptualized within the framework of postcolonial state-building and 'ethnicised citizenship,' with emphasis on the continuities of the colonial legacy. Third, paying attention to the liberal peace literature and its critiques, the analysis examines the limits of international interventions. In doing so, it establishes a conceptual basis for evaluating how peace operations relate to existing regimes of structural violence.

1.1. Structural Violence and the Structural Causes of Civil Wars

In peace and conflict studies, Johan Galtung's (1969) typology of violence, distinguishing between direct, structural, and cultural violence, offers a perspective that does not confine violence to

physical harm alone. According to Galtung (1969), structural violence arises when social, economic, and political arrangements systematically restrict certain groups' access to basic needs, rights, and opportunities; therefore, unequal life chances and chronic precarity become 'normalised' and rendered invisible as a pervasive form of violence.

This approach requires focusing not only on the moment when civil wars 'erupt,' but also on the long-term social structures and institutional arrangements that render such eruptions possible and likely (Stewart, 2008). In this sense, ethnic discrimination, regional inequalities, practices of legal exclusion, and the coercive pressure of the security forces on particular groups constitute key dimensions of structural violence (OHCHR, 2021; The South Asia Collective, 2022). In contrast to approaches that define peace merely as a ceasefire or the cessation of direct violence, a structural violence perspective contends that peace acquires substantive meaning only when enduring inequalities and hierarchies are transformed (Paris, 2004).

Roland Paris's (2004) contribution to the peacebuilding literature extends this debate into the context of post-civil war reconstruction. Paris (2004) argues that post–Cold War peacebuilding operations have frequently pursued the rapid establishment of 'market democracy.' It promotes elections and economic liberalisation in contexts where institutional capacities remain weak, thereby generating new forms of instability in fragile states (Paris, 2004). Paris's argument supports the idea that when peacebuilding is confined to technical, short-term interventions that neglect underlying structural conditions, it may contribute to the reproduction of the very structural violence that sustains conflict (Paris, 2004).

This article analyses Galtung's conception of structural violence in the Sri Lankan context along three dimensions: (1) ethnicised citizenship regimes; (2) regional and class-based inequalities; and (3) the securitised structure and militarisation of the state. These dimensions are treated as the main components of a regime of structural violence that intensified in the pre-war period and persisted in different forms after the end of the conflict. In this way, the 'success' or 'failure' of international interventions is assessed not only in terms of securing ceasefires or achieving short-term reductions in violence, but also with reference to whether they generate transformative change in the structure.

1.2. Postcolonial State-Building and Ethnicised Citizenship

Postcolonial theory conceptualizes the modern state not as a neutral, 'natural' formation independent of its colonial past, but rather as embedded in the enduring power and knowledge regimes forged during the colonial period (Chatterjee, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Parasram, 2013). Partha Chatterjee (1993) argues that postcolonial nation-states largely inherit the administrative, legal, and epistemic frameworks established under colonial rule. Chatterjee (1993) further demonstrates that even when national identity is reconstructed through a distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' domains, it continues to bear the imprint of these colonial divisions.

Sankaran Krishna's work from 1993 and 2014 demonstrates how the discipline of International Relations produces a 'politics of forgetting' by systematically marginalizing themes of colonialism, race, and violence. Krishna (1993, 2014) also emphasizes that the internal security regimes of postcolonial states have continuities with colonial-era practices of counterinsurgency and

population control. Moreover, Barkawi and Laffey (2006) criticize the Eurocentric assumptions of security studies. They argue that security problems in the Global South cannot be understood without taking into account the imperial histories and colonial relations (Barkawi & Laffey, 2006).

This literature is particularly useful for conceptualizing how, in postcolonial contexts such as Sri Lanka, state-building and citizenship regimes are grounded in an ethnicised notion of the national community (Wijeyeratne, 1998; Uyangoda, 1999; Kanapathipillai, 2009; DeVotta, 2016; Venugopal, 2024). The colonial practices of classifying populations into ethnic and religious categories, organizing systems of representation and education around these classifications, and positioning certain groups advantageously through access to administration, bureaucracy, and missionary schooling were, after independence, recoded in different ways (Chatterjee, 1993; Krishna, 1999). Thus, the postcolonial state emerges not as a 'neutral arbiter,' but as a structure that institutionalizes the historical claims of a particular ethno-religious community while rendering the status of other groups permanently subject to negotiation (Balasundaram, 2016).

