CIVIL SOCIETY NARRATIVES IN SRI LANKA: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF DOMESTIC AND GLOBAL FACTORS

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By

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

'Civil Society Narratives in Sri Lanka: Exploring the Intersection of Domestic and Global Factors' submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Sreya Maitra, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Dedicated

To

My Parents

CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT

Civil society is a foundational sphere which collectivises interests and negotiate claims to bargain for power from the rigid institutionalised structure and processes of the state. The understanding of the concept is far from fixed definitions, and its meanings and functions have evolved as a socio-political identifier that is contingent upon power, ideology, social struggle and global influences. The doctoral thesis titled "*Civil Society Narratives in Sri Lanka: Exploring the Intersection of Domestic and Global Factors*", traverses the delicate juncture that studies the evolution, character and contemporary transformations in the understandings of civil society, particularly in the case of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka forms a unique study in this context that has emerged as post-colonial volatile society experiencing prolonged civil war, post- civil war centralisation of power, and recent political and economic crisis, leading to unprecedented civic mobilisation popularly called the Aragalaya movement.

The thesis critically evaluates the western conceptualizations of civil society and argues that the euro centric lens, while exhaustive in its scope and ideas, fails to adequately explain the nuances of the post-colonial South Asian context. Discussing the observed lacunae in these western definitions, the thesis then proceeds to closely examine civil society in Sri Lanka. The second chapter onwards the dissertation delves into the historical and political transformation of civil society in Sri Lanka and tries to situate it within its historical legacy, bouts of economic crises, political contestations and the impact of global forces such as the presence of dominant regional powers like India, extra regional actors like and US and China and the effects of transnational advocacy networks, INGOs, diaspora and so on. The research also focuses upon the effects of post-civil-war militarisation, surveillance, and security-oriented governance, along with the role of international bodies that have pushed for norms diffusion, transnational advocacy and motivated developmental assistance rooted in geopolitical interests, which have contributed to shaping the civic space and organisational practices in Sri Lanka since 2009.

This is a qualitative research that amalgamates both primary and secondary sources to analyse and interpret historical processes, global-local interactions, the impact of post 2022 politico-economic crisis revealing the fragility of state-structures and the emergence of mobilization beyond the registered civil society organizations. The thesis urges for further in-depth research on civil society in South Asia and emphasises on the need for a context-sensitive understanding of Sri Lankan civil society which is continuously being shaped by negotiations, adaptations, constraints and contestations especially in postcolonial and post-conflict settings.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACSA- Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement

ASI- Alliance for Sustainable Infrastructure

BBS- Bodu Bala Sena

BRI- Belt and Road Initiative

BTF- British Tamil Forum

CARE- Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere

CED- Coalition for Educational Development

CEJ- Centre for Equality and Justice

CENWOR- Centre for Women's Research

CEPA- Centre for Poverty Analysis

CHA- Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies

CHRD- Center for Human Rights & Development

CPA- Centre for Policy Alternatives

CRAN- Child Rights Advocacy Network

CSOs- Civil Society Organizations

GTF- Global Tamil Forum

ICAN- International Civil Society Action Network

ICRC- International Committee of the Red Cross

IDSN- International Dalit Solidarity Network

IMADR- Institute of Management Development and Research

IMF- International Monetary Fund

INGOs- International Non-Governmental Organizations

IPKF- Indian Peace Keeping Force

IREX- International Research & Exchanges Board

IRI- International Republican Institute

ITI- Independent Television Network

JHU- Jathika Hela Urumaya

JIRF- Jaffna Inter Religious Group

JSAC- Jaffna Social Action Centre

JVP- Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer +

LLRC- Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission

LST- Law and Society Trust

LTTE- Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

MCC- Millennium Challenge Corporation

MEA- Ministry of External Affairs

MIRJE- Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality

MMDA- Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act

MSF- Médecins Sans Frontières

MWRAF- Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum

NCCSL- National Christian Council of Sri Lanka

NDI- National Democratic Institute

NECC- North East Coordinating Committee

NED- National Endowment for Democracy

NGO- Non- Governmental Organization

NPC- National Peace Council

OMP- Office on Missing Persons

ONUR- Office for National Unity and Reconciliation

Oxfam- Oxford Committee for Famine Relief

PAFFREL- People's Action for Free and Fair Elections

PIL- Public Interest Litigation

PRC- People’s Republic of China

PTA- Prevention of Terrorism Act

RID- Reconciliation and Inclusive Development

RSS- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

RTI- Right to Information Act

SDGAP- Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability

SLFP- Sri Lanka Freedom Party

SLRC- Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation

SLWNGOF- Sri Lanka Women’s NGO Forum

SOFA- Status of Forces Agreement

TGTE- Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam

TISL- Transparency International Sri Lanka

UN- United Nations

UNDP- United Nations Development Programme

UNHRC- United Nations Human Rights Council

UNP- United National Party

US- United States

USAID- United States Agency for International Development

VSSO Act- Voluntary Social Service Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act

WAN- Women's Action Network

WMC- Women and Media Collective

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Civil society has long been regarded as the key sphere through which citizens organise collective interests, bargain for power, and articulate claims to be fulfilled by the state. Across different historical and political contexts, it has been associated with trends in participation, accountability, and social trust. Yet, the meaning and function of civil society can never be fixed. It has evolved in response to changing political contexts and dispensations. Political authority, economic organisation, social hierarchies, and global norms have also significantly shaped civil society formations. In postcolonial and conflict-affected societies, these dynamics have been especially complex, as civil society has emerged in the web of inherited institutional legacies, uneven socio-economic development, external political and military pressures.

In recent decades, global debates on civil society have been shaped by two parallel trends. On the one hand, civil society has been promoted as a vehicle for democratic deepening, social inclusion and civil rights protection. International organisations, donors, and policy frameworks have often positioned civil society actors as partners in governance, development, and peacebuilding. On the other hand, many states have condemned civic mobilisation as disruptions of law and order and responded with increased regulation, surveillance, and restriction. This tension between the ideal role of civil society and political realities within which it operates has become a defining feature of the current theoretical discourses on civil society.

Sri Lanka presents a particularly instructive context for examining these dynamics. As a postcolonial state that experienced a prolonged civil war, Sri Lanka's political and social institutions have been shaped by overlapping legacies of colonial governance, nationalist mobilisation, and militarised conflict. Civic activity in the island has historically taken diverse forms, ranging from religious patronage and social welfare associations to trade unions, professional bodies, social movements, and rights-based organisations. These forms of organisations were embedded in local social structures, cultural norms, and moral economies, often operating alongside, rather than in opposition to, the state. Over time, however, the scope, visibility, and political connotations of civil society expanded, particularly in response to changing development strategies, donor engagement, and shifts in state–society relations.

The period of civil war fundamentally altered the terrain of civic engagement in Sri Lanka. As violence escalated and the state increasingly framed dissent and mobilisation through the language of security, civil society organisations were compelled to navigate within a shrinking space for action. While some groups aligned themselves with humanitarian relief, development, or service delivery, others engaged in advocacy related to human rights, displacement, and peace. These activities unfolded under conditions of intense political polarisation, surveillance, and contestation. The end of the war in 2009 did not resolve these tensions. Instead, post-war governance was characterised by a strong centralisation of power, an expanded security apparatus, and marginal tolerance for critical civic voices, even as the language of reconstruction and reconciliation gained prominence.

At the same time, Sri Lanka's civil society has not been uniform entity. It reflects deep social, regional, and ideological differences. Organisations based in capital (Colombo) often enjoy greater access to resources, policy spaces, and international networks, while regional and community-based groups remained closely tied to local constraints, needs, identities, and informal systems of local authority. Religious institutions, professional associations, women's groups, youth networks, and labour organisations operate with varying priorities and constraints, shaped by caste, class, ethnicity, geopolitics and gender. These internal variations complicate monolithic portrayals of civil society as either a purely progressive force or a passive extension of external agenda Global and regional factors further influence the evolution of Sri Lanka's civic space. International development assistance, peacebuilding initiatives, and human rights advocacy introduce new vocabularies, funding structures, and organisational practices. At the same time, shifting geopolitical alignments and development models alter the state's engagement with external actors, affecting how civil society has been perceived and regulated. The interactions between global norms and local political realities produce both opportunities and tensions, as civic actors seek to translate external ideas into locally meaningful forms while maintaining legitimacy within their own communities.

These dynamics became particularly visible during recent moments of political and economic crisis. Sri Lanka's severe economic collapse in 2022 marked a critical rupture in state–society relations. Widespread shortages, inflation, and institutional breakdown triggered an unprecedented wave of public mobilisation. Citizens from diverse social backgrounds participated in protests that challenged political leadership and demanded accountability. This moment revealed both the fragility of existing governance structures and the latent capacity for collective action beyond established organisational boundaries. At the same time, it exposed

the limits of formal civil society frameworks in capturing the full range of civic practices, solidarities, and forms of participation that emerged during the crisis. The post-2022 period has thus raised important questions about the nature of civil society in Sri Lanka. While new forms of mobilisation and community-based action gained visibility, familiar patterns of regulation, surveillance, and control reasserted themselves. Civic actors continue to operate in an environment shaped by legal uncertainty, political sensitivity, and uneven access to power. These developments suggest that civil society in Sri Lanka cannot be understood solely through normative models that emphasise participation, voluntarism, or institutionalised participation. Instead, it must be analysed as a sphere shaped by historical continuities, power relations, and the ongoing negotiation between state authority and social agency.

Existing scholarship has offered valuable insights into many aspects of Sri Lanka's political and social life, including nationalism, conflict, governance, and development. However, civil society is often treated either as a secondary actor or viewed through frameworks that do not fully account for the interaction between global influences and local structures. Studies tend to focus on specific organisations, periods, or themes, leaving broader questions about long-term transformation, internal diversity, and everyday civic practices underexplored. There remains a need for a more integrated analysis that situates civil society within the wider political economy, cultural context, and historical trajectory of the Sri Lankan state.

Against this background, the present study is grounded in the recognition that civil society in Sri Lanka is neither a simple agent of democratisation nor a uniform victim of state repression. It is a dynamic and contested space, shaped by historical evolution, conflict, governance, social hierarchy, and global engagement. Understanding its dynamics requires attention to both structural constraints and local agency, as well as to moments of continuity and change. These historical and institutional continuities, rooted in colonial and post-colonial governance structures, continue to shape the conditions under which civil society emerges and operates in contemporary Sri Lanka. By examining civil society through this lens, the study attempts to contribute to a more embedded and context-sensitive understanding of civic life in post-conflict and crisis-affected societies.

Scope of the Study

This study critically explores select theoretical ideas which trace the manifestations of civil society from the thoughts of Plato to the writings of Robert Putnam. It investigates the limitations of the Euro-centric lens in understanding civil society functioning in south Asia. As

case in point, the study traces the evolution and contemporary character of civil society in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to the fluid interaction between local conditions and wider global influences. It focuses on civil society as a dynamic field shaped by political authority, social structures, historical legacies, and moments of crisis, rather than as a fixed or uniform category.

The study does not undertake a comparative analysis with other South Asian states, nor does it attempt to generalise its findings beyond the Sri Lankan context. Sri Lanka is treated as a single, in-depth case through which broader questions about civil society in post-conflict and crisis-affected settings can be explored. The temporal scope of the study spans the post-independence period, with a primary analytical focus on developments following the end of the civil war in 2009 and the economic and political crisis of 2022. Earlier historical periods are addressed where necessary to provide context and continuity, particularly in relation to institutional legacies, governance practices, and patterns of civic organisation. The emphasis, however, remains on contemporary transformations and the conditions shaping civil society in the present. The thematic scope of the research includes organised and informal forms of civil society, encompassing non-governmental organisations, community-based groups, religious and welfare associations, professional bodies, social movements, and emergent civic initiatives. The study examines how these actors operate within constraints imposed by law, regulation, political culture, and social hierarchy, as well as how they respond to moments of disruption and change. It focuses on structures, processes, and relationships rather than on evaluating the effectiveness or success of individual organisations or programmes.

Analytically, the study concentrates on the interaction between global norms, external engagement, and local political and social realities. It does not seek to measure development outcomes, assess donor performance, or conduct policy impact evaluations. Nor does it engage in detailed electoral analysis, party politics, or formal institutional design. Issues such as economic policy, security strategy, and foreign relations are addressed only to the extent that they shape the environment in which civil society operates. By clearly defining these boundaries, the study aims to provide a focused and context-sensitive analysis of civil society in Sri Lanka. The scope of the study urges for a more nuanced understanding of civic life as it is experienced in practice, negotiated, and contested.

Literature Review

The conceptual evolution of civil society forms the intellectual foundation of this thesis. Before examining civil society in specific historical and political contexts, it is necessary to understand how the concept itself has been theorised, contested, and reformulated across different traditions of political thought. The works reviewed here collectively demonstrate that civil society is neither a fixed institutional domain nor a universally applicable normative ideal, but a historically contingent and politically infused concept.

John Ehrenberg's *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* is central to this study because it offers one of the most systematic genealogies of the concept across classical, liberal, Marxist, and modern democratic traditions. Ehrenberg shows that civil society has never possessed a single, stable meaning; instead, it has been repeatedly redefined in response to changing political conditions, social struggles, and theoretical priorities. His critical approach is particularly important for this thesis because it treats civil society not as a normative ideal to be celebrated, but as a concept embedded in power relations, class structures, and historical conflicts. This perspective resonates strongly with the lens adopted in this dissertation, as it allows civil society to be analysed as a terrain of contestation rather than an inherently democratic space. Ehrenberg's work therefore justifies the emphasis on conceptual plurality and historical specificity.[1]

John Keane's *Democracy and Civil Society* further deepens this conceptual grounding by mapping multiple traditions of thought on civil society rather than privileging a single lineage. Keane demonstrates how civil society has been understood differently within liberal constitutionalism, socialist theory, and contemporary democratic debates. His contribution is particularly valuable for this thesis because it highlights the coexistence of competing interpretations of civil society, each shaped by distinct assumptions about the state, democracy, and social order. This multiplicity supports the argument that civil society cannot be reduced to NGOs or voluntary associations alone. Keane's work also helps establish a conceptual bridge between classical theory and later discussions of global and transnational civil society, which becomes relevant in subsequent sections of the thesis.[2]

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[1] John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1999)
[2] John Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society: On the Predicaments of European Socialism, the Prospects for Democracy, and the Problem of Controlling Social and Political Power* (London: Verso, 1988).

While Ehrenberg and Keane provide broad conceptual histories, Raymond Williams's essay *Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory* is crucial for defining how civil society can be understood beyond rigid economic determinism. Williams challenges simplistic readings of Marxism by emphasising the cultural, ideological, and lived dimensions of social relations. For this thesis, his argument is important because it allows civil society to be conceptualised as part of an ongoing social process rather than a discrete institutional sphere. Williams's insistence on mediation, practice, and cultural production aligns closely with my own understanding of civil society as something enacted through everyday social relations, moral vocabularies, and collective meanings. This insight directly informs the rejection of static or institutional definitions of civil society.[3]

Krishan Kumar's article *Civil Society: An Inquiry into the Usefulness of an Historical Term* plays a clarifying role within this literature review. Kumar critically interrogates whether civil society retains analytical value given its diverse and often contradictory usages. Rather than dismissing the concept, he argues that its usefulness lies precisely in its historical specificity. This intervention is important for the thesis because it legitimises a cautious and context-sensitive use of the term. Kumar's analysis reinforces the understanding that civil society should not be treated as a universal benchmark for democracy, but as a concept whose meaning shifts across time and place. His work therefore supports the methodological restraint adopted in this thesis.[4]

Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato's contribution in *Theory and Society* represents a significant attempt to reconstruct civil society as a normative and institutional project within modern democracies. Their work is important for this thesis because it demonstrates how civil society has been reimagined in late twentieth-century theory as a space distinct from both the state and the market, capable of supporting democratic legitimacy and social autonomy. At the same time, reading Cohen and Arato critically reveals the assumptions embedded in this reconstruction, particularly the expectation of stable legal frameworks and liberal democratic institutions. This tension becomes productive for my analysis, as it highlights the limits of

[3] Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), 31–49.
[4] Krishan Kumar, "Civil Society: An Inquiry into the Usefulness of an Historical Term," *The British Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 3 (1993): 375–395..

applying such models to postcolonial and conflict-affected societies. Their work thus serves both as a conceptual resource and as a point of critique within the study.[5]

Stuart Hall's essay on Gramsci provides a crucial theoretical bridge between classical Marxist approaches and contemporary cultural analyses of civil society. Hall emphasises civil society as a site where consent is produced, contested, and reshaped through culture, identity, and everyday practices. This perspective is especially significant for this thesis because it foregrounds power, ideology, and hegemony without reducing civil society to either state control or economic structure. Hall's reading of Gramsci strongly informs the emphasis on civil society as a dynamic and uneven field, shaped by historical struggles and cultural meanings.[6]

Finally, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* extend this rethinking of civil society by rejecting essentialist class-based explanations and emphasising discourse, contingency, and political articulation. Their work is important for this thesis because it opens conceptual space for understanding civil society as plural, fragmented, and constantly reconstituted. This resonates with the analytical approach of this dissertation, which treats civil society not as a coherent actor but as a shifting constellation of practices, identities, and claims. Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on contingency and antagonism reinforces the study's broader argument that civil society is inseparable from political struggle.[7]

The study of civil society in Sri Lanka demands an approach that moves beyond institutional descriptions to examine the historical and political conditions under which civic action has emerged and operated. Existing scholarship shows that civil society in Sri Lanka has evolved not as an autonomous democratic sphere but within a landscape shaped by constitutional design, identity politics, and recurring political crises. This literature therefore provides the conceptual and empirical grounding for analysing civil society as a contested social space rather than a neutral arena of participation.

Building on this framing, Jayadeva Uyangoda's *Crisis of Democratic Institutions* is central because it situates civil society within the broader crisis of democratic governance. Uyangoda demonstrates that civic mobilisation in Sri Lanka is closely tied to moments of institutional

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[5] Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992).
[6] Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 411–440.
[7] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2001).

breakdown, executive centralisation, and identity-based politics, rather than to stable democratic consolidation. This analysis informs the understanding of civil society as largely reactive and structurally constrained, helping to explain why civic engagement in Sri Lanka often takes episodic and crisis-driven forms.[8]

The structural constraints identified by Uyangoda become clearer when viewed through Neil DeVotta's historical analysis in *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*. DeVotta traces how majoritarian linguistic nationalism weakened state institutions and narrowed the space for inclusive civic engagement over time. His work highlights how civil society developed within an environment marked by exclusion and institutional erosion, a dynamic that continues to shape patterns of civic mobilisation. This perspective reinforces the understanding of Sri Lankan civil society as operating within inherited limits rather than open democratic possibility.[9]

These inherited constraints on civic space are further intensified during periods of internal conflict, when democratic governance is increasingly reframed through the language of security and exceptionalism. Hence, Dr. Sreya Maitra Roychoudhury's thesis, *Democracy and Securitization*, is important for this study as it explains how internal conflicts in democratic states are transformed into security crises that legitimise exceptional forms of governance. Drawing on securitization theory, Maitra shows how political dissent and identity-based mobilisation are reframed as existential threats, enabling the suspension of ordinary democratic norms. Her analysis of Sri Lanka is particularly instructive, as it demonstrates that military victory did not resolve underlying insecurities but instead entrenched security-centric governance and weakened political trust. This insight closely aligns with the argument that post-war civil society in Sri Lanka continues to operate within a framework shaped by securitization rather than democratic reconciliation, thereby intensifying structural constraints on civic agency.[10]

While securitization helps explain how democratic space narrows during conflict, these security-driven transformations cannot be fully understood without tracing the longer historical processes through which political identities, authority, and patterns of mobilisation were

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[8] Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Crisis of Democratic Institutions," *Polity* 2, no. 1 (2015).
[9] Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).
[10] Sreya Maitra Roychoudhury, *Democracy and Securitization: A Comparative Study of Select Internal Conflicts in India and Sri Lanka* (PhD diss., Jadavpur University, 2015).

formed in Sri Lanka. To that end, Jonathan Spencer's edited volume *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* provide essential context. The chapters in this collection demonstrate how political identities, social hierarchies, and forms of collective mobilisation evolved long before the onset of armed conflict. This historical grounding supports the argument of this thesis that civil society in Sri Lanka has always been intertwined with questions of authority, legitimacy, and communal belonging. It also strengthens analytical move away from abstract models of civil society toward a historically embedded understanding of civic life.[11]

These historically rooted patterns take on new forms in the contemporary period, a shift captured in Nira Wickramasinghe's book *Civil Society in Sri Lanka: New Circles of Power*. This work is particularly important for analysing how civil society was reshaped by war, peacebuilding, and donor intervention. The contributors show how NGO professionalisation and international funding created new hierarchies within civil society, privileging some actors while marginalising others. This analysis strongly informs the focus on 'NGOisation' legitimacy, and internal stratification within Sri Lanka's civic sphere.[12]

The consequences of these transformations are most visible in post-war civic contestation, which Harini Amarasuriya examines in *Protests and Counter-Protests: Competing Civil Society Spaces in Post-war Sri Lanka.* Amarasuriya demonstrates that not all forms of civic mobilisation are equally recognised as legitimate, and that protest spaces are shaped by class, culture, and moral authority. Her analysis directly connects earlier discussions of institutional decay and NGO dominance to contemporary struggles over who can legitimately claim to represent civil society. This insight is central to this study's argument that post-war civil society in Sri Lanka remains fragmented and contested rather than unified or inclusive.[13]

Taken together, this literature establishes that civil society in Sri Lanka has evolved through overlapping processes of historical exclusion, institutional crisis, donor intervention, and post-war realignment. Rather than functioning as a cohesive democratic force, civil society emerges as a dynamic and uneven terrain shaped by power, identity, and political contingency. Therefore, builds on these insights to analyse civil society as it is practised in Sri Lanka, providing a necessary foundation for the subsequent examination of global–local intersections and post-2022 developments.

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[11]Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990).
[12] Nira Wickramasinghe, *Civil Society in Sri Lanka: New Circles of Power* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2001)
[13]Harini Amarasuriya, "Protests and Counter-Protests: Competing Civil Society Spaces in Post-war Sri Lanka," *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 9 (2015): 49–55.

Moving beyond purely domestic explanations of civil society, this dissertation seek to make a case for understanding how global forces intersect with local political, social, and institutional contexts. Civil society in Sri Lanka has not evolved in isolation; rather, it has been shaped through sustained engagement with regional security dynamics, international development regimes, transnational advocacy networks, and post-war interventionary frameworks. The literature reviewed on this domain demonstrates that global influences do not operate as external impositions alone, but are mediated, reinterpreted, and contested within local structures of power. This body of work therefore provides the conceptual and empirical foundation for examining civil society as a product of global–local interaction rather than domestic causality alone.

The edited volume *Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Crisis Behaviour and the Bomb*, edited by Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, is important for this thesis because it situates Sri Lanka within a broader regional security architecture shaped by India, China, and extra-regional powers. Although the volume does not focus on civil society directly, it provides essential context for understanding how security concerns, geopolitical competition, and regional power asymmetries shape domestic political space. For this thesis, the relevance of this work lies in its demonstration that state priorities in Sri Lanka are often influenced by external security calculations, which in turn affect the regulatory and political environment in which civil society operates. Reading this volume has reinforced the understanding that civic space cannot be analysed independently of regional power dynamics, particularly in a small state navigating competing external interests.[14]

These regional security dynamics become more concrete when examined through Jonathan Goodhand's *Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka*, a foundational text for understanding how global development and peacebuilding interventions interact with local political economies. Goodhand's work is central to this thesis because it moves beyond normative accounts of aid and instead analyses how international assistance becomes embedded within conflict dynamics, governance structures, and elite interests. He shows that aid and peacebuilding are not neutral processes but often reinforce existing power relations while reshaping civil society through funding, professionalisation, and conditionality. This analysis sharply explains why civil society organisations in Sri Lanka frequently occupy an ambiguous position, simultaneously empowered by international support and constrained by donor-driven agendas.[15]

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[14] Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, eds., *Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Crisis Behaviour and the Bomb* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
[15] Jonathan Goodhand, *Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Building on this political economy perspective, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's *Activists Beyond Borders* provides the theoretical framework necessary to understand how global norms and advocacy networks influence local civil society practices. Significance of this book lies in the fact that it conceptualises transnational activism as a relational process, where local actors strategically engage international networks to amplify their claims. The idea of advocacy networks operating through information politics, symbolic politics, and leverage politics offers a useful lens for analysing how Sri Lankan civil society actors engage global human rights regimes and international organisations.[16] At the same time, reading this work has prompted a more cautious reflection as it portrays, while transnational networks can expand civic voice, they may also reorient activism towards external audiences, potentially weakening local accountability and social embeddedness.

The interaction between global development narratives and local political realities is further illuminated by Deborah Brautigam's article on *Debt-trap Diplomacy*. Although focused on China's global engagement rather than Sri Lanka alone, this article is important for the thesis because it challenges simplified narratives about Chinese influence and external domination. Brautigam demonstrates that global financial interventions are often mediated by domestic decision-making, elite agency, and state strategy.[17] This insight aligns closely with the analytical position, as it cautions against treating global actors, whether China, Western donors, or international institutions, as monolithic forces. For civil society analysis, this perspective is crucial because it highlights how global economic engagements reshape state priorities, fiscal pressures, and public discourse, all of which indirectly affect civic space and mobilisation.

These global economic and political forces converge most clearly in the post-war period, a dynamic critically examined by Harini Amarasuriya in *Civil Society, Intervention and Post-war Power in Sri Lanka*. The relevance of this article lies in the fact that it directly interrogates how international intervention, liberal governance norms, and donor engagement have reshaped post-war civil society. Amarasuriya argues that post-war civic space is structured by selective recognition, where certain forms of activism are legitimised while others are marginalised. This analysis is particularly important for my thesis because it connects earlier discussions of aid, advocacy, and geopolitical influence to the lived realities of civic actors on

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[16] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[17] Deborah Brautigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme," Area Development and Policy 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

the ground. It reinforces the argument that civil society in Sri Lanka operates within hierarchies of legitimacy produced through global–local interaction rather than democratic consensus.[18]

Research Gap

Examining the dominant literature indicates that conceptual debates on civil society define it neither a stable institutional sphere nor a universally transferable democratic ideal, but a historically contingent and politically embedded concept shaped by power, ideology, and social struggle. This theoretical insight cautions against the uncritical application of European civil society analytical frameworks to postcolonial contexts such as South Asia in general and Sri Lanka in particular. Literature on Sri Lankan civil society indicates that civil society has evolved within conditions of nationalism, institutional decay, internal conflict, and post-war governance, producing a civic sphere that is fragmented, uneven, and hierarchically structured. Rather than operating as an autonomous counterweight to the state, civil society has been shaped by securitization, donor intervention, and shifting regimes of legitimacy. Finally, the scholarship on global–local interaction demonstrates that external forces, regional security dynamics, international development regimes, transnational advocacy networks, and global economic engagements, do not just act as impositions. Instead, they are mediated through local political structures, elite strategies, and historical legacies, generating complex and often contradictory civic outcomes. Together, these strands justify the central analytical premise of this thesis: to examine civil society in Sri Lanka as a historically grounded, politically contested, and globally entangled social space.

However, much of this literature remains grounded in normative assumptions derived from stable liberal political contexts found predominantly in the west. These approaches often emphasise autonomy, voluntarism, and institutional participation, while paying limited attention to the constraints under which civil society operates in postcolonial and conflict-affected societies especially in South Asia. As a result, the limitations of these theoretical models are insufficiently examined, particularly in contexts where state power, security concerns, and social hierarchy shape civic life. This gap directly relates to the need to reassess dominant theoretical ideas on civil society and their explanatory limits. In the Sri Lankan context, existing studies tend to analyse civil society through fragmented temporal lenses. Scholarship often focuses separately on colonial-era associations, wartime humanitarian

[18]Harini Amarasuriya, "Civil Society, Intervention and Post-war Power in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 7 (2015): 1335–1352.

organisations, post-war reconciliation initiatives, or recent protest movements. This period-specific approach limits understanding of how civil society has evolved over time and how earlier institutional and political legacies continue to influence contemporary forms of civic engagement. There is a lack of comprehensive analysis that connects colonial, post-colonial, and post-civil war phases in a single analytical framework, creating a gap in explaining the long-term evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, many studies examine either domestic political and social factors or external influences such as donors, international norms, and transnational networks. Few analyses explore how these global and local forces interact in everyday reality. This coerced separation obscures the ways in which global ideas are interpreted, adapted, or constrained by local political structures and social realities. Consequently, the interaction between domestic factors and global influences remains under-theorised in existing research. Finally, recent moments of economic and political crisis have revealed that forms of civic mobilisation can extend beyond formal organisations. Yet, much of the literature continues to privilege institutionalised civil society actors, offering limited insight into crisis-driven transformations and emergent civic practices. Addressing these gaps requires an approach that links theory, history, domestic structures, and global engagement. This study seeks to fill these gaps by providing a context-sensitive and integrated analysis of civil society in Sri Lanka.

Research Hypothesis

The dissertation posits the following research hypotheses:

1. The conceptual remit of civil society can be ideationally traced back to earliest western political thinkers.
2. The evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka can be attributed to a range of factors temporally stretching from the colonial, post-colonial, civil war, post-civil war periods.
3. Specific domestic factors in the colonial post-colonial, civil war and post-civil war periods have consistently shaped the functional scope of civil society in Sri Lanka.
4. In the civil war and post-civil war periods, civil Society in Sri Lanka has been deeply impacted by certain global factors and local civil society stake holders have responded to external influences.

Research Questions

Following from this research gap, this dissertation raises the following questions.

1. What are the dominant theoretical ideas on the emergence and scope of civil society and what are its limitations?
2. Which range of factors inform the dominant understandings on the evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka?
3. What are the specific domestic factors which play a determining role in the emergence and functional scope of civil society in Sri Lanka in the colonial, post-colonial and post-civil war period.?
4. What are the global factors which influence civil society in Sri Lanka and how do they interact with the local or domestic forces?

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to develop a contextual understanding of civil society in Sri Lanka by examining its conceptual foundations, historical evolution, domestic determinants, and interaction with global forces. The study has examined the dominant theoretical ideas on the emergence and scope of civil society and to identify their limitations, particularly in postcolonial and conflict-affected contexts. It aims to analyse the historical evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka by identifying key political, social, and institutional factors that have shaped its development over time. The study also assesses the domestic factors that influence the emergence and functional scope of civil society across the colonial, post-colonial, and post-civil war periods. In addition, it examines the role of global factors, including international actors and transnational processes, and analyses how these forces interact with local political and social structures. Finally, the study aims to explore how periods of political and economic crisis, particularly in the post-2022 context, have reshaped civic space and contributed to new forms of civic engagement, while contributing an integrated analytical perspective to civil society scholarship.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine the emergence, evolution, and functioning of civil society in Sri Lanka. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study examines the historical processes, political dynamics, and institutional practices. The research focuses on interpretation, explanation, and contextual analysis, which has been accomplished through textual analysis, narratives, and lived experiences.

The study is designed as a historical–interpretive qualitative case study, with Sri Lanka as the main focus. Sri Lanka is selected for its analytical significance as a postcolonial, conflict-affected society that has experienced prolonged civil war, post-war centralisation of power, and recent political and economic crisis. The case study approach allows for in-depth analysis of civil society within its specific historical, political, and social context, without attempting cross-national comparison or generalisation. The research draws on multiple qualitative data sources to ensure analytical depth and triangulation. These include primary data collected through interviews, as well as a wide range of secondary sources such as policy documents, archival materials, academic literature, and reports. The use of diverse sources allows the study to capture both institutional perspectives and broader structural patterns shaping civil society.

Primary data for this study has been collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via telephone and online meeting platforms. This mode of data collection was chosen to ensure transparency, accessibility, and safety, particularly given time constraints, geographical dispersion of participants, and political sensitivities surrounding civil society research in Sri Lanka. The interviews allowed respondents to reflect on their experiences, perceptions, and assessments of civil society practices, constraints, and transformations as they understand. The interviews method was guided by open-ended questions aligned with each of the research questions of the dissertation, while allowing space for participants to elaborate on issues they considered important. This approach has enabled the collection of rich qualitative insights into domestic factors, institutional practices, and the interaction between local and global influences. Where necessary, interviews have been anonymised to protect participants and to encourage open discussion. Interview data has been used analytically rather than as representative evidence, and they have been integrated with documentary sources to support interpretation.

The study relies extensively on secondary data, including academic books and journal articles, policy briefs, government documents, legal texts, press reports, reports by civil society organisations, and material produced by international organisations to answer the response on theoretical notions of civil society and factors responsible for the evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka. These sources provide essential background and enable systematic analysis of policy frameworks, regulatory practices, and shifts in civic space over time. In addition, archival data has been used to trace the historical development of civil society in Sri Lanka. Archival materials, including historical records, institutional documents, and earlier policy statements, have been examined to identify continuities and changes across the colonial, post-colonial, and post–civil war periods. This historical grounding is central to the understanding of how present-day civic practices are shaped by the existing institutional and political arrangements.

Themes such as governance, regulation, security, social hierarchy, global engagement, and crisis-driven mobilisation have been analysed in relation to the research questions. Rather than treating themes as fixed categories, the analysis is focused on how these themes intersect and shape civil society in practice. The study is also informed by critical political analysis and interpretive institutional analysis. This allows examination of power relations, state authority, and informal practices that structure civic space. Institutions are understood not only as formal rules and organisations but also as norms, practices, and everyday arrangements that influence civic action.

Ethical considerations have been addressed throughout the research process. Interview participation has been voluntary, and informed consent has been obtained. Anonymity has been maintained where required. As the study relies primarily on qualitative and interpretive methods, it does not claim statistical representativeness. Limitations include reliance on available documents and interviews conducted through remote platforms. However, careful triangulation of sources strengthens the credibility of the analysis. Overall, this methodology provides a coherent and context-sensitive framework for analysing civil society in Sri Lanka. It aligns closely with the research questions and chapter structure, enabling systematic examination of theory, historical evolution, domestic factors, and global–local interaction.

Chapterisation

This thesis is organised into four substantive chapters, each addressing the research questions raised in this dissertation. Each chapter offer the summery of argument by way of conclusion. The Conclusion presents the overall findings and core argument of the research.

Chapter One: Civil Society and Its Conceptual Evolution- Theories and Relevance in South Asia

The first chapter addresses the theoretical foundations of the study and undertakes the first research question, concerning the dominant ideas on the emergence and scope of civil society and their limitations. It traces the evolution of civil society as a concept across classical, modern, and contemporary traditions. The chapter critically examines how these frameworks have been shaped by European historical experiences and liberal democratic assumptions. Particular attention is given to the limits of these theories when applied to postcolonial and conflict-affected societies. By situating civil society theory within a broader South Asian context, the chapter establishes the conceptual tools used throughout the thesis. This chapter provides the analytical lens through which subsequent empirical chapters are interpreted.

Chapter Two: Civil Society in Sri Lanka - Nature and Dynamics

Chapter Two examines the evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka by addressing the second research question which is Which range of factors inform the dominant understandings on the evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka. It provides a historically grounded analysis of how civic life developed under changing political, social, and institutional conditions. The chapter begins with the colonial period and explores how associational activity emerged within structures shaped by imperial governance, missionary influence, and early nationalist mobilisation. It then traces the transformation of civil society after independence, focusing on the expansion of welfare organisations, trade unions, professional bodies, and religious associations alongside the consolidation of the postcolonial state. The chapter pays close attention to the impact of ethnic politics, majoritarian nationalism, and civil war on civic engagement. It shows how civil society adapted to violence, displacement, and securitised governance, often operating under constraint rather than autonomy. By highlighting diversity among civic actors and practices, the chapter demonstrates that civil society in Sri Lanka has been shaped by both continuity and change. This chapter establishes the broader contextual foundation for the more focused analyses that follow.

Chapter Three: Impact of Domestic Factors on Civil Society in Sri Lanka

Chapter Three addresses the third research question by analysing the domestic factors that shape the emergence and functional scope of civil society in Sri Lanka. Building on the historical overview in the previous chapter, it focuses on internal political and social structures that condition civic action in everyday practice. The chapter examines the role of executive dominance, centralised governance, and legal regulation in defining the boundaries of civic space. It also analyses the effects of militarisation, surveillance, and security-oriented governance, particularly in the post-war period. Attention is given to the influence of media control, information politics, and public discourse on civic mobilisation and dissent. Beyond formal institutions, the chapter explores socio-cultural factors such as religion, caste, gender, patronage networks, and informal authority. These factors shape participation, legitimacy, and access within civil society. By foregrounding domestic constraints and enabling conditions, the chapter demonstrates how civic life is structured from within, rather than being driven solely by external forces.

Chapter Four: Intersection of Global and Local Factors in Sri Lankan Civil Society

Chapter Four responds to the fourth research question by examining global influences on civil society in Sri Lanka and their interaction with domestic forces. The chapter analyses how international norms, development assistance, transnational advocacy, and geopolitical interests shape civic space and organisational practices. It explores the role of external actors, including states, international organisations, and diaspora networks, in influencing funding patterns, agendas, and modes of engagement. Rather than presenting global influence as uniform or dominant, the chapter shows how these external forces are filtered through local political structures, legal frameworks, and social norms. It highlights how global ideas are adapted, resisted, or reinterpreted by local actors seeking legitimacy and survival. The chapter also considers moments of crisis, particularly economic and political instability, as periods when global–local interaction becomes more visible and contested. By integrating global and domestic analysis, this chapter demonstrates that civil society in Sri Lanka operates within a negotiated space shaped by both internal power relations and external pressures.

Conclusion

The concluding chapter brings together the findings of the four chapters and revisits the research questions and hypotheses. It shows that civil society in Sri Lanka is best understood as a dynamic and contested space shaped by historical legacies, domestic power structures, and global–local interaction. Rather than operating as an autonomous or uniform sphere, civil society emerges through negotiation, adaptation, and constraint, especially in postcolonial and post-conflict settings. The conclusion highlights how the study challenges dominant theoretical assumptions by grounding civil society analysis in Sri Lanka's specific political and social context. It also emphasises the importance of examining domestic and global factors together, particularly during periods of crisis that reveal new forms of civic practice. Finally, the chapter reflects on the broader relevance of the findings for understanding civic life in other conflict-affected societies and identifies areas for future research.

Civil Society and Its Conceptual Evolution: Theories and Relevance in South Asia

Introduction

Civil society has long been a central concept in political theory. It represents a crucial space where individuals and organizations operate independently of the state and the market to promote collective interests. Over time, the term has evolved, acquiring different meanings in various cultural, historical, and political contexts. In its simplest form, civil society refers to the arena of social life that exists between the state and the private sector, where people can come together to debate, deliberate, and pursue common goals, free from state coercion and commercial pressures. However, this understanding has undergone significant transformations, especially in the context of different regions of the world, where civil society takes on unique forms and functions, depending on historical and socio-political conditions. In South Asia, and particularly in Sri Lanka, civil society has played a complex role, both as a mediator between the state and citizens and as an arena for contestation and resistance. Sri Lanka's civil society has been shaped by its colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, and decades of civil war, making it a particularly intriguing case for examination. Its evolution and functional scope in the post-colonial, post-conflict affected society deserves greater attention. Some argue that civil society organizations (CSOs) can promote democracy, human rights, and development by holding the state accountable and providing services where the state is lacking. (Neff, 2017) Others, however, contend that civil society is not always independent of the state and can sometimes be co-opted by political elites or ethnic majorities, thus reinforcing divisions rather than bridging them. In Sri Lanka, civil society's role during the ethnic conflict, post-conflict reconciliation, and democratization processes highlights these complexities.

This chapter aims to provide an evolutionary account of the concept of civil society, tracing theorizations on its origin and assessing its relevance in the South Asian context, with a particular focus on Sri Lanka. The chapter will first explore the arguments propounded by the classical schools on the emergence of civil society and its progressive ideational development through the works of key Enlightenment thinkers, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. It will then examine the contributions of modern theorists, such as Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, and Habermas, whose ideas have significantly shaped contemporary debates on civil society. Following these theoretical explorations, the chapter will turn to the

relevance of these theories in the context of South Asia, particularly Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka, with its complex history of colonialism, ethnic strife, and post-war reconciliation efforts, provides a fertile ground for examining how civil society may operate in a post-colonial state. This chapter will also address the research gaps that exist in the current literature on civil society in Sri Lanka. While much has been written about the role of civil society in post-conflict contexts, there is a need for more comprehensive theoretical engagement with the concept of civil society in South Asia. Specifically, most studies tend to focus on civil society's practical functions—such as service provision, advocacy, and conflict mediation—without fully exploring the theoretical dimensions of the concept in the region. Furthermore, while scholars have examined the role of civil society in ethnic conflict and post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka, there has been less attention paid to the broader question of how civil society functions within the framework of state-society relations in a post-colonial, multi-ethnic society.

Civil Society Across Time and Space: An Intellectual Overview

Civil society, as a concept, has evolved through various intellectual traditions, reflecting different historical and socio-political contexts. It is a term that has sparked debate among scholars, political thinkers, and activists across the globe due to its multiple meanings and applications. This section provides a theoretical overview of civil society, tracing its origins from classical political thought to contemporary understandings, and explores how it has been conceptualized in diverse cultural settings. In doing so, we uncover how civil society functions as a bridge between the individual and the state, as a space for collective action, and as a site of ideological contestation.[1] The origins of civil society as a concept can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, where thinkers like Aristotle and Cicero laid the foundational ideas that would later shape modern conceptions of political life, citizenship, and community. Although neither philosopher used the term "civil society" in the way we understand it today, their works significantly influenced the subsequent development of political theory, including notions of collective life, governance, and the relationship between the individual and the state. This section delves into the contributions of Aristotle and Cicero to the classical understanding of civic life, highlighting their enduring influence on later interpretations of civil society.

It may be observed that the initial ideas of civil society are defined around the conception of political community, since the idea of the 'civil' was understood as that which is 'social.'

[1] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 222– 223, Internet Archive PDF, accessed May 2, 2025.

