

# **Putting Democracy Under An Ethnographic-lens: Understanding of 'Democracy' and Popular Politics of JHU in Sri Lanka**

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Research on democracy and democratisation has tended to emphasise macro-level explanations of 'transition' and 'consolidation' which stress the roles played by institutions and elites. By and large, these studies of democracy were conducted by political scientists whose concerns with political institutions, formal regime shifts, and comparative country studies shaped the questions and set the agendas for debate. However, by focusing on 'institutional factors' rather than on 'the practices and ideas of local people', which locally legitimise or do not legitimise democracy and practices associated with it, these studies have tended to provide accounts of only one side of the process.

Anthropology offers an ideal point of departure for a radical rethinking of democratisation theories. Its ethnographic method has the potential to enter and understand worlds (such as popular politics) which are often left unexplored or under-explored by the more formal methodologies of other social science disciplines. However, despite this potential, until recently the anthropology of democracy has been a marginal topic of study. Indeed, anthropology has not only failed to generate ethnographic studies of 'democracy' but it has also failed to provide a critique of the Orientalism that is entailed in much of the theorising about democracy. Universalistic and modernist misconceptions about democratisation processes and the assumed homogeneity and static nature of culture are still commonplace in comparative politics and political science (Michelutti 2007).

Following the decolonisation period, anthropologists produced ethnographic accounts of how democracy was working (or failing to work) in the new independent countries (see Geertz 1963). In this context, democracy was considered a universal political form, and an indicator of modernity and progress. In recent years government agencies, NGOs, and international organisations have promoted democracy as the panacea for developing countries (see Paley 2002). These organisations often focus on promoting free and fair elections and good governance. In today's

political discourse 'democracy' is widely considered the only legitimate political regime. Mainstream political studies which try to make sense of democratisation processes have therefore often been trapped in this modernist narrative.

In a seminal work "Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia" Jonathan Spencer argues that the modern institutions of government in post-colonial countries have been understudied due to their presumed 'transparency' and foreign origin (2007). Accordingly, since 'democracy' originates in the West, its interpretation in post-colonial states has been considered essentially similar to those in the West and hence anthropologically irrelevant and intellectually unchallenging (Spencer 2007: 13). Only in the last decade have anthropologists begun to turn their attention to formal political institutions and to macro-political areas of inquiry. Many of the current ethnographic insights on the working of democracy in different settings have emerged as part of discussions about 'the state' (see, e.g., Das and Poole 2004, Sharma and Gupta 2006,), 'post-communism regimes' (Verdery 1996), post-colonialism (Chatterjee 2004), and civil society (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). However, few have been the studies which directly address democracy as an object of ethnographic enquiry (see Paley 2002, Michelutti 2007). Illustrations about how democracy has come to be understood and practiced in local contexts can be found in the work of Gutmann (2002) in Mexico, Paley's (2001) study of Chilean democracy, and Schirmer's (1998) work on Guatemalan politics and the military (cf. Michelutti 2007). In Sri Lanka Spencer's (1990, 2007) study of rural electoral politics shows how democracy has different meanings for different sections of society. Also, Tambiah (1997) shows that democracy in parts of South Asia is understood more in terms of collective rights than individual rights.

Qadri Ismail (2005 and David Scott (1999) have proposed different ways of understanding Sri Lanka's democracy, conflict and peace. For Scott the *problem* rather the cause of lack of peace in Sri Lanka is not hegemonic Sinhala nationalism or Tamil terrorism but democracy itself. As David Scott puts 'if we want to achieve lasting peace in Sri Lanka such liberal democracy and all its assumptions need to be given up'. This radical idea of Scott is so taken up by Ismail and asks a question about not just the necessity or practicality but the very ethicality of what is arguably the founding structural principle of representative democracy or majority rule. Though Ismail seriously take the question of majority rule as an obstacle to lasting peace in Sri Lanka, he does not adequately explain how new conception of 'peace' that he proposes should deal with the issue of democracy and minority (see De Silva 2007). In my view, Sri Lanka to be understood not just as text but as a textual as well as empirical problem, a problem for liberal democracy itself. The question is does democracy inhabit peace? Can such thinking produce 'lasting peace', in any sense, in Sri Lanka.