As emphasized in Robbie Shilliam's (2010) edited volume *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity*, approaches that overlook the constitutive role of colonialism and imperialism in the emergence of global modernity tend to reduce forms of violence and exclusion in postcolonial states to mere 'internal affairs' (Shilliam, 2010). So, this article draws on postcolonial literature to analyze the formation of ethnicised citizenship, language regimes, and center-periphery relations in Sri Lanka. Within this framework, 'structural causes' refer not only to socio-economic inequalities, but also to the re-politicization of colonial-era population categories through national historical narratives and citizenship regimes (Peebles, 1990; Dirks, 2001; Rogers, 2004).

In the Sri Lankan case, the exclusion, lack of representation, and security threats faced by ethnic minorities are thus conceptualized not merely as instances of individual discrimination, but as expressions of the institutional logic of the postcolonial state. On the other hand, this conceptualization helps to explain the structural causes of the civil war and also why international interventions have often had only limited impact on these structural fields.

1.3. Liberal/Post-Liberal Peace and the Limits of International Intervention

To conceptualize international interventions in the Sri Lankan civil war, the article draws on the liberal peace literature. In the post-Cold War era, peacebuilding operations led by the UN and other international actors have sought to create 'liberal market democracies' through elections, market reforms, and institutional restructuring, but this approach has backfired in fragile states, generating new forms of instability (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Mac Ginty, 2011; Finkenbusch, 2021).

Oliver Richmond (2011) conceptualizes liberal peace both as a normative ideal and as a practical repertoire of intervention. Richmond (2011) critiques this model for its relationship with local societies, characterizing it as predominantly technocratic and top-down, in ways that often constrain local agency. According to Richmond (2015), debates on 'post-liberal peace' underscore the need for liberal peace architectures to be transformed by local actors, for hybrid forms of peace to emerge, and for more pluralistic and negotiated modalities of peacebuilding to be developed.

David Chandler (2010), by contrast, argues that some critiques of liberal peace still reduce intervention to a problem of the 'inappropriate' or 'premature' application of liberal values. In this regard, Chandler (2010) underlines that such critiques fail to adequately engage with imperial power relations and the geopolitical context of intervention. The arguments of Chandler (2010), in the Sri Lankan case, emphasizes the need to analyze not only the technical design of international interventions but also the positions of intervening actors within regional and global power relations.

The liberal peace and postcolonial literatures allow the limits of international interventions to be conceptualized at three levels. Firstly, interventions prioritize short-term objectives such as ceasefires, elections, and institution-building, while failing to create sufficient space for comprehensive democratization, egalitarian citizenship, and justice mechanisms capable of transforming long-term forms of structural violence (Call & Cousens, 2008; Jarstad & Sisk, 2008; Autesserre, 2010). Secondly, interventions are often spatially constrained: reforms intensify in the capital and institutional centers only partially translate into the lived experiences of peripheral communities and do little to redress settled regional inequalities (Goodhand, 2010; Goodhand et al., 2011; Goodhand et al., 2019; Ruwanpura et al., 2020). Thirdly, practices of intervention are grounded in Eurocentric understandings of security and order, while marginalizing colonial histories and local forms of knowledge (Barkawi & Laffey, 2006; Shilliam, 2010).

In applying this framework to Sri Lanka, the article defines India's IPKF mission, Norway's mediation efforts, and UN-centered initiatives as different attempts at liberal peace. It examines how, despite their focus on negotiation design, ceasefire regimes, and post-war 'normalization.' These interventions were constrained in their ability to transform structural factors such as ethnicised citizenship, regional inequalities, and a securitized state instrument.

2. THE STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF THE SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR

The outbreak of the Sri Lankan civil war cannot be explained only by the radicalization of Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms from the 1970s onwards. The structural causes of the civil war are based on factors: the institutional legacy shaped during the colonial period; the construction of an ethnicised state form after independence; the systematic exclusion of minorities through language and citizenship regimes; center-periphery inequalities; and a security state (DeVotta, 2004; Uyangoda, 2007).