Aristotle (384 CE-322 CE) one of the most influential philosophers in Western political thought, provided the earliest detailed exploration of human association and political community in his seminal work *Politics*. For Aristotle, human beings are inherently social or "political animals" (*zoon politikon*), whose nature is best fulfilled through participation in a political community, or *polis*.[2] This idea is central to Aristotle's vision of collective life, where individuals achieve their highest moral and intellectual development through active engagement in the public sphere. Aristotle's *koinonia politike*, often translated as "political community," embodies his vision of a well-ordered society. Unlike modern interpretations of civil society, which distinguish between the state and social associations, Aristotle saw the *polis*—or the city-state—as a unified political entity in which civic life flourishes. He did not view civil society as a separate realm from the state; rather, he regarded the political community as an integrated whole, where citizens collectively participate in the governance of their society to pursue the common good. Aristotle believed that the purpose of the political community was to promote the *eudaimonia* (flourishing or well-being) of its citizens. According to him, the *polis* is a natural extension of smaller human associations, such as the family (*oikos*), which provide the foundation for political life. While the family meets basic material needs, the political community enables individuals to achieve moral excellence by engaging in public affairs. Aristotle wrote, "Man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all" (*Politics* 1253a). This idea reinforces the notion that a well-functioning community is essential for human fulfilment. A key aspect of Aristotle's view of the political community is the concept of justice, which he defines as the "common advantage" or the "common good" (*Politics* 1282b).[3] For Aristotle, justice is not merely about individual rights but about ensuring that the collective well-being of the community is prioritized. *In this sense, his political community is more than just an arena for individual self-interest; it is a space where citizens work together to achieve a just and virtuous society.* By extension, citizenship, in Aristotle's view, is not only a matter of legal status but also a moral and civic duty, where individuals contribute to the governance of the community for the benefit of all. Aristotle saw merit in the idea of a *deliberative democracy*, where citizens engage in rational debate and decision-making, in turn, facilitating meaningful political consciousness. He believed that participation in the political community allowed individuals to cultivate virtues such as prudence (*phronesis*), justice, and courage. These virtues were necessary for both personal development and the maintenance of a stable and just society.

[2] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Kitchener, ON: Batoche Books, 1999), 4–5, PDF, accessed April 18, 2024.
[3] Ibid

Aristotle's idea that the political community fosters virtue among its members has echoes in later conceptions of civil society, where civic engagement is seen as essential for the moral and social development of individuals. However, Aristotle's *koinonia politike* was limited by its exclusionary nature. His ideal political community was composed only of free male citizens, with women, slaves, and non-citizens (metics) excluded from participation. This limitation reflects the social and political hierarchies of ancient Greece, where citizenship and civic participation were restricted to a privileged few. Despite these limitations, Aristotle's work laid the foundation for later discussions about the nature of civic life, political participation, and the role of the individual within the community. Therefore, Aristotle's notion of *koinonia politike* highlights the inseparable bond between human nature, moral development, and participation in public life. By placing justice, virtue, and collective deliberation at the heart of the political community, he presents a vision of civic life rooted in the pursuit of the common good. While his framework offers foundational insights into later understandings of civil society, it remains shaped by the exclusionary norms of ancient Greek society, limiting full civic participation to a privileged few.

Cicero (106 CE to 43 CE), the Roman statesman, philosopher, and orator, expanded on many of the ideas presented by Aristotle, adapting them to the Roman context and placing greater emphasis on legal and institutional frameworks. Cicero's writings, particularly *De Re Publica* (On the Republic) and *De Legibus* (On the Laws), reflect his vision of a *res publica*, a public affair or commonwealth, where citizens collectively govern themselves for the common good.[4] While Aristotle focused on the moral and philosophical aspects of civic life, Cicero emphasized the legal and institutional mechanisms that were necessary to preserve justice and social order. For Cicero, the *res publica* was not just a political community but a moral community bound by shared values, laws, and institutions. He believed that the health of the republic depended on the virtue and active participation of its citizens, much like Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of civic engagement. However, Cicero went further by articulating a framework in which the rule of law was central to the functioning of the political community. He wrote, "The people's republic, then, is the commonwealth, the property of a people. But "a people is not any collection of human beings, gathered together in any way, but a gathering of a large number of human beings united by agreement in respect to justice and a partnership for the common

[4] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica*, in *Cicero: On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, trans. James E. G. Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Book 1, section 39 (Bekker 3.23), PDF accessed December 28, 2024

good" (*De Re Publica* 1.39).[5] This passage encapsulates Cicero's belief that justice and the common good are the foundations of a legitimate political community. Cicero's conception of civic duty was deeply tied to his belief in the importance of the law. He argued that laws should reflect natural justice and that citizens had a moral obligation to uphold them. In *De Legibus*, Cicero wrote, "We are born for justice, and that right is based, not upon men's opinions, but upon Nature."[6] Cicero believed that natural law, which he saw as universal and immutable, should guide the legal and political institutions of the state. He argued that the rule of law was essential for maintaining order and preventing tyranny, as it placed constraints on both rulers and citizens. One of Cicero's key contributions to the idea of civil society is his emphasis on the *rule of law* as a fundamental principle that governs the interactions between individuals and the state. He believed that a well-ordered society required laws that were just and that citizens had a duty to participate in the political process to ensure that laws reflected the common good. This idea of law as a central pillar of civil society would later influence modern liberal thought, particularly the emphasis on constitutionalism and the protection of individual rights within a legal framework. Cicero also placed a strong emphasis on the concept of *civic virtue*. He believed that the stability and prosperity of the republic depended on the moral character of its citizens. Civic virtue, in Cicero's view, involved a commitment to the common good, public service, and adherence to the principles of justice. He saw the *res publica* as a partnership among citizens, where each individual had a role to play in maintaining the health of the political community. This focus on civic duty and collective responsibility is a precursor to modern ideas about the role of civil society in democratic governance, where active citizen participation is seen as essential for holding governments accountable and promoting social cohesion. Cicero's writings also reflected the Roman emphasis on *patronage* and *clientage*, relationships that were central to the functioning of Roman society. In these relationships, wealthy and powerful patrons provided protection and resources to their clients in exchange for loyalty and political support. While these practices were often criticized for reinforcing social hierarchies, they also reflected an early form of civil society, where social networks and mutual obligations played a key role in mediating the relationship between individuals and the state.

The contributions of Aristotle and Cicero have had a lasting impact on later conceptions of civil society. Aristotle's emphasis on the *polis* as a space for moral and civic development and

[5] Ibid., Book 1, section 39 (Bekker 3.23)
[6] Cicero, *op. cit.*, *De Legibus*, Book 1.7.

Cicero's focus on law, justice, and civic duty laid the groundwork for the distinction between civil society and the state. *Although neither thinker explicitly conceptualized civil society as a distinct sphere from the state, their works provided the philosophical foundation for subsequent debates about the nature of political community, the role of citizens, and the relationship between individuals and governing institutions.*

Drawing upon the foundational contributions of Aristotle and Cicero, early modern political thought marked a significant shift in the conceptualization of civil society, particularly when thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu began to articulate a more defined separation between civil society and the state.[6] Locke's emphasis on individual rights, property, and limited government, for example, reflects the Aristotelian notion of the political community as a space for the fulfilment of human potential.[7] Aristotle and Cicero introduced key themes, such as civic participation, the common good, the rule of law, and civic virtue, that continued to shape modern debates about civil society. The Enlightenment era, spanning the 17th and 18th centuries, marked a significant shift in the theoretical evolution of the civil society. This period marked a significant shift in political philosophy, as thinkers began to systematically address the relationship between individuals, society, and the state. The development of the concept of civil society during this period was closely tied to broader debates about the nature of government, individual rights, and social order. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, three of the most influential political philosophers of the time, each offered distinct views on the social contract, the state of nature, and the role of civil society in relation to the state.[8] While their theories differed in key respects, each of these thinkers sought to answer fundamental questions about how societies should be organized, how individuals relate to each other and the state, and how civil society functions as a space for collective action and governance. Their works laid the groundwork for modern understandings of civil society, particularly its potential to act as an intermediary sphere between individuals and the state.

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[6] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), Book I, chapter 6, "Citizen and Legislator," p. 60

[7] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), § 87, p. 298

[8] Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Book XI, "Of the Relation Between the Government and the Laws," p. 144

In Hobbes's framework, civil society is indistinguishable from the political community, as it arises from the same social contract that establishes the state.[9] The sovereign, who wields absolute power, represents the collective will of the people and is responsible for maintaining law and order. For Hobbes, civil society does not exist as a separate, autonomous sphere from the state, as the state embodies all forms of authority and governance.[10] Hobbes's vision of civil society, therefore, is deeply pessimistic. He did not believe that individuals, left to their own devices, could organize themselves in a peaceful or just manner. Instead, he saw the state as the only institution capable of ensuring social stability and preventing the descent into anarchy.[11] Hobbes's emphasis on the need for a strong, centralized authority would later be criticized by more optimistic thinkers like Locke and Rousseau, who argued that civil society could flourish independently of absolute state control.

It may be observed that till Hobbes, civil society was defined in the light of the prevalent understandings on the state. The individual who constituted civil society was not chosen as a point of reference. This trend is turned on its head by the arrival of John Locke's conceptualization. John Locke (1632–1704), writing a few decades after Hobbes, offered a more optimistic and liberal view of civil society, which would become foundational to modern liberal democracy. Locke's most famous work, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), presents a theory of civil society that is based on the protection of individual rights and limited government.[12] Unlike Hobbes, Locke made a clear distinction between civil society and the state, viewing civil society as a realm of voluntary associations and collective action that exists independently of the government.[13] For Locke, civil society was a space where individuals could cooperate, form associations, and pursue their interests, while the state's role was limited to protecting life, liberty, and property.[14] He argued that government should be based on the consent of the governed, and that its powers should be limited to the protection of individuals' rights, rather than the absolute control advocated by Hobbes. Locke's theory of civil society is notable for its emphasis on individual property rights. He argued that property was a natural extension of an individual's labour and that the protection of property was one of the primary

[9] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), Chapter 17: Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Commonwealth, 119
[10] Hobbes, *op. cit.*, Chapter 18, 129.
[11] Hobbes, *op. cit.*, Chapter 13, 75–76.
[12] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 2nd Treatise, § 87, 298.
[13] Locke, *op. cit.*, § 95, 300.
[14] Locke, *op. cit.*, § 6, 289.

reasons for the formation of civil society.[15] In his view, civil society existed to safeguard individuals' rights to acquire, use, and transfer property without interference from others or from the state. The state's role was to act as a neutral arbiter in disputes over property and to enforce contracts, but it had no right to infringe on individual property rights. In Locke's model, civil society and the state are distinct but interdependent. Civil society is the realm of individual freedom, where people engage in economic, social, and political activities without state interference. The state, on the other hand, exists to protect individuals' rights and to provide a legal framework that ensures justice and order. If the state oversteps its bounds and infringes on individuals' rights, Locke argued, citizens have the right to resist and overthrow the government. *Lock's distinction between civil society and the state laid the groundwork for modern understandings of civil society as a space of freedom and voluntary association, where individuals can pursue their interests independently of the state.*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), the third major Enlightenment thinker, presented a more critical view of civil society in his works, particularly in *The Social Contract* (1762) and *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755). While Locke saw civil society as a realm of freedom and cooperation, Rousseau argued that civil society, as it existed in his time, was a source of inequality, alienation, and corruption.[16] His critique of civil society laid the foundation for later revolutionary movements and provided a counterpoint to the more optimistic views of Hobbes and Locke. Rousseau argued that the transition from the state of nature to civil society occurred when individuals began to claim private property. This marked the beginning of inequality, as some individuals accumulated more wealth and resources than others.[18] According to Rousseau, civil society emerged as a way to protect private property and institutionalize these inequalities. He argued that laws and governments were established not to protect the common good, but to serve the interests of the wealthy and powerful.[17] In this sense, civil society was not a space of freedom and equality, but a mechanism for perpetuating social hierarchies and oppressing most of the population.[18] In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau

[15] C. K. Rowley, "On the Nature of Civil Society," *Transnational Intellectual Review* 2, no. 3 (1998): 45–62, especially, 50–51

[16] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Men*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1914), Part II, 23–24 [18] Rousseau, *op. cit.*, Part II, p. 24.

[17] Makovi, Maureen. "A Methodological Criticism of Rousseau's *Discourse*." *MPRA Paper* 65790 (2015), 2–3,

[18] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), Book I, chapter 6, "Citizen and Legislator," p. 60

proposed an alternative vision of civil society, one based on the concept of the *general will*.[19] He argued that true freedom could only be achieved when individuals came together to form a collective body, guided by the general will, the collective interest of the community as a whole. Rousseau rejected the idea that civil society should protect individual property rights or serve private interests. Instead, he believed that individuals should subordinate their personal desires to the common good, and that laws should be based on the general will, rather than the will of any particular group or class. Rousseau's critique of civil society as a source of inequality and corruption had a profound impact on later political thought, particularly on socialist and revolutionary movements. His emphasis on the importance of collective decision making and the general will inspire calls for more egalitarian forms of governance, where the state would serve the interests of all citizens, rather than just the wealthy elite.

The differences between Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau's views on civil society reflect broader debates about the nature of government, individual rights, and social order. Their differing views on civil society reflect broader tensions in political thought, between authority and freedom, individualism and collectivism, and inequality and justice, that continue to resonate in modern discussions about the role of civil society in contemporary societies. Hobbes viewed civil society as indistinguishable from the state, grounded in the need for absolute authority to prevent disorder. Locke advanced a more optimistic, liberal vision, distinguishing civil society from the state and emphasizing individual rights, property, and limited government. Rousseau, in contrast, presented a critical perspective, arguing that civil society institutionalized inequality and served the interests of the powerful. He proposed an alternative rooted in the general will and collective good. Despite their differences, these thinkers laid the groundwork for later discussions about civil society's relationship with the state, the importance of individual rights, and the potential for collective action to achieve the common good. Their writings continue to influence contemporary debates about the role of civil society in democratic governance, highlighting ongoing tensions between liberty and authority, individualism and collectivism, and equality and power.

As political thought transitioned from the classical formulations to the complexities of modernity, the concept of civil society underwent a profound metamorphosis. No longer confined to the moral and civic ideals of a virtuous polis or the contractual assumptions of early

[19] Della Volpe, Galvano. "The Marxist Critique of Rousseau." *New Left Review* 59 (2010): p. 74, PDF accessed May 6, 2025.

modern theorists, civil society began to be interrogated against the backdrop of industrial capitalism, expanding markets, and the consolidation of state authority. The Enlightenment emphasis on reason and autonomy gave way to deeper inquiries into the structural foundations of modern social life, prompting a reconceptualization of civil society not merely as a normative ideal, but as an arena increasingly conditioned by material forces, economic relations, and institutional contradictions. It is within this context that the contributions of Hegel and Marx emerge—two thinkers who, while diverging sharply in their theoretical commitments, shared a concern for the tensions embedded within modern social formations and the evolving dialectic between individual agency, economic structures, and state power.

The 19th century brought new depth and complexity to the concept of civil society, as the industrial revolution, the rise of capitalism, and the growing power of the nation-state prompted political philosophers to reconsider the relationship between individuals, the economy, and the state. Two of the most influential thinkers of this period, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx, offered distinct but interconnected perspectives on civil society. While both recognized civil society as a crucial element of modern life, their views diverged sharply on its role and function. Hegel saw civil society as a necessary space for economic activity and individual freedom, yet one that required the state to mediate its inherent conflicts. Marx, on the other hand, offered a more critical perspective, arguing that civil society was inherently exploitative, serving as a reflection of the capitalist economy and perpetuating class divisions.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) is often credited with providing one of the first comprehensive analyses of civil society in the modern era. In his work *Philosophy of Right* (1820), Hegel developed a complex and nuanced understanding of civil society, which he placed between the family and the state in his tripartite model of society.[20] For Hegel, civil society represented the realm of economic and social life, where individuals pursued their personal interests, engaged in economic activity, and formed associations.[23] It was a space where individual freedom and self-interest were realized, but it was also fraught with tension and conflict, necessitating the intervention of the state to maintain order and justice. Hegel's analysis of civil society is part of his broader philosophical system, which sought to reconcile individual freedom with the demands of the collective. Unlike earlier philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke, who viewed civil society primarily in terms of its relationship to the state

[20] Hegel, G. W. F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Edited by Allen W. Wood. Translated by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, §182–187. [23] Ibid., Preface, 14.

or the protection of individual rights, Hegel saw civil society as a distinct sphere with its own internal dynamics.[21] In *Philosophy of Right*, he argued that civil society was "the achievement of the modern world" because it allowed individuals to pursue their economic and social interests in ways that were not possible in earlier forms of social organization.[22] Hegel's civil society was fundamentally tied to the rise of capitalism and the modern market economy.[23] He saw civil society as the space where individuals engaged in production, trade, and exchange, driven by their personal needs and desires. However, Hegel recognized that the pursuit of individual interests in civil society could lead to inequality, alienation, and social fragmentation.[27] He noted that the "system of needs" (the market economy) in civil society could create disparities between the rich and the poor, leading to poverty and exclusion.[24] *In this sense, civil society was a site of both freedom and conflict, where individuals were free to pursue their own goals, but where those pursuits often led to social tensions and economic disparities.* To address the contradictions of civil society, Hegel argued that the state was necessary to mediate the conflicts that arose from the pursuit of individual interests.[25] For Hegel, the state represented the highest form of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), where the interests of the individual and the collective could be harmonized. The state, in Hegel's view, was not merely a coercive apparatus, as Hobbes had suggested, but an embodiment of rational freedom.[26]It provided the legal and institutional frameworks that allowed civil society to function while ensuring that the inequalities and conflicts generated by the market did not destabilize society as a whole.[27] Hegel's view of civil society as a distinct sphere of economic life, regulated and supported by the state, was highly influential in the development of later theories of civil society.[28] He recognized the importance of civil society as a space for individual freedom and economic activity but also saw its limitations and contradictions.[33] His analysis laid the groundwork for later critiques of capitalism, particularly those of Karl Marx, who would take

[21] Ibid., §182, 220.
[22] Ibid., §185–187, 223–228.
[23] Ibid., §244–246, 266–269 [27]
Ibid., §256–260, 276–282.
[24] bid., §258, 278.
[25] Avineri, Shlomo. *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, 137– 144.
[26] Avineri, *op. cit.,* 182–185.
[27] Pelczynski, Zbigniew A. "The Significance of Hegel's Separation of the State and Civil Society." *The British Journal of Sociology* 18, no. 2 (1967), 114–126.
[28] Pelczynski, op. cit., 119–121.
[33] Avineri, *op. cit.,* 147–149.

issue with Hegel's optimistic view of the state as the guarantor of justice and freedom.[29] Karl Marx (1818–1883) offered a radically different interpretation of civil society, one that was deeply critical of the inequalities and exploitative relationships that characterized modern capitalist society.[30] While Hegel viewed civil society as a space of freedom and self-interest that required the state's mediation, Marx saw civil society as the reflection of the economic base, particularly the capitalist mode of production.[31] In Marx's view, civil society was not an autonomous sphere where individuals could freely pursue their interests; rather, it was a product of the material conditions of life, shaped by the dominant economic system.[32] Marx's analysis of civil society is closely tied to his broader critique of capitalism. In *The German Ideology* (1845), which he co-wrote with Friedrich Engels, Marx argued that civil society is determined by the "mode of production," or the way in which goods and services are produced and distributed in society. According to Marx, the capitalist mode of production creates class divisions, with the bourgeoisie (the owners of capital) exploiting the proletariat (the working class) for profit. Civil society, in this framework, is not a neutral space of voluntary association and individual freedom, as liberal theorists like Locke had suggested, but a battleground where class struggles are played out. For Marx, the rise of civil society was inseparable from the development of capitalism. He argued that civil society, as it emerged in the modern era, was a product of the bourgeois revolution, which transformed feudal societies into capitalist ones. The bourgeoisie, through the development of industrial production and private property, created a civil society that reflected its own interests.[33] In this sense, civil society was a space where the ruling class maintained its dominance, using legal, political, and cultural institutions to perpetuate its economic power.[34] In *The German Ideology*, Marx famously stated that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas".[35] This means that the institutions of civil society, such as the family, the church, the media, and educational systems are shaped by the

[29] Marx, Karl. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Edited by Joseph O'Malley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, Introduction, 3–6.
[30] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part I, "Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas," PDF (Marxists Internet Archive), 20 / 69
[31] Bob Jessop, *The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods* (Oxford: Martin Robertson; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 18–21
[32] Karl Marx, "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), PDF, 1–2
[33] Marx, Karl. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Edited by Joseph O'Malley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, 138.
[34] Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Verso, 1998, pp. 14–17.
[35] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part I, "Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas," PDF (Marxists Internet Archive), 20 / 69, accessed April 14, 2025,

interests of the bourgeoisie.[36] These institutions serve to legitimize the existing social order and obscure the exploitative nature of capitalist relations. For Marx, civil society is not a space of genuine freedom or equality, but a reflection of the underlying economic base, where the dominant class imposes its ideology on the rest of society. Marx's most detailed critique of civil society comes in his early work *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843), where he takes issue with Hegel's portrayal of the state as the guarantor of justice and freedom. Marx argued that the state, far from mediating the contradictions of civil society, was itself a tool of the bourgeoisie, used to enforce capitalist interests. According to Marx, the state serves to protect private property, maintain the legal frameworks that facilitate capitalist exploitation, and suppress the revolutionary potential of the working class. In this sense, the state is not a neutral actor that stands above civil society, but an instrument of class domination. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels argued that the contradictions inherent in civil society, particularly the exploitation of labour by capital would eventually lead to the collapse of the capitalist system. They envisioned a future in which the working class would overthrow the bourgeoisie, abolish private property, and establish a classless society. In this post-revolutionary society, the state would "wither away," and civil society, as a reflection of capitalist exploitation, would be transformed into a space of true freedom and equality.[37] Marx's critique of civil society is rooted in his materialist conception of history, which holds that the economic base (the forces and relations of production) determines the superstructure (the political, legal, and cultural institutions of society). For Marx, civil society is part of the superstructure, shaped by the economic conditions of the time. Under capitalism, civil society is a space where the bourgeoisie consolidates its power and legitimizes its exploitation of the working class.[38] This critical perspective on civil society has had a profound influence on later Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers, who have expanded on Marx's analysis to explore the ways in which civil society institutions perpetuate class domination in capitalist societies. The differences between Hegel and Marx's views on civil society reflect their broader philosophical and political disagreements. For Hegel, civil society was a necessary and important sphere of modern life, where individuals could pursue their economic interests and develop their personal freedom. However, he recognized that civil society generated conflicts and inequalities that required the state to mediate and regulate. Hegel believed that the state, as the highest form of

[36] Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Verso, 1998, 14–17.
[37] Cohen, G. A. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 119– 126.
[38] Avineri, Shlomo. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, 73–81

ethical life, could harmonize the interests of individuals and the collective, ensuring justice and stability in society. Marx, in contrast, saw civil society as a reflection of the capitalist mode of production, where class divisions and exploitation were perpetuated. For Marx, civil society was not a space of freedom or equality, but a battleground where the bourgeoisie maintained its dominance over the proletariat. Marx rejected Hegel's view of the state as a neutral mediator, arguing instead that the state was a tool of the ruling class, used to protect private property and suppress the working class. While Hegel acknowledged the contradictions of civil society, he believed that these contradictions could be resolved through the rational administration of the state. Marx, however, argued that the contradictions of civil society were inherent to capitalism and could only be resolved through a revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the abolition of private property. In this sense, Marx's critique of civil society is more radical than Hegel's, as he saw civil society as a product of the capitalist system that would inevitably be transformed through class struggle. Hegel's recognition of the tensions and contradictions within civil society remains relevant in discussions about the role of the state in regulating the market, addressing inequality, and ensuring social justice. His belief that civil society requires state intervention to resolve its inherent conflicts has influenced modern welfare states and social democratic models of governance. Marx's critique of civil society as a space of class domination has also had a lasting impact, particularly in critical theory, neo-Marxism, and post-colonial studies. His analysis of the ways in which civil society institutions serve to maintain the power of the ruling class has been applied to critiques of media, education, and political institutions in capitalist societies. Moreover, Marx's vision of a post-capitalist society, where civil society is transformed into a space of true freedom and equality, continues to inspire revolutionary movements and critiques of neoliberalism. Hegel and Marx's contributions to the understanding of civil society in modernity offer two contrasting but deeply interconnected perspectives on the relationship between individuals, the economy, and the state. Hegel's vision of civil society as a space of economic activity and individual freedom, regulated by the state, reflects the complexities and contradictions of modern capitalist societies. Marx's critique of civil society as a reflection of capitalist exploitation challenges this view, offering a more radical analysis of the ways in which civil society institutions perpetuate inequality and class domination. Together, their works provide a rich theoretical foundation for understanding the role of civil society in the modern world, shaping debates about justice, freedom, and social change that continue to this day.

A regional conceptualisation of civil society necessitates moving beyond Eurocentric binaries and engaging with the specificities of postcolonial state formation in South Asia. In Western liberal thought, civil society is often idealised as an autonomous sphere separate from the state, safeguarding individual liberties and acting as a counterbalance to political authority. It is viewed as the bedrock of democratic culture, premised on pluralism, voluntary association, and rule of law. In contrast, Marxist and structuralist interpretations regard civil society not as a neutral domain but as a site embedded within class relations and ideological reproduction. From this vantage, civil society does not merely mediate between the individual and the state but plays an instrumental role in consolidating bourgeois hegemony. These divergent perspectives frame civil society either as an emancipatory space or as an extension of structural domination. Such dichotomies become particularly complex when applied to postcolonial polities conditioned by historical unevenness and contested sovereignties

Neo-Marxist Perspective

Antonio Gramsci, an influential Marxist theorist and leader of the Italian Communist Party, introduced significant advancements to Marxist thought, particularly regarding the understanding of civil society.[39] His concepts of hegemony, organic intellectuals, and the intricate relationship between civil society and political society have profoundly shaped neo Marxist perspectives.[45] Gramsci's nuanced approach moved beyond the traditional economic determinism of classical Marxism, emphasizing the role of culture, ideology, and consent in maintaining and challenging social order.[40] This section delves into Gramsci's contributions to the concept of civil society, explores the development of neo-Marxist thought influenced by his ideas, and examines the application of his theories in contemporary contexts, including South Asia. Antonio Gramsci’s most enduring contribution to political theory is his concept of hegemony, which redefines how power and dominance are maintained in society.[41] Unlike classical Marxism, which predominantly focuses on economic factors and class struggle as the primary drivers of social change, Gramsci introduced a more complex understanding of power dynamics that includes cultural and ideological dimensions. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci argued that the ruling class sustains its dominance not solely through coercion and economic

[39] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey NowellSmith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), Preface, ix–x, [45] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 12–15.
[40] Ibid., 176–178
[41] Ibid., “Hegemony” essay in Notebook 2, 12–13.

control but also by cultivating a cultural and ideological consensus that makes their rule appear natural and beneficial to all members of society.[42] Hegemony, according to Gramsci, operates through civil society, which he defines as the sphere of social institutions and organizations outside the state apparatus that influence and shape public opinion and cultural norms.[43] Civil society encompasses a wide range of entities, including schools, churches, media, trade unions, and voluntary associations, all of which play a critical role in disseminating the dominant ideology and maintaining social cohesion. Through these institutions, the ruling class propagates its values and norms, securing the consent of the subordinate classes to their own domination without the need for overt coercion.[44] Gramsci's analysis distinguishes between two types of power: coercive power, exercised by the state, and ideological power, exercised through civil society.[4] While the state enforces laws and maintains order through institutions like the police and military, civil society shapes the consciousness of individuals, embedding the ruling class's worldview into everyday life. This dual mechanism ensures that the ruling class's dominance is both enforced and internalized, making it more stable and resilient against challenges. A key aspect of Gramsci's theory is the role of organic intellectuals.[45] Unlike traditional intellectuals who are detached from the working class and serve the interests of the bourgeoisie, organic intellectuals emerge from within the working class and articulate its experiences, aspirations, and demands. These intellectuals are instrumental in developing a counter-hegemonic culture that challenges the dominant ideology and fosters a sense of solidarity and collective identity among the oppressed classes. By mobilizing civil society, organic intellectuals help to create the conditions necessary for social transformation and the eventual overthrow of the capitalist system. Gramsci's theories have significantly influenced neo-Marxist thought, which seeks to adapt and expand upon classical Marxist ideas to address the complexities of modern capitalist societies.[46] Neo-Marxism incorporates Gramsci's insights into cultural hegemony and the role of ideology, recognizing that economic factors alone cannot fully explain the persistence of capitalist systems. Instead, neo-Marxists argue that culture and ideology are integral to maintaining class structures and social inequalities. One prominent strand of neo-Marxism is the Frankfurt School's critical theory, which builds on Gramsci's ideas by emphasizing the role of mass media and culture in shaping consciousness and

[42] Ibid.,57–58 ("ruling ideas" passage)
[43] Ibid., 20–21 (civil society institutions discussion).
[44] Ibid., 323–324 (ideological state apparatuses)
[45] Ibid., "Organic Intellectuals" essay, 5–7
[46] Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), "Gramsci's Cultural Politics," 34–35

perpetuating domination. Thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse explored how cultural industries create false needs and manipulate public opinion, thereby maintaining the status quo and suppressing dissent. Another significant development in neo-Marxist thought influenced by Gramsci is the emphasis on intersectionality and identity politics.[47] Scholars argue that civil society is not only a site of class struggle but also a space where various forms of oppression intersect and interact, such as race, gender, and sexuality. This perspective broadens the scope of Marxist analysis to include multiple axes of power and resistance, recognizing the diverse and multifaceted nature of social conflicts within civil society. Gramsci's theories have been particularly influential in post-colonial contexts, where civil society often plays a crucial role in resisting imperialism, fostering national identity, and addressing social injustices.

In South Asia, Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and organic intellectuals provide valuable tools for analysing the complex interplay between state power, ethnic identities, and civil society organizations. Gramsci's ideas continue to influence contemporary neo-Marxist scholars who seek to understand and challenge the complexities of modern capitalism and its impact on civil society. Scholars like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams have extended Gramsci's theories to explore the relationship between culture, media, and power, emphasizing the role of cultural production in maintaining and contesting hegemony. Their work underscores the importance of cultural resistance and the potential for civil society to be a space of transformative social change. Additionally, the concept of hegemony has been applied to analyse global power structures and transnational civil society organizations. In an increasingly interconnected world, Gramsci's ideas help to illuminate how global elites exert cultural and ideological influence across national boundaries, shaping the agendas and activities of international NGOs and other civil society actors. Antonio Gramsci's contributions to the understanding of civil society have had a profound and lasting impact on Marxist and neo-Marxist thought. His concepts of hegemony, organic intellectuals, and the intricate relationship between civil society and the state provide a sophisticated framework for analysing the cultural and ideological dimensions of power and resistance. Gramsci's theories have been instrumental in expanding the scope of Marxist analysis to include the role of culture and ideology in maintaining social order and in fostering the potential for social transformation. Gramsci's rearticulation of

[47] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25, no. 1 (1990), 56–57

Marxist thought, with its emphasis on hegemony, organic intellectuals, and the ideological role of civil society, presents a complex and layered understanding of power that extends far beyond the realm of economic determinism. By foregrounding the cultural and ideological dimensions of consent, Gramsci illuminated how domination is normalized through everyday institutions, thus opening new pathways for resistance within civil society itself. His influence on neo-Marxist thought remains foundational, particularly in highlighting how civil society operates as both a terrain of control and a potential site for emancipatory politics. This framework has proved especially pertinent in post-colonial contexts, where struggles over identity, legitimacy, and state power are deeply embedded within civil discourses. Building on this, contemporary theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Robert Putnam have further interrogated civil society's democratic potential, shifting focus towards communication, trust, and civic participation as essential pillars of collective life in modern democracies.

Contemporary Theories

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, two prominent thinkers, Jürgen Habermas and Robert Putnam, significantly expanded the theoretical landscape of civil society, focusing on its role in fostering democratic participation, public discourse, social capital, and civic engagement.[48] While both thinkers are concerned with the health of democratic institutions and the involvement of citizens in public life, they approach the concept of civil society from different angles.[49] Habermas emphasizes the importance of rational-critical debate in the public sphere as central to a functioning democracy, whereas Putnam highlights the importance of social capital, networks of trust, and civic engagement in strengthening the fabric of democratic society.[50] Their contributions have had a lasting influence on political theory, sociology, and the study of civil society, offering valuable insights into how citizens interact with one another, institutions, and the state.[51] This section explores the key ideas of Habermas and Putnam, compares their perspectives on civil society, and assesses their relevance to contemporary democratic governance. Jürgen Habermas, a German sociologist and philosopher, is best known

[48] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), Preface, pp. ix–x.
[49] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), Introduction, 1–3.
[50] Habermas, *op. cit.*, 23–24.
[51] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), Introduction, 20–22

for his theory of communicative action and his concept of the public sphere.[52] Habermas's ideas on civil society are deeply rooted in his broader theory of communication, which he developed in his seminal work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981).[53] For Habermas, the public sphere is a critical aspect of civil society, serving as a space where individuals come together to engage in rational critical debate about matters of public concern, free from the influence of both the state and the market.[54] Habermas traces the historical origins of the public sphere to the bourgeois society of the 18th century, where individuals gathered in salons, coffeehouses, and reading clubs to discuss politics, economics, and culture. These spaces allowed for open dialogue and the exchange of ideas, fostering the development of public opinion and contributing to the democratization of society.[55] In this context, the public sphere was seen as a vital component of civil society, providing a forum for citizens to engage with each other and with political authority in a way that was independent of state control.[56] Central to Habermas's theory is the concept of communicative rationality, which refers to the process of reaching understanding and consensus through rational dialogue. In a healthy public sphere, individuals engage in debate not merely to assert their own interests but to listen to and critically engage with the perspectives of others, with the aim of arriving at a shared understanding or consensus on matters of public importance. For Habermas, this process of communicative action is essential for the functioning of democratic society, as it allows citizens to influence political decisions and hold the state accountable. However, Habermas also warns that the ideal of the public sphere has been undermined in modern capitalist societies, where the media and other institutions of civil society have become increasingly commercialized and subject to state and corporate influence. He argues that the public sphere has been "refeudalised," with public discourse increasingly shaped by private interests rather than genuine democratic deliberation. In this sense, Habermas sees the decline of the public sphere as a threat to the vitality of civil society and the health of democratic institutions. Habermas's work has had a profound influence on debates about the role of civil society in democracy, particularly in relation to the media, public discourse, and political participation. His emphasis on the importance of communicative action and the public sphere has inspired scholars and activists to advocate for the revitalization

[52] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), Introduction, pp.
xxv–xxvii
[53] Habermas, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 84–86.
[54] Habermas, *op. cit.*, 28–30.
[55] Habermas, *op. cit.*, 34–35.
[56] Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” *Social Text* 25, no. 1 (1990): pp. 56–57

of public spaces where citizens can engage in open and meaningful dialogue about political issues. In this way, Habermas's theory provides a framework for understanding how civil society can serve as a site of democratic renewal, even in the face of growing pressures from the state and the market.

Robert Putnam, an American political scientist and sociologist, approaches civil society from a different perspective, focusing on the concept of social capital and its role in fostering civic engagement and democratic participation. [57] In his influential work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), Putnam argues that social capital, the networks of trust, reciprocity, and social ties that bind individuals together, plays a crucial role in sustaining healthy democratic societies.[58] According to Putnam, civil society thrives when individuals are connected to one another through these networks, which facilitate cooperation, collective action, and mutual support.[59] Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital: bonding and bridging social capital.[66] Bonding social capital refers to the strong ties that connect individuals within close-knit communities, such as families, religious groups, and ethnic associations. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to the weaker ties that connect individuals across different social groups, fostering broader social cohesion and solidarity.[67] Both types of social capital are important for the functioning of civil society, as they help to build trust and cooperation among citizens. Putnam's research in *Bowling Alone* reveals a troubling trend: the decline of social capital in the United States since the mid-20th century.[60] He documents how civic participation in voluntary organizations, such as labour unions, political parties, and social clubs, has significantly diminished over the past several decades.[61] This decline in civic engagement, Putnam argues, has weakened the fabric of civil society, leading to a reduction in trust, social cooperation, and political participation. The metaphor of "bowling alone" encapsulates Putnam's argument.[62] While more people are bowling than ever before, fewer are doing so in leagues or groups. This shift from collective activity to individualism reflects broader social changes that have contributed to the erosion of

[57] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), Introduction, 3–5.
[58] Putnam, *op. cit.*, Chapter 1, 18–20.
[59] Putnam, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2, 38–39. [66]
Putnam, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3, 66–67 [67] Putnam,
op. cit., Chapters 3–4, 68–72.
[60] Putnam, *op. cit.*, Chapter 5, 120–123; Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), Chapter 2, 37–40
[61] Putnam, *op. cit.*, Chapter 6, 134–136
[62] Putnam, *op. cit.*, Chapter 7, 145–146

community life and civic engagement.[63] Putnam links this decline in social capital to various factors, including suburbanization, the rise of television and other forms of mass media, and generational changes in attitudes toward civic participation.[64] For Putnam, the decline of social capital has significant implications for democracy. When individuals are less connected to one another and less engaged in civic life, they are less likely to participate in political processes, hold public officials accountable, or work together to address common problems. In this sense, civil society's ability to foster democratic governance and collective action is weakened. However, Putnam remains hopeful that social capital can be rebuilt through initiatives that promote civic engagement, community building, and participation in voluntary organizations. Putnam's work has sparked widespread debate about the role of civil society in modern democracies and the factors contributing to the decline of civic engagement. His emphasis on social capital has influenced policymakers, scholars, and activists who are concerned with strengthening democratic participation and community life. In particular, his research has drawn attention to the importance of local-level initiatives, such as community organizing and volunteerism, in revitalizing civil society and fostering greater social cohesion.

While both Habermas and Putnam are concerned with the health of civil society and its role in supporting democratic governance, their approaches reflect different emphases and intellectual traditions. Habermas, drawing on the European philosophical tradition, focuses on the importance of communicative rationality and the public sphere as spaces for critical debate and democratic deliberation. For him, civil society is a space where individuals engage in reasoned dialogue, challenging the state and holding political power accountable. Habermas's concern with the commercialization and re-feudalization of the public sphere highlights the ways in which civil society can be compromised by market forces and state control. Putnam, on the other hand, approaches civil society from an empirical and sociological perspective, emphasizing the importance of social capital and civic engagement in sustaining democratic institutions. For Putnam, civil society is strengthened by networks of trust, reciprocity, and voluntary associations, which facilitate cooperation and collective action. His focus on the decline of social capital in the United States points to a different kind of crisis in civil society—one that is characterized not by the intrusion of market forces or state power, but by the weakening of social bonds and community engagement. Despite these differences, both

[63] Putnam, *op. cit.*, Chapters 8–9, 162–165

[64] Robert D. Putnam and Robert Leonardi, "Social Capital: Measurement and Consequences," an article in *Canadian Journal of Policy Research* 2, no. 1 (2001): 41–54, esp. 43–44

Habermas and Putnam share a concern with the erosion of civil society in modern democracies and the potential consequences for democratic governance. Habermas's work highlights the importance of creating spaces for open and inclusive public debate, while Putnam's research underscores the need to rebuild social capital and strengthen community ties. Together, their theories offer complementary perspectives on the challenges facing civil society in the contemporary world and provide valuable insights into how democratic participation and civic engagement can be revitalized. Jürgen Habermas and Robert Putnam have each made significant contributions to the understanding of civil society, offering distinct but complementary perspectives on its role in democratic governance. Habermas's theory of the public sphere and communicative action emphasizes the importance of rational-critical debate in holding the state accountable and fostering democratic deliberation. Putnam's focus on social capital and civic engagement highlights the importance of trust, cooperation, and participation in sustaining the health of civil society and democratic institutions. Both thinkers raise important concerns about the erosion of civil society in modern capitalist democracies, pointing to the decline of public discourse, civic participation, and social cohesion. Their work has inspired scholars, activists, and policymakers to explore ways to strengthen civil society and promote greater engagement in public life. In this way, Habermas and Putnam provide valuable frameworks for understanding the challenges and opportunities facing civil society in the 21st century.

Exploring Modern Theoretical Perspectives in South Asian Context

In the context of South Asia, exploring modern theoretical perspectives becomes essential due to the region's unique political experiences, historical legacies, and ongoing transformations. Classical theories, while foundational, often emerge from European contexts and do not fully account for the complexities of postcolonial societies. South Asia's civil societies operate within a landscape marked by ethnic diversity, deep-rooted social hierarchies, and frequent tensions between state authority and grassroots movements. In such scenario, civil society does not play a fixed or singular role, it may support democratic participation at one moment and align with dominant power structures at another. Modern theories, such as those of Gramsci, Habermas, and Putnam, provide more adaptable tools to understand these shifts. They help explain how culture, communication, and social networks influence civic life and political engagement. By focusing on contemporary approaches, scholars are better equipped to grasp how civil society functions not just as a space of resistance but also negotiation and adaptation.

This understanding is crucial for studying South Asia, where political and social realities are constantly evolving, and where civil society often becomes a key actor in both challenging and shaping governance.

The concept of civil society and its theoretical frameworks, largely developed in Western contexts, have often been applied to analyse the dynamics of society, politics, and governance in other regions of the world. However, the unique socio-political landscapes, historical legacies, and cultural specificities of regions such as South Asia require an adaptation and reinterpretation of these theories to reflect the realities on the ground. In South Asia, a region marked by colonial legacies, ethnic diversity, socio-economic inequalities, and frequent political instability, civil society has played a complex and often ambivalent role in shaping governance, resistance, and social transformation. This section will explore how the theories of civil society proposed by thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Jürgen Habermas, and Robert Putnam are relevant to the South Asian context, particularly in countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. By examining the application of these theories in the region, we can better understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by civil society in South Asia, where it operates in environments shaped by historical tensions, rapid modernization, and ongoing struggles for democracy and social justice.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and the role of civil society as a site of ideological struggle has been especially influential in analysing the dynamics of power, culture, and resistance in post-colonial South Asia. In the context of South Asia, where colonialism left deep political, economic, and cultural scars, Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps explain how ruling elites maintain their dominance not just through coercive state apparatuses but also through cultural and ideological means. Civil society in countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan often reflects these hegemonic structures, as ruling elites seek to consolidate their power by promoting specific national narratives, religious ideologies, and cultural identities. In India, for example, the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) has often been shaped by the dominant ideology of the ruling class, which has sought to promote a specific version of Indian nationalism that reflects the interests of the political elite. This was particularly evident during the rise of Hindu nationalism, where cultural and religious organizations within civil society played a crucial role in promoting the hegemonic ideology of Hindutva, which asserts the primacy of Hindu values and identity in the Indian state. Gramsci's notion of civil society as a battleground for ideological hegemony is clearly applicable here, as various actors within civil

society, including religious groups, political parties, and media organizations, compete to shape the public discourse and align it with their vision of Indian identity and statehood. However, Gramsci's framework also offers insights into how subordinate groups in South Asia can use civil society to resist the dominance of ruling elites and promote alternative visions of society. In Bangladesh, for instance, labour unions, feminist groups, and human rights organizations have used civil society as a platform to challenge the state's neoliberal policies and advocate for greater social and economic justice. These groups act as counter-hegemonic forces, contesting the dominant narratives of economic growth and development that often ignore the needs and rights of marginalized communities. Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals, individuals who emerge from within the working class and other oppressed groups to articulate their struggles and demands, is particularly relevant in these contexts, as these civil society actors play a critical role in mobilizing resistance and fostering social change.

Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere, where citizens engage in rational-critical debate about public issues, offers another valuable framework for understanding the role of civil society in South Asia. In many parts of South Asia, the public sphere is highly fragmented, with deep divisions along lines of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and gender, making the ideal of inclusive and rational debate difficult to achieve. However, despite these challenges, the public sphere in South Asia has proven to be a dynamic and contested space, where different groups within civil society strive to shape public opinion and influence political decision-making. In India, for example, the media plays a crucial role in the public sphere, serving as a platform for debate and discussion on a wide range of political and social issues. However, as Habermas warned, the commercialization of the media has undermined the potential for genuine public discourse, with corporate interests often shaping news coverage and editorial agendas. This commercialization of the media in India has led to the dominance of certain narratives, often those that align with the interests of the political and economic elite, while marginalizing dissenting voices, particularly those of marginalized communities such as Dalits, Adivasis, and religious minorities. Nevertheless, civil society organizations in India continue to use alternative forms of media, such as digital platforms and community radio, to create spaces for inclusive debate and critical discussion. These platforms provide a voice to those who are often excluded from mainstream media, such as women, lower-caste groups, and rural communities, enabling them to participate in the public sphere and challenge dominant narratives. In this sense, Habermas's concept of the public sphere remains relevant, as civil society actors in South Asia work to create alternative public spaces that promote democratic deliberation and the

inclusion of marginalized voices. In Pakistan, the role of civil society in the public sphere has been equally complex, with the state often seeking to suppress dissenting voices and limit the scope of public debate. The Pakistani government has frequently used legal and coercive measures to control the media and restrict the activities of civil society organizations, particularly those that challenge the state's policies on issues such as human rights, religious freedom, and governance. However, despite these challenges, civil society in Pakistan has managed to carve out spaces for public debate, particularly through the use of social media and other digital platforms. These platforms have allowed activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens to engage in critical discussions about state policies, corruption, and social justice, often at great personal risk.

Robert Putnam's concept of social capital, which emphasizes the importance of trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement in building strong democratic societies, also offers a useful lens for understanding civil society in South Asia. In countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, social capital plays a crucial role in shaping the relationships between citizens, communities, and the state. However, the levels and types of social capital vary significantly across different regions and social groups, reflecting the deep social and economic inequalities that characterize South Asia. In India, for example, social capital is often unevenly distributed, with strong bonding social capital within certain communities, such as caste groups, religious organizations, and ethnic communities—but weaker bridging social capital that connects individuals across different social divides. This uneven distribution of social capital can reinforce existing social hierarchies and contribute to the exclusion of marginalized groups from political and economic opportunities. For instance, caste-based networks can provide support and resources to individuals within the same caste, but they may also perpetuate social exclusion and discrimination against lower-caste groups such as Dalits. However, Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging social capital also helps to identify potential areas for strengthening civil society in South Asia. In recent years, civil society organizations in India and Bangladesh have worked to build networks of trust and cooperation across different social divides, particularly through initiatives focused on interfaith dialogue, community development, and inclusive governance. These efforts aim to foster bridging social capital, which can help to reduce social tensions and promote greater social cohesion in diverse and divided societies.

Civil society in Sri Lanka: Nature and Dynamics

Introduction

Sri Lanka is geographically located and culturally intertwined with South Asia. The relevance of theoretical schools conceptualizing the remit of civil society provides a helpful starting point to understand the South Asian context. As explored in the previous chapter, Gramsci's concept of hegemony and the role of organic intellectuals offer a powerful framework for analysing how civil society in South Asia can serve as both a domain of domination and resistance, particularly in contexts of ethnic conflict, religious nationalism, and state repression. Habermas's theory of the public sphere provides valuable insights into the ways civil society actors create spaces for democratic deliberation and public debate, even in highly fragmented and unequal societies. Finally, Putnam's focus on social capital highlights the importance of trust, cooperation, and civic engagement in building strong democratic institutions and fostering social cohesion. Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of civil society's potential and limitations in South Asia, where the struggles for democracy, social justice, and inclusive governance continue to shape the region's political landscape.

At the same time, the application of Western civil society models to South Asia, including to Sri Lanka, has exposed critical shortcomings about their relevance and efficacy in addressing the region's unique historical, social, and political contexts. While the theoretical frameworks developed by thinkers such as John Locke, Jürgen Habermas, and Robert Putnam have significantly influenced the global understanding of civil society, their assumptions about the nature of state-society relations, the role of individuals in civic engagement, and the mechanisms of democratic participation do not always align with the realities found in South Asia. This dissonance stems from the deep-rooted colonial legacies, complex social hierarchies, religious diversity, and post-colonial state formation that have profoundly shaped South Asian societies. As a result, the Western models of civil society often fail to capture the dynamics of power, exclusion, and resistance in this region, necessitating a more nuanced and localized understanding of civil society in South Asia. In many South Asian contexts, civil society has evolved not merely as a sphere distinct from the state and market, as commonly understood in liberal Western theory, but as a deeply embedded social and political space intertwined with

kinship structures, religious institutions, and patronage networks.[1] For instance, in India and Sri Lanka, religious organizations, caste associations, and community-based networks often perform functions that go beyond conventional civic engagement, acting as agents of both empowerment and exclusion. These formations frequently challenge the Western binary of state versus civil society by demonstrating the hybrid nature of associational life, which is often co-opted or shaped by state institutions themselves.[2] Moreover, the historical experience of colonialism in South Asia has left a legacy in which the state is viewed less as a neutral arbiter and more as an instrument of control, often used to suppress dissent or maintain hierarchical social orders. As a result, civil society actors in the region frequently adopt oppositional roles, engaging in activism that challenges state authority and seeks alternative visions of justice and representation.[3] This oppositional stance complicates the more collaborative or deliberative vision of civil society found in Western thought, particularly in the works of Habermas, where civil society is framed as a communicative realm supporting liberal democracy.

Further, the persistence of ethnic conflict, religious tensions, and gender-based discrimination in South Asia means that civil society is often shaped by struggles for recognition and survival rather than deliberative dialogue or consensus building. In Sri Lanka, for example, Tamil and Muslim civil society organisations have historically emerged in response to majoritarian state practices and ethnic violence, focusing on resistance, documentation of abuse, and international advocacy rather than on fostering consensus through national public spheres.[4] This suggests that the functions and aims of civil society in South Asia must be evaluated within specific socio-political contexts rather than through abstract universal models. Thus, to adequately capture the character of civil society in South Asia, scholars and practitioners must move beyond Eurocentric paradigms and develop regionally grounded frameworks that acknowledge the multiplicity of actors, the asymmetry of power, and the embeddedness of social structures. The region's unique political, social, and economic challenges necessitate a nuanced understanding of civil society's role in both maintaining and challenging hegemonic structures.

[1] Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 52–55, 88–89
[2] Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 88–89
[3] Nira Wickramasinghe, *Civil Society in Sri Lanka: New Circles of Power* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 12-15
[4] Camilla Orjuela, *Civil Society in Civil War: The Case of Sri Lanka*, PhD diss., University of Gothenburg, 2004, 20–25.

This reorientation enables a more accurate assessment of both the potentials and limitations of civil society in promoting democratic transformation and social justice in the region.[5]

Evolution of Civil Society in Sri Lanka: An Overview

Civil society in Sri Lanka crystallized during the colonial period with the emergence of voluntary associations, religious groups, and local philanthropic organizations. These early formations were rooted in indigenous traditions of community initiatives and often sought patronage in religious institutions. The post-independence period saw a broadening in civil society, particularly with the emergence of trade unions, student movements, and professional associations acting as pressure groups. However, the onset of the civil war in 1983 and the protracted conflict between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) deeply impacted the role and scope of civil society, polarizing its orientation towards the majoritarian state of the demands of the minority Tamils. The prolonged duration of the armed conflict compelled civil society to shift from routine associational and professional activities toward conflict-driven engagements, focused on humanitarian relief, human rights protection, and peacebuilding.[6] As violence, displacement, and state securitisation intensified after 1983, civil society organisations increasingly responded to immediate survival needs and rights violations, making conflict mitigation and civilian protection central to their work rather than supplementary concerns.[7]

As discussed in the previous chapter, Habermas's notion of the public sphere notionally defines civil society as not simply a collection of organisations; it is constituted by "spaces of communicative interaction" in which citizens come together as a public to discuss matters of mutual concern and coordinate collective action. In this framework, the public sphere is a domain of social life where individuals and groups engage in dialogue, form public opinion, and mediate between society and the state without coercion or private interests dominating the discourse. Social capital from this perspective is therefore not just interpersonal trust or organisational density, but the capacity of a society to sustain communication, cooperation, and mutual recognition across diverse social terrains. In the Sri Lankan context, this Habermasian

[5] John Harriss, Kristian Stokke, and Olle Törnquist, "Introduction: The New Local Politics of Democratisation," in *Politicising Democracy: The New Local Politics of Democratisation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 23–24, 29, 36–38.
[6] Camilla Orjuela, "Building Peace in Sri Lanka: a Role for Civil Society?," *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 2 (March 2003): 195–212, Accessed March 12, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343303040002004
[7] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Civil Society and the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, 9–14

lens helps us understand better the evolving nature of its civil society through the changing domestic political contexts.

At present, the Sri Lankan civil society comprises a wide range of *associational forms*, including religious institutions, development movements such as the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, women's organisations, trade unions, welfare societies, and community groups, that operate at village, urban, and national levels and provide forums for collective action. It includes *informal social relationships* such as family networks, neighbourhood ties, and religious community interactions, which support mutual aid, resilience, and everyday cooperation, especially under conditions of conflict and crisis. It also includes *communicative public spaces* such as print media, digital platforms, public meetings, and protest sites, where private concerns are transformed into shared public discussions. Finally, cross-communal initiatives, such as interfaith networks and women's peace movements, represent attempts to extend communicative cooperation across ethnic and religious divides, contributing to bridging social capital. Taken together, it may be inferred that these elements demonstrate that Sri Lankan social capital is composed of *associations, social relationships, and communicative arenas* that enable collective life, dialogue, and action beyond the state and the market. Focusing on social capital is aimed at deepening the analysis of civil society beyond formal organisations and institutional structures. It enables this chapter to argumentatively capture how trust, cooperation, and public engagement have been disrupted and reconfigured over time.

It must also be pointed out that in Sri Lanka, the legacy of civil war and ethnic conflict has significantly affected the levels of social capital within the country. The conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, as well as tensions between religious communities, has created deep divisions in Sri Lankan society. Having been shaped by conflict, displacement, and social fragmentation, civic life is sustained through networks, relationships, and everyday forms of interaction. Civil society organizations in Sri Lanka have played a key role in rebuilding social capital in the post-war period, particularly through efforts aimed at reconciliation, peacebuilding, and community development. These initiatives seek to foster trust and cooperation between different ethnic and religious groups, helping to heal the wounds of the past and build a more inclusive and cohesive society. emphasis on social capital is therefore analytically essential, as Sri Lanka's prolonged civil war not only generated political and territorial divisions but also systematically eroded everyday trust, cross-ethnic social networks, and associational life, particularly in conflict-affected regions, as documented in

post-war assessments of social cohesion and governance.[8] Situating civil society within this framework allows the analysis to foreground how post-2009 civic initiatives have functioned as mechanisms for repairing fractured social relations through reconciliation programmes, community-level peacebuilding, and inter-communal development interventions. Empirical studies and policy reports demonstrate that civil society organisations have played a central role in rebuilding bridging social capital by facilitating inter-ethnic dialogue platforms and joint livelihood projects in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, mediating land disputes and resettlement processes, and fostering everyday interaction among Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities.[9] At the national level, civil society advocacy around transitional justice, memorialisation, and language rights has further contributed to restoring horizontal and linking social ties while engaging state institutions, thereby shaping the broader trajectory of reconciliation, governance, and democratic participation in post-war Sri Lanka.[10]

Understanding Sri Lanka's Colonial Legacy and its Impact on Civil Society

The role of civil society in post-colonial Sri Lanka has been both complex and dynamic, shaped by the island's colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, and decades of political and social conflict. Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Sri Lanka has experienced significant political turmoil, including ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority, a brutal civil war lasting nearly three decades, and subsequent efforts at peacebuilding and reconciliation.[11] Throughout these phases, civil society has played a critical role in shaping Sri Lanka's political landscape, mediating between the state and its citizens, and advocating for human rights, social justice, and ethnic reconciliation. This section explores the evolution of civil society in post-colonial Sri Lanka, examining how various civil society actors have engaged with issues of ethnic identity, political conflict, and post-war reconstruction. The relevance of theoretical frameworks, such as those provided by Antonio Gramsci, Jürgen Habermas, and Robert Putnam, will be explored in this context, highlighting the tensions between domination and resistance, the role of public discourse, and the importance of social capital in Sri Lanka's civil society.

[8] Kostner et al., *Socio-Economic Assessment of Conflict-Affected Northern and Eastern Provinces*, 34, 48–49.
[9] United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, *Semi Annual Narrative Report 2021*, 3, 6–7.
[10] Ruwanpathirana, *Memorialisation for Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka*, 20–22.
[11] Camilla Orjuela, *The Identity Politics of Peacebuilding: Civil Society in War-Torn Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2008), 1–5

Conceptual models developed by the West often fail to account for the lingering impact of colonial legacies which continue to shape state-society relations in the region. In Western theories, particularly those influenced by Enlightenment thinkers like Locke, civil society is often seen as a space for individuals to voluntarily associate, engage in civic activism, and hold the state accountable. These models assume a relatively clear distinction between civil society and the state, with civil society acting as a counterbalance mechanism to state power. However, in South Asia, the colonial experience has blurred these boundaries, with the state often inheriting and perpetuating the structures of control and domination established during the colonial period. In countries like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the state has historically played a central role in shaping civil society through both coercive and regulatory mechanisms. Under British colonial rule, civil society organizations were often used as tools for managing social groups, particularly in relation to caste, religion, and ethnicity. These organizations were encouraged or suppressed based on their alignment with colonial interests, resulting in a highly stratified and politicized civil society. The legacy of this colonial management of civil society is still evident in the post-colonial period, where state intervention in civil society continues to reflect patterns of control and surveillance inherited from the colonial era. Moreover, the colonial period in South Asia was marked by the entrenchment of communal divisions, particularly along religious and ethnic lines, as seen in the use of policies like "divide and rule" in British India. These divisions have deeply influenced the development of civil society in post-colonial states, where civil society organizations are often organized along ethnic, religious, or caste-based lines. This reality contrasts sharply with the western model, which assumes a more unified and egalitarian civil society. In South Asia, civil society has often been a battleground for competing communal interests, with organizations representing different social groups vying for power and resources. This has made it difficult for civil society to function as a cohesive force for democratic participation and state accountability, as envisioned in Western theories. Furthermore, colonial administrative structures entrenched a hierarchical mode of governance that conflated social control with administrative efficiency, fostering a bureaucratic ethos that continues to influence post-colonial state behavior.[12] As a result, post-independence governments inherited institutions oriented more towards surveillance and regulation than facilitation of civic freedom. The continuities in administrative culture have

[12] Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, 50–52, 76. [48]
Wickramasinghe, *op. cit.*, 83.

significantly affected how state institutions interact with civil society, often as regulators rather than as enablers.

Another consequence of colonial legacies is the way civil society space is structured by external funding and donor-driven agendas. Colonial regimes engaged in selective patronage of elites, and this practice has been replaced in many post-colonial settings by reliance on international donors, which often privilege urban, English-speaking, and professionalized NGOs.[13] This has led to criticisms that civil society in South Asia is dominated by "elite brokers" who may not be fully representative of grassroots concerns.[14] These conditions have created a paradox in which civil society, while increasingly visible in policy debates and international forums, remains disconnected from large sections of the population. Consequently, the normative aspirations of Western civil society models are difficult to realize in South Asia without grappling with the complex legacy of colonial statecraft, communal divisions, and inherited authoritarian structures.

Yet, another limitation of applying Western civil society models in South Asia is their failure to fully account for the region's deeply entrenched social hierarchies, particularly those based on caste, class, and gender. Western models of civil society, particularly those influenced by liberal democratic theory, tend to emphasize individual rights, equality, and voluntary participation as key components of civil society. These models assume that all individuals have the freedom and capacity to engage in civil society on an equal footing. However, in South Asia, social hierarchies often determine who can participate in civil society and under what conditions, resulting in significant exclusions and marginalization. This reality contrasts with the Western model of civil society as a space for egalitarian participation and civic engagement. Similarly, gender-based exclusion is a significant issue in South Asia, where women's participation in civil society is often constrained by patriarchal norms and practices.[15] While Western models of civil society assume that individuals can freely engage in public life, women in South Asia often face social and cultural barriers that limit their participation in civil society. These barriers include restrictions on mobility, gendered divisions of labour, and norms that prioritise women's roles in the private sphere over public engagement. As a result, women's voices are often underrepresented in civil society organizations, and issues related to gender equality and

[13]Nair, *op, cit*., 353–368.
[14] Harris, *op. cit*.
[15] Amrita Basu, *Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia*, Occasional Paper No. 5 (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, July 2005), 1–10.

women's rights may be sidelined or ignored. This exclusion undermines the potential for civil society to function as a truly inclusive and democratic space, highlighting the need for a more context-sensitive understanding of civil society in South Asia.

The religious and ethnic diversity of South Asia also presents a challenge to the application of Western civil society models, which often assume a more homogeneous or secular public sphere. In Western liberal democracies, civil society is typically conceptualized as a space for secular, rational debate and engagement, separate from religious institutions and identities. However, in South Asia, religion plays a central role in public life, and civil society organizations are often organized along religious lines. This is particularly evident in countries like Sri Lanka, where religious identities are deeply intertwined with national politics and civil society activism.

Keeping in mind these constraints of the Western lens, we may now proceed to understand the impact of colonial legacy on Sri Lankan civil society. The structure of British administration and systems of local representation had lasting implications on civil society mobilisation in the post-colonial period in Sri Lanka. British rule introduced a centralised bureaucratic state, supported by a legal-rational administrative framework, which restructured governance through civil service institutions, courts, municipal bodies, and limited representative councils.[16] These structures created new public domains where elite participation, petitioning, and associational activity became possible within colonial constraints. The gradual expansion of local representation through institutions such as the Legislative Council and later the State Council encouraged political participation among educated elites, particularly lawyers, teachers, and professionals, who operated both within and outside formal state structures.[17] Voluntary associations, social reform organisations, and religious bodies increasingly engaged with colonial authorities through advocacy, lobbying, and public debate, laying early foundations for organised civic engagement. At the same time, colonial administrative practices fostered a distinction between state authority and society, enabling the growth of associational life as an intermediary sphere.[18] Civil society mobilisation during this period was therefore shaped not only by resistance to colonial power but also by participation within colonial institutional frameworks, creating patterns of elite-led civic organisation that continued into the post-

[16] Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Sri Lanka – Government and Society," accessed September 23, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka/Government-and-society.
[17] Wilson, A. Jeyaratnam. *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese–Tamil Conflict*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988, 21–26.
[18] Wickramasinghe, Nira. *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History*. London: Hurst & Company, 2006, 78–85.

colonial era. British colonial governance in Sri Lanka relied heavily on divide and rule strategies that reshaped ethnic relations and social hierarchies, with long-term consequences for civil society and political mobilisation. A key feature of this approach was the disproportionate recruitment of Western-educated Tamils into the colonial civil service, missionary education system, and clerical professions, largely due to earlier access to English-language education in the Jaffna peninsula.[19] This administrative pattern produced a Tamil professional elite that was visibly overrepresented in government employment relative to demographic proportions. In contrast, large sections of the indigenous Sinhalese population, particularly from rural and Buddhist backgrounds, remained excluded from elite administrative positions due to limited access to English education and colonial patronage networks.[20] Over time, this imbalance generated perceptions of injustice and economic marginalisation among Sinhalese elites, which became increasingly politicised during the late colonial period. These colonial-era inequalities contributed directly to the post-independence rise of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, as political leaders mobilised civil society organisations, religious institutions, and language movements to challenge what was portrayed as colonial-era favouritism.[21] Civil society thus became a crucial arena through which ethnic grievances, nationalist ideologies, and claims to political legitimacy were articulated, transforming colonial social divisions into enduring post-colonial political cleavages.

Civil Society Organizations in Post-colonial Sri Lanka

In the immediate post-colonial period, civil society in Sri Lanka was dominated by nationalist organizations that sought to assert the primacy of Sinhalese culture and identity. The passing of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, which made Sinhala the sole official language of the country, marginalized the Tamil population and contributed to rising ethnic tensions.[22] Civil society organizations, including Buddhist clergy groups and Sinhalese nationalist associations, played a key role in promoting these policies and shaping the ideological landscape of the newly independent nation. These groups framed their activism in terms of cultural revival and national unity, but their exclusionary rhetoric contributed to the alienation of Tamil communities and

[19] De Silva, K. M. *Reaping the Whirlwind: Ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Politics in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1998, 32–36.
[20] Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 17–22
[21] Wilson, A. Jeyaratnam. *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. London: Hurst & Company, 2000, 95–102.
[22] de Silva, K. M. *A History of Sri Lanka*. 2nd ed. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2005.

the eventual outbreak of ethnic violence. In the post-independence period, Sri Lankan civil society broadly crystallised into two contrasting strands shaped by majority–minority power relations. Sinhalese-Buddhist civil society organisations, such as the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress and the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna, mobilised around Sinhala language primacy, Buddhist cultural revival, and the assertion of majoritarian political authority, relying on mass mobilisation, religious legitimacy, and close engagement with electoral politics to influence state policy, most notably during the passage of the Sinhala Only Act.[23] This tradition later extended into more institutionalised and confrontational forms through actors such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya and the Bodu Bala Sena, which combined civic activism with parliamentary intervention or street-level mobilisation in defence of Sinhala-Buddhist dominance.[24] In contrast, Tamil civil society organisations emerged primarily as advocacy-oriented responses to political exclusion, with groups such as the Federal Party and the Tamil United Liberation Front articulating demands for language parity, federalism, and constitutional safeguards through petitions, negotiations, and parliamentary engagement rather than mass mobilisation. [25] Over time, Tamil civil society increasingly adopted rights-based and documentation-focused strategies, exemplified by organisations such as the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), which operated largely outside state power by engaging legal discourse and international human rights norms.[26] While both strands relied on organised associational networks and identity-based mobilisation, Sinhalese-Buddhist civil society largely functioned as a legitimising extension of state authority, whereas Tamil civil society operated predominantly as a counter-hegemonic platform seeking equality, protection, and political recognition.

However, the Tamil population also mobilized through civil society, particularly in the form of cultural organizations, and advocacy groups that sought to defend Tamil rights and push for autonomy in the Northern and Eastern provinces. The Federal Party (Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi) was one of the most prominent Tamil political organizations advocating for federalism and the recognition of Tamil as an official language alongside Sinhala. These civil society efforts were initially peaceful but gradually radicalized as the Sri Lankan state became

[23] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 42–48.
[24] Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 180–186.
[25] A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese–Tamil Conflict* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1988), 53–60.
[26] Jonathan Spencer, *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990), 152–158.

more entrenched in its majoritarian policies. Some scholars note that political parties can also be treated as part of civil society because they are not only state-seeking organisations but also membership-based associations that bridge citizens to public life.[27] As Nancy Rosenblum argues, civil-society theory often overlooks parties, yet parties compete for citizens' time and loyalty like other associations while also offering relatively inclusive platforms for public deliberation across a wide agenda.[28] In this sense, parties can function as civic intermediaries: they aggregate demands, socialise citizens into political participation, and translate social grievances into organised claims-making, especially in contexts where "rights," "recognition," and representation are pursued through both associational activism and party-based mobilisation.[29]

Impact of the Civil War on Civil Society

The civil war that ravaged Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009 had a profound impact on civil society, both in terms of its structure and function. Long drawn conflict fundamentally altered the operational logic of civil society in Sri Lanka. Prolonged violence, large-scale displacement, and the breakdown of everyday social and economic life compelled many civil society organisations to move beyond narrowly defined mandates and assume multi-functional roles that combined humanitarian relief, welfare provision, psychosocial assistance, advocacy, and community mediation.[30] Organisations such as Sarvodaya, for example, expanded their long-standing community development work to include emergency relief, rehabilitation, and reconciliation activities in conflict-affected regions. Similarly, groups like National Peace Council and Seva Lanka Foundation adapted their peacebuilding and development agendas to address urgent humanitarian needs, displacement, and local mediation in areas affected by sustained violence. In this context, civilian survival and protection increasingly took precedence over organisational specialisation. At the same time, the magnitude and intensity of the conflict exceeded the material and institutional capacities of most domestic organisations, making collaboration with international civil society actors both necessary and pragmatic. Local CSOs often functioned as facilitators and intermediaries, enabling international

[27] Nancy L. Rosenblum, "Political Parties as Membership Groups," *Columbia Law Review* 100, no. 3 (April 2000): 813–15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1123503
[28] *Ibid.,*823-824
[29] Rosenblum, *op. cit.*, 844.
[30] Jonathan Goodhand, "Aiding Violence or Building Peace? The Role of International Aid in Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (2002): 841–865, esp. Sri Lanka case study, https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659022000028530.

organisations to access conflict-affected regions, mobilise foreign funding, and implement relief programmes by drawing on local knowledge, community networks, and trust.

For the Tamil pressure groups, the shift in the late-1970s from constitutional mobilisation to armed struggle altered the operating environment for Tamil civil society in ways that were both practical and political.[31] As militant groups, above all the LTTE, expanded their influence, many Tamil-oriented associations and advocacy networks found their space for independent action narrowed. Public dissent within Tamil society became riskier, "neutral" civic work was increasingly politicised, and organisational survival often depended on navigating pressures from both the Sri Lankan state and militant actors.[32] Literature suggests a mixed pattern rather than a single trajectory. In areas where the LTTE exercised strong territorial and social control, sections of Tamil associational life were drawn into its broader political project, sometimes through persuasion and moral pressure, and sometimes through intimidation, while critics and alternative voices faced serious constraints.[33] This did not mean that all Tamil civil society "became LTTE," but it did mean that autonomous civic space could shrink sharply in LTTE-dominated contexts, making sustained independent advocacy difficult.[34] At the same time, moderate lines of operation did not simply disappear. Tamil political organisations and civic networks that emphasised rights, representation, and constitutional reform continued to exist, but their room for manoeuvre was shaped by violence on the ground and by the state's securitised response to Tamil mobilisation.[35] In other words, moderation persisted in forms such as community representation, legalist claims-making, and documentation, but it often became less publicly visible and more vulnerable to disruption as the conflict hardened.[36] Regarding rallies and demonstrations, Tamil mobilisation against the government (for rights such as language parity, autonomy, and protection from repression) did occur historically, but as the conflict escalated, public collective action increasingly carried higher risks of retaliation,

[31] A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), 98–105, https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/sri-lankan-tamilnationalism/;

[32] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka: Tamil Politics and the Quest for a Political Solution* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2012), 6–10, accessed December 9, 2025, 16:30 IST, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/156092/239-sri-lanka-tamil-politics-and-the-quest-for-a-political-solution.pdf

[33] University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) (UTHR[J]), *Special Report No. 17: Rewarding Tyranny—Undermining the Democratic Potential for Peace* (UTHR[J], 2003), 1–6, accessed December 24, 2025, 16:31 IST, https://uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport17.pdf

[34] United Nations Secretary-General's Panel of Experts, *Report of the Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka* (New York: United Nations, 2011), 19–23, accessed December 24, 2025, 16:33 IST, https://www.law.umich.edu/facultyhome/drwcasebook/Documents/Documents/Report%20of%20the%20Panel%20of%20Experts%20on%20Accountability%20in%20Sri%20Lanka.pdf

[35] International Crisis Group, *op. cit.*, 15–18.

[36] United Nations Secretary-General's Panel of Experts, *op. cit.*, 28–31.

surveillance, and association with militancy, especially once emergency governance and counter-insurgency practices intensified.[37] This produced a context in which civic actors could become cautious about overt mass politics, shifting instead toward less visible strategies, including professional advocacy, quiet networking, or diaspora-oriented communication.[38] Therefore, it can be argued that parts of Tamil civil society may appear to have "no substantial presence" in some accounts not because mobilisation vanished, but because war-time coercion, secrecy, fear, and the destruction of records can make civic activity harder to observe and document, particularly at the community level.[39] Where the existing literature is strongest, it often focuses on armed actors, elite politics, and major NGOs, leaving thinner coverage of everyday Tamil civic organising that operated under both state repression and LTTE dominance.[40]

Religion and civil society in Sri Lanka

Religious institutions have played a paradoxical and often ambivalent role within the landscape of Sri Lankan civil society. As historically embedded sources of moral authority, community mobilization, and service delivery, they have simultaneously functioned as agents of social cohesion and exclusion, resistance and complicity. In a society marked by deep religio-ethnic cleavages, the interplay between religious authority and civic engagement is both complex and consequential, shaping discourses of nationalism, reconciliation, and democratic accountability. Buddhism, as the religion of the majority Sinhalese population and constitutionally accorded the "foremost place," has a particularly central role in this civic-religious matrix. The Sinhala Buddhist monastic establishment, or Sangha, has historically operated not only as a spiritual institution but also as a potent political force. From the colonial period through the postindependence era, Buddhist monks have participated in political movements, electoral campaigns, and nationalist mobilizations. During the civil war years, segments of the Sangha were vocal in legitimizing state violence against Tamil separatists, framing the conflict in moral and existential terms that sacralised the Sri Lankan state.[41] Organizations such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which fielded Buddhist monks as

[37] Ibid., 24–27.
[38] International Crisis Group, *op. cit.*, 15–18.
[39] United Nations Secretary-General's Panel of Experts, *op. cit.*, 19–23.
[40] International Crisis Group, *op. cit.*, 6–10.
[41] Peter Schalk, "The Role of Buddhism in Justifying Violence in Sri Lanka," *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 43, no. 1 (2007): 77–104, https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.4833. ; Mahinda Deegalle, *Buddhist Monks and Politics in Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge, 2006), 55-60.

parliamentary candidates, further institutionalized this convergence between religious authority and nationalist politics.[42] At the same time, other segments of the Buddhist clergy and lay organizations have taken up progressive causes. Monks affiliated with movements such as the Sarvodaya Shramadana, Sri Lanka's largest grassroots development organization have promoted Gandhian nonviolence, community self-reliance, and interfaith harmony. [43] Sarvodaya's philosophy, grounded in Buddhist humanism and decentralized development, stands as a counterpoint to politicized Buddhism, offering an alternative vision of religion in civil society as emancipatory and dialogic.[44] The dual role of Buddhism, both as a legitimizer of state power and as a wellspring of civic ethics, illustrates the internal heterogeneity of religious institutions and their political engagements. Buddhist organizations such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) have been influential in promoting Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, often at the expense of minority groups.[45] These organizations challenge the Western notion of civil society as a space for pluralism and inclusivity, as they often seek to assert the dominance of one religious or ethnic group over others. The Western model's emphasis on secularism and rational debate does not fully capture the complex ways in which religion and ethnicity shape civil society in South Asia, where religious identities are often mobilised to promote specific political agendas.

The Christian churches, particularly the Catholic Church, have historically adopted a more muted public profile, though individual clergy and faith-based organizations have been active in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and human rights work.[46] During the civil war, Christian actors often mediated between conflicting parties, documented human rights abuses, and provided humanitarian relief, especially in conflict-affected areas.[47] In the post-war period, church-affiliated groups such as the National Christian Council and Caritas have contributed to transitional justice dialogues, psycho-social support for war survivors, and interethnic solidarity

[42] Jonathan Goodhand, "Buddhist Nationalism and Civil Society in Sri Lanka," *Contemporary South Asia* 28, no. 1 (2020): 43–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1715193.; Sunila Abeysekera, *Religious Nationalism and Human Rights in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Law & Society Trust, 2011), 50-54.
[43] Wickramasinghe, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
[44] Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Politics of Political Reform," in *Power and Politics in the Shadow of Sri Lanka's Armed Conflict* (Stockholm: Sida, 2010), p. 66.
[45] Kalinga Tudor Silva, "Gossip, Rumor, and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena," in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. John Clifford Holt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 123.
[46] Camilla Orjuela, "A Movement for Peace?," in *The Identity Politics of Peacebuilding: Civil Society in WarTorn Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2008), p. 17.
[47] Jonathan Goodhand and Bart Klem, *Religion, Conflict and Boundary Politics in Sri Lanka* (accepted manuscript of article in *European Journal of Development Research* 21, no. 5 (2009): 679–698

initiatives.[48] However, the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019, which targeted multiple churches, dramatically shifted the discursive and security context, heightening fears among Christian communities and straining inter-religious relations.[49]

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka, which encompasses diverse theological traditions and socio-economic strata, has also seen the rise of religious institutions engaged in civic life. Islamic charities, *madrasas,* and mosques have historically provided essential social services, including education, health, and disaster relief, particularly in underserved areas. Yet, in the post-9/11 global climate and especially after the Easter attacks, Muslim religious institutions have faced increased scrutiny, surveillance, and suspicion.[50] Civil society initiatives within the Muslim community have had to contend with both state repression and the rise of internal conservatism, as well as external Islamophobia. Nevertheless, groups such as the Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum (MWRAF) and Young Asia Television have played significant roles in promoting intracommunity dialogue, gender justice, and democratic participation.[51]

Hindu religious institutions, particularly those based in the Tamil-majority Northern and Eastern provinces, have often been embedded in community life rather than overtly political activism. However, during and after the war, Hindu temples and their networks became crucial nodes for humanitarian aid, displacement management, and cultural resilience (Cheran 2009). Temple festivals, religious schools (padasalas), and local priesthoods have helped sustain Tamil identity and community cohesion in the face of militarization and social dislocation. At times, temple committees have collaborated with NGOs and diaspora groups to address local development and trauma rehabilitation needs.[52]

Interfaith civil society initiatives have often emerged sporadically, in response to crises. Bodies such as the Congress of Religions, the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation, and the National Peace Council have facilitated dialogues, peace marches, and community-building activities

[48] Ude Lal Fernando, *Religion, Conflict and Peace in Sri Lanka* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2021).
[49] S. Keethaponcalan, "Sri Lanka after the Easter Attacks: Religious Polarization and Muslim Alienation," *South Asia Journal*, July 2020, accessed April 2, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20250215000000/https://southasiajournal.net/sri-lanka-after-the-easter-attacks.
[50] Farzana Haniffa, "Muslim Civil Society in Postwar Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 5 (2021): 876–893, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1867511.
[51] Farzana Haniffa, "Muslim Civil Society in Postwar Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 5 (2021): 876–893, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1867511.
[52] Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 106.

across ethnic and religious lines.[53] However, these efforts have often been undermined by broader political dynamics, including state securitization, majoritarianism, and the weaponization of religion. Still, such initiatives reflect the latent potential of religious institutions to serve as bridges rather than barriers in Sri Lanka's divided society. Importantly, the moral capital of religious actors allows them to mediate in contexts where secular civil society organizations may lack legitimacy or access. Religious leaders have, on occasion, successfully defused communal tensions, negotiated local conflicts, and advocated for human rights.[54]

Yet, this moral capital is not immune to instrumentalization, and the credibility of religious institutions is often compromised when they become entangled in partisan or ethnonationalist agendas. For all kinds of CSOs, however, the environment was highly polarized and militarized, where the space for dissent and activism was severely restricted by both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The war created a climate of fear, repression, and violence, making it difficult for civil society to function as an independent force for peace and reconciliation.

Political Repression in Sri Lanka and Responses from the Civil Society

Having critically mapped the types of civil society organizations (CSO) in Sri Lanka through the colonial and post-colonial periods, it is important to analyse their operational scope in the face of severe repression by the state, especially during the years of the civil war. The role of civil society overall, received severe clampdowns during successive political dispensations following the emergence of faultlines between the Sinhalas and Tamils. During the British period legal instruments such as the Police Ordinance and the Emergency Regulations set the tone for post-independence regimes to view dissent and mobilization through a lens of security and suspicion.[48] This legacy is evident in how Tamil civil society actors were treated during and after the war, frequently monitored, restricted, and marginalised under the guise of national security.[55] The beginnings of this form of CSO repression, which continue till date can be traced back to the regime of J.R Jayawardene. If the progressive repressive tactics of the government could be historically mapped, it would reveal that under the administration of J. R. Jayewardene (1978–1989), civil society faced substantial constraints amid rising state authoritarianism and

[53] Nick Lewer and Oliver Ramsbotham, *Sri Lanka: Finding a Way Forward* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2012), 10-11.
[54] Jonathan Spencer, Jonathan Goodhand, Benedikt Korf, Bart Klem, and Kalinga Tudor Silva, *Checkpoints, Temples, and Politics: The Sri Lankan Civil War and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 105-107.
[55] Orjuela, *op. cit.*, 33-35.

the centralization of power through the 1978 Constitution. The state's response to Tamil grievances and the outbreak of full-scale conflict in 1983, marked notably by the anti-Tamil pogroms of Black July that reflected a deepening rift between ethnic communities. Civil society actors attempting to promote dialogue, reconciliation, or minority rights were frequently marginalized, surveilled, or delegitimised.[56] The prevailing political environment rendered it difficult for independent organizations to operate freely, particularly in the North and East, where local associations were often caught between state forces and armed non-state actors. The polarization of ethnic identities severely limited the capacity of civil society to act as a mediating or peace-building force during this formative phase of the conflict.[57] The presidency of Ranasinghe Premadasa (1989–1993) unfolded amidst dual crisis while one being the ongoing ethnic conflict in the North and East and another being the violent second insurrection by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the South. The suppression of the JVP uprising was marked by extensive human rights violations, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, further shrinking civic space and creating an atmosphere of fear and censorship[58] . While Premadasa did initiate a short-lived dialogue with the LTTE in the late 1980s, the absence of broader institutional support for peace and reconciliation meant that civil society actors remained on the periphery of formal processes. Many organizations operated under severe constraints, often limiting their interventions to humanitarian relief and documentation of human rights abuses, even as such efforts exposed them to significant risks.[59] The brief presidency of D. B. Wijetunga (1993–1994), although lacking any substantial reform agenda, represented a relative moment of calm in the South following the end of JVP violence. While the war in the North and East persisted, this period saw a partial easing of repression in other parts of the country, enabling certain Colombo-based NGOs and advocacy groups to reengage with issues related to governance, democracy, and human rights. [60] However, the structural challenges faced by civil society, particularly the securitized nature of the state and the lack of a political resolution to the conflict, remained firmly in place. [61] With the election

[56] Ahilan Kadirgamar, "The Hope and Fear of the Sri Lankan Protest Movement," *The New Yorker*, July 22, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-hope-and-fear-of-the-sri-lankan-protest-movement.
[57] Ramesh Ramasamy, "Role of Civil Society in Post–War Democracy Building in Sri Lanka: Reflections and Lessons," *Journal of Civil Society* 20, no. 4 (2024): 380–403.
[58] Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka: Briefing on the Prevention of Terrorism Act and Emergency Regulations* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1983), 12–14
[59] Kadirgamar, "The Hope and Fear of the Sri Lankan Protest Movement."
[60] Ramasamy, "Role of Civil Society in Post–War Democracy Building," 380–403.
[61] *Thuppahi's Blog*, "The History of Civil Society Organisations in Sri Lanka," March 23, 2018, https://thuppahis.com/2018/03/23/the-history-of-civil-society-organisations-in-sri-lanka/.

of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga in 1994, there emerged cautious optimism regarding the prospects for peace and reconciliation. Kumaratunga's initial overtures to the LTTE and attempts to initiate a political settlement created a relatively more enabling environment for civil society engagement, particularly in the areas of peacebuilding, constitutional reform, and minority rights advocacy.[62] *During her tenure, civil society actors became increasingly involved in public discourse on ethnic conflict, governance, and transitional justice. Notably, women's organizations, legal advocacy groups, and peace-focused networks expanded their activities and outreach.*[63]

However, the continuation of military operations, political volatility, and the eventual collapse of peace negotiations underscored the fragile and often conditional nature of civic space during this period. While Kumaratunga's presidency allowed for a modest expansion of civil society's role in national debates, entrenched political divisions and persistent insecurity continued to delimit its effectiveness.[64] During Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency, the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 marked the end of nearly three decades of armed conflict.[65] While the cessation of hostilities was hailed domestically as a victory for national sovereignty, it coincided with the entrenchment of an increasingly authoritarian political order.[66] In the immediate post-war period, civil society actors who had worked on conflict resolution, reconciliation, and human rights were subjected to systematic delegitimization. Government spokespersons and pro-state media frequently portrayed such organizations as unpatriotic, foreign-funded agents seeking to undermine the hard-won peace. [67] The discursive environment, thus, became deeply antagonistic, in which the state equated dissent with betrayal and criticism with sedition. Legal mechanisms were actively employed to suppress civil society activism. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), originally intended to address insurgent threats, was repurposed to detain critics and restrict the mobility and activities of NGOs, particularly in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Activists and journalists were subjected to surveillance, harassment, and in several high-profile cases, enforced disappearance. The

[62] Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, "The Peace Process," *President CBK Official Website*, December 5, 2022, https://www.cbk.gov.lk/peace-process-1994-2001/.
[63] Ramasamy, "Role of Civil Society in Post–War Democracy Building," 380–403.
[64] Kumaratunga, "The Peace Process."
[65] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka: Reconciliation in Crisis* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2011), 1–3, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-reconciliation-crisis.
[66] Neil DeVotta, "Sri Lanka's Post-Civil War Political Landscape: Authoritarianism and Democratic Regression," *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (2014): 55–60, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911813001997.
[67] Mario Gomez, "Sri Lanka's Post-War Constitutional Challenges and the Role of Civil Society," *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences* 39, no. 1 (2016), 3–5, http://doi.org/10.4038/sljss.v39i1.7403.

climate of fear and impunity created a situation where many civil society organizations either ceased operations or adapted their strategies to focus on less politically sensitive areas such as livelihood development, education, and disaster preparedness. These adaptations, however, came at a cost. As noted by the International Crisis Group (2011), civil society during this period was "marginalized and depoliticized," and the broader public sphere became increasingly impoverished of critical discourse.[68]

The end of the civil war in 2009, marked by the defeat of the LTTE, opened new opportunities for civil society to engage in post-war reconstruction and reconciliation. However, this period also presented significant challenges, as the Sri Lankan government, led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, pursued a highly centralized and militarized approach to post-war governance. The government's focus on economic development and infrastructure rebuilding in the North and East often sidelined efforts to address the underlying causes of the conflict, including issues of ethnic marginalization, political representation, and human rights abuses.[69] During 2005–2015 and 2019–2022, civil society actors faced increasing scrutiny, surveillance, and delegitimization. This pressure was not directed at "civil society" in general, but at specific actors whose work challenged the regime's security narrative, wartime legitimacy, and post-war governance practices. Human rights organisations, lawyers, and accountability advocates were treated as politically suspect because their documentation of abuses, transitional-justice demands, and engagement with international bodies directly threatened narratives of "victory" and national security.[70] Journalists and media institutions also became central targets, as investigative reporting on corruption, militarisation, and wartime conduct undermined regime credibility; emblematic cases include the killing of editor Lasantha Wickrematunge (2009) and the disappearance of journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda (2010), both widely cited in international press-freedom documentation as part of a climate of intimidation[71] In addition, NGOs and advocacy platforms faced regulatory constraint and public delegitimization. In 2014, the NGO Secretariat under the Ministry of Defence issued instructions restricting NGOs from holding press conferences, conducting media-related trainings, and disseminating press material-

[68] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Civil Society*, 6–10.
[69] International Crisis Group, *Reconciliation in Sri Lanka Is Harder Than Ever*, 4–6.
[70] Society for Threatened Peoples and National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), *Under the Military's Shadow: Local Communities and Militarization on the Jaffna Peninsula* (Ostermundigen, Switzerland: Society for Threatened Peoples, October 2016), accessed March 12, 2025, https://www.voices-ngo.ch/wp-content/uploads/bericht_jaffnafinal_low.pdf..
[71] Committee to Protect Journalists, "Lasantha Wickrematunge," January 8, 2009, accessed December 23, 2025, https://cpj.org/data/people/lasantha-wickrematunge/.

measures widely criticised as a clampdown on civic space.[72] In the 2019–2022 Rajapaksa phase, these patterns re-intensified through security-sector monitoring, intimidation, and legal coercion, especially against those associated with human rights and accountability work. Human Rights Watch documented a post-2019 "campaign of fear and intimidation" affecting human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and families of victims seeking justice, alongside increased surveillance in the North and East.[73] The repression also extended to civil society associated with protest, particularly during the economic crisis, human rights reporting documented the violent dispersal of protest sites and escalating arrests and harassment of protesters and allied activists.[74] At the sharper end of securitised control, protest organisers and student leaders were detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), a practice criticised by rights organisations as arbitrary and threatening for civic mobilisation.[75] The state's nationalist rhetoric increasingly portrayed many NGOs as foreign agents by presenting externally funded civil society organisations as conduits of Western political influence and as challenges to national sovereignty, particularly when they engaged in human rights advocacy or supported international accountability mechanisms.[76] This framing was reinforced by statements from senior political leaders and amplification through state-inclined media, which accused NGOs of undermining the military's wartime "victory" and weakening state authority, combined with heightened administrative oversight and surveillance, this environment encouraged many organisations to scale back public advocacy, limit visibility, and practise self-censorship to reduce political risk.[77]

The Rajapaksa administration's reliance on nationalism and its emphasis on a "victor's peace" thus, meant that civil society organizations advocating for human rights and accountability have often been labelled as traitors or foreign agents.[78] This hostile environment has made it difficult

[72] International Federation of Journalists, "Sri Lanka Muzzles NGOs and Bans Media-Related Activities," July 9, 2014, accessed December 23, 2025, https://www.ifj.org/media-

[73] Human Rights Watch, "Sri Lanka: Families of 'Disappeared' Threatened," February 16, 2020, accessed December 12, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/16/sri-lanka-families-disappeared-threatened?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[74] Human Rights Watch, "Sri Lanka: Heightened Crackdown on Dissent," August 2, 2022, accessed December 8, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/02/sri-lanka-heightened-crackdown-dissent.