From the 1950s to the early 1980s anthropologists did not pay much attention on democratic politics in Sri Lanka. During this period they produced a large body of literature on kinships, land tenure, village Buddhism, caste and rural change. With some noteworthy exceptions (e.g., Margret Robinson 1975), studies on the politics of democracy have generally failed to explore local politics ethnographically.

In the last decade anthropologists intrigued by the phenomenon of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and by ethnic issue went back to the study of politics in Sri Lanka (see, e.g., Tambiah 1986, 1992, 1997; Spencer 1990, 2007; Woost 1993; Brow 1995). Importantly this new literature on the anthropology of democracy draws attention to the daily lives and political struggles of people living in non-elite sectors of society. My project will contribute to this emerging literature and looks at how democratic ideas and practices are lived and experienced among a non-elite sector of the Sri Lankan society, more precisely my study will be focused on the engagement of democratic politics by Buddhist monks in postcolonial Sri Lanka.

My main premise is that for anthropologists of post-colonial societies (but not only), 'democracy' should be regarded as one of many traditional ethnographic topics (such as kinship, religion, Caste, etc.) which ethnographers study to unpack the socio-cultural institutions and practices of the societies under investigation. The hypothesis behind this approach is that the moment democracy enters a particular historical and socio-cultural setting it becomes what Michelutti calls "vernacularized", and through vernacularisation it produces new social relations and values which in turn shape political rhetoric and political culture (2007). The process of vernacularisation of democratic politics, she means the ways in which values and practices of democracy become embedded in particular cultural and social practices, and in the process become entrenched in the consciousness of ordinary people (2007: 639-40). Similarly Spencer suggests that the recognition that politics always happens in a culturally inflected way also undermines the naïve formalism found in a great deal of political science and the earlier work done in political anthropology (2007: 07). As they correctly suggest anthropology of democracy should study 'democracy' as both the product and the producer of different socio-political and cultural relations.

Democratic practices associated with popular politics often base their strength and legitimacy on the principle of popular sovereignty versus the more conventional notions of liberal democracy. These popular forms of political participation are often accompanied by a polarisation of opinions and political practices between the so-called 'ordinary people' and the elites. Looking at democratisation processes through the prism of vernacularisation will therefore help to understand how and why democracy grounds itself in everyday life and becomes part of conceptual worlds that are often far removed from theories of liberal democracy.

In the following sections I explore these dynamics in the context of the rise of popular democracy in Sri Lanka. Here I use the concept of ‘vernacularization of democracy’ that can be fruitfully applied to understand contemporary popular politics and democratic trends in Sri Lanka, particularly ‘democratic politics’ of Buddhist monks dominated party like Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). By focusing on particular political party I want to explore the ways in which ‘democracy’ has acquired social and cultural roots in Sri Lanka and how it produces new social relations and values which in turn energizes popular politics.

### **Buddhist Monks and Democratic Politics**

In 1970 leading German Indologist Heinz Bechert wrote an essay titled “Theravada Buddhist Sangha: Some General Observations on Historical and Political Factors in Its Development” and argued that Max Weber’s assertion that early Buddhism was ‘non-political’ does not hold true for Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Because Buddhism was later ‘incorporated’ into politics. So it is this supposed incorporation of Buddhism into politics that gives religion its ‘political’ identity. It is this Buddhism that he calls “canonical Buddhism” which included “a coherent system of religious and philosophical teaching” to regulate the behavior of “early” Buddhist monks who had no “direct involvement in the affairs of state and society”. So the interrelation between Buddhism and politics, the monks and the state, posed a crisis of religious identity as it was measured against the image of a supposed ‘apolitical’ canonical Buddhism. For him, the integration of monks in the structure of the state completely changed the original function and position of monks. These views about the relation between Buddhism, politics and monks dominated literature on the subject. The assumption here is that Buddhism (including monks) can be recovered by depoliticising it, by diverting it of its political influences. In other words, such views propose the separation of religion from politics.