2.1. Colonial Legacy and the Construction of the Ethnic State

The British colonial rule established an administrative order that reclassified the population along ethnic and religious lines and transformed social and political relations on the island (Rogers, 2004; Wickramasinghe, 2006). Through education, the public bureaucracy and missionary schools, Christianized and English-speaking minority groups (Sri Lankan Tamils) concentrated in certain positions and it generated asymmetries in structures of representation (DeVotta, 2004). After the independence, Sinhala political elites interpreted this legacy through a discourse of 'historical injustice' narrative that legitimized majoritarian nationalism (Tambiah, 1986; Wickramasinghe, 2014).

Uyangoda (2007) thinks that the dynamics of ethnic conflict are shaped not merely by the antipathy between the ethnic groups, but by struggles over whose behalf, and in what ways, state power is exercised. According to Uyangoda (2007), the centralized state shaped during the colonial period was transformed after independence into an 'ethnic state' that institutionalized the Sinhala-Buddhist majority's claims to historical entitlement. This led the state to define minority demands, when articulated as calls for redistribution and power-sharing within the state structure, as 'non-negotiable' (Uyangoda, 2007).

The colonial legacy can be defined on two different levels. Firstly, the perception that colonial rule both 'favored minorities' and 'marginalized the majority' became a reference point in the post-independence era for mobilizing Sinhala nationalism and for questioning the legitimacy of Tamil demands (DeVotta, 2004). Secondly, the centralized state structure was established during the colonial period and it became a new decision-making authority over land, security and developmental issues (Venugopal, 2003). So, it facilitated the systematic suppression of demands for political autonomy and self-government by minority communities in peripheral regions (Venugopal, 2003).

Shaped during the colonial period and later engaged with neoliberal economic policies and transnational diaspora, the postcolonial state form was one of the variables in facilitating the civil war and enabling its spread across the island (Venugopal, 2003). Thus, the colonial legacy emerges not merely as a historical backdrop but as a structural factor. This factor produces continuity by shaping the functioning of the state and the description of citizenship.

2.2. Language Policies and Citizenship Regimes

Language policies and citizenship regimes were one of the key assumptions in which the idea of ethnicised citizenship was concretely institutionalized in the Sri Lankan civil war. DeVotta (2004) argues that linguistic nationalism moved to the center of ethnic politics after independence and that the 1956 Sinhala Only Act, which designated Sinhala as the sole official language, was a milestone in the marginalization of Tamil communities. The use of language as a filter for entry into the bureaucracy, employment in the public sector, and access to higher education generated a split in minorities' relationship with the state (De Silva, 1981).

For DeVotta (2004), language policy is not merely a technical matter of communication. It also functions as an ideological implement that defines who counts as the 'core people' and who is designated as a 'guest' or only a 'tolerated minority' (DeVotta, 2004). The coding of Sinhala as the 'national language' and the 'bearer of civilization' relegated Tamil and other minority languages to a secondary status in the public sphere and to tolerated, yet institutionally weak, languages in the private realm (DeVotta, 2004). This dynamic not only deepened inequalities in education and employment, but also formed a symbolic hierarchy that called into question the status of minorities in the state (DeVotta, 2004).

Citizenship regimes were similarly ethnicised (Uyangoda, 2011). In particular, the 1948 citizenship legislation deprived a large proportion of Indian Tamil workers[4] employed in the plantation economy during the British colonial rule era of their citizenship rights (Peebles, 1990). This relegated the group to a position of marked political and legal vulnerability (Uyangoda, 2007). Such practices of legal exclusion enabled Tamil communities to be seen as 'extensions of external forces' or as 'fundamentally foreign' (Ananthavinayagan, 2018).

Dower, Ginsburgh and Weber's (2017) study examines the impact of colonial legacies and linguistic nationalism on ethnic polarization. They (2017) analyze ethnolinguistic polarization in Sri Lanka using a historically informed measure and demonstrates that language policies and settlement patterns have contributed to heightened mistrust between groups and political polarization. These findings confirm that language and citizenship regimes were already factors in the production of structural violence prior to the outbreak of the civil war.