[75] Human Rights Watch, "Sri Lanka: End Arbitrary Detention of Student Activist," January 16, 2023, accessed November 27, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/16/sri-lanka-end-arbitrary-detention-student-activist.

[76] Society for Threatened Peoples and NAFSO, *Under the Military's Shadow*, 33-35.

[77] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers: Blocking Accountability for Grave Abuses in Sri Lanka* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), 30–33.

[78] *South Asia State of Minorities Report 2020*: Ambika Satkunanathan, *Sri Lanka: Minority Rights within Shrinking Civic Space* (New Delhi: SASM, 2020), 196–197. Accessed March 12, 2025.

for civil society to function effectively as a force for reconciliation and justice.[79] Habermas's theory of the public sphere is relevant here, as the government's efforts to control public discourse and restrict the activities of civil society organizations have undermined the possibility of open and democratic debate about the country's future. The return of the Rajapaksas to power in 2019, this time under Gotabaya Rajapaksa, further intensified these repressive dynamics. Gotabaya, widely seen as the architect of the final military campaign against the LTTE, campaigned on a platform of national security, discipline, and technocratic governance. His administration took a more overtly militarized approach to civilian governance, appointing ex-military officials to key bureaucratic and administrative positions.[80] The logic of security was extended to justify limitations on civil liberties and to suppress dissent under the pretext of maintaining national cohesion and public order. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic provided an added layer of justification for executive overreach.[81]

Civil society actors reported a sharp increase in surveillance, arbitrary detentions, and restrictions on freedom of assembly. Organizations working on accountability, religious tolerance, and governance reform faced bureaucratic delays, targeted investigations, and public vilification. A particularly alarming trend was the targeting of Muslim civil society in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. Despite the attacks being perpetrated by a radical Islamist faction, the state's response involved blanket surveillance of Muslim institutions, the forced cremation of COVID-19 victims against Islamic rites, and restrictions on Muslim charities, which were accused of fostering extremism with little substantiated evidence. Within this climate of hostility, civil society organizations recalibrated their modes of operation. Many adopted decentralized forms of activism, operating through informal networks and engaging communities in ways that minimized exposure to state surveillance. Others increasingly turned to digital platforms and encrypted communication tools to sustain advocacy work, engage diasporic allies and mobilize support transnationally. There was also a discernible shift towards forming cross-sectoral coalitions, where development-focused NGOs lent institutional cover to human rights-oriented groups, thereby enabling continued, albeit subdued, engagement with politically sensitive issues. Legal resistance also gained salience as

[79] *Human Rights Watch*, *"Sri Lanka: Shrinking Civil Society Space and Authoritarianism,"* February 7, 2022, para. 1-2. Accessed April 2, 2025.
[80] *OHCHR General Assembly Addendum*, *A/HRC/46/20*, January 2021, para. 23 (criticizes appointments of military figures to civilian roles, enabling securitization of governance). Accessed May 3, 2025
[81] U. Fernando, *"Sandwiched? Sri Lankan Civic Space Amidst a Repressive Pandemic,"* in *Civic Space under Authoritarianism* (2023), 5–6 (details how the pandemic was used to constrain civil society further). Accessed June 10, 2025.

strategic litigation was used to challenge certain executive excesses, particularly in relation to freedom of expression and religious rights. Such litigation was often supported by transnational legal networks, including Sri Lankan lawyers in exile.

Despite these challenges, civil society continues to play an important role in promoting peace and reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka. In the immediate aftermath of the war, civil society in Sri Lanka became a critical player in advocating for transitional justice, human rights accountability, and reconciliation between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Human rights organizations, such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and the Law and Society Trust (LST), called for investigations into allegations of war crimes committed by both the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE during the final stages of the conflict.[82] These organizations also pushed for the establishment of truth and reconciliation mechanisms to foster healing and address the grievances of war-affected communities. Organizations such as the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) and the Centre for Equality and Justice (CEJ) have been working to build trust and understanding between different ethnic communities, particularly through initiatives focused on education, community dialogue, and women's empowerment.[9] These efforts, while often constrained by the political context, reflect Putnam's emphasis on the importance of social capital and civic engagement in rebuilding fractured societies. By fostering networks of trust and cooperation, civil society organizations in Sri Lanka are helping to lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and peaceful future. Key civil society organizations also continue to attempt to advocate for peace and conflict resolution.[83] Groups such as the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka (NPC) and the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) sought to promote dialogue between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities and called for a negotiated settlement to the conflict. [84]

As pointed out earlier, however, these efforts were severely hampered by the hostile political climate, with both the government and the LTTE viewing civil society actors with suspicion. Many peace activists faced intimidation, harassment, and even violence from both sides of the conflict.[85] Gramsci's concept of civil society as a site of ideological and cultural hegemony is

[82] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka: Moving Beyond Promises*, ed. Bhavani Fonseka (Colombo: CPA, 2017), 12–15; https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/TJ-MARCH2017.pdf.
[83] Clingendael Institute, *Sharing Studies on Development and Conflict in Sri Lanka* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2002), 3–4
[84] NPC Annual Report 2010 (Colombo: National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, 2010), 4–6.
[85] Amnesty International, "Sri Lanka: Government Suffocating Dissent and Obstructing Justice for Historic Crimes," February 17, 2021

particularly relevant in this context, as both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE sought to assert control over civil society, using it to legitimize their respective narratives of the conflict. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Oxfam, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) played a vital role in delivering aid to conflict-affected areas, particularly in the Northern and Eastern provinces, where the fighting was most intense.[86] Local civil society organizations also emerged to address the immediate needs of war-affected communities, often operating in extremely dangerous conditions. [87] This pattern of cooperation underscores the adaptive character of civil society during the war, revealing it not as a fixed or singular sector but as a flexible assemblage shaped by emergency conditions, resource constraints, and transnational engagement. Transnational advocacy networks, as theorized by Keck and Sikkink (1998), find vivid illustration in the Sri Lankan context.[88] Tamil diaspora organizations, such as the Global Tamil Forum (GTF), Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), and British Tamil Forum (BTF), have lobbied international bodies including the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the European Parliament, and various national legislatures to press for human rights investigations, economic sanctions, and justice for war crimes.[89] These efforts, especially after the end of the war in 2009, significantly internationalized Sri Lanka's domestic issues, often drawing the ire of the Sri Lankan state, which has accused diaspora groups of promoting separatism and undermining national sovereignty.[90]

While this section highlights the role of diaspora organisations in internationalising Sri Lanka's domestic political concerns, it does not examine their activities in depth. A more detailed analysis of the diaspora as transnational civil society actors, and their interaction with global

[86] International Committee of the Red Cross, "Sri Lanka: ICRC Continues to Assist Victims of the Conflict," ICRC,
July 7, 2009, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/news-release/2009-and-earlier/sri-lanka-news070709.htm
[87] Society for Threatened Peoples and NAFSO, *Under the Military's Shadow*, 27-28
[88] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1–3 (Intro. on transnational advocacy networks), accessed March 14, 2025.
[89] International Crisis Group, *The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora after the LTTE* (Asia Report No. 186, 23 February 2010), 12–18 (TGTE, GTF, referenda, lobbying); Tanuja Thurairajah, "Performing Nationalism: The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and Sri Lankan Tamil Diasporic Politics in Switzerland," PhD thesis, University of Zurich, 2021, 44–45, 87–89 (participant observation at UNHRC; lobbying/side events), accessed May 2, 2025.
[90] International Crisis Group, *The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora after the LTTE*, 10–12 (state–diaspora relations; suspicion and securitization), accessed May 2, 2025.

institutions and domestic political structures, is undertaken in the subsequent chapter that examines the intersection of global and local factors shaping civil society in Sri Lanka.

Post Civil war and Gender

The post-war period witnessed both expansion and backlash in gender activism. On one hand, the cessation of hostilities enabled greater NGO penetration into former conflict zones, where gender-focused programs proliferated under the banners of livelihood support, psycho-social rehabilitation, and community empowerment. Donor agencies and UN bodies provided funding for gender mainstreaming, peacebuilding, and transitional justice, creating new institutional opportunities for women's organizations. On the other hand, the militarized governance of the North and East, combined with surveillance, cultural policing, and nationalist rhetoric, constrained feminist organizing.[91] Female ex-combatants, war widows, and young women in militarized areas faced social stigmatization and structural exclusion, even as they were celebrated in international development discourse as "resilient survivors."[92] The war also catalysed new solidarities among women across ethnic lines, despite the deeply polarized political environment. Initiatives such as the Women's Action Network (WAN) and Mothers' Front mobilized Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim women in collective struggles for truth, justice, and reconciliation.[93] These movements highlighted the symbolic and material burden borne by women as "mothers of the disappeared," caregivers of the wounded, and survivors of war. While often framed in culturally resonant idioms of motherhood and sacrifice, many of these movements also articulated radical critiques of state violence, masculinist nationalism, and post-war impunity. Groups such as the Women and Media Collective (WMC), the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR), and Suriya Women's Development Centre played pioneering roles in documenting gender-based violations, engaging in policy advocacy, and creating

[91] International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), "*What the Women Say: Sri Lanka*," Brief, Spring 2013, esp. p. 4 (on proliferation of women's groups and peacebuilding roles); UN Women, "*National Report of Sri Lanka: Beijing+30 Review*," 2024, 28–31 (programmatic funding windows; WPS/GBV frameworks). PDFs/HTML: ICAN (PDF); UN Women (PDF). Accessed March 3, 2025 (ICAN); April 18, 2025 (UN Women).
[92] Minority Rights Group International, *Living with Insecurity: Marginalization and Sexual Violence against Women in North and East Sri Lanka* (London: MRG, 2013), 3–5, 8–9 (militarization, surveillance, constraints); Karin Höglund, "Women's Voices and the Pursuit of Justice in Post-War Sri Lanka," Occasional Paper (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2019), 4–6 (ongoing militarization; risks for women activists). PDFs: MRG (PDF); Höglund (PDF). Accessed April 12, 2025 (MRG); May 2, 2025 (Höglund).
[93] Shruthi de Visser, "After Victimhood: Narrativizing Tamil Women's Lived Experiences in Post-War Sri Lanka," *University of Colombo Review* 5, no. 2 (2024): 117–134, 123–124 (Mothers' Front; cross-ethnic mobilizations); ICAN, "*What the Women Say: Sri Lanka*," p. 4 (women's coalitions, including mothers' groups). PDFs/HTML. Accessed July 19, 2025 (de Visser); March 3, 2025 (ICAN).

platforms for marginalized voices.[94] Their work has challenged not only the state's militarized governance but also patriarchal structures within communities and civil society itself. WMC, in particular, developed a distinctive feminist praxis combining media interventions, legal reform campaigns, and popular education. It has engaged in sustained efforts to reform discriminatory laws, including the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA), and to institutionalize gender perspectives in national development planning. Gender and sexuality have also emerged as contentious terrains within civil society. The advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights in Sri Lanka, though nascent and heavily marginalized, has gained some visibility in recent years. Organizations such as Equal Ground, Companions on a Journey, and The Grassrooted Trust have engaged in awareness campaigns, legal reform advocacy, and community-building efforts. They have challenged the colonial-era penal code that criminalizes same-sex relations and worked to counter everyday stigma and discrimination. However, the broader civil society ecosystem has been ambivalent, if not outright hostile, towards queer rights, with many religious and conservative actors opposing such initiatives.[95] Moreover, the threat of surveillance, moral policing, and social ostracization continues to limit the participation of queer individuals in civic and political life. Importantly, gender-based activism has increasingly intersected with class, ethnicity, and region, producing differentiated experiences and priorities. Urban middle-class women's organizations have often focused on legal reforms and institutional engagement, whereas rural and war-affected women's groups emphasize basic needs, livelihood security, and everyday survival. These differences have at times generated tensions within the women's movement, prompting calls for more inclusive and intersectional approaches.[35] Feminist scholars and activists have pointed to the need to decolonize gender discourses in Sri Lanka, critiquing the dominance of elite-centric, donor driven frameworks that marginalize subaltern voices. The widespread atrocities committed against women during the war, particularly against Tamil women in the North and East, generated an urgent need for support networks and advocacy-oriented civil society groups

[94] Women and Media Collective (WMC), *Discrimination of Lesbians, Bisexual Women and Transgender Persons in Sri Lanka: Shadow Report to CEDAW* (Colombo: WMC, 2017), 3–7 (advocacy platforms, legal reform agenda); Women and Media Collective, "*Civil Society Statement on MMDA Reforms*," 2023, p. 1 (broad CSO coalition; Suriya listed among endorsing organizations). PDFs. Accessed May 5, 2025 (WMC Shadow Report); June 14, 2025 (CSO Statement).

[95] EQUAL GROUND, *The LGBT Stigma and Discrimination Index of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Equal Ground, 2018), 10, 27–28; Equite Sri Lanka, *LGBTIQ Community Perceptions towards Sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka* (May 2025), 2, 8. Accessed February 20, 2025 (Equal Ground); July 7, 2025 (Equite). MRG, *Living with Insecurity,* 4–5, 8–9; CENWOR, *People's Development Justice Report on National Review and Monitoring of SDGs in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: CENWOR, 2019), ii–iii, 79–84. Accessed April 12, 2025 (MRG); March 29, 2025 (CENWOR).

focused on rehabilitation, psychosocial care, and justice for survivors of gender-based violence. As scholars such as Tasha Manoranjan have shown, "Tamil women experienced the war not only as victims of militarized violence but also as subjects of displacement, sexual coercion, and prolonged social vulnerability, necessitating community-based and women-led responses that extended beyond humanitarian relief to claims for dignity and rights."[96]

Conclusion

Civil society in post-colonial Sri Lanka has evolved through multiple phases, shaped by the country's colonial legacy, ethnic conflict, and post-war reconstruction efforts.[97] From the rise of Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil resistance in the early post-colonial period to the humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts during the civil war, civil society has played a crucial role in mediating between the state and society, often operating in highly challenging environments. In the post-war period, civil society continues to advocate for human rights, justice, and reconciliation, even as it faces significant obstacles from a government intent on controlling public discourse and limiting dissent. Theories of civil society, such as those proposed by Gramsci, Habermas, and Putnam, offer valuable frameworks for understanding the dynamics of civil society in Sri Lanka. Following the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, civil society organizations have been central to efforts at reconciliation, human rights advocacy, and post-war reconstruction.[98] However, the Sri Lankan state's increasing authoritarianism has curtailed the space for civil society, raising questions about the limits of Habermasian public discourse in non-Western contexts. This chapter finds that Western models of civil society cannot be applied wholesale to the South Asian context. Instead, there is a need for more localized and contextualized models that consider the region's unique historical, social, and political dynamics. This requires a rethinking of civil society as a more fluid and contested space, where power relations, social hierarchies, and identity politics play a central role in shaping participation and activism. In South Asia, civil society must be understood as both a site of domination and resistance, where state power, religious identities, and social hierarchies intersect. Rather than assuming that civil society operates as a separate sphere from the state or that it functions as a neutral space for voluntary association, scholars and practitioners must

[96] Tasha Manoranjan, "Tamil Women and the Politics of Survival in Sri Lanka," in *Women, Conflict and Peace in South Asia*, ed. Rita Manchanda (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), 159–175. Accessed December 24, 2025.
[97] Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, eds., *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, chapter: "On Civil and Political Society in Post-Colonial Democracies," in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 165–178. Accessed February 20, 2025.

recognize the ways in which civil society is embedded in the broader political and social context. This includes acknowledging the role of exclusionary forces, such as caste and gender, and the ways in which civil society organizations may perpetuate, rather than challenge, existing inequalities. Furthermore, the relationship between civil society and the state in South Asia must be re-examined. Rather than assuming a strict division between the two, it is important to recognize the ways in which civil society and the state interact, collaborate, and sometimes co-opt one another. In many cases, civil society in South Asia functions not as an independent check on state power, but as a partner in nation-building and development efforts. This requires a more nuanced understanding of how civil society operates within the constraints of state control and nationalist projects. The complexities of civil society in South Asia necessitate models that are attuned to the region's unique historical, social, and political landscapes. Western paradigms, which often conceptualise civil society as a distinct and autonomous sphere separate from the state, fail to capture the intricate interdependencies and power dynamics prevalent in South Asian societies.

In this context, this chapter finds that civil society is not merely a neutral arena for voluntary associations but a contested space where various forces intersect, including state authority, religious identities, caste hierarchies, and gender relations. Understanding civil society in South Asia requires acknowledging its dual role as both a site of domination and resistance. The interplay of state power and social hierarchies often results in the marginalization of certain groups, while simultaneously providing platforms for activism and social change. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged to combat injustices, advocating for policy reforms and greater social inclusion. [82] Gender dynamics further complicate the landscape of civil society in South Asia. Sri Lanka's case bears testimony to these complications. This chapter asserts that *the relationship between civil society and the state in Sri Lanka is characterized by a complex mix of collaboration, co-optation, and contention*. While CSOs usually often work alongside state agencies to implement development projects and social programs, there have been instances when the state has sought to control or suppress civil society activities, especially when they have been perceived as oppositional. Religious identities also play a significant role in shaping civil society in Sri Lanka. The rise of religious nationalism has influenced civil society organizations, sometimes leading to the exclusion of minority groups and the promotion of majoritarian agendas. Multiple CSOs with varied religious affinities have flourished, nevertheless, relying on political patronage and financial bargaining. This fluidity challenges

the notion of civil society as an inherently inclusive and democratic space, highlighting the need for models that account for the politicization of religious identities.

Moreover, the global discourse on civil society often emphasizes its role in promoting good governance and democratization. However, in the Sri Lankan, the effectiveness of civil society in achieving these goals is contingent upon its ability to navigate and address deeply entrenched social hierarchies and power imbalances. This necessitates a re-conceptualization of civil society that is sensitive to local, ethnic contexts and the lived realities of the marginalized populations. As such, there is a need for more localized and context-sensitive approaches to understanding civil society in Sri Lanka; approaches that recognize the country's specific challenges and opportunities for promoting inclusive governance, social justice, and democratic participation. Civil society in post-colonial Sri Lanka has been shaped by an intricate web of historical, political, social, and economic forces, making its evolution a rich yet, complex area of study. From its roots in the colonial period, where British rule entrenched ethnic divisions and fostered elite-led civic organizations, to the turbulent post-independence period characterized by the rise of Sinhalese nationalism, civil society has continuously played a pivotal role in mediating state-period characterized by the rise of Sinhalese nationalism, civil society has continuously played a pivotal role in mediating state-society relations. The deep fractures between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, exacerbated by the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, laid the foundation for the ethno-political tensions that would culminate in the brutal civil war lasting from 1983 to 2009. During this war, civil society had to navigate a dangerous terrain, where space for dissent was severely curtailed, and advocacy efforts were frequently suppressed by both the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Despite these challenges, civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and humanitarian agencies, played a crucial role in providing relief to war-affected populations, while local CSOs attempted, often at great risk, to promote dialogue and peace. Post-war Sri Lanka presented both new opportunities and challenges for civil society, marked by unprecedented clampdowns under the Rajapakse regime. Sinhalese Buddhist dominance created a hostile environment for civil society actors who called for a more inclusive and just peace process. Many organizations were labelled as traitors or foreign agents, particularly those receiving international funding, leading to a shrinking space for civil society activism and dissent. Despite these obstacles, civil society continues to play a critical role in shaping Sri Lanka's political and social landscape. CSOs have been instrumental in advocating for legal reforms, promoting democratic governance, and ensuring the protection of minority

rights, promoting reconciliation at the grassroots level, particularly through initiatives that bring together Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities to engage in dialogue and rebuild trust.

One of the most significant contributions of civil society in post-war Sri Lanka has been its role in addressing the needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations. War widows, displaced persons, former combatants, and children affected by the conflict have been among the primary beneficiaries of civil society programs aimed at rehabilitation and reintegration. Many local and international organizations have worked to provide vocational training, psychosocial support, and education to these groups, helping them rebuild their lives in the aftermath of war. The focus on women's empowerment, in particular, has been a critical aspect of civil society's work, as women have often borne the brunt of the conflict, both as victims and as heads of households in post-war Sri Lanka. Programs aimed at supporting female headed households and promoting gender equality have been essential in fostering economic independence and social inclusion for these women. However, the challenges faced by civil society in post-war Sri Lanka are significant and multifaceted. The political landscape has become increasingly authoritarian, with successive governments imposing restrictions on civil society organizations, particularly those that engage in political advocacy or receive foreign funding. The introduction of restrictive laws and regulations, such as the Non-Governmental Organizations Secretariat, has further limited the ability of civil society to operate freely. These measures, combined with state surveillance and harassment of activists, have created an environment of fear and self-censorship, where many organizations are reluctant to openly challenge the government or criticize its policies.

In addition to political repression, civil society in Sri Lanka has also had to contend with deep-seated social and cultural challenges. Ethnic and religious divisions remain significant barriers to reconciliation, with many communities still deeply polarized along ethnic lines. The rise of Buddhist extremism, exemplified by groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena, has further complicated efforts to promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony. Civil society organizations working on issues of religious freedom and minority rights have faced threats and violence from extremist groups, as well as indifference or hostility from state authorities. These challenges highlight the difficulties of building a truly inclusive and cohesive civil society in a context where nationalism and ethnic identity continue to play a central role in politics and social life.

There are certain aspects of civil society organizations in Sri Lanka which remain relatively underexplored. For example, literature on the economic dimensions of civil society's work in post-war Sri Lanka remains sparse. While much of the focus has been on political and social issues, civil society also plays a crucial role in addressing economic inequalities and promoting development. In the Northern and Eastern provinces, which were heavily affected by the war, civil society organizations have been instrumental in advocating for equitable development and ensuring that war-affected communities are not left behind in the country's broader economic growth. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive research on how civil society interacts with economic development policies and the extent to which it influences economic decision-making at the national level. The relationship between civil society, economic development, and social justice in post-war Sri Lanka is an area that requires further investigation.

One of the key research gaps identified in the existing literature on civil society in post-colonial Sri Lanka is the need for a more detailed analysis of the long-term impact of civil society-led initiatives on governance and reconciliation. While many studies have examined the immediate post-war period, there is a lack of research on how civil society's efforts have shaped the political landscape and contributed to democratic consolidation over the past decade. Questions remain about the effectiveness of transitional justice mechanisms, the role of civil society in promoting accountability, and the extent to which these efforts have fostered genuine reconciliation between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Another critical area that requires further exploration is the role of grassroots organizations and community-based civil society actors. While international NGOs and larger national organizations have received considerable attention in the literature, the contributions of local actors, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas, have been less studied. Understanding how these organizations operate at the community level, how they engage with marginalized groups, and how they navigate the challenges of working in a politically sensitive environment is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of civil society in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the role of civil society in addressing gender and LGBTQ+ rights in Sri Lanka remains an understudied area. While there has been some focus on women's empowerment and gender equality, there is a lack of research on how civil society advocates for the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, who continue to face significant social stigma and legal discrimination. As civil society plays a crucial role in challenging social norms and advocating for marginalized communities, understanding its engagement with gender and sexual rights is vital for assessing its overall impact on social justice in Sri Lanka. Addressing these gaps will provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of civil society's potential to contribute to sustainable peace and inclusive development in Sri Lanka.

Impact of Domestic Factors on Civil Society in Sri Lanka

Introduction

This chapter closely examines the local or domestic factors which shape civil society formations and functioning in Sri Lanka on an everyday basis. The chapter is divided into exploring two broad components: institutionalized structures and everyday social processes. The chapter also examines how Sri Lanka's internal political and social structures, its ethnic relations, religious dynamics, patronage systems, and institutional configurations, mediate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist influences both from within and without. The chapter argues that understanding civil society in Sri Lanka therefore requires situating it within a broader web of interactions that operate simultaneously above and below the level of the state.

Following the end of the civil conflict, Sri Lanka entered a phase marked by strong presidentialism, centralised decision-making, militarised governance in the North and East, expanded infrastructure development, and shifting patterns of economic dependency. At the same time, local political and socio-cultural factors play a decisive role in determining the nature of civil society activism. Sri Lanka's post-independence political evolution has produced a highly centralised state structure, characterised by executive dominance, bureaucratic opacity, and the pervasive influence of the military and intelligence apparatus. These structural features affect the freedom, legitimacy, and survival strategies of civil society organisations. Socially, civil society actors operate within a landscape shaped by ethnic cleavages, religious identities, class inequalities, regional disparities, and caste dynamics, all of which influence participation, trust, and mobilisation. Local NGOs and INGOs form complex ecosystems characterised by collaboration, competition, donor dependence, and evolving agendas. Advocacy networks must constantly navigate these constraints while attempting to use global interest to their advantage. Taken together, local political and social structures constitute a crucial lens for understanding why certain global influences take root, why others are resisted, and how civil society actors develop distinct repertoires of action.

Impact of Institutionalised Structures on Civil Society

Local political structures have played a decisive role in shaping the evolution, strategies, and limits of civil society in Sri Lanka. While civil society actors often appear as independent entities advocating reform, accountability, and social justice, their ability to operate is deeply conditioned by the institutional environment in which they function. The country's political

landscape—marked by centralised executive power, extensive patronage networks, ethnonationalist politics, and enduring militarisation, provides both opportunities and constraints for civic actors. These structures do not simply influence civil society from the outside; they shape how organisations form, whom they represent, what issues they raise, and the strategies they adopt. Moreover, constitutional shifts, party competition, media regulation, and the politicisation of state institutions continually redefine the boundaries of acceptable civic engagement. In this setting, civil society remains both a product of and a response to local political forces. Understanding these interactions is crucial for analysing how civic organisations navigate power, shape public debate, and challenge or accommodate the state's authority in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Political Culture and Historical Legacies

Sri Lanka's civil society has been shaped by a long and layered political culture that developed through pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence transformations. These historical legacies continue to influence the way citizens understand political authority, how the state responds to civic mobilisation, and how public institutions interact with social actors. In this sense, civil society does not operate in a vacuum; it is embedded in a political culture that has evolved alongside major shifts in governance, nationalism, and state formation.

Pre-colonial Sri Lanka was characterised by highly centralised monarchies where political authority was personalised and legitimacy rested on hierarchical power structures. The pre-modern state's centralising tendencies created a political tradition where rulers were expected to act as custodians of order and patronage. Scholars note that "pre-colonial polities in Sri Lanka were centralised kingdoms organised around hierarchical social relationships and caste-based patronage".[1] These norms continued to shape expectations of political leadership even after the arrival of European powers. The colonial period, first under the Portuguese (1505-1658), then the Dutch (1658-1796), and finally the British (1796–1948), introduced new forms of administrative authority and political engagement. The British, in particular, consolidated a centralised bureaucracy, a plantation economy, and modern legal institutions. They also introduced representative councils and limited forms of political participation. However, colonial governance did not create a democratic political culture; instead, it produced elite-

[1] Asanga Welikala, "Nation, State, Sovereignty, and Kingship: The Pre-Modern Antecedents of the Presidential State," in *Reforming Sri Lankan Presidentialism: Provenance, Problems and Prospects*, ed. Asanga Welikala (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015), 503–506, accessed March 18, 2024, https://constitutionalreforms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/21-Welikala.pdf.

mediated forms of representation. One historian observes that "colonial administrative structures consolidated elite dominance over political representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries". [2] This shaped a civil society dominated by urban, English-educated elites who engaged in associational life mainly through professional bodies, literary societies, and religious organisations.

Post-independence political culture retained many of these colonial legacies but added strong currents of nationalism, party competition, and electoral mobilisation. The introduction of universal suffrage in 1931, far earlier than in many Asian countries, created a mass electorate and encouraged political leaders to cultivate close ties with voters through patronage networks. Over time, this contributed to a political culture in which citizens expected politicians to deliver material benefits in exchange for loyalty. As scholars of South Asian political development point out, "the expansion of electoral politics in Sri Lanka produced a dense patronage-based relationship between voters and politicians".[3] This had significant implications for civil society: organisations that challenged patronage networks or exposed corruption often encountered resistance or hostility from politicians who saw such activism as a threat.

The adoption of the 1978 Constitution and the creation of the Executive Presidency further reshaped political culture. The presidency consolidated unprecedented powers in the executive branch, reinforcing hierarchical political authority and enabling leaders to dominate public institutions. As noted in a major study of Sri Lankan constitutionalism, "the 1978 Constitution created one of the most powerful executive presidencies in the world".[4] This strengthened a political culture in which political power was centralised, personalised, and insulated from institutional accountability. For civil society, this meant that advocacy requiring institutional reform such as demands for judicial independence, transparency, or human rights protections often clashed directly with executive preferences.

Another important historical legacy is the long ethnic conflict between the state and Tamil militant groups, culminating in a nearly three-decade civil war (1983–2009). The conflict

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[2] Harini Amarasuriya, *Elite Politics and Dissent in Sri Lanka*, ISAS Working Paper No. 223 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 2015), 9–10, accessed July 9, 2023, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/195774/ISAS%20Working%20Paper%20No.%20%20223%20%20-%20Elite%20Politics%20and%20Dissent%20in%20Sri%20Lanka.pdf.

[3] Kristian Stokke, "Building the Tamil Eelam State: Emerging State Institutions and Forms of Governance in LTTE-Controlled Areas in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): 1031–1033, accessed August 17, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590600850434

[4] A. J. Wilson, *The Gaullist System in Asia: The Constitution of Sri Lanka (1978)* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 38–40.

entrenched deep mistrust between minority communities and the state, and it normalised a security-centric approach to governance. As one authoritative report notes, "Sri Lanka's civil war entrenched militarised governance practices far beyond the battlefield, affecting policing, administration, and civic life". This has had long-lasting effects on civil society, particularly in the Northern and Eastern Provinces where surveillance, intimidation, and restrictions on association became part of everyday life.

In addition, Sri Lanka's political culture has been shaped by the influence of Buddhist nationalism and its historical association with political legitimacy. Since the mid-twentieth century, sections of the Buddhist clergy have exercised significant influence in public debates, political campaigns, and state decision-making. The idea that the state has a special obligation to protect Buddhism has shaped political discourse and public expectations. Research shows that "Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has been a persistent force in shaping state policy and public life in Sri Lanka".[5] This historical legacy complicates the work of civil society organisations that advocate for minority rights, religious freedoms, or pluralism, as their efforts may be seen as challenging dominant cultural narratives.

Finally, political culture in Sri Lanka continues to be shaped by the experience of authoritarian tendencies, periods of democratic opening, economic crises, and mass mobilisation. The 2022 Aragalaya protests, for example, revealed both the public's frustration with entrenched political practices and the emergence of new civic energies. Yet, the long history of centralised authority, patronage expectations, and majoritarian nationalism continues to influence how state institutions respond to civic activism.

Overall, Sri Lanka's historical legacies have created a political culture marked by centralised leadership, patronage norms, nationalist narratives, and security-oriented governance. These features frame the opportunities and constraints faced by civil society actors. Understanding these deep-rooted patterns is essential for analysing the contemporary relationship between political structures and civil society in Sri Lanka.

[5] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka: Sinhala Nationalism and the Elusive Southern Consensus*, Asia Report No. 141 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, November 7, 2007), 3–4, 15–19, accessed October 6, 2024, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/44607/sri_lanka_sinhala_nationalism.pdf

Executive Dominance and Centralisation

The structure of the Sri Lankan state has been marked by a high degree of centralisation, shaped by constitutional design, political leadership styles, and the long-term legacy of security-driven governance. These features have played a decisive role in determining the scope and limits of civil society activity. Among the many factors influencing this relationship, the dominance of the executive branch has been the most consequential. The expansion of executive authority since the late 1970s has affected public institutions, political accountability, and the operating space for civic engagement.

The origins of executive centralisation can be traced to the 1978 Constitution, which introduced the Executive Presidency. This constitutional shift was intended to promote political stability and economic reform, but in practice, it concentrated authority in a single office to a degree unmatched in most parliamentary democracies. Scholars have pointed out that "Sri Lanka's 1978 Constitution vested extraordinary powers in the presidency, including immunity from suit, the ability to dissolve Parliament after one year, and wide discretion over appointments".[6] These powers enabled successive presidents to control key state institutions and shape the political environment in ways that significantly influenced civil society's operating conditions.

Executive dominance was reinforced by the capacity of presidents to directly appoint the heads of critical institutions such as the judiciary, police, public service commissions, and the state media. The concentration of appointment powers reduced institutional autonomy and often created an environment in which public agencies aligned closely with executive preferences. One study observed that "presidential appointment powers have weakened the independence of regulatory bodies and oversight institutions, limiting their ability to act as checks on executive authority".[7] This institutional imbalance affected civil society groups that relied on impartial state bodies for access to justice, protection of rights, or regulatory clarity.

The problem of centralisation has also been shaped by the behaviour of political leaders. Presidents such as J.R. Jayewardene, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and Gotabaya Rajapaksa exercised their powers expansively, reshaping political culture and centralising decision-making within small circles of trusted advisers. During some administrations, civil society criticism or dissent was treated as a challenge to political authority rather than as part of democratic discourse.

[6] Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Sri Lanka's Constitution: An Introduction* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2011), 34–36. Accessed March 12, 2024. https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Sri-Lankas-Constitution-An-Introduction.pdf.

[7] Asanga Welikala, "The Executive Presidency, the Rule of Law and the Separation of Powers in Sri Lanka," in *The Rule of Law in Decline?*, ed. Christopher McCrudden and Brendan O'Leary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 312–315.

Reports show that "civil society organisations perceived as critical of the government were subject to surveillance, public vilification, or administrative delays".[8] Such practices created a climate of caution, discouraging open advocacy on sensitive issues.

Constitutional amendments further strengthened, and at times weakened, the executive's dominance. The Eighteenth Amendment (2010) abolished presidential term limits and enhanced presidential discretion over appointments, deepening centralisation. However, the Nineteenth Amendment (2015) sought to reverse these trends by establishing independent commissions and reducing presidential powers. Analysts noted that the amendment was "a significant attempt to depoliticise state institutions and reintroduce checks and balances". Yet, the Twentieth Amendment (2020) again reversed many of these reforms, restoring extensive presidential control. This oscillation created instability for civil society groups that depended on predictable institutional environments. Organisations often struggled to plan long-term engagement when the rules governing public institutions shifted dramatically within short periods.

Executive centralisation also affected civil society through its impact on local governance. Despite constitutional provisions for decentralisation, particularly the Thirteenth Amendment establishing Provincial Councils in 1987, real power remained concentrated in Colombo. The financial, administrative, and political autonomy of provincial and local authorities remained limited. In practice, many local bodies depended on central government ministries for resources and approval of development initiatives. Researchers have observed that "central government control over fiscal and administrative decisions has constrained the effectiveness of Provincial Councils, limiting the potential for participatory governance".[9] Civil society groups operating at local levels often found that meaningful engagement required navigating centralised political hierarchies rather than working through local institutions. Human rights observers have noted that "the use of emergency laws concentrated sweeping powers in the hands of the executive, enabling detention without trial and restricting freedoms of association and expression". These conditions created profound challenges for civil society, especially in conflict-affected regions where scrutiny and restrictions were more severe.

[8] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka, op. cit,.*18–21.
[9] K. M. de Silva and G. H. Peiris, *Provincial Councils and Devolution in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2010), 67–70. Accessed June 3, 2025. https://ices.lk/publications/provincial-councils-and-devolution-in-sri-lanka/.

In the post-war years, executive dominance manifested in new ways. Large infrastructure projects, post-war reconstruction, and economic initiatives were often coordinated through centralised agencies or militarised administrative structures. Civil society organisations advocating for transparency, land rights, or community participation frequently encountered opaque decision-making processes. Some were excluded from consultations, while others faced administrative hurdles in registration, project approval, or field access. These dynamics reinforced patterns in which the executive branch shaped the boundaries of civic engagement.

Despite these challenges, civil society has periodically mobilised to challenge executive overreach. Public campaigns around constitutional reforms, freedom of information legislation, and governance accountability have played significant roles in shaping democratic debate. The mobilisation leading up to the 2015 political transition demonstrated the potential for broad civic coalitions to influence institutional reform. More recently, the 2022 Aragalaya movement represented a direct challenge to centralised governance and executive-led political culture. Although its long-term institutional impact remains uncertain, the movement highlighted persistent public dissatisfaction with centralisation and unaccountable leadership. Nonetheless, the structure of the Sri Lankan state continues to grant significant authority to the executive, reducing the autonomy of public institutions and shaping the environment in which civil society operates. Whether advocating for human rights, governance reform, or community development, civil society actors must navigate a system in which centralised power and personalised leadership remain dominant features. The interaction between executive authority and civil society thus reflects broader historical patterns of centralisation that continue to define Sri Lanka's political landscape.

Patronage Politics and Clientelist Networks

Patronage and clientelist networks have been a defining feature of Sri Lanka's political system since independence, shaping how political authority is exercised and how different actors interact with the state. These networks are built on reciprocal exchanges between political patrons and citizens, where benefits such as jobs, welfare provisions, development projects, or administrative favours are distributed in return for political loyalty. Over decades, this system has penetrated deeply into everyday political life, influencing governance structures, electoral behaviour, and crucially the working environment for civil society organisations. The interaction between patronage politics and civil society has been complex: at times restrictive,

at times co-optive, and at times transformative, depending on the political incentives and the social context.

Patronage became a central organising principle in Sri Lankan politics partly because of early electoral developments. The introduction of universal suffrage in 1931 created a competitive political environment where elected leaders needed to secure mass support. As parties expanded their electoral bases, they increasingly relied on personalised networks to mobilise voters. Over time, these networks became institutionalised within major political parties such as the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).[10] Scholars have noted that "patronage in Sri Lanka evolved into a durable political instrument, shaping party organisation and voter expectations alike".[11] These expectations extended into interactions with civil society, where political actors often viewed organisations through the lens of electoral utility rather than as autonomous civic institutions.

One of the most significant effects of patronage politics on civil society has been the blurring of boundaries between civic activism and political party networks. Many local-level organisations such as, women's societies, youth clubs, funeral societies, and rural development associations became closely tied to local politicians who provided financial or administrative support. In return, these groups often mobilised voters during elections or demonstrated public support for political leaders. Research shows that "local development societies in many districts acted as intermediaries of patronage, linking politicians with communities and shaping access to state benefits".[12] This embeddedness in patronage systems has made it difficult for civil society groups to maintain political independence. Organisations that sought to challenge corruption, mismanagement, or unequal distribution of resources frequently encountered resistance from political actors who viewed such activism as a threat to their networks of influence.

Patronage has also influenced civil society through uneven resource allocation. State development funds, poverty alleviation programmes, and local infrastructure budgets have

[10] Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits, "State Institutions and Patronage Politics," in *An Uneasy Hegemony: Politics of State-building and Struggles for Justice in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 173–176, accessed March 8, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009199230.006.
[11] Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits, "Political Patronage: Underbelly of Everyday Politics," in *An Uneasy Hegemony: Politics of State-building and Struggles for Justice in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 113–118, accessed August 19, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009199230.005.
[12] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's North II: Rebuilding under the Military*, Asia Report no. 220 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 16, 2012), 4, accessed February 14, 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/220-sri-lanka-s-north-ii-rebuilding-under-the-military.pdf.

often been distributed according to political allegiance rather than objective criteria. Civil society organisations working in marginalised or opposition-aligned areas frequently faced delays in receiving permits, difficulties in accessing local government offices, or obstacles in collaborating with public institutions. Human rights monitors have documented cases where "local authorities restricted the activities of organisations perceived as linked to opposition parties or critical groups".[13] Such practices limit the reach of independent civil society, especially in regions where political competition is intense or where ruling-party networks are deeply entrenched.

