

Buddhist Monks and the Politics of Lanka's Civil War

Ethnoreligious Nationalism of the Sinhala Saṅgha and Peacemaking in Sri Lanka, 1995-2010

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The war in Sri Lanka was violent and costly in human and material terms. This was one of the longest wars in modern South Asia. Often referred to as an 'ethnic' conflict between the majority Sinhals and the minority Tamils, the war had a profound religious dimension. The majority of Sinhala Buddhist monks (the Sangha) not only opposed any meaningful powersharing but latterly advocated an all-out military solution. Such a nexus between Buddhism and violence is paradoxical; nevertheless it has a historical continuity. In 2009, when the war ended amid serious questions of war crimes and crimes against humanity, monks defended the military and its Buddhist leadership.

Taking the lives of three key Sangha activists as the modern framework of a Sinhala Buddhist worldview, this book examines the limitations of Western theories of peacebuilding and such solutions as federalism and multinationalism. It analyzes Sinhala Buddhist ethnoreligious nationalism and argues for the urgent need to engage Buddhist politics—in Lanka and elsewhere—with approaches and mechanisms that accommodate the Sangha as key actors in political reform.

Sinhala Buddhism is often studied from a sociological or anthropological standpoint. This unique book examines the faith and practice of the Sinhala Sangha and their followers from a political science perspective.

Dr Rāghavan's important book is the result of many years of research about the political problems in Sri Lanka, but it is also the result of his personal engagement with these issues. This is a critical and engaged scholarly book that should be read by all those interested in the role of Theravada Buddhism in politics.

*Torkel Brekke, Deputy Director and Research Professor,
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

This is a critical study of the political role of Sinhala Buddhism, especially its monastic order, in Lanka. The book makes a major contribution to an understanding of why the powerful Buddhist sangha has such a visceral response to a proposed notion of Western-style federalism as an answer to Lanka's political travails, and how the international community failed (and still does fail) to adequately understand this.

*Bruce Matthews, Emeritus Professor of Comparative Religion,
Acadia University, Nova Scotia*