2.3. Economic Inequalities and the Security State

A third structural dimension of the Sri Lankan civil war was economic inequalities between the two societies and a security-oriented state structure (Goodhand, 2010; Stokke & Uyangoda, 2011; Venugopal, 2011). During the years of civil war, the northern and eastern regions of the island, where the majority of Tamils have been living, suffered severe economic and social devastation as a result of both infrastructure destruction and the continuous presence of military forces (Korf, 2004; International Crisis Group, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2018; World Bank, 2018). By contrast, Sinhala-majority areas in the south and west achieved higher rates of growth, particularly through free-market reforms, tourism, and urban redevelopment projects (Venugopal, 2011). This is a development geography that institutionalized economic inequalities (Venugopal, 2011).

Venugopal (2011) conceptualizes this process as 'military fiscalism.' Venugopal (2011) argues that the civil war obscured the social costs of neoliberal reforms while simultaneously providing a justification for rising defense expenditure. According to Venugopal (2011), the civil war not only opened up new rent-seeking opportunities for specific fractions of capital and political elites, but also became part of a sovereignty project that consolidated central state control over peripheral regions.

The World Bank's 2018 socioeconomic assessment of the northern and eastern provinces shows that, compared to the rest of the country, these regions experience higher levels of infrastructural deficits, unemployment, trauma and social disintegration (World Bank, 2018). Such inequalities and insecurities pose a serious risk to the sustainability of peace (World Bank, 2018). Ruwanpura et al. (2020), by examining post-war road construction projects, demonstrate that transport infrastructure has been used not only as a tool for economic integration but also as a means of

[4] The term *Indian Tamils* (often referred to as *Up-country Tamils*) denotes the descendants of Tamil plantation workers brought from South India by the British to work on tea and rubber estates in the central highlands. Unlike the Sri Lankan Tamils concentrated primarily in the north and east, many Indian Tamils were rendered stateless by the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 and related legislation, losing both citizenship and franchise rights, which illustrates a distinct layer of exclusion within Sri Lanka's Tamil population.

consolidating state control over territory and entrenching military presence. So, it shows that a new regime of control and securitization has been produced.

Throughout the civil war, states of emergency, arbitrary arrests, disappearances and forced displacement formed a set of practices that normalized state control over specific groups (Uyangoda, 2007). Even after the civil war, the failure to reduce military presence has produced a condition that can be described as 'militarization in times of peace' in the everyday lives of minority communities, particularly in the north and east (Dibbert, 2016; Kelegama, 2024). However, despite a decline in direct violence, structural forms of violence such as economic marginalization, lack of political representation, securitized control and cultural exclusion have continued in different ways.

3. INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS AND THEIR LIMITS

The structural causes discussed in the previous section provide the context within which international interventions in the Sri Lankan civil war ought to be situated. India's military intervention (IPKF), the peace process shaped by Norwegian mediation, and the peacebuilding efforts of the United Nations (UN) and NGOs were designed within the framework of liberal peace that focused on the short-term 'management' of the conflict. By contrast, they have had only limited impact on transforming structural factors such as ethnicised citizenship, regional inequalities, and the securitized structure of the state (Goodhand & Walton, 2009; Stokke, 2009; Walton, 2012).

3.1. India's Intervention: The IPKF Experience

India's intervention in Sri Lanka has importance as the first large-scale external military engagement in the civil war. Although the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), deployed to the island following the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord in 1987, was officially mandated to disarm Tamil armed groups and facilitate a political settlement, it soon departed from its peacekeeping role and became chaotic in intense armed confrontations (Rupesinghe, 1988).

Rupesinghe (1988) characterizes the deployment of the IPKF as a product both of India's efforts to consolidate its regional hegemony and of domestic political pressures emanating from Tamil Nadu. According to Rupesinghe (1988), the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka became a regional security concern for India, owing not only to refugee flows and border security issues but also to worrying about limiting the influence of Pakistan and other external actors on the island. Similarly, Khobragade (2008) interprets India's policy towards Sri Lanka within a security framework that views instability in neighboring countries as a threat to India's own security interests, and understands the IPKF deployment as the military expression of this logic.

However, the IPKF intervention mission lost legitimacy both for the Sri Lankan state and Tamil communities (Babu, 1998). Uyangoda (2007) emphasizes that the conduct of IPKF against LTTE on the ground, marked by human rights violations and heavy civilian casualties among Tamil communities, reinforced its perception as an occupying force. Nevertheless, Sri Lankan state elites came to view the IPKF as an external instrument of pressure that exceeded their intentions, in light of its implications for territorial integrity and sovereignty (Uyangoda, 2007).