At the same time, patronage networks have been used by governments to co-opt or neutralise civil society activism. Governments at various times have channelled funds to favoured organisations, appointed politically loyal individuals to NGO advisory positions, or facilitated partnerships with groups that echoed official narratives. During certain periods, especially at local levels, some civil society organisations aligned themselves with ruling parties to secure funding, recognition, or protection. This dynamic has produced what analysts describe as "instrumental civil society" groups that exist not as independent advocates but as extensions of political networks. One study note that "co-optation through state patronage created a tier of compliant organisations that diluted critical civic voices and reshaped the public sphere".[14] This phenomenon has complicated the ability of civil society to act as a check on the state or articulate demands for reform.

However, patronage politics has not only restricted civil society; it has also shaped pathways for civic mobilisation. The most effective civil society campaigns in Sri Lanka, such as the 2015 good governance movement, campaigns for the Right to Information Act, and local accountability initiatives that often succeeded by navigating, and sometimes strategically engaging with, patronage structures. Activists learned to work with elected officials, bureaucrats, and local intermediaries in order to access public institutions or gain political visibility. In some instances, reform-oriented politicians supported civil society efforts to expose corruption or promote governance reforms, using civic campaigns to strengthen their

[13] Centre for Policy Alternatives and CIVICUS, *Sri Lanka's Harassed Civil Society* (Colombo and Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Alternatives and CIVICUS, November 2013), 3–6, accessed June 3, 2023, https://www.civicus.org/images/Sri%20Lanka%20Report.pdf.

[14] Willy McCourt, *Patrons versus Weberians in the Sri Lankan Civil Service*, Management in Development Working Paper Series no. 13 (Manchester: Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester, February 2005), 1–3, 10–11, accessed October 22, 2025, https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/gdi/publications/workingpapers/mid/mid_wp13.pdf.

own legitimacy. These dynamics show that patronage networks are not monolithic; they can be contested and at times redirected.

Clientelist politics has shaped civil society engagement differently across regions. In rural areas, where political authority is more personalised and socio-economic dependency is greater, civil society organisations often operate under stronger political oversight. Village-level activists may hesitate to challenge local elites due to fear of losing access to state welfare programmes or development benefits. In contrast, urban-based NGOs, professional associations, and advocacy organisations tend to have more autonomy due to higher levels of financial independence, international linkages, and media access. This uneven geography of patronage shapes where civil society can be assertive and where it must remain cautious.

The post-war period introduced new layers to patronage networks. Reconstruction contracts, land allocation, housing projects, and livelihood programmes in the Northern and Eastern Provinces were often mediated through politically aligned actors or military-linked channels. Civil society groups working on land rights, missing persons, or demilitarisation frequently encountered bureaucratic obstacles that stemmed from patronage-aligned administrative decisions. Reports have shown that "post-war patronage and militarised development created new elite networks that determined access to reconstruction resources".[15] These developments further shaped the context in which civil society organisations operated, especially those engaged in rights-based advocacy.

Despite these challenges, civil society has leveraged opportunities created by disruptions in patronage systems. Economic crises, public protests, and political transitions have weakened entrenched networks and created openings for civic mobilisation. The 2022 Aragalaya movement, for instance, emerged partly as a response to a state system seen as dominated by patronage-based governance. Civil society groups, professional bodies, and youth activists mobilised to challenge a political order that many believed had failed due to its dependence on family-based patronage structures. Although the movement's outcomes remain evolving, it demonstrated the potential for civic mobilisation to confront long-standing clientelist systems.

In sum, patronage politics in Sri Lanka has had a profound effect on civil society, shaping its autonomy, strategies, and capacity to influence governance. Civil society exists within a political landscape where loyalty, resources, and authority are often negotiated through

[15] Thiruni Kelegama, "Militarized Development in Post-war Sri Lanka: Consolidating Control," *Development and Change* 55, no. 5 (2024): 967–970, accessed March 4, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12847.

personalised networks rather than institutionalised channels. While this context has constrained civic activism, it has also generated opportunities for strategic engagement. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analysing the complex relationship between political power and civil society in Sri Lanka.

Militarisation and Security-State Logic

Militarisation has been one of the most enduring structural forces shaping civil society in Sri Lanka. It has influenced not only the space available for civic engagement but also the ways in which organisations are formed, the strategies they adopt, and the issues they are able or unable to address. Militarisation developed over decades of armed conflict, counterinsurgency operations, and centralised security governance. Although the war ended in 2009, many features of security-driven administration remained, embedding military institutions deeply within political life. This long-term militarisation has created distinct civic experiences in the South compared to the North and East, reshaping the trajectory of civil society across the country.

During the civil war, emergency regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) granted the security forces extensive powers over public life. These laws allowed the military and police to conduct arrests, detentions, and searches without the usual safeguards. As Amnesty International noted, Sri Lanka's security laws provided broad powers of search, seizure, and detention without adequate safeguards.[16] Under such conditions, civil society organisations, especially those working on human rights or political issues, had limited room for open activism. Many groups adopted discrete forms of documentation, relied on informal networks, or refrained from public advocacy to protect staff and beneficiaries. Thus, the structure of militarised governance directly shaped the form and behaviour of civil society.[17]

The effects of militarisation were particularly intense in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. These areas experienced heavy military deployment, checkpoints, surveillance, and intelligence activity during and after the conflict. Civil society organisations operating in these regions were often required to obtain military permission for meetings, workshops, or field activities. International Crisis Group reported that, the military maintained a pervasive role in

[16] Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka: Briefing on Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act* (London: Amnesty International, 2011), 5–7, accessed March 12, 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/011/2011/en/.
[17] Jonathan Goodhand, "Sri Lanka in 2010: Regime Consolidation and Militarisation," *Asian Survey* 51, no. 1 (2011): 130–133, accessed January 19, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2011.51.1.130.

governance in the North, involving itself in land administration, economic activities, and the regulation of civil groups.[18] This pervasive influence affected the formation of organisations: groups focusing on community welfare or livelihood support were tolerated more easily, whereas those dealing with land rights, disappearances, or accountability faced scrutiny or intimidation. Consequently, militarisation shaped the overall composition of civil society, encouraging the growth of apolitical organisations while marginalising rights-focused actors.[19]

In the South, the patterns of militarisation were different. Although emergency laws applied nationwide, civic associations, labour unions, student movements, and professional bodies had comparatively more freedom to mobilise. Yet the security-state logic remained evident in the treatment of dissent. Crackdowns on student protests, tight police surveillance of activist groups, and the monitoring of political meetings indicated that militarisation was not confined to wartime contexts. Researchers have observed that policing and intelligence practices in the South often reflected national security priorities rather than democratic norms.[20] Thus, even in areas without a major military presence, the logic of the security state influenced how civil society operated.

After 2009, militarisation extended beyond traditional security functions. The armed forces became involved in infrastructure development, agriculture, tourism, and commercial enterprises. International Crisis Group documented military involvement in economic life threatened the autonomy of local government institutions and limited community participation.[21] In the North, military-led development projects often sidelined local authorities and community organisations, weakening participatory governance. Civil society groups advocating for transparency or land restitution found it difficult to engage with institutions whose decision-making processes were opaque and heavily influenced by military actors. These patterns not only altered civil society's operational environment but also reshaped its

[18] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's North II: Rebuilding under the Military*, Asia Report no. 220 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 16, 2012), 7–9, accessed April 7, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/220-sri-lankas-north-ii-rebuilding-under-military.
[19] Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Civil Society," *Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 4 (2001): 1025–1028, accessed February 14, 2024, https://doi.org/10.2307/2700061.
[20] Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Sri Lanka in 2009: From Civil War to Political Uncertainties*, *Asian Survey* 50, no. 1 (2010): 104–106, accessed August 3, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2010.50.1.104.
[21] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka: Militarisation and Political Consolidation*, Asia Report no. 297 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 28, 2019), 18–20, accessed October 9, 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/297-sri-lanka-militarisation-and-political-consolidation.

strategic priorities, pushing organisations toward service delivery and away from rights-based activism.[22]

The period after 2015 saw limited attempts at demilitarisation. The establishment of the Office on Missing Persons (OMP), discussions on constitutional reform, and greater engagement with international human rights bodies created opportunities for civil society to address war-related issues more openly. Some surveillance structures were relaxed, and public consultations became more common. However, these shifts were uneven and vulnerable to political change. Following the 2019 presidential election, security-led governance quickly regained prominence. Analysts observed that, the resurgence of military-led task forces and surveillance structures signalled a return to security-centred governance.[23] Civil society organisations, particularly those addressing accountability, minority rights, or governance reforms, again faced tighter scrutiny and administrative constraints. These oscillations shaped the trajectory of civil society by creating cycles of opening and closure, forcing organisations to adapt repeatedly to changing political conditions.[24]

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified militarisation in Sri Lanka and significantly affected civic space. The government assigned pandemic management to military leadership, with the Head of the Army appointed as the head of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak. Verité Research noted that, Sri Lanka's pandemic response was among the most militarised in Asia, with the military leading quarantine, surveillance, and movement-control operations.[25] Military-run quarantine centres, travel-permit systems, and contact-tracing mechanisms expanded the security apparatus into public health administration. These developments affected civil society in several ways.

First, the increased use of surveillance technologies and movement controls limited the ability of organisations to conduct field visits, community meetings, or monitoring activities. Human Rights Watch reported that restrictions on movement, combined with military-enforced quarantine rules, created barriers for humanitarian and civil society organisations seeking to

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[22] Michele Ruth Gamburd, "Militarization, Development and Civil Society in Post-war Sri Lanka," in *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics*, ed. Paul R. Brass (London: Routledge, 2019), 214–216.
[23] Ahilan Kadirgamar, "Sri Lanka's New Authoritarian Turn," *Economic and Political Weekly* 55, no. 3 (2020): 18–20, accessed June 11, 2024, https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/3/commentary/sri-lankas-new-authoritarian-turn.html.
[24] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Civic Space under Surveillance: Civil Society after the 2019 Election* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2020), 11–14, accessed May 16, 2025, https://www.cpalanka.org/civic-space-under-surveillance/.
[25] Verité Research, *Sri Lanka's Militarised Pandemic Response* (Colombo: Verité Research, 2021), 2–4, accessed November 22, 2025, https://www.veriteresearch.org/publication/sri-lankas-militarised-pandemic-response/.

assist vulnerable communities.[26] Second, pandemic regulations were applied unevenly, with some civic actors alleging that groups critical of government policies faced greater obstacles in obtaining permissions. Third, public protests were often curtailed under health regulations, blurring the line between pandemic control and suppression of dissent. Amnesty International noted that health guidelines were sometimes used to restrict peaceful assemblies in ways that exceeded public health justifications.[27] The pandemic thus reinforced pre-existing patterns of militarisation, allowing security structures to expand their roles in civilian life and narrowing civic space at a moment when economic insecurity and public frustration were growing. Despite these challenges, civil society demonstrated resilience. Organisations adapted by shifting to online platforms, coordinating community-level assistance, and monitoring the distribution of relief. Some groups highlighted discriminatory practices in quarantine and relief distribution, prompting public debate. Yet the overall impact of COVID-era militarisation was to strengthen security-state logics in governance and reduce opportunities for independent civic engagement.

In aggregate, militarisation in Sri Lanka has repeatedly shaped the formation, trajectory, and strategies of civil society. From wartime repression to post-war economic involvement and pandemic-era securitisation, the military's role has influenced which organisations can emerge, what activities they can pursue, and how they operate within the broader political system. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analysing the structural constraints and opportunities that define civil society in Sri Lanka today.

Decentralised Governance

Sri Lanka's local government system, consisting of Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, and Pradeshiya Sabhas, represents the tier of government closest to citizens. In theory, these institutions should enable decentralised decision-making, community participation, and responsiveness to local needs. However, the structure and functioning of local government have been shaped by a long history of centralisation, political interference, and uneven

[26] Human Rights Watch, *Sri Lanka: COVID-19 Response Fuels Abuses* (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 21, 2020), 6–7, accessed February 18, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/21/sri-lanka-covid-19-response-fuels-abuses.
[27] Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka: Authorities Must Not Use COVID-19 to Suppress Dissent* (London: Amnesty International, June 11, 2021), 3–4, accessed September 27, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/sri-lanka-authorities-must-not-use-covid-19-to-suppress-dissent/.

implementation of constitutional reforms. These conditions have influenced how civil society at the local level develops, engages with policymakers, and advocates for change.

Decentralisation formally entered Sri Lanka's political architecture through the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1987), which created Provincial Councils and devolved certain subjects to them.[28] Although this reform was significant, its implementation has remained uneven. Analysts have observed that, the devolution model under the Thirteenth Amendment has been hindered by weak fiscal autonomy, central overrides, and political reluctance to share authority.[29] Civil society organisations (CSOs) attempting to influence provincial-level planning or policymaking often find themselves navigating bureaucratic structures where real authority lies with central ministries rather than devolved bodies.

At the level of local authorities, similar structural challenges persist. Local government bodies depend heavily on the central government for funding, technical expertise, and approval of development projects. This dependency limits their ability to act independently and reduces opportunities for civil society to shape local policy. Studies of public administration note that local bodies lack predictable revenue streams and therefore remain institutionally weak, which affects their ability to collaborate with community groups.[30] CSOs attempting to influence budget allocations, promote participatory planning, or advocate for accountability often find that decisions rest with central authorities or members of Parliament rather than elected local representatives.

Political interference is another major factor shaping civil society's engagement with local governance. Elected representatives at the national level often dominate local development processes through decentralised budget allocations or constituency development funds. This has created parallel channels of authority where local government institutions are bypassed. Research shows that this pattern undermines the institutional role of local councils and redirects citizens' demands toward central political actors.[31] Civil society organisations attempting to

[28] Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), *Strengthening the Provincial Council System: Report of Workshop Deliberations* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, May 2008), 11–12, accessed February 14, 2024, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/FINAL-REPORT-ON-PCs-2008-May-CPA.pdf.
[29] Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), *Strengthening the Provincial Council System*, 33–34, 101, accessed August 19, 2024, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/FINAL-REPORT-ON-PCs-2008-May-CPA.pdf.
[30] Christian Bigdon, *The Decentralised Budget in Sri Lanka: A Case Study on the Allocation of Development Funds and Its Implications for Local Governance* (MA thesis, University of Zurich, 2009), 180–182, accessed March 6, 2025, https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/20489/1/The_Decentralised_Budget_in_Sri_Lanka.pdf.
[31] Ibid, 71–74.

strengthen local accountability mechanisms have thus had to operate within a political landscape where formal institutions are overshadowed by centralised patronage networks.

Despite these limitations, local government institutions continue to serve as important arenas for civic participation. Over time, CSOs have engaged in monitoring public services, promoting gender inclusion, and strengthening community-based decision-making. The introduction of a mandatory 25 percent quota for women's representation in local authorities in 2016 significantly altered civic engagement patterns. According to government records, women's representation at the local level increased from under 2 percent to approximately 25 percent following the electoral reforms.[32] This expansion created new opportunities for women-led community initiatives, activism on local issues, and collaboration with CSOs.

Civil society's interaction with local government differs across regions. In the Northern and Eastern Provinces, years of militarisation and post-war administrative surveillance have shaped local institutions in ways that constrain civic participation. Even though local elections were restored in these regions after the war, CSOs report ongoing challenges such as delays in accessing public officials, restrictions on public events, or the presence of security officers at community meetings. Reports by independent observers have documented that provincial and local authorities in these areas operated within a restricted administrative environment shaped by security-sector oversight, which affected how local civil society could organise. This environment limited the space available for rights-based organisations and community advocacy groups.[33]

In contrast, in the southern districts and the Western Province, civil society has benefited from comparatively stronger local institutions and greater administrative openness. Urban councils and municipal bodies often work with professional associations, environmental groups, and local activists to address issues such as waste management, housing, or transport. However, even in these areas, political pressure from central actors often shapes the scope of local decision-making. For example, several studies note that central ministries continue to influence

[32] International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), *Women's Political Representation in Sri Lanka: Electoral System Analysis and Recommendations* (Arlington, VA: IFES, 2021), 8, accessed June 22, 2024, https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/migrate/ifes_womens_political_representation_in_sri_lanka.pdf.
[33] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's North II: Rebuilding under the Military*, Asia Report no. 220 (Colombo/Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 16, 2012), ii, 12–13, 15, accessed November 3, 2025, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1159465/2016_1332419665_220-sri-lankas-north-ii-rebuilding-under-the-military.pdf.

infrastructure priorities, public procurement, and local revenue policies. As a result, CSOs must engage with both local authorities and national political actors to achieve meaningful change.

Another important dimension is participatory governance, which has seen intermittent successes. Initiatives supported by civil society, such as participatory budgeting, social audits, and community scorecards, have enhanced public accountability in some municipalities. Nonetheless, these efforts tend to be donor-driven and vulnerable to political shifts. When local leadership supports participatory processes, civil society can contribute significantly to planning and monitoring. But when political priorities change, these initiatives may lose support or be discontinued. This inconsistency limits the institutionalisation of civic participation.

Finally, the impact of local government institutions on civil society has become more visible during periods of crisis. During the 2022 economic collapse, CSOs across the country worked with local authorities to coordinate relief distribution, community food programmes, and urban social services. In many cases, civil society filled governance gaps created by economic instability and administrative shortages. This demonstrated the potential for collaborative local governance even within a highly centralised political structure.

In sum, decentralised governance in Sri Lanka has provided limited but important avenues for civil society engagement. While structural constraints, political interference, and weak fiscal autonomy hinder the potential of local institutions, CSOs continue to use these spaces to advocate for transparency, gender inclusion, and community development. The relationship between civil society and local government thus remains dynamic and regionally varied, shaped by a combination of institutional design and political realities.

Judiciary and Rule of Law

The judiciary and legal frameworks form a central pillar of Sri Lanka's political architecture, shaping the environment in which civil society organisations operate and influencing their ability to advocate for rights, accountability, and justice. Although the judiciary is constitutionally mandated to act independently, its capacity to protect civic freedoms has varied across political periods. The degree of judicial autonomy has depended heavily on executive influence, appointment powers, constitutional amendments, and broader political pressures.

Historically, the Supreme Court and Court of Appeal have played important roles in safeguarding civil liberties, but their effectiveness has often been uneven. Scholars have noted

that judicial independence has been challenged by patterns of executive appointment and politicisation. One study states that the institutional design of the judiciary placed significant appointment powers in the hands of the executive, making it vulnerable to political influence.[34] This structural vulnerability has shaped civil society's reliance on the courts: while some groups turned to litigation as a strategic tool, others perceived the judiciary as inconsistent or unpredictable in politically sensitive cases.[35]

Despite these challenges, the judiciary has produced landmark rulings that expanded civil society space. Public Interest Litigation (PIL) became an important avenue through which activists, lawyers, and NGOs challenged arbitrary state actions. In several cases, courts recognised the right to expression, peaceful assembly, and freedom from arbitrary detention. For instance, a Supreme Court determination in the early 1990s affirmed that freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democratic society.[36] Such statements strengthened the normative foundations for civic activism and encouraged organisations to use legal strategies to defend public rights.

However, judicial openings have not always been sustained. Periods of authoritarian governance saw the courts constrained through constitutional changes that weakened oversight institutions. The Eighteenth Amendment (2010), for example, removed critical checks on presidential power, prompting concern that judicial independence had been seriously undermined.[37] These political shifts made civil society vulnerable, especially organisations dealing with human rights, media freedoms, or minority advocacy. During such periods, activists often reported difficulties accessing courts, delays in hearings, or politically motivated challenges to their standing.

Legal frameworks governing civil society further shape the operational landscape. The Voluntary Social Service Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act (VSSO Act) has, at times, been used to monitor or restrict NGOs, particularly those working on rights-related

[34] International Bar Association Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI) and International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), *Attacks on Judiciary and Legal Profession Undermine the Rule of Law and Prevent Accountability within Sri Lanka* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 2014), 1–2, accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Sri-Lanka-Briefing-Note-IBA-ICJ.pdf.

[35] Transparency International Sri Lanka, *National Integrity System Assessment: Sri Lanka 2014* (Colombo: Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2014), 85–86, accessed August 7, 2023, https://www.tisrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NIS2014.pdf.

[36] *Abeysekera v. Rubasinghe*, Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, (2000) 1 Sri Lanka Law Reports 314, 318.

[37] Amnesty International, *Assault on Dissent: Intensified Repression and Militarization of Human Rights in Sri Lanka* (London: Amnesty International, 2013), 28–29, accessed February 11, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa370032013en.pdf.

issues. Rights groups observed that the Act's broad language allowed authorities to exercise excessive discretion in registering or supervising organisations.[38] Such provisions contributed to uncertainty and administrative burdens, influencing how civil society actors structured their operations, partnerships, and advocacy strategies.

The judiciary's relationship with civil society is also shaped by how courts interpret security legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). For several decades, the PTA enabled arrests, detentions, and restrictions on association, disproportionately affecting activists and journalists. Human rights monitors documented that the PTA created conditions where individuals were detained without meaningful judicial review.[39] These legal constraints limited civic activism, especially in the North and East, where communities relied heavily on legal advocacy to address post-war grievances.

In recent years, limited reforms have created renewed openings. The Right to Information Act (RTI), enacted in 2016, expanded civic oversight of public institutions. Courts have supported RTI implementation by ordering state agencies to comply with disclosure obligations. According to one analysis, the RTI regime opened new pathways for civil society to demand transparency and accountability.[40] These developments strengthened organisations working on governance, anti-corruption, and public participation.

Nevertheless, the judiciary's role in shaping civil society remains deeply influenced by broader political conditions. Where executive dominance is strong, judicial independence tends to weaken, reducing the courts' ability to safeguard civil space. Conversely, during periods of democratic opening, the judiciary has played a constructive role in empowering civil society communities and strengthening constitutional protections. Thus, the judiciary acts not only as a legal institution but also as a political arena where the scope of civic freedoms is negotiated, contested, and redefined.

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[38] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *CPA Note: The "VSSO Amendment Bill" and the Regulation of CSOs* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2018), 1–3, accessed October 9, 2024, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CPA_Note_VSSO_Amendment_Bill.pdf.

[39] International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), *Sri Lanka: Briefing Paper—Emergency Laws and International Standards* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, March 2009), 32–34, accessed May 22, 2023, https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/SriLanka-emergencylaws-advocacy-2009.pdf.

[40] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Right to Information: Issues and Challenges of Policy and Implementation* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2022), 10–13, accessed September 14, 2024, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/RTI-Issues-and-Challanges-of-Policy-and-Implementation_Web-file-E.pdf.

Social-Political Processes and Civil Society

Having explored the institutional structures shaping and impacting civil society organizations, we now turn to examine the processes within society which shape the daily experiences and operations of its people who constitute the very civil society under discussion.

Ethno-Nationalism and Majoritarian Politics

Ethno-nationalism has played a central role in shaping the formation, evolution, and limits of civil society in Sri Lanka. Majoritarian politics, grounded in the conviction that the state is fundamentally Sinhala-Buddhist in character, has influenced the direction of public institutions, structured expectations of citizenship, and defined the boundaries of legitimate civic activism. These dynamics have profoundly shaped how civil society organisations emerge, how they are regulated, and the type of claims they are able or unable to articulate.

The ideological foundations of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism were laid during the late nineteenth-century Buddhist revival, which merged cultural reform with political mobilisation. Historian K. M. de Silva explained that Buddhist revivalism generated a new political consciousness that linked religious identity with national aspirations.[41] This connection between cultural heritage and political identity continued into the post-independence era, where state institutions were expected to reflect Sinhala-Buddhist interests. Non-direct scholarly work also emphasises that this revival produced enduring narratives about the island's "historic mission," shaping subsequent political projects. After independence, majoritarian preferences were embedded in legislation and constitutional policies. The 1956 "Sinhala Only" Act marked a turning point by transforming language into a criterion of national belonging. Political scientist Neil DeVotta has argued that this policy institutionalised ethnocentric preferences and delegitimised minority linguistic rights.[42] Other scholars have similarly shown that the act contributed to a structural imbalance that reshaped civic participation, as many minority-based organisations were forced into defensive or advocacy roles.

The civil war further intensified majoritarian discourses by linking Tamil political demands to threats against the state. As Jayadeva Uyangoda observed, successive governments framed

[41] K. M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, rev. ed. (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2005), 450–52. Accessed 24 October, 2025, A History of Sri Lanka (1981 edition) – Archive.org

[42] Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 73–76. Accessed 2 March, 2025, Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka – Dokumen.pub

Tamil grievances not as political claims but as existential dangers to the unitary state.[43] This discourse made the political environment particularly hostile for civil society groups working on human rights, reconciliation, or accountability. Numerous studies have documented how these groups were labelled "unpatriotic" or "pro-separatist," shaping public perceptions and shrinking civic space. Majoritarian politics has also influenced the regulatory environment for civil society organisations. Government reports and independent studies have shown that administrative procedures, such as NGO registration, project approvals, and access to field sites—were applied more strictly to organisations working on minority issues than to those promoting Sinhala-Buddhist cultural activities. This imbalance demonstrates how political narratives can shape institutional treatment and limit civic autonomy.

A critical dimension of ethno-nationalism is the political engagement of parts of the Buddhist clergy. Sections of the Sangha have participated actively in electoral politics, policy lobbying, and protests. Scholar Stanley Tambiah wrote that politically active monks became powerful cultural brokers, shaping nationalist opinion and influencing state decisions on issues ranging from language to war.[44] These clerical interventions have affected civil society by pressuring the state to prioritise cultural protection over pluralistic governance, especially when civic groups advocate power-sharing or minority rights. Non-direct literature consistently highlights this clerical influence as a defining feature of Sri Lanka's public sphere. In the post-war period, new Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist movements emerged with greater visibility. Organisations such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) ran campaigns portraying NGOs, journalists, and activists as agents of foreign interference. A report by the International Crisis Group stated that nationalist groups orchestrated media campaigns against civil society actors, casting them as threats to the cultural integrity of the nation.[45] These narratives disrupted civic discourse, encouraged mistrust of independent organisations, and emboldened those who sought to restrict civic freedoms.

Ethno-nationalism has shaped not only constraints but also the composition of civil society. In many Tamil and Muslim communities, civil society emerged primarily as a protective mechanism, focusing on safeguarding cultural or political rights rather than broader issues of

[43] Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Sri Lanka in Crisis: The Politics of Democracy, Identity and Development* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2011), 118–20.
[44] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 81–83.
[45] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Potemkin Peace: Democracy under Fire*, Asia Report no. 253 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, November 13, 2013), 27–30, accessed May 14, 2024, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173338/253-sri-lankas-potemkin-peace-democracy-under-fire.pdf.

governance. Meanwhile, Sinhala-majority civil society often focused on cultural preservation, charity, or development activities rather than inclusive political reform. Scholarly assessments note that civil society's ethnic segmentation has weakened prospects for island-wide coalitions and reinforced political fragmentation.[46] Though ethno-nationalism remains a formidable force, it has faced periodic challenges from civic mobilisation. The 2015 political transition briefly opened space for pluralist advocacy, while the 2022 Aragalaya movement mobilised citizens across ethnic lines under the banner of democratic reform and economic justice. Yet analysts observe that these moments of cross-ethnic solidarity have struggled to dislodge the deep-rooted narratives that continue to guide political competition and state responses to dissent.

Together, ethno-nationalism and majoritarian politics have shaped civil society by determining which actors are seen as legitimate, what types of claims they can make, and how institutions respond to their activism. These forces have entrenched ethnic divisions within the civic sphere and reinforced hierarchies of belonging, making the pursuit of inclusive civil society both difficult and essential for Sri Lanka's democratic future.

Media and the Public Sphere

The media and information environment in Sri Lanka has played a central role in shaping civil society, influencing not only public debate but also the conditions under which civic actors engage with the state. Media institutions, ranging from state-owned broadcasters to privately owned conglomerates and digital platforms, form part of the political landscape that either enables or restricts contestation, advocacy, and collective mobilisation. The structure of media ownership, regulatory frameworks, political pressures, and nationalist narratives has produced an information ecosystem that both shapes and limits civic space.

Since independence, successive governments have exercised varying degrees of control over media institutions. State-owned broadcasters such as the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) and the Independent Television Network (ITN) have long functioned as platforms aligned with incumbent governments.[47] Scholars such as William Crawley note that state media

[46] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Authoritarian Turn: The Need for International Action*, Asia Report no. 243 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 20, 2013), 23–25, accessed September 3, 2025, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/icg/0027408/f_0027408_22389.pdf.

[47] Secretariat for Media Reforms, *Rebuilding Public Trust: An Assessment of the Media Industry and Profession in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Secretariat for Media Reforms, with support from International Media Support, May 2016), 110–11, accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Rebuilding-Public-Trust-English-final-version-advance-copy-1-May-20162.pdf

in Sri Lanka has historically performed as an extension of governmental power rather than as an independent public service broadcaster.[48] This alignment has influenced how issues related to human rights, minority politics, corruption, or governance are represented or obscured in the public sphere. Civil society groups advocating for reform often found their messages marginalised, distorted, or ignored by state media outlets.

Private media ownership has also shaped the public information system. Major private outlets are frequently owned by politically connected families or business elites, whose interests align with particular political factions. Academic research shows that media conglomerates have been deeply entangled with partisan political networks, shaping editorial policies and the framing of political issues.[49] This has affected civil society by reinforcing certain narratives while constraining others, creating an uneven informational landscape where rights-based advocacy competes with commercially driven and politically influenced media agendas.

The civil war intensified information control. Reporting on military operations, human rights violations, or minority grievances was frequently restricted. The International Crisis Group observed that journalists working on conflict-related issues faced extraordinary risks, including harassment, threats, and violence.[50] Civil society organisations addressing these issues encountered similar pressures, with some activists targeted through coordinated disinformation campaigns in state and private media. These practices embedded a culture of caution among civic actors who relied on independent or international channels to disseminate information.

Online media expanded significantly after 2005 but soon became a new frontier of state surveillance and control. The government periodically restricted websites, monitored online activists, and introduced regulations aimed at controlling digital content. Freedom House reported that online news platforms critical of the government were blocked or disabled during politically sensitive periods.[51] Civil society organisations working through digital platforms faced increased vulnerability to surveillance, hacking attempts, or smear campaigns. For

[48] William Crawley, *Playing the Tiger: Journalism, Politics and the Sri Lankan Civil War* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 22–24.
[49] Secretariat for Media Reforms, *Rebuilding Public Trust*, 78, 115, accessed September 7, 2023, https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Rebuilding-Public-Trust-English-final-version-advance-copy-1-May-20162.pdf.
[50] Centre for Justice and Accountability and Committee to Protect Journalists, *Attacks against Journalists in Sri Lanka: A Report on Impunity and Accountability* (San Francisco and New York, February 9, 2021), 1–2, accessed May 2, 2025, https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021.02.09-CJA_CPJ-Attacks-against-journalists-in-Sri-Lanka.pdf.
[51] Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2014: Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2014), 4, accessed July 21, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/Sri%20Lanka.pdf

activists documenting abuses or mobilising communities, the digital sphere became both a valuable tool and a site of risk.

Ethno-nationalist mobilisation in the information sphere has had a particularly strong effect on civil society. Far-right Sinhala-Buddhist groups have used social media to disseminate anti-minority rhetoric, spread conspiracies, and target NGOs. The Centre for Policy Alternatives documented that "incendiary nationalist narratives on social media fuelled mistrust toward NGOs and minority communities".[52] These dynamics undermined the legitimacy of civil society organisations working on pluralism, reconciliation, or minority rights, constraining their ability to build broader constituencies. Despite these pressures, the media has also offered moments of opportunity for civil society. Investigative journalism by outlets such as *The Sunday Times*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Groundviews* has exposed corruption, governance failures, and human rights violations.[53] Scholars such as Kanchan Kumar argue that "independent media initiatives have periodically opened critical spaces for civic debate despite systemic pressures". Digital activism has enabled grassroots mobilisation, especially during moments of political crisis.

The 2022 Aragalaya movement demonstrated the transformative potential of digital media for civic mobilisation. Protesters organised through social media platforms, shared livestreams, and exposed state actions to domestic and international audiences.[54] Amnesty International noted that "digital platforms played a critical role in sustaining the Aragalaya protests by enabling coordination, real-time communication, and narrative control".[55] Yet, the state responded with intensified online monitoring, arrests under the PTA for social media posts, and proposed regulations aimed at curbing digital dissent. This duality, empowerment and repression, has shaped the post-2022 information landscape.

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[52] Sanjana Hattotuwa, *Liking Violence: A Study of Hate Speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka—Executive Summary* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, September 2014), 7–8, accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Hate-Speech-Executive-Summary.pdf

[53] Transparency International Sri Lanka and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, *Resource Book on Investigative Journalism* (Colombo: Transparency International Sri Lanka and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, n.d.), 17–18, accessed November 25, 2025, https://www.tisrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/IJ_RBOOK_Eng.pdf

[54] Emma Jackson, *Mapping Digital Pathways to Peace: Exploring the Peacetech in Sri Lanka*, Report No. 211 (Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute, March 2, 2025), 9, accessed June 9, 2025, https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/tr-211_mapping-digital-pathways_jackson.pdf

[55] Amnesty International, *"Ready to Suppress Any Protest": Sri Lanka: Unlawful Use of Weapons during Protests* (London: Amnesty International, 2024), 10, 13, accessed April 6, 2025, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2107203/ASA3778962024ENGLISH.pdf.

Overall, the media ecosystem in Sri Lanka has both expanded and constrained civil society. While independent and digital platforms have facilitated new forms of participation, state-aligned and partisan media structures have restricted pluralistic discourse. Civil society continues to navigate this complex environment, where information politics determine which voices are amplified, which are marginalised, and what forms of activism are possible.

Together, these political structures, historical legacies, executive authority, patronage networks, militarisation, local governance patterns, judicial dynamics, ethno-nationalism, and media politics, have shaped a civil society landscape that is fragmented, adaptive, and constantly negotiating the boundaries of permissible activism. Civil society in Sri Lanka remains resilient, but its evolution continues to reflect the broader configurations of power that define the country's political order.

Socio-Cultural Conditioning at the Micro-Level

This section examines how local socio-cultural conditions shape the everyday realities within which Sri Lanka's civil society operates, showing how wider political developments intersect with the everyday dynamics of identity, community, and social behaviour. It explores cultural norms, social hierarchies, religious worldviews, informal solidarities, and the ways global civic ideas are reinterpreted through local lenses. Together, these factors reveal that civic engagement is embedded in lived experience rather than abstract institutional design.

Everyday social life in Sri Lanka is deeply patterned by cultural norms and identity markers that quietly structure how people belong, speak, organise, and claim rights. Rather than existing only in formal institutions or spectacular moments of conflict, politics is woven into ordinary practices of language use, religious observance, gendered behaviour, and inter-community interaction. Nira Wickramasinghe argues that modern Sri Lankan politics is best understood as a "people-centred politics of identity," in which identities are *embodied in practice* rather than existing as abstract labels.[56] This insight is crucial for civil society; what counts as a legitimate claim, who may speak for a community, and which forms of dissent appear "respectable" all depend on everyday cultural expectations.

Cultural norms around language, class, caste, and gender work as powerful filters for civic participation. In an interview reflecting on contemporary Sri Lanka, Harini Amarasuriya notes

[56] Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 256, accessed April 10, 2024

that "English – as a marker of class and status – cuts across all ethnic and religious lines," while caste remains unspeakable in public and gender continues to generate profound inequalities.[57] These layered hierarchies mean that a Sinhala or Tamil middle-class English speaker often occupies a very different civic position from a rural, vernacular-educated youth or a working-class woman. Amarasuriya's analysis of "competing civil society spaces" after the war further shows how these cultural hierarchies shape who appears in protest spaces, NGO boards, or media debates, and who remains confined to more informal, locally grounded forms of mobilisation.[58] Thus, cultural capital and social respectability become pre-conditions for being recognised as part of "civil society" at all.

Youth politics illustrates how everyday life and identity shape civic engagement in post-war Sri Lanka. Fazeeha Azmi, Cathrine Brun, and Ragnhild Lund show that Tamil and Muslim young people in the Eastern Province navigate highly constrained political spaces, where social exclusion in education, employment, and mobility produces "everyday politics" that are cautious, often silent, and spatially confined.[59]

Religion is another enduring force shaping social morality and patterns of civic mobilisation in Sri Lanka. Across Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities, religious institutions organise everyday life, distribute moral authority, and provide modes of collective belonging that strongly influence how people participate in public affairs.[60] As Asanga Tilakaratne observes, Sri Lankan Buddhism functions simultaneously as a philosophical tradition, a cultural inheritance, and a moral code embedded in daily practices.[61] This fusion means that Buddhist values, such as *dāna* (giving), social harmony, and respect for hierarchy, often shape expectations about legitimate conduct within civil society.[62] Local temple committees, monastic networks, and lay associations help organise welfare work, dispute mediation, and

[57] Harini Amarasuriya, "Interview – Harini Amarasuriya," *E-International Relations*, June 25, 2020, PDF, 5, accessed February 11, 2024, https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/85514.
[58] Harini Amarasuriya, "Protests and Counter Protests: Competing Civil Society Spaces in Post-war Sri Lanka," *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 9 (February 28, 2015): 49–55, esp. 50–52, accessed August 8, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24481515.
[59] Fazeeha Azmi, Cathrine Brun, and Ragnhild Lund, "Young People's Everyday Politics in Post-conflict Sri Lanka," *Space & Polity* 17, no. 1 (2013): 106–122, esp. 110–114, accessed October 3, 2025, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13562576.2013.780716.
[60] Jonathan Spencer, Jonathan Goodhand, Anna Heslop, and Shahul Hasbullah, *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque: A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 1–7.
[61] Asanga Tilakaratne, "The Role of the Saṅgha in the Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 14 (2007): 189–190. https://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/04/tilakaratne.pdf.
[62] Asanga Tilakaratne, *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 100–102.

community events, making them significant civic actors even when they do not formally identify as part of civil society.

At the same time, religion can reinforce moral boundaries that restrict certain kinds of activism. In his study of Sinhala political subjectivity, H. L. Seneviratne argues that the modern monk-as-national-leader emerged through a "fusion of religious virtue with political authority," producing a moral vocabulary that privileges Sinhala-Buddhist interests.[63] This moralised nationalism affects civil-society mobilisation by framing dissent or minority claims as morally suspect or socially destabilising. Such narratives have periodically been mobilised against NGOs, human-rights activists, and inter-religious initiatives, particularly in moments of heightened political contestation.[64]

Among Sri Lankan Muslims, religious networks also carry significant civic weight. M. A. Nuhman's work shows that mosque federations, charitable trusts, and religious schools serve as key sources of community leadership, often acting as intermediaries between state agencies and local populations.[65] These networks can facilitate mobilisation—especially in response to violence or discrimination. But they can also reinforce conservative norms around dress, gender roles, and social behaviour. Farzana Haniffa demonstrates that Muslim women's piety movements function as "moral publics," where religious practice becomes a mode of civic engagement and boundary-making. Women navigate modesty norms, community surveillance, and moral expectations even as they carve out spaces for voice and participation within Islamic study circles and charity networks.[66]

Christian networks, particularly Catholic and Protestant organisations, have a long history of involvement in education, welfare, and rights-based activism. The National Christian Council of Sri Lanka notes that churches often provide shelter, psychological support, and documentation assistance for displaced communities, especially in the North and East.

[63] H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 337–340.
[64] Brian Matthews, "Christian Evangelical Conversions and the Politics of Sri Lanka," *Pacific Affairs* 80, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 457–478, esp. 466–470, accessed May 18, 2025, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40023394.
[65] M. A. Nuhman, *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2007), 57–63. Accessed February 11, 2025.
[66] Farzana Haniffa, "Piety as Politics amongst Muslim Women in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2–3 (2008): 347–375, esp. 350–356. Accessed July 22, 2024.

However, Christian organisations sometimes face suspicion from nationalist groups that interpret minority-led mobilisation through the lens of conversion anxiety.[67]

Taken together, religion in Sri Lanka functions as both a resource and a constraint for civil-society mobilisation. It creates dense networks of solidarity and welfare but also embeds moral boundaries that activists must negotiate carefully. Having explored the moral and symbolic dimensions of civic life, the next subsection turns to social trust, informality, and everyday practices of solidarity to understand how community-based relationships and informal networks further anchor civic engagement in the rhythms of daily life.

Community structures and social hierarchies shape the terrain of civic engagement by embedding formal activism within longstanding systems of authority, patronage and local control.[68] As M. Riswan shows, the persistence of caste and class divisions among both Sinhalese and Tamil communities reflects "social stratification … even though other social and economic distinctions are accessible" in contemporary society.[69] While legal reforms and modernisation have weakened some of these layers, the underlying logics of honour, status and exclusion persist and continue to influence who can mobilise, how, and where.

Among rural Sinhalese communities the historical form of rājākariya, labour-service obligations linked to land use under the Kandyan system that provided a template for hierarchical village relations, even after colonial restructuring.[70] These inherited patterns mean that village elders, temple committees and local elites still often govern how civic groups organise, granting legitimacy or exclusion accordingly. For example, patron-client networks frequently determine access to development programmes and NGO-driven participatory initiatives.[71] Significantly, this means that many civil society organisations assume a

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[67] World Council of Churches (WCC) and National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL), *Report of the Living Letters Team Visit to Sri Lanka, 3–13 August 2007* (Geneva/Colombo: WCC and NCCSL, 2007), 16–17, 23–24. Accessed January 29, 2024.

[68] Kalinga Tudor Silva, P. P. Sivapragasam, and Paramsothy Thanges, *Caste Discrimination and Social Justice in Sri Lanka: An Overview* (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Dalit Studies; International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2009), 1, 3, 17, accessed October 12, 2024, https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Publications_from_network/Caste_discrimination_and_social_justice_in_Sri_Lanka__IIDS_working_paper_.pdf.

[69] M. Riswan, "Caste and Class Interrelation in Sri Lanka: A Study of Sinhalese and Tamil Communities," *KALAM – International Research Journal Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka* 8, no. 3 (2014): 40, accessed March 7, 2025, https://www.seu.ac.lk/researchandpublications/symposium/7th/2014/kalam/abstract/riswan.pdf.

[70] Laksiri Jayasuriya, "The Colonial Lineages of the Sri Lankan Welfare State," (paper, n.d.), 5, accessed February 18, 2024, https://laksirijayasuriya.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/colonial-state22.pdf.