But the political context of the 1940s witnessed the emergence of the discourse of Buddhism and politics in Sri Lanka. Following the universal adult franchise in 1931, some Buddhist monks became vocal supporters of the leftist Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP), formed in 1936. Most of them were affiliated with the Vidyalkankara pirivena, one of the most prestigious monastic collages in Sri Lanka, founded in 1875. The Buddhist monks of Vidyalkankara claim about the monks’ duty to take part in politics but such claim was overwhelmingly rejected by the leading elites and liberal politicians at that time. The debates on the issue of participation of monk in democratic politics animated as it was by competing ideological arguments and counterarguments, sought to foreground authoritative claims about what and who could be seen as Buddhism and politics or what and who should and should not be part of ‘Buddhism’ and ‘politics’ (see Seneviratne 1999; Abeysekara 2002). Most of the claims and the counter claims explain the relationship between Buddhism and the state, monks and democratic politics in postcolonial Sri Lanka. 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 times. Therefore, enhancing the formal role of Buddhism within the state has been an important political project since independence. It is in this context role of the Buddhist monks in democratic politics should be understood.

During the 1930s and 1940s 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. The political monks argue that their political agenda is beyond self-interest, urging social unity in contrast to the aims of self-interested politicians. When the social and political conditions weakened the economy of the country partly as a result of severe disruptions and destructions of the two decades of ethnic turmoil, the monastic involvement in extremist, nationalist politics has given birth to radical innovations. Some aspects of these political trends in postcolonial Buddhist monkhood in relation to the ethnic issue have already been documented in recent scholarly works (e.g., Amunugama 1991, Tambiah 1992, Seneviratne 1999, Bartholomeuz 2002, Abeysekara 2002, Deegalle 2006). While these studies have generated a rethinking of monks political activism in ethno-politics in Sri Lanka and they fail to understand diverse ideological positions and activism of Buddhist monk on the issues relating to democracy, peace, and conflict.

### **Originating Electoral Politics of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka**

On 2 April 2004, a newly formed Buddhist monk political party, JHU (Sinhala National Heritage Party) fielded over 200 Buddhist monk candidates on an explicitly Sinhala-Buddhist supremacist program for the general election which was held to elect 225 Members of Parliament. Though the JHU was established by two extreme rightwing outfits—the Sinhala Urumaya (SU) and its associated organisation of Buddhist monks, the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya (JSS)—just two months before the election, they managed to win nine parliamentary seats by creating the most recent radical political shift in the history of Theravada monasticism in South and Southeast Asia. However, active involvement of Buddhist monks in party politics in Sri Lanka can be traced back to mid-twentieth century. The first account of a Buddhist monk contesting in the elections reports back in 1943. The monk was Ven. Migettuvatte Jinananda contested for Colombo Municipal Council but he was not elected. In 1957 another monk who contested for a village council in the Matara District became the first elected monk member for the local political establishment in Sri Lanka. Since then there has been several Buddhist monks were elected as members of local and provincial political establishments. Though monk participation in local and provincial elections became increasingly visible in local democratic politics in the country, the contesting for a national or parliamentary election was not in the political agenda of the so-called ‘political monks’. However, in 1977 Ven. Pinikahane Saddhatissa contested

in the 252 Buddhist priests as candidates in 21 of the country's 22 electoral districts parliamentary election for Karandeniya electorate in the Galle District but he was not elected. In December 2001, another Buddhist monk, Ven. Baddegama Samitha contested for same electorate and became the first Buddhist monk elected for the Sri Lankan Parliament. Samitha has been known as a left political activist since his university student days and also became an active member of left wing Lanka Samasamaja Party founded in 1935 (see Deegalle 2006: 234-236). There have also been large segment of young Buddhist monks closely associated with the Marxist-cum-nationalist JVP politics. Even though young JVP monks actively engage in the party politics their representation in electoral politics was rather limited.

These events clearly demonstrate that the participation of Buddhist monk in democratic politics in Sri Lanka intermittently happened as an individual political interest until the JHU fielded over 200 monk candidates for the election in February 2004. The mobilisation of the significant numbers of Buddhist monks under the exclusively monk-led political party has generated new political debates and contests in the everyday democratic politics in Sri Lanka. In the past, the Buddhist monk has supported or campaigned for one or other of the major parties—the SLFP or the United National Party (UNP), the major component of the UNF coalition. Now a section of the monk is responding to the deep-going alienation of broad layers of the Sinhala Buddhist population from the existing political parties and seeking to turn it in an entirely reactionary direction. Its decision to form the JHU and participate in the April 2 election shows a part of the complex story of 'vernacularization' of democratic liberal politics in Sri Lanka and its deepening political crisis.

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