The limits of the IPKF intervention become more concrete in case of structural causes. First of all, the intervention of India failed to generate lasting reforms that would redefine the ethnicised structure of the state which consists of constitutional arrangements, citizenship regimes, and language policies (Uyangoda, 1994). Secondly, center-periphery inequalities and the economic and social marginalization of the northern and eastern regions persisted during and after the IPKF's deployment (World Bank, 2018; Sakalasooriya, 2021). Development initiatives were shaped as projects that reinforced security-oriented control (Venugopal, 2011).

Third, the IPKF intervention strengthened the distrust of international intervention articulated through sovereignty discourse strong (Jaganathan & Kurtz, 2014). Both Sinhala political elites and Tamil actors became wary of solutions premised on external military intervention after the IPKF's withdrawal; this, in turn, made engagements by the UN or other regional actors politically almost impossible in subsequent years (Destradi, 2010). Consequently, the IPKF experience not only 'froze' the civil war in the short term by creating a window for ceasefire and renewed negotiations, but also questioned the legitimization for international actors as mediators in the longer term.

3.2. Norwegian Mediation and the Peace Process

In the 2000s, Norway emerged as one of the most important external actors in Sri Lanka's peace process (Bullion, 2001). Moolakkattu (2005) analyses Norway's role in Sri Lanka within the framework of the literature on small-state peace facilitation. Moolakkattu (2005) also argues that Norway's lack of a colonial past, its reputation in development assistance, and its relatively balanced relations with the parties were key factors enabling it to assume this role.

The 2002 Ceasefire Agreement led by Norway's auspices, together with the rounds of negotiations, 'internationalized' the Sri Lankan civil war within a framework consistent with the liberal peace model (Höglund & Svensson, 2009). Goodhand and Walton (2009) examines this process through the three pillars of liberal peace, conflict resolution, liberal democracy, and market liberalization. And the 'co-chairs' group, comprising Norway, the European Union (EU), Japan and the United States, designed an aid architecture that conditioned development assistance on progress in the peace process (Goodhand & Walton, 2009).

Stokke (2009), by contrast, examines this process through the lens of the problematic construction of liberal peace in the local context. According to Stokke (2009), international actors have largely structured the peace process around elite-level negotiations, technical institutional arrangements, and aid policies. This process made the democratic legitimacy of the peace process shorter among both Sinhala and Tamil constituencies (Stokke, 2009). Stokke (2009) further emphasizes that the peace process at times intensified rather than reduced mistrust between the two sides through the 'securitization of aid' and the use of development funds as instruments of political pressure.

Goodhand and Walton (2009) analyses the complex relationships between 'liberal peace exporters' (international actors), 'importers' (domestic elites) and 'resisters' (both actors within the state and factions within the LTTE), highlighting the disconnection between the peace and domestic power struggles. From this standpoint, the peace process proved insufficient to bring about transformation in structural sphere such as the ethnicised citizenship, the constitutionally based

unitary state, and security-oriented practices of governance (Goodhand & Walton, 2009). However, the sides used peace as an opportunity to expand their military and diplomatic power (Goodhand & Walton, 2009).

Moolakkattu (2005) claims that, despite Norway's claim to neutrality, its reliance on Western normative frameworks, particularly on human and minority rights, led Sinhala nationalist circles to perceive it as 'pro-Western,' thus undermining the domestic legitimacy of the peace process. It suggests that the peace process opened a relationship with historical sensitivities shaped by the colonial legacy (Wickramasinghe, 2006).

3.3. The UN, NGOs, and the Liberal Peace Architecture

In the Sri Lankan civil war, the role of the UN and NGOs was shaped less by the direct deployment of peacekeeping forces and more by the provision of normative frameworks, humanitarian assistance, development projects, and human rights monitoring mechanisms. For instance, Paris (2004) and Richmond (2011), in the discussions of post-Cold War peacebuilding operations, emphasize that interventions in cases such as Sri Lanka tended to prioritize short-term objectives such as elections, institution-building and market reforms over addressing the structural causes of conflict.

Focusing on the case of Sri Lanka, Goodhand and Walton (2009) analyses the role of international actors in the peace process within the framework of debates on the 'limits of liberal peace.' According to Goodhand and Walton (2009), the UN and international NGOs shaped the institutional structure of peace by providing financial and political support to the Norwegian-facilitated process. However, these efforts failed to achieve a transformation in structural topics such as the ethnicised citizenship regime, center–periphery relations and militarization (Goodhand & Walton, 2009).