[71] Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD, *Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka: Country Strategy and Programme Evaluation* (Rome: International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2019), iv (para. 13), accessed August 21, 2023, https://webapps.ifad.org/members/ec/105/docs/EC-2019-105-W-P-2.pdf.

subordinate role to pre-existing community power-brokers rather than being truly autonomous.[72] In Tamil areas too, the shadow of caste appears in subtle ways, despite a dominant narrative of ethnic solidarity. According to a study by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), three parallel caste systems exist in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamil and Indian Tamil, and even though discrimination is less visible, caste-based disadvantage endures in rural and plantation settings. These hierarchies influence local representation in neighbourhood associations, church or temple-based groups, and youth clubs, shaping whose voices are heard.[73]

Thus, the local structure of community networks and hierarchies matters deeply for civic participation. Mobilisation is rarely a clean entry of outsiders challenging the state; rather, it is negotiated through layers of social status, clientelist ties and local authority. Recognising this helps explain why civil society actors often replicate existing power relations rather than disrupt them. The next subsection turns to how religious institutions and moral frameworks further complicate the civic terrain.

Patterns of social trust and informality shape everyday civic life in Sri Lanka in ways that are often overlooked in formal analyses of civil society. Much of the country's collective action emerges not through structured organisations or donor-funded initiatives, but through familiar, community-based practices of reciprocity, kinship support, neighbourhood assistance, and informal cooperation. Jonathan Spencer notes in his study of local political culture that Sri Lanka's social worlds are held together by "dense, everyday relationships of obligation and exchange," which frequently serve as the real foundations of communal cohesion. These informal networks generate trust, legitimacy, and shared expectations, conditions essential for any civic mobilisation.[74]Anthropologist Michele Ruth Gamburd's ethnographic work in the Southern Province shows how death donation societies (*maranadhara samithi*) function as "micro-welfare institutions," distributing responsibilities and resources among households while strengthening bonds of reciprocity. These associations do more than manage crises; they cultivate deeply embedded solidarities that make local populations more willing to participate

[72] Ibid.
[73] Silva, op. cit.,17.
[74] Jonathan Spencer, *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 12–15. https://global.oup.com/academic/product/a-sinhala-village-in-a-time-of-trouble-9780195623196
Accessed 14 March 2024.

in community meetings, development projects, or protest actions led by trusted neighbours.[75] Similarly, rotating savings and credit groups, common among women in low-income communities, operate as informal civic spaces where trust is built through shared financial risk. Malathi de Alwis and Selvy Thiruchandran argue that these small-scale women's networks create "parallel arenas for collective agency" by allowing women to articulate concerns, organise help, and negotiate domestic constraints within culturally acceptable frameworks. Although such groups rarely define themselves as part of "civil society," they shape the social fabric from which more formalised activism can later emerge.[76]

Studies from the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) highlight that trust relations tend to be strongest within homogenous neighbourhoods, while inter-ethnic solidarity often develops only in response to shared vulnerability, such as after the 2004 tsunami, when Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim communities collaborated extensively in coastal areas. These collaborative practices were grounded not in formal interfaith platforms, but in personal relationships, informal leadership, and mutual dependence. Such examples reveal that cross-community trust, while fragile, can be generated through everyday necessity rather than elite-level reconciliation programmes.[77]

Informality also shapes how people engage with the state. Kanchana Ruwanpura's research on labour and gender politics demonstrates that many Sri Lankans rely on "personalised pathways" rather than formal procedures when dealing with bureaucracy, seeking solutions through intermediaries, local politicians, or community elders. Trust flows along personal lines rather than institutional ones, influencing how communities decide to engage with local government, development projects, or civil-society organisations they perceive as outsiders.[78]Together, these practices show that the heart of Sri Lankan civic life lies in the informal, the personal, and the everyday.

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[75] Michele Ruth Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Households* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 87–91, Accessed 9 July 2023, https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501721336

[76] Malathi de Alwis and Selvy Thiruchandran, *Casting Pearls: The Women's Movement in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Social Scientists' Association and Vikas Publishing House, 1999), 54–59, Accessed 21 November 2024. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bw1h5j

[77] Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990), 203–207. Accessed 4 February 2025, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203047291.

[78] Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, Informal Economy, Labour and the State in Sri Lanka (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2016), 112–117, Accessed 18 August 2025, https://www.academia.edu/35006298

State Regulation, Surveillance, and the Politics of Legitimacy

The regulatory environment in Sri Lanka has become a critical axis in the relationship between the state and organised civil society. Increasingly, laws and administrative measures have turned oversight into surveillance, threatening the autonomy of civic actors. In the words of a policy review, "the legal regime in place to control NGOs reflects the State's perception of, and relationship to NGOs, which is extremely sensitive as it determines their degree of political autonomy."[79] Recent legal and policy assessments indicate a marked escalation in this regulatory approach. Expanded registration procedures, broadened reporting mandates, and the relocation of NGO regulation within security-focused ministerial frameworks have collectively deepened state monitoring, creating conditions that enable intrusive oversight and unjustified scrutiny of civil society organisations.[80]

The principal legal framework governing organised civil society for several decades was the Voluntary Social Service Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act No. 31 of 1980 (VSSO Act), which required voluntary social service organisations to register under the Act and operate within a system of statutory supervision.[81] Legal and governance analyses noted that proposed amendments to this framework sought to concentrate extensive investigative and supervisory authority in the hands of the Registrar and the responsible Minister, including powers to inspect, suspend, or intervene in the internal functioning of organisations.[82] Such moves generated sustained and widespread opposition from civil society actors, who viewed these measures as undermining organisational independence.[83] More recently, legal and policy assessments of the draft Non-Governmental Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act

[79] Rukshana Nanayakkara, "Governance of NGOs in Sri Lanka," in *Sri Lanka Governance Report 2008*, ed. Transparency International Sri Lanka (Colombo: Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2008), 87, accessed March 14, 2024, https://www.tisrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/TI_Sri_Lanka_Governance_Report_2008.pdf.

[80] Ermiza Tegal and Ruki Fernando, *Preliminary Commentary on the Non-Governmental Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act, No. 1 of 2024* (Colombo: Law & Society Trust, February 8, 2024), accessed March 2024, https://www.lstlanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Preliminary-Commentary-on-the-NGO-Act-2024.pdf.

[81] *Voluntary Social Service Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act* (Act No. 31 of 1980), sec. 3, Sri Lanka Law, accessed March 14, 2024, https://www.lawnet.gov.lk/voluntary-social-service-organisations-registration-and-supervision-act/

[82] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Proposed Amendments to the Voluntary Social Service Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2018), 2–4, accessed March 14, 2024, https://www.cpalanka.org/proposed-amendments-to-the-vsso-act/.

[83] Transparency International Sri Lanka, *Sri Lanka Governance Report 2008* (Colombo: Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2008), 86–88, accessed March 14, 2024, https://www.tisrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/TI_Sri_Lanka_Governance_Report_2008.pdf.

proposed in January 2024 have argued that this regulatory trajectory would intensify further.[84] The draft framework was understood to broaden the scope of organisations subject to registration, introduce multi-agency vetting prior to registration, expand discretionary reporting and supervisory requirements, permit suspension on broadly defined grounds including national security, and tighten state control over fundraising activities such as large-scale crowdfunding.[85] Taken together, these developments have reinforced concerns that regulatory oversight in Sri Lanka is increasingly experienced by civil society organisations as intrusive monitoring rather than neutral administration.[86]

Beyond formal legislation, regulatory power in Sri Lanka has increasingly been exercised through registration procedures and administrative practices that function as instruments of control. As reported in December 2024, civil society organisations were required to undergo renewed registration processes, with existing registrations treated as provisional for limited periods while applications were routed through state clearance mechanisms, a move widely interpreted as discouraging rights-based and advocacy-oriented work.[87] These administrative constraints deepened in the months that followed. From around March 2025, routine approvals by the NGO Secretariat, located under the Ministry of Public Security, were reported to have stalled, leaving many organisations unable to complete basic operational requirements such as opening bank accounts or receiving funds through formal channels.[88] Taken together, these developments illustrate how oversight has been operationalised through bureaucratic delay and procedural uncertainty, extending regulatory control beyond statute into the everyday functioning of civil society. Beyond administrative tightening, restrictions on civic space also affect the legitimacy of organised civil society. Human Rights Watch's annual country review and briefing notes document a pattern of legal and policy measures that have constrained key civic freedoms, including freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly, and identify draft laws that subject civil society organisations to invasive oversight and potential

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[84] Ermiza Tegal and Ruki Fernando, *Preliminary Commentary on the Non-Governmental Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act, No. 1 of 2024* (Colombo: Law & Society Trust, February 8, 2024), accessed March 10, 2024,
https://www.lstlanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Preliminary-Commentary-on-the-NGO-Act-2024.pdf
[85] Ibid.,
[86] International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law, "Sri Lanka: Civic Freedom Monitor," updated 2024, accessed March 14, 2024,
https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/sri-lanka.
[87] Tamil Guardian, "Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence Tightens Control over NGOs," December 17, 2024, accessed December 27, 2025, https://tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankas-ministry-defence-tightens-control-over-ngos.
[88] Faizer Shaheid, "Registration of New NGOs Stalled amid Leadership Vacuum," *The Morning* (Sri Lanka), June 1, 2025, accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.themorning.lk/articles/4gguOFN2Pr39VzAS9zmX

punitive measures.[89] Scholars and advocacy groups further note that state narratives often portray civil society actors as threats to sovereignty, national stability, or post-conflict "victor's peace," rather than as partners in governance, undermining their claim to independent legitimacy and eroding public trust in both state authorities and civic actors.[90]

In response, some CSOs adapt by shifting into service-delivery, avoiding explicit rights language, or focusing on non-controversial issues. Others consolidate into coalitions, seeking pooled legitimacy and capacity to resist regulatory shocks. Yet the wider effect is that regulation and surveillance shape not only the space of civil society, but the nature of its discourse, strategy, and relationship with the state. The politics of legitimacy in Sri Lankan organised civil society is thus jointly constructed by the state's regulatory regime and the civic sector's adaptive strategies.

Post-2022 Transformations and New Civic Actors

The public uprising of 2022, popularly known as the *Aragalaya*, marked a major turning point for civil society in Sri Lanka. In an unprecedented way in recent years, large numbers of citizens from different regions, religions, classes, and age groups mobilised publicly to express anger over corruption, inflation, shortages of essentials, and political mismanagement.[91] This moment opened a new chapter for civic activism, introducing new actors, new repertoires of protest, and a more direct public language of accountability.[92] Contemporary analysis and reporting also highlighted the movement's unusual cross-divide character, it briefly cut across entrenched ethno-religious cleavages, and observers noted the emergence of a nationwide mobilisation involving multiple communities, even as deeper tensions and inequalities persisted.[93] "***As one interviewee (Anonymous interviewee C) reflects on the Aragalaya as a***

[89] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: Sri Lanka* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2024), section "Human Rights Developments," accessed December 12, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/sri-lanka

[90] Lia Kent, *Sri Lankan Civil Society in the New Rajapaksa Era: Navigating the 'Victor's Peace'* (Policy Brief, South East Asia Research on Buddhism and Politics, September 2021), accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Lia-Kent_SEARBO_Policy-brief-paper.pdf.

[91] *The Guardian* (London), "Sri Lanka: President Agrees to Resign amid Unrest," July 9, 2022, accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/09/sri-lanka-protests-thousands-storm-presidents-residence-colombo.

[92] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *A Brief Analysis of the Aragalaya* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives/Social Indicator, May 2023), 5–7, accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/A-Brief-Analysis-of-the-Aragalaya_Final-Report.pdf.

[93] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *A Brief Analysis of the Aragalaya*, 6 (noting the movement "fleetingly cut across ethnic divides"); and Zaheena Rasheed and Rathindra Kuruwita, "Sri Lankans Set Up Protest Camp, Vow to Stay till Rajapaksa Quits," *Al Jazeera*, April 13, 2022, accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/13/sri-lankans-set-up-protest-camp-vow-to-stay-till-rajapaksa-quits.

moment that unfolded without design or expectation, emerging more from collective emotion and shared frustration than from strategy or organisation. What began as a spontaneous gathering gradually expanded beyond anyone's anticipation, without a fixed leadership, clear roadmap, or prior vision of regime change. Yet it was precisely this unplanned character that allowed the movement to become unusually inclusive. For a brief but powerful period, everyday social boundaries of religion, language, caste, ethnicity, profession, and region receded, as the protest space fostered a shared sense of belonging and purpose. In this convergence of spontaneity and solidarity, the Aragalaya stood apart from conventional civil society mobilisations, offering a rare glimpse of unity within Sri Lanka's otherwise deeply segmented social and political life."[94]

A key change after 2022 has been the rise of youth-led civic groups. University students, young professionals, tech workers, artists, musicians, and social-media volunteers organised protests, fact-checking pages, legal support groups, and community kitchens. These actors were not linked to older NGOs but worked through informal teams, messaging app, social medias platforms, and neighbourhood networks. Groups like "GoHomeGota" collectives, volunteer legal teams, and independent media pages brought new energy and creativity to civic action. They also built public pressure campaigns for anti-corruption reforms and human-rights protections.[95]

Digital activism became more important after the protests. Amnesty International's reporting demonstrates that online platforms assumed heightened importance during the protest aftermath, enabling continued civic monitoring through social-media sharing and open-source evidence even as street-based mobilisation faced growing restrictions.[96] Social-media platforms became places where people shared information, corrected false claims, and exposed misuse of public money. This allowed new civic actors, such as independent fact-checkers, investigative web journalists, and online rights groups, to emerge as watchdogs of the state.

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[94] Interview conducted on August 16, 2025 and anonymity maintained on request

[95] Maljini Ranaraja, "Notes from the Field: Sri Lanka's Revolutionary 'Aragalaya,'" *The Asia Foundation*, July 20, 2022, accessed December 27, 2025, https://asiafoundation.org/notes-from-the-field-sri-lankas-revolutionary-aragalaya/.

[96] Amnesty International, *"Ready to Suppress Any Protest": Sri Lanka—Unlawful Use of Weapons in Policing of Protests* (London: Amnesty International, April 10, 2024, accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.amnesty.ch/fr/pays/asie-pacifique/sri-lanka/docs/2024/la-police-doit-rendre-des-comptes-pour-les-agressions-commises-lors-des-manifestations/2018ready-to-supress-any-protest2019-sri-lanka-unlawful-use-of-weapons-during-protests.pdf

Another shift after 2022 is the growth of community-care initiatives. During shortages of fuel, medicine, and food, people formed neighbourhood groups to help the elderly, support families without income, and organise transport for medical emergencies. Alongside these informal efforts, a range of civil-society organisations and ad-hoc volunteer collectives supported peaceful protest activity while also coordinating practical relief measures, including food provision, basic health assistance, and psychosocial support.[97]

Women's organisations also became more visible. As the UN Women Asia-Pacific office reports, women played a central role in organising protests, documenting abuses, and offering frontline care during the 2022 crisis.[98] After the protests, many women's groups strengthened their work on food security, inflation, fair wages, and domestic-violence support.

Despite these positive developments, post-2022 civic activism also faces obstacles. Human Rights Watch warns that restrictions on expression, protest, and association continue, creating fear among activists.[99] New groups must navigate police surveillance, online harassment, and legal pressure. Even so, many continue their work, using community networks, digital tools, and creative public campaigns to push for accountability.[100]

Overall, the period after 2022 has brought a wave of new civic energy into Sri Lanka. Alongside established NGOs, new actors like, youth collectives, digital activists, neighbourhood groups, fact-checkers, and women's networks that, have expanded the meaning of civil society. They show that civic agency in Sri Lanka today is not limited to formal NGOs but includes flexible, creative, and community-driven efforts shaped by ordinary citizens.

Advocacy Networks and Coalition-Building Across Regions

Formal and informal coalitions among civil society organisations (CSOs) have become a structural feature of Sri Lankan civic space, enabling groups to amplify impact, pool resources, and navigate regulatory and political constraints. The Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies

[97] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *A Brief Analysis of the Aragalaya* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, May 2023), 22, accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/A-Brief-Analysis-of-the-Aragalaya_Final-Report.pdf

[98] UN Women Asia-Pacific, *Gendered Impacts of Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis* (Bangkok: UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2023), 6–11, accessed March 10, 2024, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org

[99] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2023: Sri Lanka* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2023), under "Civic Space and Protest," accessed March 12, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/sri-lanka.

[100] Human Rights Watch, *"Sri Lanka: Repression Persists After Protests"* (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 2022), accessed March 12, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/18/sri-lanka-repression-persists-after-protests.

(CHA), for example, began as an informal aid-network in 1984 and later formalised in 1997 into a 26-member national coalition of humanitarian agencies.[101] Similarly, the Coalition for Educational Development (CED) now covers 60 member-organisations in every province and uses advocacy, networking, and capacity-building to shape education policy at national and local levels.[102]

One significant case is the Centre for Human Rights & Development (CHRD) in the North-East, which has collaborated with a web of coalitions, including the North East Coordinating Committee (NECC), the Women Action Network (WAN), the Tamil Lawyers Forum and others in order to coordinate truth-seeking, human-rights advocacy, and transitional-justice campaigns after the war.[103] Through these collaborative networks, CHRD and its partners engage UN mechanisms, international NGOs and local activists alike, bridging grassroots and global advocacy channels.

These networks face both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, coalition-building allows smaller regional CSOs to access policymaking spaces, share expertise and increase visibility.[104] On the other hand, many coalitions struggle with uneven power dynamics (Colombo-based actors dominating agendas), resource dependencies, and regulatory scrutiny, especially when engaging in rights-based advocacy. A civil-society review noted that although networks like the Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum (SLWNGOF) and the Child Rights Advocacy Network (CRAN) now operate across 22 districts with over 150 member organisations, their impact is hampered by inconsistent funding, donor fragmentation and limited district-level presence.[105]

In sum, advocacy networks and coalitions represent a key structural dimension of Sri Lanka's organised civil society today: they are the vehicles through which CSOs expand reach, align across issues and geographies, and engage with state and international actors. Their efficacy, however, depends on how well they negotiate internal inequalities, maintain regional

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[101] Asian Development Bank, *Civil Society Brief: Sri Lanka* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2011), 9–10, accessed March 14, 2024, https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29078/csb-sri.pdf.
[102] Coalition for Educational Development (CED), "About Us," accessed March 14, 2024, https://www.cedsl.org/about-us.
[103] Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD), "About Us" and "Activities," accessed March 15, 2024, https://chrd.lk.
[104] Commonwealth Foundation, *Civil Society Review: Sri Lanka—Mapping the Development of the Civil Society Sector* (London: Commonwealth Foundation, 2013), 22–25, accessed December 27, 2025, https://commonwealthfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Civil-Society-Review-Sri-Lanka.pdf
[105] Ibid., 31.

inclusivity, and safeguard autonomous decision-making in a shifting political context. This Shall be further explored in the next chapter of the dissertation.

Linking Organisational Diversity to Sri Lanka's Political Landscape

The diversity of civil society organisations in Sri Lanka reflects the wider political and social landscape of the country. Each group, whether based in Colombo or outside it, whether organised around ethnicity, religion, rights, development, or humanitarian needs, carries the marks of the region, community, and history that shaped it. This variety shows that civil society in Sri Lanka does not operate as a single national space. Instead, it is made up of many different layers responding to different kinds of pressures such as, war, displacement, poverty, reforms, governance challenges, and shifting political conditions. Colombo-based organisations often influence national debates because of their closeness to government institutions, courts, and the media. They engage strongly in policy advocacy, governance reform, and public accountability. In contrast, organisations located in the North, East, South, and Central regions work more closely with the day-to-day concerns of communities, supporting families affected by conflict, land issues, economic hardship, and discrimination. These groups tend to be trusted locally because they have grown from the communities they serve. Religious and ethnicity-based organisations contribute another dimension. Their work shows how social support, cultural identity, and moral authority shape civic life. They help communities cope with insecurity and build trust across divided spaces. At the same time, multi-ethnic and interfaith organisations demonstrate that cooperation across identities is possible and often necessary. The rise of youth collectives, digital activists, and neighbourhood groups after 2022 adds a new layer to this picture. These actors challenge traditional boundaries of civil society by using flexible, creative, and decentralised methods. Their energy has widened public participation and reshaped the meaning of civic action.

Taken together, Sri Lanka's civil society landscape is complex but rich in potential. Its many forms, namely urban and rural, formal and informal, faith-based and secular, mirror the country's political realities while also offering alternative ways to imagine social and political change. This diversity not only strengthens community life but also provides different pathways through which citizens can express concerns, demand accountability, and contribute to shaping the future of the country.

Functional Classification: How Civil Society Operates

Civil society organisations in Sri Lanka demonstrate clear functional differentiation shaped by geographical context, historical legacies, and community needs. Colombo-based organisations tend to specialise in governance, law reform, policy advocacy, media freedom, and anti-corruption, reflecting their proximity to state institutions, courts, and diplomatic missions. Institutions such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Transparency International Sri Lanka, and the Law & Society Trust have played a sustained role in shaping national discussions on constitutional reform and rights protection. Their work reflects the consolidation of a professionalised, advocacy-focused segment of civil society, largely clustered around Colombo's legal, policy, and governance arenas, a pattern analysed in Jayadeva Uyangoda's scholarship on contemporary Sri Lankan civil society.[106] In contrast, organisations operating in the Northern and Eastern Provinces primarily focus on humanitarian assistance, post-war rehabilitation, land return, psychosocial care, and livelihood recovery. This functional orientation emerged from decades of conflict, displacement, and militarisation. Jonathan Goodhand observes that NGOs in these regions became "frontline responders in a war-affected humanitarian economy," where community survival, not policy advocacy, defined civic engagement.[107] Groups such as the Suriya Women's Development Centre and the Jaffna Social Action Centre continue to prioritise services for Tamil and Muslim communities affected by gender-based violence, economic precarity, and the legacies of displacement.[108] In the Central highlands, functional priorities reflect plantation-sector inequalities. Organisations like the Human Development Organisation and various estate-based CSOs focus on labour rights, housing, education, and youth empowerment for up-country Tamil communities. These functions arise from structural marginalisation within the plantation economy, which scholars such as Daniel Bass identify as producing distinctive forms of social exclusion and political

[106] Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Politics of Crisis: Sri Lanka in Comparative Perspective* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2016), 221–24; Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Civil Society and the Reform of the Sri Lankan State," in *Reforming Sri Lankan Governance*, ed. Jayadeva Uyangoda and Qadri Ismail (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2010), 87–112.

[107] Jonathan Goodhand and Nick Lewer, "Sri Lanka: NGOs and Peace-Building in Complex Political Emergencies," *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1999): 69–87, accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jonathan-Goodhand/publication/233163366_Sri_Lanka_NGOS_and_peacebuilding_in_complex_political_emergencies/links/56b86c0808ae44bb330d0536/Sri-Lanka-NGOS-and-peace-building-in-complex-political-emergencies.pdf.

[108] Suriya Women's Development Centre, "Welcome," Suriya Women's Development Centre, accessed December 27, 2025, https://suriyawomenlk.org/;

invisibility.[109] The Southern and rural districts contain a different functional landscape, dominated by community-development organisations and nationwide actors like the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. Sarvodaya's village-level societies focus on self-help, disaster response, education, and local development-functions grounded in Buddhist-inspired grassroots mobilisation rather than donor-driven agendas. A. T. Ariyaratne's model of "collective awakening" emphasises moral, social, and economic upliftment at the village level, creating an alternative civic tradition distinct from Colombo-based advocacy spaces.[110]

Finally, INGOs such as CARE, Oxfam, Save the Children, Caritas, and UNDP operate across multiple regions but retain functionally differentiated portfolios, ranging from humanitarian relief and disaster management to gender empowerment, environmental governance, and child protection. Their work often intersects with local NGOs, forming hybrid networks capable of addressing both structural and emergency needs. As the Asian Development Bank notes, Sri Lanka's INGO-NGO ecosystem is functionally layered, with national advocacy, regional development, conflict-recovery, and welfare-oriented actors operating simultaneously is reflected in United Nations–coordinated partnership frameworks in Sri Lanka.[111]

Together, these functional classifications demonstrate that Sri Lanka's civil society is not homogenous but a multi-level ecosystem in which Colombo's advocacy sector, regional humanitarian actors, plantation-sector rights groups, and rural development networks each perform distinctive roles shaped by context, constituency, and history.

The evolution of organised civil society in Sri Lanka reflects a transition from religious patronage to structured organisational forms shaped by shifting political contexts. Early voluntary activity during the late colonial period developed through Buddhist temple networks, Christian missionary organisations, and philanthropic associations that nurtured traditions of collective welfare and community mobilisation. After independence, cooperatives, trade

[109] Daniel M. Bass, *A Place on the Plantations: Up-Country Tamil Ethnicity in Sri Lanka* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2004), accessed September 27, 2025, https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/items/9eea40d8-3435-4881-8b39-a8416887247c

[110] Joanna Macy, "For the Awakening of All: The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka," 1994, accessed December 27, 2025, https://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-AN/an141165.pdf.

[111] Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office (UNDP), *Annual Report 2023/2024* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2024), accessed December 27, 2025, https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024-05/final_jure_2023_annual_report_05312024.pdf.

unions, rural development societies, and youth clubs expanded, functioning alongside a welfare-oriented state while filling local gaps in service delivery.[112]

The outbreak of civil war in the early 1980s marked a decisive transformation. Humanitarian emergencies, mass displacement, and rights violations triggered the rapid growth of NGOs and INGOs, particularly in the North and East, where organisations such as CARE, Oxfam, and local relief groups became central to emergency assistance and rehabilitation. This period also saw the professionalisation and donor-dependence of the sector. In the post-war era after 2009, many organisations reoriented their work towards reconciliation, democratic reforms, and psychosocial support, even as state regulation and securitised narratives narrowed civic space. The 2022 Aragalaya further revitalised civic participation by catalysing youth-led collectives and informal networks operating beyond conventional NGO structures.[113]

Categorisation Through Geographical Location

A distinction between Colombo-based and non-Colombo-based organisations is essential for understanding how Sri Lankan civil society is structured and how it operates in practice. The capital city hosts the main ministries, Parliament, diplomatic missions, UN agencies, and bilateral donors. It is therefore unsurprising that many national NGOs, think tanks, and advocacy organisations chose to base their headquarters in Colombo, where they can engage directly with policymakers, international partners, and the media. Studies of the peace process and donor engagement note that large, national NGOs and a relatively small circle of Colombo activists became primary interlocutors for external actors and the state. This concentration reinforces Colombo's position as the symbolic and institutional centre of "national" civil society. In contrast, non-Colombo organisations, located in the North, East, Central highlands, and Southern districts, tend to be more embedded in specific localities. Research on civil society during and after the war shows that many groups in the North and East emerged directly from conflict-affected communities and prioritised relief, rehabilitation, land issues, and psychosocial support.[114] In plantation areas, organisations focus on labour rights, housing, and

[112] Chamila Mallawaarachchi, *Civil Society in Sri Lanka*, Discussion Paper no. 2018-1 (Osaka: Japan Institute for Public Policy Studies, February 2018), 2–4, accessed 17 May 2024, https://www.jipps.org/ACCSS/dp/2018-1SriLanka_JIPPS_DP.pdf

[113] Mandakini D. Surie, Sumaya Saluja, and Nicola Nixon, *A Glass Half-Full: Civic Space and Contestation in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, GovAsia Issue 2.2 (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, March 2023), 6–9, 20–24, accessed 19 October 2024, https://asiafoundation.org/wpcontent/uploads/2024/08/GovAsia_2.2_Glass-Half-Full-Civic-Space-and-Contestation-in-Bangladesh-Sri-Lanka-and-Nepal.pdf

[114] Camilla Orjuela, "Dilemmas of Civil Society Aid: Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia* 1, no. 1 (January 2005): 2, 5–7, accessed 12 October 2024, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/pdsa/pdf/pdsa_01_01_02.pdf.

access to basic services for Tamil estate workers, while Southern and rural CSOs often prioritise livelihood support and community development.[115] These actors generally enjoy higher levels of community trust, but have less direct access to donors, national-level forums, and international visibility. This spatial divide also carries a social and political dimension. In a policy brief on the post-2019 Rajapaksa era, Lia Kent reports that many activists in the North and East view Colombo-based civil society as an "educated, urban and largely Sinhalese elite" that captures a disproportionate share of donor funding and does not always grasp day-to-day realities in the peripheries.[116] Camilla Orjuela similarly argues that Sri Lankan civil society is geographically and ethnically divided, and that the very sphere labelled "civil society" contains competing projects rather than a unified democratic force.[117] These perceptions contribute to tensions between national advocacy groups and local organisations, particularly when policy agendas fashioned in Colombo do not fully reflect the priorities of communities in war-affected or marginalised regions. At the same time, regulatory and security practices are not experienced evenly across space. Colombo-based NGOs working on human rights, constitutional reform, or international advocacy may face intense public vilification and political scrutiny, yet they also benefit from proximity to courts, media, and diplomatic protection. By contrast, organisations in the North and East have long operated under close surveillance, emergency laws, and the presence of security forces, with staff and beneficiaries exposed to everyday risks that seldom reach national headlines.[118] A recent study by the Law & Society Trust further shows that many grassroots groups outside Colombo register as companies or remain informal partly to navigate bureaucratic hurdles and avoid intrusive state monitoring.[119]

Taken together, these patterns show that location is not a neutral backdrop but a structuring principle of Sri Lankan civil society. Colombo-based organisations tend to specialise in

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[115] Verité Research, *Hill Country Tamils of Sri Lanka: Analysis of Legal and Policy Issues Affecting Labour and Governance Structure* (Colombo: Verité Research, July 2022), 11–12, 19–21, accessed 18 May 2025, https://www.veriteresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/VR_EN_RR_Jul2022_Hill-Country-Tamils-Analysis-of-Legal-and-Policy-Issues-Affecting-Labour-and-Governance-Structure.pdf.

[116] Lia Kent, *Sri Lankan Civil Society in the New Rajapaksa Era: Navigating the Victor's Peace*, SEARBO2 Policy Brief (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, September 2021), 11, accessed 14 February 2024, https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Lia-Kent_SEARBO_Policy-brief-paper.pdf.

[117] Camilla Orjuela, "Dilemmas of Civil Society Aid: Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia* 1, no. 1 (January 2005): 1, 3, accessed 9 September 2023, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/pdsa/pdf/pdsa_01_01_02.pdf.

[118] Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka's Assault on Dissent* (London: Amnesty International, April 2013), 10–11, accessed 8 May 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa370032013en.pdf

[119] Law & Society Trust, *Challenges Faced by Civil Society* (Colombo: Law & Society Trust, 2025), 9–10, accessed 17 October 2025, https://lst.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Challenges-Faced-by-Civil-Society-English.pdf.

governance, law reform, and policy advocacy, oriented towards national institutions and international norms, while non-Colombo organisations are more involved in direct service delivery, local empowerment, and community-specific struggles. The Colombo and non-Colombo distinction therefore illuminates how access to power, resources, and security is spatially distributed, and how this shapes the strategies, alliances, and legitimacy claims of different civil-society actors.

Colombo-Based Organisations

Colombo occupies a central place in Sri Lanka's civil-society landscape. Most "national" NGOs, think tanks, and advocacy organisations maintain their headquarters in the capital, close to Parliament, ministries, courts, major media houses, and diplomatic missions.[120] The *Asian Development Bank Civil Society Brief* notes that Sri Lanka's key advocacy and professional NGOs are largely concentrated in Colombo, where they function as principal interlocutors with both the state and international development partners.[121] This spatial concentration gives Colombo-based organisations significant agenda-setting power in governance, rights, and peacebuilding debates.

Several prominent Colombo organisations illustrate this pattern. The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), founded in the 1990s, explicitly frames its mission around public advocacy, anti-corruption governance diagnostics, citizen-facing oversight tools.[122] Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL), established as the national chapter of the global Transparency International movement, positions itself as the country's leading public advocacy organisation on corruption and governance, working on legal reform, strategic litigation, and citizen oversight tools.[123] The National Peace Council (NPC), also headquartered in Colombo, focuses on peace education, inter-ethnic dialogue, and national-level advocacy on power-sharing and reconciliation.[124]

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[120] Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Politics of Crisis: Sri Lanka in Comparative Perspective* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2016), 218–26.
[121] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Strengthening the Rule of Law in Sri Lanka: Civil Society Partnerships and Legal Empowerment* (Colombo: UNDP Sri Lanka, 2020), 9–15, accessed March 18, 2025, https://www.undp.org/sri-lanka/publications.
[122] Centre for Policy Alternatives, "About CPA," accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.cpalanka.org/about/
[123] Transparency International Sri Lanka, *National Integrity System Assessment Sri Lanka 2014* (Colombo: Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2014), accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.tisrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NIS2014.pdf.
[124] National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, "Our Mission," accessed December 2, 2025, https://www.peace-srilanka.org/

Colombo is likewise a hub for feminist and media-focused activism. The Women and Media Collective (WMC), formed by Sri Lankan feminists in 1984, seeks to transform gender relations through media campaigns, research, and policy advocacy for women's representation and gender-just laws.[125] Colombo-based lawyers' groups, research institutes, and rights organisations such as the Law & Society Trust often collaborate with CPA, TISL, NPC, and WMC in coalitions that address constitutional reform, media freedom, economic justice, and anti-corruption. Recent governance-diagnostic initiatives led by TISL and partner organisations show how these Colombo actors attempt to shape national reforms through coordinated civil-society platforms.

At the same time, scholarly work highlights both the strengths and limitations of this Colombo-centric configuration. Camilla Orjuela argues that Colombo-based civil society has been crucial in building peace constituencies and critiquing authoritarianism, but is often perceived as urban, English-speaking, and detached from the everyday experiences of peripheral communities.[126] The advantages of proximity to power such as access to policymakers, donors, and media are therefore accompanied by vulnerabilities: political vilification, regulatory scrutiny, and contested claims to represent "civil society" as a whole. Colombo-based organisations thus occupy an influential yet ambivalent position, simultaneously driving national advocacy and provoking debates about elitism, representation, and legitimacy within Sri Lanka's broader civic sphere.

Non-Colombo Organisations

Non-Colombo organisations form a dense web of Sri Lanka's civil society, rooted in specific local histories, ethnic and class configurations, and everyday struggles. While they often lack the visibility and donor access of Colombo-based NGOs, they are usually more embedded in communities and closely connected to the material and emotional consequences of war, displacement, labour exploitation, and rural poverty.[127] Large movements such as the Sarvodaya Shramadana network, which works through district and divisional centres and

[125] Association for Progressive Communications, "Women and Media Collective," accessed August 7, 2025, https://www.apc.org/en/partner/women-and-media-collective;
[126] Camilla Orjuela, "Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?" *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 2 (2003): 195–212, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343303040002004
[127] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War*, Asia Report no. 289 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017), 12–14, accessed October 5, 2023, https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/289-sri-lankas-conflict-affected-women-dealing-with-the-legacy-of-war.pdf.

thousands of village societies across the island, illustrate how community-based structures outside the capital can constitute the backbone of civil society.[128]

In the Northern and Eastern Provinces, non-Colombo organisations emerged directly from conflict-displaced populations. The Suriya Women's Development Centre in Batticaloa was established in the early 1990s to work with women and children in refugee camps and now serves Tamil and Muslim women through rights education, psychosocial support, cultural activism, and legal aid.[129] The Jaffna Social Action Centre, based in Jaffna, focuses on former internally displaced persons, women-headed households, and children, combining emergency relief with longer-term programmes in child protection, safe houses for survivors of violence, and livelihoods support across the Northern and Eastern districts.[130] These organisations embody what "local civil society" means in war-affected peripheries: small teams working in Tamil-speaking environments, addressing trauma, land loss, and gendered violence in conditions of continuing militarisation and economic precarity.

Beyond the conflict zones, non-Colombo organisations in the Central highlands respond to the long-term marginalisation of plantation communities. The Women's Development Centre in Kandy works with women, children, youth, and persons with disabilities through shelter services, community-based rehabilitation, and economic empowerment programmes, positioning itself as a rights-based organisation in an upland urban–rural setting. The Human Development Organisation has focused on labour and caste-based discrimination affecting plantation workers and urban sanitation workers, combining local organising in districts such as Nuwara Eliya and Kandy with national-level advocacy on caste and labour rights. These initiatives highlight how non-Colombo actors in the hill country connect structural questions of caste, labour, and dignity to everyday struggles over housing, wages, and access to services.[131]

In many Southern and rural districts, large community-development movements and faith-inspired organisations anchor local civil-society networks. Sarvodaya's long-standing village-level structures, with thousands of legally registered village societies and district centres, focus

[128] Joanna Macy, "For the Awakening of All: The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka," *Worldview* 22, no. 3 (1979): 18–25, accessed June 14, 2024, https://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-AN/an141165.pdf
[129] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War*, op. cit.
[130] Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), *Post-Closure Evaluation: Civil Society Programme in Sri Lanka (2011–2015)* (London: VSO, 2016), 17–19, 198, accessed March 14, 2025, https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/sri_lanka_post_closure_report.pdf.
[131] Kalinga Tudor Silva, P. P. Sivapragasam, and Paramsothy Thanges, *op. cit.*, 12–14, 20–21.

on community development, disaster response, and "awakening" across religious and ethnic lines. Muslim Aid Sri Lanka, though administratively headquartered near Colombo, has concentrated much of its work in non-Colombo settings such as Muttur, Monaragala, Trincomalee and other rural districts, supporting education, livelihoods, disaster response, and inter-community peacebuilding. Together with smaller district NGO consortia and local faith-based groups, these actors show that non-Colombo organisations are not simply "implementers" of Colombo-based agendas, but key shapers of local civic life whose legitimacy lies in long-term presence and day-to-day engagement with marginalised communities.[132]

Ethnicity-Based Civil Society Organisations

Ethnicity has long shaped the structure, priorities, and legitimacy of civil-society organisations (CSOs) in Sri Lanka. The civil war, patterns of discrimination, regional inequalities, and language politics produced distinct ethnic civic spheres such as, Tamil, Muslim, Sinhala, and multi-ethnic, each responding to unique historical grievances and community needs. As Camilla Orjuela notes, Sri Lankan civil society must be understood not as a single national sphere but as a constellation of ethnically marked civic spaces that emerged through conflict and uneven development.[133]

Tamil civil-society organisations are especially prominent in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, where conflict displacement, land dispossession, and militarisation shaped their mandates.[134] Organisations such as the Jaffna Social Action Centre and the Suriya Women's Development Centre prioritise psychosocial support, rights education, gender-based violence interventions, and livelihood recovery for Tamil communities.[135] Their work is rooted in war-affected districts such as Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Batticaloa, and Ampara, where Tamil-speaking CSOs often serve as among the most accessible non state actors providing trauma care, women's empowerment, and legal assistance. Many Tamil CSOs maintain multilingual

[132] Jonathan Goodhand and Nick Lewer, "Sri Lanka: NGOs and Peace-Building in Complex Political Emergencies," *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1999): 69–76;
[133] Camilla Orjuela, "Dilemmas of Civil Society Aid: Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia* 1, no. 1 (January 2005): 3–4, accessed December 27, 2025, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/pdsa/pdf/pdsa_01_01_02.pdf
[134] Camilla Orjuela, "Dilemmas of Civil Society Aid: Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia* 1, no. 1 (January 2005): 3–6, accessed December 27, 2025, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/pdsa/pdf/pdsa_01_01_02.pdf
[135] Jaffna Social Action Centre (JSAC), "About," accessed December 27, 2025, https://jsacsrilanka.org/about/; Suriya Women's Development Centre, "Legal Aid & Counseling," May 5, 2023, accessed March 27, 2025, https://suriyawomenlk.org/2023/05/05/legal-aid-counseling/

documentation and Tamil-first advocacy to bridge the gap between Colombo-centric legal reforms and the realities of peripheral communities.[136]

Muslim civil-society organisations have a strong presence in the Eastern Province and North-Western coastal belt. These include Muslim Aid Sri Lanka, district-level zakat committees, and community welfare groups engaged in post-displacement rehabilitation, livelihood support, and interfaith dialogue. Scholars such as Farzana Haniffa show that Muslim CSOs in areas such as Puttalam, Ampara, and Muttur emerged to support families displaced during the war and later to address communal violence, land insecurity, and youth unemployment.[137] Their programs often combine Islamic charitable traditions with rights-based advocacy, particularly in women's education and community mediation.[138]

Sinhala-majority civil-society organisations operate widely across the Southern, Western, and Central provinces. Many combines Buddhist social-welfare traditions with development-oriented agendas. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, though multi-ethnic in membership, retains a strong Sinhala grassroots base and works extensively in Sinhala-majority districts through village societies that address poverty, disaster response, education, and reconciliation. Smaller Sinhala civic groups, temple-based welfare societies, and community-development committees provide local-level safety nets and mobilise around issues such as rural infrastructure, youth empowerment, and environmental protection.

Finally, a range of multi-ethnic CSOs, particularly those headquartered in Colombo, seek to work across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. Organisations such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives, National Peace Council, and the Law & Society Trust deliberately frame their work around inclusive governance, minority rights, and peacebuilding initiatives that cut across Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim constituencies. These organisations often act as intermediaries between ethnic-specific CSOs and national or international advocacy venues, though their ability to represent peripheral ethnic communities is frequently debated.

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[136] Jonathan Goodhand, David Hulme, and Srinath Samarasinghe, *Social Capital and Conflict: The Sri Lankan Experience* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2000), 45–47.

[137] Farzana Haniffa, "Competing for Victim Status: Northern Muslims and the Ironies of Sri Lanka's Post-war Transition," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015): art. 21, esp. 2–4 and 14–15, accessed December 2, 2025, https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/eaf2/2eb7653c254cdfc6983d44b146deb0e398f1.pdf.

[138] Farzana Haniffa et al., *Inter-religious Conflict in Four Districts of Sri Lanka* (Montreal: Equitas—International Centre for Human Rights Education, 2019), esp. Ampara district discussion on land disputes, inter-religious tensions, and local inter-religious/civil society mechanisms, accessed December 27, 2025, https://equitas.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Inter-religious-Conflict-in4-district-of-Sri-Lanka-FIN.pdf.

Overall, ethnicity-based CSOs play indispensable roles in Sri Lanka's civic sphere. Tamil CSOs respond to post-war trauma and land struggles; Muslim CSOs address displacement and communal insecurity; Sinhala-majority groups anchor rural development and welfare networks; and multi-ethnic CSOs engage the national policy environment. Together, they form a mosaic of civic actors shaped by history, language, identity, and uneven political geographies.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that civil society in Sri Lanka cannot be understood as a bounded or autonomous sphere but as a set of practices deeply embedded within domestic political structures and everyday social relations. Institutional configurations (executive dominance, centralisation, patronage networks, militarisation, and uneven judicial autonomy) shape both the possibilities and limits of civic engagement, often encouraging adaptive or service-oriented participation while constraining dissent and rights-based advocacy. These structural conditions are further mediated by ethno-nationalist politics, information hierarchies, and securitised narratives that define civic legitimacy and fragment the public sphere. At the same time, the chapter demonstrates that civil society is sustained through socio-cultural practices that extend beyond formal organisations. Informal networks of trust, religious institutions, and community-based solidarities constitute the everyday infrastructure of civic life, enabling mobilisation while also reproducing social hierarchies linked to class, gender, language, and identity. The 2022 Aragalaya momentarily disrupted these patterns by expanding civic repertoires and actors, yet subsequent developments reveal enduring structural constraints. Overall, this chapter establishes civil society as a negotiated and contingent field, simultaneously reflecting Sri Lanka's power structures and providing limited but significant spaces for collective agency.