Examining the role of national NGOs in peacebuilding in Sri Lanka, Walton (2012) highlights the tensions between these organizations' dependence on international funding, their claims to 'neutrality,' and their local legitimacy. In his study, on the other hand, Walton (2012) notes that NGOs situated within the liberal peace architecture have implemented technical peace projects and facilitated dialogue processes. Alongside performing these functions, Walton (2012) additionally argues NGOs were seen as 'extensions of the West' in an ever more polarized political environment, which made it difficult for them to build and sustain relations with locals.

In the 'returns to peace' debate, Sriskandarajah (2003) criticizes the prioritization of development and reconstruction projects over conflict resolution. According to Sriskandarajah (2003), in Sri Lanka development aid and infrastructure projects were implemented without addressing the underlying political causes of the conflict such as minority demands for autonomy and equal citizenship, by that generating a 'normalization' agenda in the language of peace. So, it caused disappointment among minority communities (Sriskandarajah, 2003).

Jayasundara-Smits (2011) states that in Sri Lanka both war and peace have constituted a continuation of politics by other means. According to Jayasundara-Smits (2011), both the ending

of the civil war and the post-war period were the process in which the hegemonic Sinhala state project was reproduced. The criticism raised by the UN and other international actors in the post-war period on human rights, accountability and minority rights is illuminating, as Colombo framed such interventions as 'violations of sovereignty' and 'one-sided accusations' (Jayasundara-Smits, 2011).

In light of the literature discussed in this section, the limits of international interventions in Sri Lanka can be summarized on three levels in this article. First, interventions focus on objectives such as securing ceasefires, establishing negotiation and coordinating humanitarian assistance rather than structural issues such as ethnicised citizenship, regional inequalities and the security-oriented nature of the state. Second, liberal peace interventions diminish the political grounds required for reconciliation and constitutional reforms. Third, most interventions failed to engage with colonial histories, ethno-religious hierarchies and local forms of knowledge. In this context, it advances distrust towards external actors among both the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the Sri Lankan Civil War not as a manifestation of 'hatred' between ethnic groups. Instead, it argues that the civil war grew out of a structure of violence shaped by the colonial legacy. The colonial legacy consists of an ethnicised state, exclusionary language and citizenship policies, economic inequalities, and a securitised form of state. The findings indicate that neither the outbreak of the civil war nor the fragility of the post-war peace can be understood without taking into account the continuities in this structural context.

The first finding is that the administrative and political legacy inherited from British colonial rule was transformed after independence into an ethnic state form that institutionalised the Sinhala-Buddhist majority's claims to historical entitlement. Language and citizenship regulations disadvantaged Tamil and other minority groups in terms of legal status, political representation and access to public resources. This citizenship regime undermined the ontological security of minorities. Economic inequalities and the militarisation in the island's northern and eastern regions turned states of emergency and security surveillance into permanent features of everyday life. In doing so, they produced a persistent field of structural violence.

The second finding is that the interventions of India's IPKF, Norwegian mediation, and the initiatives of the UN and international NGOs had a very limited influence to transform this structural establishment. Although the IPKF temporarily altered the military balance of power, it failed to bring about lasting change in the structure. On the contrary, it increases concerns over sovereignty and made future options for external intervention even more political. The Norway-led peace process changed to Sri Lanka a liberal peace centred on ceasefires and negotiations. But it also did not form solid steps towards equal citizenship, strong power-sharing mechanisms or the demilitarisation. Moreover, the UN and NGOs played a limited role, which constrained the scope for intervention in structural areas.

Third, the article has shown that examining the literatures on structural violence, postcolonial state-building, and liberal/post-liberal peace makes it possible to analyse both the causes of the civil war

and the practices of intervention within a single analytical framework. Within this framework, assessments of peacebuilding show that indicators such as securing ceasefires, holding elections and building institutional capacity are, on their own, insufficient. What ultimately matters are the transformations that occur in areas such as the ethnicised citizenship regime, the distribution of land and resources, militarisation, and mechanisms of accountability. Consequently, in the Sri Lankan case, international interventions served to continuation of the status quo rather than to generate change in these structural fields.

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