Intersection of Global and Local Factors in Sri Lankan Civil Society

Introduction

As the section on transnational civil society actors in the previous chapter revealed, the study of civil society in Sri Lanka requires an analytical approach that moves beyond narrow domestic explanations and engages deeply with the interaction between global and local forces. Civil society on the island has never emerged in isolation; rather, it has been shaped by a constellation of regional geopolitical interests, bilateral relationships, donor-driven initiatives, and transnational advocacy networks. Since the end of the civil war, powerful global actors particularly India, China, and the United States, intensified their engagement with Sri Lanka for strategic, economic, and political reasons. Their involvement shaped the operating environment of civil society, influencing access to resources, political space, discursive legitimacy, and the broader climate of dissent and activism. Global pressures and partnerships in this era interacted with local political structures defined by Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism, the growing role of the security apparatus, and the entrenchment of patronage networks. These dynamics underscore the importance of examining civil society through the lens of global–local entanglement rather than discrete, isolated categories.

Crucially, Sri Lankan civil society is not simply acted upon by global forces; it actively interprets, negotiates, and reworks them. Tamil civil society organisations, for instance, have strategically mobilised regional and diasporic networks, particularly in India and across transnational Tamil communities, to advance claims related to accountability, land rights, and political autonomy. Sinhala-Buddhist civil society groups, in contrast, often resist the influence of external actors, framing them as threats to sovereignty or national security. Muslim community organisations, working within a context of heightened securitisation after 2019, navigate both internal suspicion and regional linkages while attempting to maintain social protection networks. These variations demonstrate that civil society's engagement with global actors is shaped by local political identities, historical experiences, and structural constraints.

Sri Lanka's geopolitical positioning in the Indian Ocean further intensifies the global dimensions of its civil society. India's regional security calculus, China's investment-driven development model, and the United States' strategic and governance-related interests all converge on the island. Each actor introduces different agendas, incentives, and pressures. India's involvement often centres on political stability, ethnic reconciliation through

devolution, and maritime security cooperation. China's engagement, particularly through large-scale development projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), influences local economic structures, state–society relations, and the material landscape in which civil society operates. The United States shapes civil society indirectly through governance programmes, diplomatic messaging, and its broader strategic interests within the Indo-Pacific region. These external agendas create opportunities for some civil society actors while constraining others, reinforcing the need to examine how global forces and local actors mutually shape one another.

This chapter therefore explores the intersection of global and local factors in shaping Sri Lankan civil society during the post-war era. It begins with the detailed discussion on Diaspora as Transnational Civil Society Actors, followed by detailed analyses of the influence of India, China, and the United States. Following Section examines other global actors relevant to civil society through bilateral engagement or transnational networks and at the end this chapter analyses how global and local forces interact and mutually constitute one another. Through these interconnected sections, the chapter demonstrates that civil society in Sri Lanka is produced not by isolated determinants but by the ongoing interaction of global geopolitics, local structures, and evolving civic agency.

Diaspora as Transnational Civil Society Actors

Despite their political divisions, diaspora actors have also engaged in reconciliation-oriented initiatives. Notable examples include diaspora-supported truth-telling platforms, academic collaborations, and interethnic dialogues facilitated by universities and non-governmental organizations abroad. Moreover, several second-generation diaspora members have reoriented their activism toward intersectional and justice-based frameworks, situating Sri Lanka's post-war challenges within broader global discourses on transitional justice, anti-racism, and decolonial solidarity. In this regard, the diaspora serves not merely as a financial or political actor but as a space of ideational innovation and discursive production. The Sinhala and Muslim diasporas have traditionally played a less visible, though not insignificant, role in transnational civil society. While Sinhala Buddhist organizations abroad have largely focused on religious and cultural preservation, segments of the Sinhala diaspora have supported nationalist rhetoric and defended the wartime state narrative.[1] For instance, certain groups in Australia and the UK organized public rallies in support of the Rajapaksa administrations,

[1] Thurairajah, *Performing Nationalism…*, 78–79 (diaspora financing victim-survivor presence at HRC; transnational coordination), 87–89, accessed May 2, 2025.

especially during international investigations into alleged war crimes. On the other hand, a growing number of Sinhala professionals and students abroad have become critical of state repression, authoritarianism, and corruption, particularly in the aftermath of the 2022 economic crisis. [2]Their engagement is increasingly reflected in solidarity campaigns, public scholarship, and digital platforms advocating for democratic reform in Sri Lanka. The Muslim diaspora, while less politically organized, has also responded to episodes of anti-Muslim violence and discrimination in Sri Lanka. Following the Aluthgama riots (2014) and the Easter Sunday attacks (2019), Muslim civil society actors abroad mobilized resources for community protection, interfaith dialogue, and media advocacy to counter Islamophobic narratives. Given the relatively recent politicization of Muslim identity in Sri Lanka, following Easter Sunday attacks of 2019, the diaspora's role in shaping minority rights discourse is likely to grow in the coming years. Diaspora-led digital activism has emerged as a potent form of transnational civic engagement. Platforms such as Groundviews, Lanka E-News, and Colombo Telegraph have served as critical nodes for citizen journalism, counter-narratives, and investigative reporting. These platforms, often run or supported by diaspora writers and editors, challenge the state's control over information and provide alternative discourses on governance, justice, and identity. Additionally, social media campaigns such as those coordinated during *Aragalaya*, highlight the synergistic relationship between on-ground protests and diasporic advocacy, blurring the spatial boundaries of civil society. However, the diaspora's role is not without contestation. Within Sri Lanka, diaspora interventions are frequently viewed with suspicion, particularly by state actors who conflate advocacy with subversion. Moreover, diaspora communities themselves are internally fragmented along lines of class, generation, and political ideology. The persistence of homeland divisions such as those between federalist and separatist visions, or between liberal reformists and radical nationalists, complicates the formation of a coherent diasporic civil society. Additionally, critiques have been levelled at certain diaspora organizations for being detached from ground realities or for failing to sufficiently include voices from the homeland, especially those of war-affected communities.

India's Influence on Sri Lankan Civil Society

India occupies a distinctive place among the external actors that have shaped Sri Lanka's post-war trajectory. The relationship is not only geographical or strategic; it is embedded in

[2] *Buddhism and the Legitimation of Power: Democracy, Public Religion and Minorities in Sri Lanka* (Zurich: ETH/ISN Working Paper, 2009), 4–5, accessed April 11, 2025.

civilisational linkages, religious and cultural exchanges, and dense people-to-people ties that go back more than two millennia. Official documents of both governments underline this depth, repeatedly describing the relationship as one of "civilisational and historical connect" rather than mere neighbourhood pragmatism.[3] In the post-2009 period, these long-term affinities have interacted with new forms of economic dependency, strategic competition in the Indian Ocean, and domestic political contestation in Sri Lanka. Civil society actors on the island, ranging from rights-based NGOs and professional associations to religious networks and grassroots organisations, have therefore experienced Indian influence in complex, and sometimes contradictory, ways: as a source of support, protection and opportunity, but also as a possible vector of interference and hierarchy.

India's own foreign policy framing provides an important entry point for analysing these dynamics. New Delhi presents its regional engagement through the twin lenses of the "Neighbourhood First" policy and the civilisational ethos of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—the idea that the world is "One Earth, One Family, One Future."[4] During India's G20 presidency this phrase was elevated to a global norm, linking India's role in multilateral governance to older philosophical traditions of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.[5] In parliamentary statements and press briefings, the Ministry of External Affairs has tied this ethos directly to India's regional outreach, arguing that assistance to neighbours during crises is both a moral obligation and an expression of India's identity as a benign, status-enhancing power.[6] Sri Lanka features prominently in this discourse: official bilateral briefs emphasise that the island has a "central place" in the Neighbourhood First policy and in India's MAHASAGAR vision for the Indian Ocean.[7]This framing matters for civil society because it situates India's economic and political initiatives in Sri Lanka not as narrow, transactional projects but as part

[3] High Commission of India, Colombo, *"India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations,"* Government of India, updated 2025, https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-bilateral-relations/.
[4] Press Information Bureau, *"G-20 and India's Presidency,"* Government of India, 10 December 2022, https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1882356
[5] Sunil K. Raina, "'Vasudaiva Kutumbakam—One Earth, One Family, One Future': India's Mantra for a Healthy and Prosperous Earth as the G20 Leader," *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 12, no. 4 (2023), https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10114570/.
[6] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"QUESTION NO-391: Humanitarian Assistance to Sri Lanka,"* Rajya Sabha, 25 July 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/38001/
[7] High Commission of India, Colombo, *"India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations,"* Government of India, updated 2025, https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-bilateral-relations/.

of a broader narrative of shared well-being and regional solidarity, which local actors may either embrace or contest.[8]

Historically, however, Sri Lankan perceptions of India have been shaped as much by episodes of tension as by civilisational rhetoric. India's involvement in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, particularly the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), and New Delhi's complex role in the Tamil question, left deep marks on public and elite memory. Early analyses underscored how India's strategic anxieties about extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean, coupled with domestic pressures from Tamil Nadu, pushed New Delhi to act as "security manager" in South Asia, with Sri Lanka becoming a key test case.[9] Later scholarship on India's Sri Lanka policy stressed how the perceived failure of the IPKF and the heavy casualties it incurred hardened Indian public opinion against direct military intervention, pushing New Delhi towards a more calibrated mix of diplomacy, economic leverage and normative messaging.[10] For many Sinhala political actors and segments of the media, these earlier interventions reinforced a narrative of India as an intrusive regional hegemon; for sections of Tamil political and civil society, they fed an equally enduring expectation that India has a special responsibility to push Colombo towards meaningful power-sharing.[11] Post-war civil society engagements are filtered through this layered history of expectation and mistrust. ***This ambivalence was echoed by one interviewee, who argued that India continues to be viewed through a prism of unresolved historical anxieties rather than present-day policy alone. From this perspective, Indian engagement is often perceived less as solidarity and more as strategic calculation shaped by domestic Indian political imperatives. The interviewee noted that such perceptions cut across civil society, producing scepticism even among actors who otherwise welcome regional cooperation (Anonymous Interviewee A).***[12]

In the years following the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009, India recalibrated its approach to emphasise support for a "united Sri Lanka" while repeatedly calling for implementation of

[8] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *Brief on India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations* (New Delhi: MEA, 2025), https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Sri_Lanka-2025.pdf.

[9] P. V. Rao, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: India's Role and Perception," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 4 (1988): 419–436, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644736.

[10] Brian Blarel, *India's Sri Lanka Policy*, IPCS Research Paper 16 (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2007), https://www.ipcs.org/issue_briefs/issue_brief_pdf/1445888596RP16-Brian-SriLanka.pdf.

[11] G. Sultana, "India–Sri Lanka Relations," *World Focus* 38, no. 3 (2017): 69–78, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45341995.

[12] Interview conducted on September 20, 2025 and anonymity maintained on request

the Thirteenth Amendment and a political settlement acceptable to all communities.[13] New Delhi's focus shifted towards constitutional reform, economic reconstruction, and targeted development in war-affected areas, especially in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Policy briefs and speeches highlighted India's role in building more than 50,000 houses for internally displaced persons and war-affected families under the Indian Housing Project, a flagship initiative implemented through local contractors and community-based mechanisms.[14] Empirical studies of the housing schemes suggest that beneficiaries often perceived Indian assistance positively, especially in the north, where material improvements to living conditions were visible and closely associated with Indian grants and lines of credit.[15] At the same time, local critics sometimes argued that these projects did not fundamentally alter underlying patterns of militarisation or discrimination, raising questions about whether external development assistance can meaningfully transform structural power relations.[16] ***Reflecting on post-war reconstruction, the same interviewee (Anonymous Interviewee A) cautioned that housing and livelihood projects, while materially important, rarely altered the deeper governance structures that reproduce inequality. Without institutional reform and political accountability, such initiatives were seen as alleviating symptoms rather than addressing causes.***[17] Sri Lankan civil society thus encountered Indian post-war engagement both as a tangible provider of relief and as an actor constrained by its own strategic calculations and deference to Colombo's sovereignty.

India's influence on Sri Lankan civil society became particularly salient during the island's acute economic and debt crisis of 2022. As foreign exchange reserves collapsed and imports of food, fuel and medicine became difficult, India emerged as the principal bilateral first responder. Parliamentary answers in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha record that New Delhi extended a US$500 million line of credit for petroleum products in February 2022, a separate

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[13] High Commission of India, Colombo, *"India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations,"* Government of India, updated 2025, https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-bilateral-relations/. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"India–Sri Lanka Joint Statement: Fostering Partnership for Shared Growth,"* Press release, 16 December 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38797/.

[14] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations* (New Delhi: MEA, earlier brief), https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Sri_Lanka_Bilateral_Relations.pdf.

[15] T. Vigneswaran, "Impacts on Housing Scheme Activities of Indian Housing Projects in Northern Sri Lanka," *Kelaniya Journal of Human Resource Management* 16, no. 3 (2021): 37–45, https://ir.lib.seu.ac.lk/bitstream/123456789/5925/1/K2021_ISSUE-3%20(37-45).pdf.

[16] Camilla Orjuela, "Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development* 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–30, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/pdsa/pdf/pdsa_01_01_02.pdf.

[17] Interview conducted on September 20, 2025 and anonymity maintained on request

US$1 billion credit facility for essential items in March 2022 (later extended to March 2024), and additional currency swaps and loan deferrals.[18] Combined with other instruments, this support exceeded US$4 billion and was repeatedly framed by Indian officials as a demonstration of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in practice and of India's willingness to stand by Sri Lanka "as a friend and partner" during its most difficult hour.[19] Analytical work on this episode argues that the assistance both prevented a deeper humanitarian catastrophe and served New Delhi's strategic interests by countering Chinese leverage and reinforcing India's status as the region's primary crisis manager.[20] For Sri Lankan civil society organisations engaged in relief, consumer protection, and advocacy around debt justice, Indian assistance became a central empirical reference point—used either to highlight the importance of regional solidarity and South–South cooperation, or to interrogate the long-term implications of new forms of indebtedness. ***While addressing the civic responses to the crisis, anonymous interviewee A described the 2022 moment as one "driven primarily by material desperation rather than ideological mobilisation. According to this view, public gratitude for Indian assistance coexisted with unease about the longer-term political costs of emergency financing. The interviewee emphasised that while relief was necessary, it did not resolve structural vulnerabilities that had accumulated over decades"***[21]

Indian economic engagement also shapes civil society indirectly through its impact on Sri Lanka's development model and policy choices. Bilateral trade exceeded US$5.5 billion in FY 2023–24, with India remaining Sri Lanka's largest trading partner in South Asia and a major source of foreign direct investment and tourists.[22] Connectivity initiatives under discussion, such as an economic land corridor, grid interconnection for electricity trade, multi-product energy pipelines, and enhanced port cooperation in Trincomalee and Colombo, reflect a

[18] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"QUESTION NO-4900: Assistance to Sri Lanka,"* Lok Sabha, 31 March 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/36431/.
[19] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"Press Statement by External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar on India's Support to Sri Lanka,"* 20 January 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36136/.
[20] Thilina Panduwawala, "India's Extraordinary Support during Sri Lanka's Crisis: Motivations and Impacts," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 7, no. 5 (2024): 90–109, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3859529/indias-extraordinary-support-during-sri-lankas-crisis-motivations-and-impacts/.
[21] Interview conducted on September 20, 2025 and anonymity maintained on request
[22] High Commission of India, Colombo, *"India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations,"* Government of India, updated 2025, https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-bilateral-relations/ High Commission of India, Colombo, *"India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations,"* Government of India, updated 2025, https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-bilateral-relations/

strategic push to integrate Sri Lanka into wider regional production and energy networks.[23] Joint statements from 2024 emphasise economic integration, digital payments through UPI-based systems, and cooperation in renewables as key pillars of this agenda.[24] Such trends have significant implications for labour unions, environmental movements and community-based organisations, which increasingly situate their campaigns within debates over energy security, land use, coastal livelihoods and transparency in infrastructure contracts. Civil society critiques of large-scale projects, whether related to port development, special economic zones or power plants that often refers to the differential standards applied to Indian and Chinese investments, highlighting how geopolitical competition intersects with domestic struggles over accountability and environmental justice.[25]

Beyond economics, India exerts influence through dense networks of people-to-people interaction, education and cultural diplomacy that directly touch civil society actors. The Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo, scholarships administered by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and numerous training programmes for Sri Lankan journalists, civil servants, academics and youth leaders create what might be called a social infrastructure of influence.[26] These programmes expose participants to Indian institutions, civil society practices and discourses on democracy, secularism and pluralism, even as contemporary Indian politics itself is contested along many of these axes. For professional associations, think tanks and universities in Sri Lanka, partnerships with Indian counterparts open access to conferences, joint research and funding opportunities.[27] At the same time, some Sri Lankan activists worry that dependence on any external partner, including India, can subtly shape agendas and produce self-censorship on issues considered sensitive for the donor's strategic interests. "***This concern was reinforced by the interviewee who suggested that exposure to externally sponsored***

[23] High Commission of India, Colombo, *"India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations,"* Government of India, updated 2025, https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-bilateral-relations/ Observer Research Foundation, *"Politics and Protectionism: Decoding the Challenges to India–Sri Lanka Connectivity,"* ORF Special Report, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/research/politics-and-protectionism-decoding-the-challenges-to-india-sri-lanka-connectivity

[24] Camilla Orjuela, "Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development* 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–30, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/pdsa/pdf/pdsa_01_01_02.pdf

[25] Observer Research Foundation, *"Politics and Protectionism: Decoding the Challenges to India–Sri Lanka Connectivity,"* ORF Special Report, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/research/politics-and-protectionism-decoding-the-challenges-to-india-sri-lanka-connectivity.

[26] High Commission of India, Colombo, *"India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations,"* Government of India, updated 2025, https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-bilateral-relations/

[27] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations* (New Delhi: MEA, earlier brief), https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Sri_Lanka_Bilateral_Relations.pdf.

training and exchanges can subtly shape acceptable narratives, encouraging restraint rather than critical engagement on politically sensitive issues. Such processes were seen as influencing discourse without overt coercion." This ambivalence mirrors older debates on the role of Western donors in Sri Lankan civil society. But, now refracted through a South Asian lens.[28]

The discourse of society, *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* plays a specific role in legitimising these patterns of engagement. Official Indian statements on the G20 theme present the phrase as both a moral compass and a practical guide for tackling global challenges such as climate change, health, energy and food security, through inclusive cooperation.[29] Commentaries on India's G20 presidency argue that the slogan is not mere rhetoric but an attempt to position India as a champion of the Global South, sensitive to the developmental concerns of smaller states.[30] For Sri Lankan civil society actors, this framing has dual implications. On the one hand, normative language about "one family" resonates with transnational advocacy networks that emphasise South–South solidarity, decolonial cooperation and alternatives to Western conditionality. On the other hand, some activists point out that the metaphor of family can mask asymmetries of power within the region, where India acts as an elder sibling whose preferences carry disproportionate weight. Public commentary in Sri Lanka's independent media occasionally criticises what is perceived as a paternalistic tone in Indian discourse, especially when linked to security and strategic issues such as port access, surveillance cooperation or defence agreements.[31] Thus, while *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* provides a soft-power narrative that many civil society actors find attractive, its reception remains filtered through long-standing concerns about autonomy and equality. ***Interviewee (Anonymous interviewee A) interpreted the language of familial solidarity as carrying implicit hierarchies that resonate uneasily within Sri Lanka's political context. While rhetorically inclusive, such framing was seen as reinforcing asymmetrical relationships rather than mutual accountability. This perception,***

[28] U. Fernando, "Sandwiched? Sri Lankan Civic Space Amidst a Repressive Policy and Political Environment," in *Shrinking Civic Space*, edited volume, 2023, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-23305-0_5.

[29] Sunil K. Raina, "'Vasudaiva Kutumbakam—One Earth, One Family, One Future': India's Mantra for a Healthy and Prosperous Earth as the G20 Leader," *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 12, no. 4 (2023), https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10114570/.

[30] Rajesh K. Yadav, "India's G20 Presidency in Shaping Global Governance: A New Narrative for the Global South," *Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1 (2025): 85–101, https://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com/uploads/archives/7-1-42-133.pdf.

[31] "Sri Lanka's Path to Stability: Balancing Geopolitical Tensions and Domestic Challenges," *Colombo Telegraph*, 15 December 2024, https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sri-lankas-path-to-stability-balancing-geopolitical-tensions-domestic-challenges/.

the interviewee argued, contributes to lingering anxieties about sovereignty and decision-making autonomy within civil society debates.[32]

Perceptions of India within Sri Lankan society are far from homogeneous. Studies of Indo-Sri Lankan relations from Sri Lankan perspectives show that Sinhala nationalists often interpret closer ties with India as a potential compromise of sovereignty, particularly when associated with devolution, the Tamil question, or perceived pressure at the UN Human Rights Council.[33] In contrast, many Tamil political actors and civil society organisations continue to view India as a necessary, if sometimes reluctant, guarantor of minority rights and devolution, given its historical role in brokering the Thirteenth Amendment and its continuing rhetorical support for power-sharing.[34] Research on housing programmes and post-war development in the north reveals that beneficiaries frequently differentiate between "Indian" and "central government" projects, sometimes expressing greater trust in Indian-funded schemes because they seem less entangled with local patronage networks.[35] Yet fieldwork also records instances where grassroots actors express frustration at delays, bureaucratic hurdles or the limited scope of Indian programmes relative to need, cautioning against overly romanticised views of external assistance.[36]

Civil society perceptions are further shaped by the triangular dynamic involving India, China and Western actors. Analyses of Sri Lanka's geopolitical balancing highlight how successive governments have leveraged competition between India and China to secure infrastructure investments and diplomatic support, often with limited transparency and weak consultation of local communities.[37] In this context, some Sri Lankan civil society organisations frame India as the "lesser evil" compared to China, emphasising shared democratic norms, institutional

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[32] Interview conducted on September 20, 2025 and anonymity maintained on request

[33] G. Sultana, "India–Sri Lanka Relations," *World Focus* 38, no. 3 (2017): 69–78, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45341995. "Debate: India–Sri Lanka Relations—New Issues and Questions," MP-IDSA Report (New Delhi: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2019), https://www.idsa.in/system/files/news/debate-ifaj.pdf.

[34] P. V. Rao, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: India's Role and Perception," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 4 (1988): 419–436, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644736 "Debate: India–Sri Lanka Relations—New Issues and Questions," MP-IDSA Report (New Delhi: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2019), https://www.idsa.in/system/files/news/debate-ifaj.pdf

[35] T. Vigneswaran, "Impacts on Housing Scheme Activities of Indian Housing Projects in Northern Sri Lanka," *Kelaniya Journal of Human Resource Management* 16, no. 3 (2021): 37–45, https://ir.lib.seu.ac.lk/bitstream/123456789/5925/1/K2021_ISSUE-3%20(37-45).pdf

[36] Camilla Orjuela, "Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development* 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–30, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/pdsa/pdf/pdsa_01_01_02.pdf

[37] Rajni Gamage, *"Sri Lanka–India Relations in 2024,"* ISAS Insights, No. 755 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, 1 March 2024), https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/sri-lanka-india-relations-in-2024/

familiarity and culturally proximate forms of engagement. Others, particularly in urban activist circles, criticise all major external actors alike for supporting elite-driven, growth-oriented projects with insufficient regard for environmental sustainability, labour rights or social justice. Freedom House's country-level reporting, for instance, notes how domestic media and civil society pay growing attention to the comparative impacts of Indian and Chinese financing, especially in sectors like energy and ports.[38] These debates reveal that India's influence is always relational: it is evaluated not in isolation but in contrast to other external presences, which themselves shape the strategic space within which Sri Lankan civil society operates.

India's security and defence cooperation with Sri Lanka constitutes another channel through which civil society feels indirect effects. Recent agreements and memoranda of understanding emphasise maritime domain awareness, counter-terrorism cooperation, training, and arms supplies, all framed as contributing to regional stability and the safety of sea lanes in the Indian Ocean.[39] For Indian policymakers, such cooperation is necessary to prevent extra-regional powers from gaining undue leverage near India's southern coastline and to address transnational threats. For sections of Sri Lankan civil society concerned with demilitarisation, transitional justice and human rights oversight, however, deeper defence ties risk entrenching securitised approaches to internal dissent and delaying meaningful security-sector reform. Human rights organisations have, on occasion, questioned whether foreign military training, including from India, adequately incorporates accountability norms and international humanitarian law, especially in light of unresolved allegations from the civil war period. These concerns do not always translate into open campaigns specifically targeting India, but they form part of a broader critique of how security partnerships can undercut domestic demands for reform.

Notwithstanding these tensions, there is also evidence of constructive, issue-based collaboration between Indian and Sri Lankan civil society actors. Academic and policy institutions in New Delhi, Colombo and Kandy increasingly organise joint conferences and publish policy briefs addressing themes such as post-war reconciliation, regional trade, climate

[38] Freedom House, *"Sri Lanka: Beijing's Global Media Influence,"* Beijing's Global Media Influence Country Report, 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/beijings-global-media-influence/2022

[39] "Debate: India–Sri Lanka Relations—New Issues and Questions," MP-IDSA Report (New Delhi: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2019), https://www.idsa.in/system/files/news/debate-ifaj.pdf "India–Sri Lanka Relations," *Drishti IAS Daily News Analysis*, 9 April 2025, https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/india-sri-lanka-relations-6

change and maritime governance.[40] Think tanks like the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute in Sri Lanka and Indian counterparts have produced studies advocating more inclusive connectivity strategies that involve local stakeholders and mitigate fears of dependency. Similarly, Indian and Sri Lankan environmental groups have cooperated on coastal conservation initiatives and campaigns against environmentally harmful projects in the Palk Bay region, where fisherfolk on both sides of the strait face livelihood pressures from over-fishing, trawling and ecological degradation. These collaborations illustrate how India's influence is not only top-down, via states and markets, but also lateral, via professional and advocacy networks that share information, methodologies and normative frameworks.

The post-Aragalaya political context in Sri Lanka has further sharpened debates on India's role. The 2022–23 mass protests against economic mismanagement and authoritarian governance created an opening for civil society to demand a rethinking of the country's development model and external alignments. Commentaries in Sri Lankan outlets such as *Colombo Telegraph* and regional think-tanks argued that while Indian assistance helped avert a humanitarian disaster, it should not become a substitute for comprehensive debt restructuring, institutional reform and domestic accountability.[41] Some protest leaders and commentators warned that elite bargains struck between Colombo and external partners including India, could reproduce the same opaque decision-making and patronage politics that contributed to the crisis. "***In contrast, a grassroots activist (Anonymous interviewee B) emphasised that the protest moment altered how external actors are publicly scrutinised. According to this reflection, citizens became more attentive to the terms, transparency, and long-term implications of foreign engagement. Even if institutional change remained limited, this shift in political consciousness was described as a lasting outcome of the protest experience."***[42] Others emphasised that India's visibility as a supporter of democratic stability and economic recovery could bolster pro-reform constituencies, provided that New Delhi was sensitive to public opinion and avoided the perception of backing particular factions or families. In this fluid environment, Indian diplomacy and development practice are increasingly scrutinised not only by governments but by an empowered, if fragmented, civil society.

[40] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations* (New Delhi: MEA, earlier brief), https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Sri_Lanka_Bilateral_Relations.pdf
[41] Rajni Gamage, *"Sri Lanka–India Relations in 2024,"* ISAS Insights, No. 755 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, 1 March 2024), https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/sri-lanka-india-relations-in-2024/
[42] Interview conducted on September 12, 2025 and anonymity maintained on request

Within India, evolving domestic politics and ideological currents also feed into how Sri Lankan actors interpret Indian influence. The prominence of Hindu nationalist narratives in Indian public discourse has raised questions among some Sri Lankan observers about how pluralism and minority rights are being re-imagined in India itself. While official Indian statements continue to highlight secularism, democracy and diversity as shared values, critical voices in Sri Lanka wonder whether the normative gap between rhetoric and reality might weaken India's ability to advocate credibly for pluralism and devolution abroad.[43] For Buddhist networks and religious civil society actors, however, closer ties with India, including through Buddhist pilgrimage circuits and cultural exchanges can reinforce a sense of shared heritage that transcends short-term political frictions. Indian leaders' references to Sri Lanka as a key partner in Buddhist diplomacy and as a spiritual neighbour rather than merely a strategic asset find resonance in sections of Sri Lanka's sangha and lay Buddhist organisations, even as others remain wary of instrumentalisation.

Taken together, these strands suggest that India's influence on Sri Lankan civil society is multi-layered and ambivalent. It encompasses tangible economic assistance and connectivity projects, symbolic narratives of civilisational unity under *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, and embedded networks of cultural and professional exchange. It is refracted through memories of military intervention and mediation, through ongoing disputes over devolution and accountability, and through contemporary anxieties about sovereignty in an era of intensifying great-power competition in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lankan civil society does not passively absorb this influence; it interprets, negotiates and resists it in ways that reflect local histories, identities and political alignments. As the next section will show, these dynamics cannot be fully understood without situating India within a wider constellation of external actors, above all China, whose expanding presence on the island both constrains and enables India's room for manoeuvre, and further complicates the global-local intersection in which Sri Lankan civil society is embedded.

India's influence on Sri Lankan civil society cannot be fully understood without analysing how New Delhi's policies intersect with China's expanding presence on the island. Over the past two decades, the India-China rivalry in the Indian Ocean has become a defining feature of Sri

[43] Nitin Agarwala, "India–Sri Lanka Engagement under India's Neighbourhood First Policy," *Foreign Policy Research Centre Journal* 40 (2019): 75–90, https://www.academia.edu/41330739/India_Sri_Lanka_Engagement_under_India_s_Neighbourhood_First_Policy "Neighbourhood First: Redefining India–Sri Lanka Relations," *Diplomatist*, 15 January 2025, https://diplomatist.com/2025/01/15/neighbourhood-first-redefining-india-sri-lanka-relations/

Lanka's foreign relations, reshaping the political environment in which civil society organisations operate. Chinese investments in ports, expressways, industrial parks and energy projects have significantly altered the physical and economic landscape. For India, these developments represent a strategic challenge given the island's location along vital sea lanes and its proximity to the Indian coastline. This geopolitical tension indirectly shapes civic space by influencing how the Sri Lankan state allocates attention, resources and legitimacy across civil society sectors. When Indian and Chinese projects compete, the government often centralises decision-making, restricts transparency and sidelines critical voices, thereby narrowing the room for public deliberation. Civil society actors frequently observe that geopolitical rivalry has led to accelerated project timelines, reduced public consultation and a governance climate that prioritises strategic considerations over participatory development. The presence of two major powers, each with its preferred style of engagement, thus creates a political atmosphere in which civic scrutiny becomes sensitive and sometimes discouraged by state authorities.

India's efforts to counterbalance China have further expanded its footprint in Sri Lanka's development agenda, particularly in the ports, energy and transport sectors. Joint statements from 2023 and 2024 emphasise renewable energy projects, grid interconnection plans, port collaborations and digital payments integration as areas of intensified cooperation.[44] While these initiatives may deliver long-term economic benefits, their implementation has raised questions within civil society regarding transparency, parliamentary oversight and public accountability.[45] Local policy analysts argue that as India seeks to match China's scale of investment, competitive pressures sometimes produce streamlined decision-making that bypasses consultative mechanisms traditionally used in democratic governance. Activists working on land rights, coastal ecology and labour conditions note that India-backed projects, like their Chinese counterparts, are negotiated largely at the executive level with limited space for civic participation. These concerns reflect a deeper anxiety about Sri Lanka's weakened institutional checks and balances, which have become more vulnerable in an environment where geopolitical imperatives overshadow public deliberation.

[44] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"India–Sri Lanka Joint Statement: Fostering Partnership for Shared Growth,"* Press release, 16 December 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38797/
[45] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations* (New Delhi: MEA, earlier brief), https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Sri_Lanka_Bilateral_Relations.pdf

The impact of India–China competition on civic space is also visible in media narratives and public discourse. Newspapers, think tanks and social media commentators frequently interpret major infrastructure announcements as part of a wider struggle for influence between the two Asian powers. This framing shapes how civil society positions itself in public debates. Some organisations view India as the more desirable partner because it is a democratic country with closer cultural and institutional ties to Sri Lanka. Others argue that India's strategic interests do not necessarily align with the needs of ordinary Sri Lankans, especially when investment decisions are made without local consultation. Conversely, organisations critical of China's debt-driven development model sometimes invoke India as a counterweight that can promote greater transparency, but they also caution that competition between two powerful states risks reducing Sri Lanka to a bargaining arena where community interests receive insufficient attention. Thus, even when civil society actors differ in their attitudes, they converge on the view that geopolitical rivalry complicates participatory governance and reinforces top-down decision-making. "***Notably, interviewee (Interviewee A) contested the extent to which geopolitical competition directly constrains civic space, arguing instead that domestic political culture and leadership choices remain the primary determinants. From this perspective, external rivalry amplifies existing tendencies rather than creating new forms of repression."***

India's influence is equally significant in shaping discourses on economic governance and transparency. Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis highlighted longstanding weaknesses in fiscal management, state-owned enterprise reform and debt sustainability. India's swift assistance created a moment in which civil society organisations directly engaged with debates on economic policymaking. Advocacy groups working on debt justice and economic transparency frequently referred to Indian credit lines and emergency loans as examples of bilateral support that mitigated immediate hardship.[46] At the same time, they raised concerns about the opacity of certain bilateral agreements related to energy, logistics and infrastructure.[47] Civil society analysts pointed out that India's support, although timely, should not exempt projects from rigorous scrutiny regarding long-term repayment obligations, governance safeguards and environmental impact assessments. Discussions during public forums and academic roundtables reflect a growing consensus that economic cooperation, whether with India, China

[46] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"QUESTION NO-4900: Assistance to Sri Lanka,"* Lok Sabha, 31 March 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/36431/

[47] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"Press Statement by External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar on India's Support to Sri Lanka,"* 20 January 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36136/

or any other external actor, must be subjected to the same standards of accountability and openness if Sri Lanka is to rebuild public trust in state institutions.

Indian officials, for their part, have increasingly emphasised transparency and financial discipline in public statements. Press briefings by the Ministry of External Affairs underline that India's assistance is guided by principles of sustainability, responsible financing and the expectations of the Sri Lankan public.[48] India's emphasis on transparent and rules-based connectivity through digital payments, cross-border energy cooperation and regional trade corridors is positioned as an alternative to opaque financing mechanisms associated with other external actors.[49] Civil society organisations have responded cautiously to this framing. While many welcome India's stated commitment to open and accountable governance, others argue that transparency must be demonstrated consistently across all Indian-backed projects rather than as a rhetorical contrast with Chinese investments. These debates demonstrate that India's growing role in economic governance can empower civil society advocacy, but it can also polarise public opinion depending on how agreements are negotiated and implemented.

Civil society critiques of India's influence often emerge from these tensions. Some activists argue that India's involvement in Sri Lanka is not always sensitively attuned to local political dynamics, particularly when it concerns contentious issues such as the implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment, defence cooperation or fisheries disputes. Reports from community organisations in the north indicate that fishermen frequently see Indian trawler incursions into Sri Lankan waters as an unresolved source of livelihood disruption. These grievances complicate the broader narrative of India as a benign or supportive neighbour. Tamil civil society organisations, while valuing India's pressure on political reform, express disappointment when New Delhi prioritises strategic stability or bilateral diplomacy over minority rights concerns. Sinhala nationalist groups, by contrast, often accuse India of exerting undue influence on domestic politics and constitutional debates. These divergent critiques reflect the fact that India's actions are interpreted through the prism of Sri Lanka's own

[48] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"QUESTION NO-391: Humanitarian Assistance to Sri Lanka,"* Rajya Sabha, 25 July 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/38001/

[49] Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *"India–Sri Lanka Joint Statement: Fostering Partnership for Shared Growth,"* Press release, 16 December 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38797/ Observer Research Foundation, *"Politics and Protectionism: Decoding the Challenges to India–Sri Lanka Connectivity,"* ORF Special Report, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/research/politics-and-protectionism-decoding-the-challenges-to-india-sri-lanka-connectivity

fragmented identity politics, where each community reads India through its historical experiences, expectations and anxieties.

A deeper critique concerns the potential imbalance between India's soft-power rhetoric and its hard-power strategic interests. Commentators in Sri Lankan independent media have observed that while *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* promotes a language of shared civilisational harmony, India's growing military and security cooperation with Colombo signals a parallel trajectory driven by realpolitik.[50] Civil society organisations working on demilitarisation sometimes worry that strengthened defence ties could reinforce existing security structures that are resistant to reform. Similarly, activists advocating for environmental sustainability question whether externally driven energy projects, whether Indian or Chinese, align with community-level needs, ecological priorities or long-term planning. These concerns do not necessarily translate into uniform opposition to India, but they reveal a persistent unease about unequal power relations and the limited agency of local actors within geopolitical competition.

Despite these critiques, many civil society actors recognise that India's role in Sri Lanka is indispensable, especially given the island's geographic proximity and economic interdependence. India is perceived as uniquely positioned to advocate for democratic stability and regional cooperation, provided it does so in ways that respect local sensitivities and community priorities. Several organisations involved in post Aragalaya governance reform discussions have suggested that India could support capacity-building initiatives in public financial management, local government strengthening and social protection frameworks. Such cooperation, they argue, would demonstrate a commitment to people-centred development rather than elite-driven infrastructure. Emerging collaborative projects between Indian and Sri Lankan think tanks reflect this possibility, indicating that civil society–to–civil society engagement may help reshape the tenor of bilateral relations in more inclusive directions.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal that India's influence on Sri Lankan civil society is neither monolithic nor static. It evolves through interconnected layers of strategic rivalry, development assistance, political engagement and normative framing under concepts such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. Civil society responses are equally varied, shaped by history, identity, region and sector-specific priorities. The competitive presence of India and China generates both constraints and opportunities, compelling activists to navigate a complex field

[50] "Sri Lanka's Path to Stability: Balancing Geopolitical Tensions and Domestic Challenges," *Colombo Telegraph*, 15 December 2024, https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sri-lankas-path-to-stability-balancing-geopolitical-tensions-domestic-challenges/

of alignments while advocating for transparency, equity and accountability. India's growing role in economic governance has opened new spaces for civil society to debate debt, transparency and development models, even as it amplifies concerns about sovereignty and agency. The critiques levelled against Indian influence underscore that external involvement, however well-intentioned, must engage with Sri Lanka's internal structures and political realities if it is to support sustainable democratic consolidation.

China's Influence on Sri Lankan Civil Society

China's role in Sri Lanka's post-war trajectory has been both material and symbolic, reshaping the island's economy, its diplomatic alignments and, increasingly, the terms on which civil society can act. From the mid-2000s, Beijing emerged as a central development partner, financing ports, highways, airports and power plants that became associated with the promise of rapid post-war growth under Mahinda Rajapaksa.[51] At the same time, China was framed by successive Sri Lankan governments as an "all-weather friend" that did not attach political conditions to aid, in contrast to Western donors who linked assistance to human rights or governance reforms.[52] This combination of large-scale infrastructure, political protection in multilateral forums and visible gestures of solidarity created a distinct Chinese presence that civil society actors could neither ignore nor treat as a simple extension of traditional donor politics. Instead, Chinese influence filtered through multiple layers, economic, religious, cultural, political and military, and interacted with existing domestic cleavages, producing complex patterns of support, dependence, anxiety and resistance within Sri Lanka's civic sphere.[53]

The economic dimension of China's presence is the most visible and has had the clearest implications for civic agendas around transparency, environmental protection and social equity. Between 2005 and 2019, Sri Lanka borrowed billions of dollars from Chinese state-owned banks, especially the Export–Import Bank of China, to finance projects such as the Hambantota Port, the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, the Southern Expressway, coal power plants

[51] Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Sri Lanka, *Official Press Release on Establishing the China–Sri Lanka Strategic Cooperative Partnership*, 2013 (Colombo: PRC Embassy). (Referenced via Chinese MFA summary: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China–Sri Lanka Relations.") https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/

[52] Central Bank of Sri Lanka, *Annual Report 2014* (Colombo: CBSL). https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/en/publications/economic-and-financial-reports/annual-reports/annual-report-2014

[53] Export–Import Bank of China, *Loan Facility Agreements to Sri Lanka: Official Financing Statements, 2007–2015* (Beijing: EXIM Bank). Example record in AidData's China database: https://china.aiddata.org/projects/33256/

and sections of the Colombo Port City.[54] Researchers estimate that by 2021 Sri Lanka owed roughly 19–20 percent of its public external debt to Chinese creditors, making China its single largest bilateral lender.[55] These loans were negotiated largely through executive-level agreements with limited parliamentary scrutiny or public debate, which civil society groups later highlighted as a key driver of opaque decision-making and elite-centric development.[56] The highly centralised nature of these negotiations meant that a small circle around the presidency and economic ministries, rather than broader policy communities or local stakeholders, shaped the terms on which Chinese capital entered the country.[57]

No project symbolises the political economy of Chinese finance more than the Hambantota Port. Conceived as an export and transhipment hub in the home district of Mahinda Rajapaksa, the port was built with Chinese loans despite feasibility studies that questioned its commercial viability.[58] When the facility failed to generate expected revenues, the government faced difficulties servicing the debt. In 2017, Colombo agreed to lease an 85-percent stake in the port and surrounding land to China Merchants Port Holdings for ninety-nine years, receiving about US$1.12 billion that was used for general budgetary purposes rather than directly repaying the original project loan.[59] International commentary often portrayed this as a classic case of "debt-trap diplomacy," though subsequent research has shown that Sri Lanka itself initiated the lease as a way to ease broader balance-of-payments pressures.[60] Regardless of the precise sequence of decisions, the Hambantota deal crystallised domestic concerns that executive bargains with Beijing could have long-term sovereignty costs and generate local dispossession.[61] For communities around Hambantota, the port and associated industrial zone implied land acquisition, environmental disruption and uncertain employment prospects issues that provided

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[54] AidData, *Banking on Beijing: Chinese Development Finance Dataset 2.0* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData, 2021). https://www.aiddata.org/data/aiddatas-global-chinese-development-finance-dataset-version-2-0

[55] Auditor General's Department of Sri Lanka, *Audit Report on Public Debt Management*, 2016, 5-6, accessed 21 May 2023, https://www.auditorgeneral.gov.lk/web/images/special_report/Public-Debt-Management-finalEnglish.pdf

[56] Verité Research, *Infrastructure Governance in Sri Lanka*, 3-4, accessed 11 November 2024, https://veriteresearch.org

[57] Sri Lanka Ports Authority, *Feasibility Review of the Hambantota Port Project*, 2006, 1–2, accessed 17 August 2023, http://www.slpa.lk/

[58] Sri Lankan Ministry of Finance, *Hambantota Port Lease Agreement: Gazette Notification*, 2017, 1–2, accessed 9 January 2025, http://www.documents.gov.lk/

[59] Deborah Brautigam and Meg Rithmire, "The Chinese 'Debt Trap' Narrative: What Is the Evidence?" *China Africa Research Initiative Policy Brief*, no. 22 (2020): 1–6, accessed April 6, 2024, https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/20-087_1f6b7c5b-2e87-4d38-9bde-9c88ef4a1a6e.pdf

[60] AidData, *Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData, 2021), accessed 25 November 2025, https://www.aiddata.org/data/aiddatas-global-chinese-development-finance-dataset-version-2-0

[61] Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, *Special Determination on the Colombo Port City Economic Commission Bill*, S.C. SD No. 19/2021 (Colombo: Supreme Court Registry, 2021), accessed August 16, 2023, https://www.supremecourt.lk/images/documents/sc_sd_19_2021_eng.pdf

fertile ground for civil society mobilisation.[62] "***Anonymous interviewee A, stressed that public discontent surrounding large-scale Chinese projects was shaped as much by domestic governance failures as by foreign financing itself. From this viewpoint, mismanagement and lack of transparency by local elites were central to popular resentment, complicating simplified external blame narratives."***

Civil society responses to Hambantota and other Chinese-funded projects were uneven but increasingly vocal. Environmental organisations, local advocacy groups and some trade unions documented the loss of land, damage to coastal ecosystems and inadequate public consultation practices around large projects.[63] Reporting by environmental journalists and human-rights networks detailed how villagers were relocated with insufficient compensation, and how promises of large-scale employment frequently failed to materialise, leaving communities to bear social and ecological costs without proportional benefits.[64] "***A civil-society activist described how opposition to such projects often emerged outside formal organisational structures, relying instead on informal networks and episodic mobilisation. These efforts, while fragmented, were seen as creating temporary accountability mechanisms in contexts where institutional oversight was weak. The interviewee highlighted that even limited mobilisation contributed to public debate and collective memory around development choices (Interviewee D)."***[65] These groups did not always single out China; they often framed their criticism as a broader indictment of Sri Lanka's development model, which privileged mega-projects and debt-financed growth over participatory planning and social welfare.[66] Yet the prominence of Chinese entities in Hambantota, Mattala and the Southern Expressway meant that Beijing became an important reference point in debates on accountability, project transparency and the distribution of risk between lenders, state elites and ordinary citizens.[67]

The Colombo Port City project added a further layer to these concerns by shifting the discussion from physical displacement to questions about legal regimes and territorial

[62] Freedom House, *Beijing's Global Media Influence: Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2022), accessed March 3, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2022/beijings-global-media-influence-sri-lanka

[63] Parliament of Sri Lanka, *Annual Performance Report of the Ministry of Defence – 2015* (Colombo: Parliament Secretariat, 2016), accessed July 22, 2023, https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/documents/paperspresented/performance-report-ministry-of-defence-2015.pd

[64] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Response to Chinese Submarine Docking in Colombo," Press Briefing, September 2014, accessed May 5, 2025, https://mea.gov.in/press-briefings.htm

[65] Interview conducted on November 14, 2025 and anonymity maintained on request

[66] Johan Elverskog, "Buddhism and China's Global Soft Power," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26, no. 2 (2021): 305–322, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-021-09734-9

[67] Kristoffer Rosendal, "Buddhism, Geopolitics and Chinese Soft Power in Sri Lanka," *Asian Politics & Policy* 14, no. 3 (2022): 451–468, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12648.

authority. Initially launched under the Rajapaksa administration and briefly suspended in 2015 before being renegotiated and restarted, the US$1.4 billion project involves land reclamation adjacent to Colombo's main port, to be developed as a special economic zone with its own regulatory commission.[68] When the government introduced the Port City Economic Commission Bill in 2021, opposition parties, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka and a range of civil society organisations challenged its constitutionality at the Supreme Court.[69] Groups such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives warned that the bill would create a "state within a state," insulating investors from domestic regulation and weakening parliamentary oversight over a strategically located enclave with strong Chinese commercial control.[70] Labour and social movements framed Port City as emblematic of a development path that privileged foreign capital and elite intermediaries over workers' rights, urban communities and democratic accountability.[71] These campaigns did not ultimately block the law, but they forced amendments and brought issues of sovereignty, rule of law and corporate governance into mainstream civic discourse.

The close personal ties cultivated between the Rajapaksa family and Chinese political as well as commercial elites were central to facilitating the surge of Chinese-funded projects and significantly shaped how Sri Lankan civil society interpreted China's growing presence. Under the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015), Sri Lanka formally upgraded its engagement with China to a "strategic cooperative partnership," marked by frequent high-level exchanges, party to party contacts, and the recurrent allocation of large-scale infrastructure contracts to Chinese state-owned enterprises without competitive tender procedures.[72] Chinese officials consistently commended Sri Lanka's adherence to the One-China policy and its diplomatic alignment with Beijing in international forums, while Rajapaksa himself publicly

[68] Freedom House, *Beijing's Global Media Influence: Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2022), accessed 3 March 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2022/beijings-global-media-influence-sri-lank

[69] *Ibid*

[70] Parliament of Sri Lanka, *Annual Performance Report of the Ministry of Defence – 2015* (Colombo: Parliament Secretariat, 2016), accessed 22 July 2023, https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/documents/paperspresented/performance-report-ministry-of-defence-2015.pdf

[71] Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, "Chinese Submarine Docking in Sri Lanka," *Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 391*, answered September 2014, accessed 5 May 2025, https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/23921

[72] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and Sri Lanka Establish Strategic Cooperative Partnership," September 18, 2013, 1–2, accessed March 14, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzyslxgx_665686/201309/t20130919_704869.html

acknowledged China's diplomatic support for Colombo at the United Nations Human Rights Council during contentious discussions on accountability for wartime abuses.[73]

Civil society analysts have argued that this degree of political closeness fostered conditions conducive to corruption, as firms with strong political connections benefited from non-transparent agreements, and encouraged the diffusion of a governance style that privileged executive authority and security-oriented narratives over procedural accountability and transparency.[74] Moreover, the strong symbolic linkage between the Rajapaksa family and high-profile Chinese-backed infrastructure projects meant that when the economic collapse of 2022 triggered mass protests and ultimately led to the family's removal from power, many protesters associated the crisis not only with domestic policy failures but also with borrowing practices tied to Chinese development finance.[75]

Chinese influence, however, is not confined to bricks and mortar or elite political ties. Beijing has carefully cultivated religious, cultural and media linkages that reach into the social fabric where civil society operates. Building on a shared Theravada Buddhist heritage, China has sponsored temple restorations, pilgrimages, academic exchanges and the Sri Lanka–China Buddhist Friendship Association, established in 2015 with the participation of leading monks from all Nikayas.[76] These initiatives are promoted as efforts to revitalise ancient maritime and religious connections, but they also function as soft-power channels, creating pro-China constituencies among segments of the clergy and lay Buddhist organisations.[77] Chinese funding has supported a Buddhist television station and a series of water-purification projects branded as symbols of "China–Sri Lanka friendship," blending humanitarian work with positive messaging about Beijing's role.[78] Civil society analysts note that such programmes can blur the line between development assistance and influence operations, especially when they coincide

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[73] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Sri Lanka*, A/HRC/22/16 (Geneva: United Nations, 2012), 2–4, accessed July 9, 2023, https://documents.un.org

[74] Jonathan Goodhand and Kanchana Ruwanpura, "China's Role in Sri Lanka's Political Economy," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 7 (2019): 1246–1251, accessed October 3, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1597318

[75] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Economic Meltdown: A System Failure*, Asia Report No. 326 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2022), 6–9, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/326.

[76] Chulanee Attanayake, "China's Buddhist Influence in Sri Lanka," in *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools*, ed. Constantino Xavier and Jabin T. Jacob (New Delhi: Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 2023), 50–51, accessed March 14, 2024, https://csep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Chinas-Buddhist-Influence-in-Sri-Lanka.pdf

[77] Deep Pal, *China's Influence in South Asia: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), p 34, accessed November 25, 2025, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/202110-Pal_SouthAsiaChina_final1.pdf

[78] Attanayake, *op. cit.*, 53–54.

with efforts by Chinese state-linked actors to shape media narratives about contentious projects or human-rights debates.[79]

Alongside religious and cultural engagement, China has steadily expanded its security and military ties with Sri Lanka, adding a strategic layer to civil society's concerns. Since the end of the civil war, Chinese defence ministers and senior military delegations have made high-profile visits to Colombo, and the two countries have signed protocols on military assistance, training and equipment.[80] Chinese naval vessels have made port calls at Colombo and Hambantota, with episodes such as the docking of the research ship *Yuan Wang 5* in 2022 provoking strong Indian objections and domestic debate.[81] Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence publicly framed these visits as routine logistical stopovers consistent with its non-aligned foreign policy, yet civil society commentators pointed out that the absence of clear parliamentary scrutiny and limited public information fuelled suspicion that strategic decisions were being made without adequate consultation.[82] For activists working on demilitarisation, human rights and freedom of association, the deepening of security ties with an authoritarian great power risked reinforcing securitised approaches to dissent and protest at home, even if direct causal links are difficult to prove.[83]

These different strands of economic, religious and security engagement intersect with how China is narrated in Sri Lankan public life. Pro-government media, especially during the Rajapaksa years, often portrayed China as a reliable, non-interfering partner willing to fund projects that Western donors would not touch, framing criticism of Chinese investments as part of a broader Western conspiracy to undermine national sovereignty.[84] At the same time, independent outlets and platforms such as Ground views, as well as some think tanks, have documented efforts by Chinese diplomatic actors to shape local media content through paid supplements, study tours for journalists and partnerships with pro-China commentators.[85] This

[79] Pal, *op. cit.*, 49–50.
[80] Chulanee Attanayake, "Chinese Defence Minister's Visit to Sri Lanka: A New Dynamic to Bilateral Ties," ISAS Brief No. 841 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 2021), 1–4, accessed January 8, 2023, https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/841.pdf
[81] Bhagya Senaratne, "Navigating Seas of Cooperation: China's Military Diplomacy in Sri Lanka," in *How China Engages South Asia: In the Open and Behind the Scenes*, ed. Constantino Xavier and Jabin T. Jacob (New Delhi: Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 2025), 119–121, accessed August 19, 2025, https://csep.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/CISA_2025-10.pd
[82] Ibid., 124.
[83] Ibid., 126.
[84] Pal, *op. cit.*, 48-49.
[85] Sarah Cook, *Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, January 2020), 10-11, accessed September 3, 2023,

media environment complicates the work of civil society organisations that seek to provide evidence-based critique of controversial projects: they must navigate polarised public opinion where any questioning of Chinese involvement can be branded as "pro-Western" or "anti-development."[86] Yet surveys and qualitative studies suggest that popular attitudes towards China are mixed rather than uniformly positive or negative, with appreciation for emergency assistance during crises tempered by anxiety over debt, land, and transparency.[87]

Within this contested space, Sri Lankan civil society has adopted a variety of strategies. Policy research organisations such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Verité Research and newer initiatives like Veemansa have produced detailed analyses of debt sustainability, legal implications of Port City and the governance of Chinese-funded infrastructure.[88] These studies have often challenged simplistic "debt trap" narratives by highlighting the role of domestic policy choices and global financial dynamics, while still criticising the lack of public information, weak environmental assessments and the concentration of benefits among politically connected elites.[89] Labour movements and community-based groups, especially in areas directly affected by mega-projects, have organised protests, petitions and legal challenges that foreground local experiences of dispossession and ecological harm.[90] At the same time, some professional associations, business chambers and clergy linked to pro-China networks have defended Chinese investments as essential for growth and argued that political instability and Western sanctions are greater threats to Sri Lanka's development than any risks posed by

https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/01152020_SR_China_Global_Megaphone_with_Recommendations_PDF.pdf

[86] Bart Klem and Udan Fernando, *Consuming News in Turbulent Times: A Study on News and Media Consumption in Sri Lanka* (Copenhagen: International Media Support, 2019), 44, accessed June 22, 2024, https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/IMS_Consuming-News-in-Turbulent-Times_Sri-Lanka_2019.pdf

[87] Cook. Op. cit., 5

[88] Verité Research, *Colombo Port City: Legal, Economic and Governance Implications* (Colombo: Verité Research, 2021), 7–15, accessed April 12, 2024, https://www.veriteresearch.org/publication/colombo-port-city; Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Debt, Development and Democratic Accountability in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: CPA, 2022), 3–6, accessed February 3, 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org

[89] Deborah Brautigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme," *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 8–11, accessed September 18, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2019.1689828.

[90] Environmental Justice Foundation, *Sri Lanka's Port City and Hambantota: Community Resistance and Environmental Risk* (London: EJF, 2020), 18–22, accessed January 9, 2025, https://ejfoundation.org/reports; International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Debt Crisis and Social Unrest*, Asia Briefing No. 176 (Brussels: ICG, 2022), 5–6, accessed August 7, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org

Beijing.[91] This divergence underscores how Chinese influence amplifies existing class, ethnic and ideological divides within civil society.[92]

China's role in Sri Lanka's recent debt crisis and subsequent restructuring negotiations has further sharpened civil society attention. When Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt in 2022, analysts quickly pointed out that Chinese lenders would be central to any successful restructuring because of their share in the external debt stock and their exposure to large infrastructure loans.[93] The process of renegotiating these obligations has been complex and politically sensitive, involving parallel talks with the China Exim Bank and other official creditors.[94] Press releases from the Sri Lankan Ministry of Finance in 2024 and 2025 confirmed that agreements with Chinese creditors were a core component of the broader debt treatment package required under the IMF programme.[95] Civil society groups have used this moment to call for greater transparency around the terms of Chinese loans, the use of borrowed funds, and the conditions attached to refinancing or roll-overs, arguing that debt negotiations should not be handled solely by technocrats and diplomats but subjected to democratic oversight.[96] The long-term outcome of these campaigns remains uncertain, yet they show that Chinese influence has become inseparable from debates about macroeconomic governance and social justice in Sri Lanka.[97]

Public reactions to specific Chinese-backed initiatives reveal the ambivalence of civic responses. When the Port City bill was debated, protests outside Parliament brought together opposition parties, lawyers' collectives, trade unions and student groups, some of whom carried

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[91] Chulanee Attanayake, "China–Sri Lanka Relations and the Politics of Development," in *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools*, ed. Constantino Xavier and Jabin T. Jacob (New Delhi: Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 2023), 54–56, accessed March 22, 2024, https://csep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Chinas-Buddhist-Influence-in-Sri-Lanka.pd

[92] Jonathan Goodhand and Kanchana Ruwanpura, *op. cit.*, 1254–1257.

[93] Umesh Moramudali, "Evolution of Chinese Lending to Sri Lanka since the mid-2000s: Separating Myth from Reality," *Kiel Working Paper* (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2022), 7–9, accessed May 6, 2024, https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/266592/1/1824423047.pdf

[94] Reuters, "Sri Lanka's economic crisis and debt restructuring efforts," April 16, 2024, accessed September 2, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/sri-lankas-economic-crisis-debt-restructuring-efforts-2024-04-16/

[95] Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies (Sri Lanka), *Sri Lanka's Public Debt Restructuring* (Colombo: Government of Sri Lanka, January 1, 2025), 1–3, accessed October 17, 2025, https://www.treasury.gov.lk/api/file/bd447900-840d-4c28-bfcb-7c78fe79bbf2

[96] National Democratic Institute, *Debt Disclosed: Debt Transparency Checklist* (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute, n.d.), 2, accessed January 29, 2025, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Debt%20Transparency%20Checklist%20-%20English.pdf

[97] International Monetary Fund, *Sri Lanka: 2024 Article IV Consultation and Second Review under the Extended Fund Facility Arrangement—Staff Report*, IMF Country Report No. 24/161 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, June 12, 2024), 1–2, accessed March 11, 2025, https://www.elibrary.imf.org/downloadpdf/view/journals/002/2024/161/002.2024.issue-161-en.pdf

placards warning against Sri Lanka becoming a "Chinese colony".[98] In Hambantota, demonstrations against land acquisition for an industrial zone associated with the port drew farmers, fisherfolk and local politicians, leading at times to clashes with security forces.[99] Yet there have also been many moments when Chinese assistance, for example, shipments of medical supplies and vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, or grants for rural water schemes and school infrastructure generated gratitude among affected communities, complicating the narrative of China as a purely extractive actor.[100] Civil society organisations have had to work within this field of contested perceptions, seeking to hold the state and external partners accountable without dismissing the real benefits some communities associate with Chinese projects.[101]

The fall of the Rajapaksa regime during the 2022 Aragalaya protests also altered the context in which Chinese influence operates. The protest movement's slogans and banners targeted corruption, nepotism and the political culture of impunity more than any single foreign power, but commentators widely noted that Chinese-linked projects became symbolic of elite misrule and risky borrowing.[102] Analysts argued that the erosion of the Rajapaksas' political base would weaken China's most trusted partners in Sri Lanka, forcing Beijing to recalibrate its approach and engage with a more pluralistic set of actors.[103] Subsequent visits by the new President Anura Kumara Dissanayake to both New Delhi and Beijing, and the signing of multiple cooperation agreements with China in early 2025, show that the relationship remains robust, but they also demonstrate Colombo's desire to balance ties with competing external partners rather than rely on a single patron.[104] Civil society debates increasingly focus on how this balancing act can be leveraged to secure better terms for Sri Lanka, insisting that any new

[98] South China Morning Post, "Sri Lanka moves ahead on major port project amid fears of China's influence," May 21, 2021, accessed November 9, 2023,
[99] Al Jazeera, "Protest over Hambantota port deal turns violent," January 7, 2017, n.p., accessed July 27, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2017/1/7/protest-over-hambantota-port-deal-turns-violent?utm_source
[100] China International Development Cooperation Agency, "Medical Aid,", accessed February 22, 2025, http://en.cidca.gov.cn/medicalaid.html
[101] Pal, op. cit., 44–46.
[102] Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Sri Lanka in 2022 and 2023: Things Fall Apart," *Asian Survey* 64, no. 2 (2024): 353–356, accessed April 9, 2025, https://online.ucpress.edu/as/article/64/2/353/200442/Sri-Lanka-in-2022-and-2023Things-Fall-Apart-Can
[103] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka," January 16, 2025, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202501/t20250116_11536637.htm
[104] "China, Sri Lanka Agree More Investment and Economic Cooperation," *Reuters*, January 15, 2025, accessed August 6, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-sri-lanka-agree-more-investment-economic-cooperation-2025-01-15/.

Chinese projects be evaluated through transparent processes, strong regulatory frameworks and meaningful public participation.[105]

At the same time, China continues to deepen its engagement under the Belt and Road Initiative, including through new agreements on energy and manufacturing that intersect directly with issues on civil society agendas. The January 2025 decision to fast-track a US$3.7 billion Sinopec oil refinery in Hambantota, framed by both governments to reduce Sri Lanka's dependence on imported refined fuel, has raised questions about environmental oversight, labour rights and long-term debt exposure.[106] Local and international NGOs have begun scrutinising the project's environmental and social impact assessments, drawing on prior experience with Port City and Hambantota to argue for stricter safeguards.[107] These debates are likely to intensify as Sri Lanka explores further Chinese financing in sectors such as renewable energy, digital infrastructure and manufacturing, where issues of data privacy, labour standards and regulatory capacity will come to the fore.[108] In each of these domains, civil society's ability to influence outcomes will depend not only on its organisational strength but also on the broader political environment, including the space available for dissent and the government's willingness to tolerate critical scrutiny of its foreign partners.[109]

Taken together, China's engagement with Sri Lanka has reshaped the landscape in which civil society operates by altering both the material conditions of development and the discursive frames through which sovereignty, accountability and partnership are understood. Chinese loans and investments have contributed to visible infrastructure and, in some cases, to short-term economic gains, but they have also deepened debt vulnerabilities, concentrated decision-making power and created enclaves of exceptional legal status that worry rights advocates and policy analysts. Religious and cultural initiatives have strengthened links between Chinese actors and influential segments of the Buddhist clergy, while media and educational exchanges have sought to normalise a positive narrative of China's role. Security cooperation has added a

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[105] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *op. cit.*, para. 20.
[106] Verité Research, *Opportunities to Protect Public Interest in Public Infrastructure: Review of Regulatory Frameworks in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Verité Research, 2021), 43–49, accessed March 3, 2024, https://www.veriteresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/VR_Eng_RR_Feb2021_Opportunities-to-Protect-Public-Interest-in-Public-Infrastructure-1.pdf
[107] "Sri Lanka Agrees with China's Sinopec to Fast-Track $3.7 Billion Refinery," *Reuters*, January 22, 2025, accessed November 19, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-china-agree-fast-track-sinopecs-37-bln-refinery-hambantota-2025-01-22/
[108] "Exclusive: China's Sinopec Charts Global Expansion with Refinery in Rival India's Backyard," *Reuters*, April 25, 2024, accessed September 8, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/chinas-sinopec-charts-global-expansion-with-refinery-rival-indias-backyard-2024-04-25/
[109] Transnational Institute, *State of Power 2024: Energy, Power and Transition* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2024), 93–95, accessed October 24, 2025, https://www.tni.org/files/2024-02/State%20of%20Power%202024_full%20report.pdf

strategic dimension that interacts with domestic debates about militarisation and the policing of dissent. Civil society has responded in varied ways from research-based critique and strategic litigation to local protest and cautious collaboration, but, it has rarely been able to shape the fundamental parameters of Sino-Sri Lankan deals, which remain largely in the hands of executive and bureaucratic elites. "***These limits of civil society influence, however, cannot be understood solely through the lens of individual projects or bilateral partnerships, but must be situated within wider patterns of elite dominance and constrained participatory governance." (Interviewee D)***

Situating U.S. Engagement in Post-War Sri Lanka

The end of Sri Lanka's civil war in May 2009 reshaped the country's political order and opened new avenues for external engagement. Among the actors that became increasingly influential, the United States played a pivotal role by combining diplomacy, human rights advocacy, development assistance, and support for civil society organisations. Post-war U.S. policy was driven by three main concerns. First, Washington foregrounded human rights and transitional justice as reports of disappearances, media intimidation, and militarisation surfaced in the immediate aftermath of the war, with U.S. State Department assessments repeatedly warning of democratic backsliding. Second, growing Chinese influence, expressed through large-scale infrastructure financing in the Hambantota Port, Port City, and related projects, positioned Sri Lanka as a strategic node in wider Indo-Pacific geopolitics, making civil society an important source of information on governance and transparency. Third, long-standing U.S. democracy-assistance institutions such as USAID, NED, IRI, and NDI expanded programmes on governance, media freedom, reconciliation, and community development. These interventions empowered many civic actors but also provoked state resistance, especially under the Rajapaksa administrations, which framed foreign-funded NGOs as instruments of Western interference. U.S. engagement thus simultaneously widened civic activism and intensified contestation, shaping the evolving terrain of Sri Lanka's post-war civil society.

United States of America's Governmental Channels

U.S. governmental engagement with Sri Lanka's civil society after 2009 operated mainly through three institutions namely, the U.S. Department of State, USAID, and the U.S. Embassy in Colombo. Although each had a different mandate, they worked toward shared goals of promoting democratic governance, human rights, and civic participation. Their actions shaped

not only diplomatic relations but also how Sri Lankan civil society understood its rights, responsibilities, and space for activism.

The U.S. Department of State became the most politically influential channel. Its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices highlighted issues such as disappearances, media restrictions, and limits on freedom of assembly.[110] Civil society groups regularly used these reports in their advocacy because they validated local concerns through an authoritative external platform. The State Department also played a key role in international accountability processes. U.S. leadership in UNHRC resolutions from 2012 to 2014 including Resolution 25/1 pushed Sri Lanka toward global scrutiny.[111] These steps strengthened victims' groups, legal networks, and documentation initiatives, even as the government criticised such moves as violations of sovereignty.[112]

While the State Department set the political tone, USAID shaped the operational and developmental aspects of U.S. engagement. After 2009, USAID expanded programmes on democratic governance, reconciliation, media training, youth leadership, women's empowerment, and economic resilience. Initiatives such as Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability (SDGAP) and Reconciliation and Inclusive Development (RID) supported community organisations, journalists, women's groups, and youth networks.[113] USAID's emphasis on skills training, organisational development, and technical assistance helped professionalise many NGOs that later became key voices during the 2015–2019 reform period and the 2022 Aragalaya movement. Although critics argued that such assistance shaped civil society agendas along Western priorities, others noted that it filled gaps left by weak state institutions.

The U.S. Embassy in Colombo served as the immediate point of contact between American policy and Sri Lankan stakeholders. Beyond diplomacy, the Embassy provided small grants,

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[110] U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013: Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2014), 1–6, accessed February 18, 2024, https://www.state.gov/reports/2013-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/sri-lanka

[111] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka*, Resolution 25/1, A/HRC/RES/25/1 (Geneva: United Nations, April 3, 2014), paras. 1–7, accessed July 7, 2023, https://documents.un.org

[112] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's North II: Rebuilding under the Military* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2012), 14–19, accessed March 22, 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/222-sri-lankas-north-ii-rebuilding-under-the-military

[113] United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *Sri Lanka Country Development Cooperation Strategy 2013–2017* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2013), 9–17, accessed January 11, 2024, https://www.usaid.gov/sri-lanka/cdcs

public diplomacy programmes, and targeted support for journalists, activists, and youth leaders. Embassy statements during sensitive moments such as the 2018 Constitutional Crisis, the post-Easter 2019 environment, and the 2022 Aragalaya, signalled American expectations regarding democratic norms and protest rights.[114] These statements were widely cited by activists and media, often helping create international attention during periods of repression. The Embassy also consulted regularly with civil society on minority concerns, governance issues, and rights-based problems, shaping a shared language around accountability and transparency. Together, the State Department, USAID, and the Embassy formed a powerful institutional structure that offered resources and legitimacy to civil society, while also provoking nationalist backlash. Their combined influence set the foundation for further engagement by semi-governmental democracy actors.

Semi-Governmental Democracy Actors

Alongside U.S. governmental institutions, semi-governmental democracy actors, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and Freedom House, played an important role in shaping Sri Lanka's civil society after 2009. These organisations, funded mainly through U.S. congressional appropriations but operating with institutional independence, worked closely with NGOs, media groups, youth networks, and political actors. Their engagement strengthened skills and organisational capacity but also triggered political scrutiny, especially during periods of shrinking civic space.

NED has been one of the steadiest supporters of Sri Lankan NGOs. Its annual grants funded work on media freedom, anti-corruption, minority rights, youth activism, human rights documentation, and community reconciliation.[115] Organisations such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Verité Research, and Transparency International Sri Lanka used NED support to build research capacity and expand outreach. NED also connected Sri Lankan groups to global conferences, training sessions, and advocacy networks, helping create a more outward-facing

[114] U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka and Maldives, "Statements and Press Releases on Democratic Governance and Protest Rights," 2018–2022, accessed October 9, 2024, https://lk.usembassy.gov.

[115] National Endowment for Democracy, *Annual Report 2020* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, 2021), 32–36, accessed March 12, 2024, https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2020-Annual-Report.pdf.

civic environment.[116] However, this international exposure also drew criticism from nationalist voices who framed such support as alignment with Western interests.

IRI and NDI, linked respectively to the U.S. Republican and Democratic parties, contributed to political learning and electoral support. IRI focused on training young leaders, local councillors, and community organisers in areas such as campaign planning, evidence-based policymaking, and public engagement, encouraging a shift away from patronage-driven political culture.[117] NDI supported election monitoring, parliamentary strengthening, and women's political participation, often collaborating with groups like PAFFREL. During the 2018 Constitutional Crisis, NDI's engagement helped civil society counter misinformation and promote peaceful mobilisation.[118] Both organisations expanded political literacy among youth and underrepresented groups, though critics argued that party-affiliated organisations might import foreign ideological preferences.

Freedom House influenced Sri Lanka mainly through its research. Its *Freedom in the World* and *Freedom on the Net* assessments provided comparative measurements of political rights, civil liberties, media freedom, and digital governance. These reports were widely used by journalists, watchdog groups, and policy analysts to highlight democratic backsliding, surveillance, and online harassment.[119] Freedom House assessments were also cited in parliamentary debates and international forums, amplifying local concerns at global levels.

Together, these semi-governmental actors strengthened research quality, expanded civic competencies, and broadened international linkages. At the same time, their involvement contributed to increased state monitoring, especially under the Rajapaksa administrations, which portrayed foreign-supported NGOs as threats to sovereignty. Thus, their influence produced both empowerment and political backlash, shaping a civic environment marked by capacity-building on one side and securitisation on the other.

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[116] Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), 178–181, accessed September 7, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/aiding_democracy_abroad.pdf

[117] International Republican Institute, *Sri Lanka: Youth Political Leadership and Local Governance Program Report* (Washington, DC: IRI, 2017), 6–9, accessed January 19, 2025, https://www.iri.org/resources/sri-lanka-youth-political-leadership/

[118] National Democratic Institute, *Sri Lanka's Constitutional Crisis: Lessons for Democratic Institutions* (Washington, DC: NDI, 2019), 11–15, accessed August 4, 2024, https://www.ndi.org/publications/sri-lanka-constitutional-crisis-lessons

[119] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2022: Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2022), 3–6, accessed October 21, 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-world/2022.

Defence and Geopolitical Structures

Defence cooperation between Sri Lanka and the United States has long shifted between partnership and suspicion, shaped both by global geopolitics and Sri Lanka's internal politics. After the civil war ended in 2009, this cooperation expanded and became more visible. As U.S.–China rivalry intensified and Sri Lanka's economic dependence on foreign partners deepened, defence frameworks such as the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), the proposed Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and the wider Indo-Pacific Strategy became central topics in public debate. Civil society began to engage with defence policy in new ways, viewing these agreements as directly tied to sovereignty, transparency, and democratic oversight. As a result, defence cooperation became an important structure shaping civil-society activism, public debate, and state–society tensions.

ACSA, first signed in 2007 and renewed in 2017, allows Sri Lanka and the U.S. military to exchange supplies, fuel, and logistical services during joint operations or humanitarian activities.[120] The U.S. Department of Defense describes ACSA as a standard logistical tool used across the Indo-Pacific, and Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence similarly stated that the 2017 version was only a technical revision. Yet the political context had changed significantly by the time of renewal. China's growing presence, through large infrastructure projects, loans, and port development, raised concerns about Sri Lanka's strategic alignment. Civil-society groups therefore viewed ACSA not as a routine agreement but as part of a larger geopolitical shift. Organisations such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives criticised the lack of parliamentary debate and called for greater accountability in national-security decision-making.[121] Commentaries published on public platforms highlighted the fear that Sri Lanka might be entering strategic commitments without democratic oversight. ACSA thus pushed civil society into areas traditionally dominated by the executive branch, encouraging deeper public involvement in foreign-policy governance.

The proposed SOFA generated even more intense debate when a draft was leaked in 2019. The earlier version of SOFA dated to the 1990s, but the new draft included expanded privileges for U.S. personnel, including legal immunities and exemptions from customs or taxes.[122] Civil-

[120] Ministry of Defence (Sri Lanka), *Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)*, 2017, 1–2, accessed February 6, 2024, https://www.defence.lk
[121] Centre for Policy Alternatives, *ACSA and National Security Governance in Sri Lanka*, 2018, 3–5, accessed August 14, 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org
[122] U.S. Department of Defense, *Status of Forces Agreement (Draft) with Sri Lanka*, 2019, 4–6, accessed January 22, 2025.

society organisations quickly analysed the legal and constitutional implications. The Bar Association of Sri Lanka warned that granting immunity from domestic courts raised fundamental questions of sovereignty. Scholars affiliated with the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute also argued that SOFA would reduce Sri Lanka's control over foreign military activities.[123] This issue brought many civic actors like lawyers, journalists, activists, academics, into shared public debate. It also broadened civil society's policy expertise, introducing a new focus on security governance, legal oversight, and foreign-policy transparency.

However, SOFA also produced friction within civil society. Reform-oriented groups emphasised constitutional oversight, while more nationalist or left-leaning organisations warned that SOFA would compromise sovereignty and strengthen U.S. influence. Some pro-government actors accused SOFA critics of working for external powers, including China, illustrating how geopolitical narratives penetrated civic debates. Despite these tensions, the SOFA debate strengthened civil society's ability to analyse international agreements and hold the state accountable in defence matters.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy added another layer to this evolving landscape. U.S. strategic documents repeatedly identify Sri Lanka as important for maritime security, democratic stability, and regional governance.[124] Although these documents were directed at global audiences, they shaped how civil society interpreted U.S. intentions. Many of the issues highlighted in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, such as transparency in foreign investment, rule of law, procurement reform, and the risks of opaque infrastructure projects that were already central concerns of Sri Lankan civil-society organisations like Transparency International Sri Lanka and Verité Research. Thus, U.S. strategic priorities amplified themes that civil society had long researched. Yet this amplification also brought risks. When civil society criticised governance failures linked to Chinese projects, they were sometimes accused of promoting Western agendas. When they critiqued U.S. defence agreements, they were accused of helping Chinese influence. As a result, civil society increasingly operated in a polarised environment where evidence-based research was interpreted through a geopolitical lens. This complicated public perceptions of neutrality and increased vulnerabilities for NGOs during political crises.

[123] Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute, *Sri Lanka–U.S. Defence Agreements: Legal and Strategic Implications*, 2019, 7–9, accessed September 18, 2024, https://lki.lk

[124] U.S. Department of State, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 2022, 12–15, accessed November 3, 2025, https://www.state.gov/indo-pacific-strategy/

The Indo-Pacific framework also facilitated new capacity-building initiatives linked to defence and security. Through the U.S. Embassy, USAID, and the U.S. Pacific Command, civil society actors received training in areas such as maritime law, emergency response, cybersecurity, and investigative journalism.[125] These resources became especially important after the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, when NGOs monitored emergency regulations, digital surveillance, and counterterrorism practices.[126] By building expertise on security and governance, civil society became a more informed actor in debates on national safety and rights. At the same time, securitisation increased. Under the presidencies of Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, NGOs receiving U.S. support were often portrayed as foreign agents seeking regime change.[127] This narrative justified administrative restrictions, increased surveillance, and public smearing. Yet civil society continued to draw on international support to defend democratic norms. U.S. Embassy statements supporting constitutional order during the 2018 crisis and the right to peaceful protest during the 2022 Aragalaya became tools that civil-society actors used to resist repression.[128] Overall, ACSA, SOFA, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy became major defence structures that shaped Sri Lanka's civil society. They expanded civic activism, strengthened public debate on defence governance, and created new forms of expertise. But they also deepened political polarisation, increased the risk of securitisation, and placed civil society within broader geopolitical narratives that shaped how their work was interpreted. The impact of U.S. defence engagement was therefore complex, creating empowerment, scrutiny, resistance, and political pressure all at once. Understanding this dual character is essential for analysing civil society's role in post-war Sri Lanka.

Development Finance and Governance Structures

U.S. development finance and governance programmes became central pillars of American engagement with Sri Lanka after the civil war. Unlike defence cooperation, often viewed

[125] U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2019), 2–3, accessed February 7, 2024, https://2017-2021.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ICS-Sri-Lanka_UNCLASS_508.pdf

[126] Amarnath Amarasingam and Lakshani Fernando, *The Impacts of Social Media Shutdown After Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday Attacks* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2020), 4–5, accessed June 12, 2023, https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/StratComms-Report-2.pdf

[127] Amnesty International, *Old Ghosts in New Garb: Sri Lanka's Return to Fear* (London: Amnesty International, 2021), 33–34, accessed September 3, 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ASA3736592021ENGLISH.pdf

[128] U.S. Department of State, "Recent Developments in Sri Lanka," press statement by Heather Nauert, Department Spokesperson, October 28, 2018, reposted by U.S. Embassy Colombo, Sri Lanka (Facebook), accessed October 21, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/Colombo.USembassy/posts/recent-developments-in-sri-lankapress-statementheather-nauertdepartment-spokespe/10158019759487846

through debates on sovereignty and geopolitics, development assistance focused on transparency, economic reform, and institutional strengthening. Two major structures shaped this area of engagement. Namely the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact and a wide range of USAID governance programmes.[129] Together, they influenced how civil society participated in economic governance, public accountability, and policy reform.

The MCC Compact became one of the most debated development agreements in Sri Lanka. After meeting MCC eligibility criteria in 2016, Sri Lanka received approval for a USD 480 million Compact focused on transport modernisation and land administration reform.[130] U.S. documentation described the Compact as an effort to reduce traffic congestion, improve land governance, and support long-term investment.[131] However, the land component drew significant controversy. Critics argued that digitising land records could enable foreign control or facilitate large-scale land acquisition. Supporters pointed out that government audits had long shown weaknesses in land administration, and that reform was necessary to reduce corruption and improve tenure security.[132] Civil society became a key actor in this debate. Organisations such as Verité Research and the Advocata Institute analysed the Compact's economic and legal implications, showing that several claims circulating online, including allegations about an "economic corridor" under foreign control, were inaccurate.[133] Much of the public confusion was amplified by political narratives and social media, pushing civil society into an investigative role where evidence-based communication became essential. At the same time, some civil-society actors raised valid concerns about the need for parliamentary scrutiny and public consultation. These concerns mirrored arguments made during the ACSA and SOFA debates, reflecting a broader expectation that major agreements with external powers must undergo transparent review. The MCC discussion also opened deeper debates about land rights in conflict-ridden regions. Groups such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives argued that

[129] K. Alan Kronstadt, *Sri Lanka: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, September 4, 2013), 3, accessed May 9, 2024, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20130904_RL31707_0a6aac550a3d4fb754d68af95e8956f3d789b3c3.pdf.
[130] Millennium Challenge Corporation, "Sri Lanka Intent to Sign CN" (Congressional Notification, April 25, 2019), 2, accessed February 3, 2025, https://assets.mcc.gov/content/uploads/cn-042519-sri-lanka-intent-to-sign.pdf.
[131] Ibid., 6.
[132] Auditor General's Department of Sri Lanka, *Head 287—Land Title Settlement Department* (Audit Report for year ended 31 December 2024; issued May 26, 2025), 4, accessed November 18, 2025, https://auditorgeneral.gov.lk/web/images/audit-reports/upload/2024/1-Min_Dep/1-XIV/Head-287---Land-Title-Settlement-Department-E.pdf.
[133] Advocata Institute, *Submission to the Expert Committee to Evaluate the Millennium Challenge Corporation* (Colombo: Advocata Institute, 2020), 7, accessed April 22, 2023, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55697ab8e4b084f6ac0581ef/t/5eebb1e0d7cd1c740dd0a39a/1592504805233/Advocata_Submission%2Bto%2Bthe%2BExpert%2BCommittee%2BMCC.pdf.

land reform had to acknowledge histories of dispossession and militarisation, showing that economic reform could not be separated from justice, reconciliation, and social memory. As a result, the MCC debate expanded civil society's engagement with economic governance. Parallel to the MCC discussion, USAID governance programmes played a major role in shaping Sri Lanka's administrative and civic landscape.[134] USAID expanded its programmes after 2009, emphasising institutional reform, democratic consolidation, economic resilience, and community development. The Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability Project (SDGAP) supported Parliament and the Ministry of Finance by improving oversight, fiscal transparency, and public financial management. Through SDGAP, USAID worked with parliamentary committees, auditors, and civil-society budget groups to develop expenditure-tracking tools and strengthen performance auditing.[135]

Another major initiative, the Reconciliation and Inclusive Development (RID) programme, focused on post-war districts. It supported community mediation, women's groups, youth networks, and local governance capacity, helping rebuild social trust in areas affected by conflict.[136] Many young activists who later became visible during the 2022 Aragalaya had previously taken part in USAID-supported leadership programmes, showing how governance assistance indirectly contributed to a more politically active civic generation. USAID also expanded its work on economic governance, especially during Sri Lanka's financial crisis from 2019 onward. Partnerships with ministries, think tanks, and watchdog organisations enabled the production of research on debt transparency, public spending, small-enterprise credit, and digital governance. During the 2022 debt default, civil-society groups relied heavily on USAID-supported data portals and fiscal-analysis tools to demand transparent debt restructuring and disclosure of loan agreements. These tools allowed civil society to intervene in policy areas previously dominated by technocrats.[137] USAID programmes also strengthened the internal governance and professionalisation of civil-society organisations. NGOs improved

[134] Bruce Vaughn, *Sri Lanka: Background, Reform, Reconciliation, and Geopolitical Context* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 16–17, accessed May 19, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R44731/R44731.3.pdf.

[135] U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "Determination and Findings (D&F): Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability Project (SDGAP) in Sri Lanka," August 5, 2019, 1–2, accessed February 3, 2025, https://imlive.s3.amazonaws.com/Federal%20Government/ID280875385551960372560426657448157736555/SDGAP_D%26F_signed_08_05_2019.pdf

[136] Vaughn, op. cit., 16–17.

[137] Mark Gallagher et al., *Debt Transparency Monitor* (Washington, DC: United States Agency for International Development, Fiscal Accountability and Sustainable Trade Project [USAID/FAST], January 2022), vi–vii, 22, accessed October 8, 2024, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z727.pdf.

financial reporting, monitoring systems, and organisational structures through USAID training. These improvements helped build public credibility at a time when political leaders frequently accused NGOs of irregularities or foreign agendas. Enhanced capacity also enabled civil society to document human-rights violations more systematically and conduct nationwide advocacy with greater coordination.[138] Yet, U.S. development assistance also faced political resistance. During nationalist periods, especially under Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, USAID programmes were criticised by state-aligned media as channels of foreign interference or as tools for promoting regime change. These narratives resurfaced during the MCC controversy, framing civil society linked to USAID as part of a wider Western project to shape Sri Lanka's political economy. While often unsupported by evidence, such claims damaged public trust and increased risks for activists working on sensitive issues. Despite these challenges, many organisations used their USAID networks to protect democratic space. During politically repressive periods, civil-society groups used international connections to raise awareness about restrictions on expression and threats to activists. In this sense, USAID did more than build technical capacity. It also strengthened political resilience by helping civil society maintain visibility and international support.[139]

Overall, the MCC Compact and USAID governance programmes reshaped civil society in three keyways. They expanded organisational capacity, broadened thematic involvement in economic and policy reform, and created new political vulnerabilities linked to foreign-influence narratives. As a result, U.S. development finance became both an empowering and contested structure that helped civil society play a stronger role in democratic accountability while also exposing it to political backlash. In Sri Lanka's post-war landscape, these programmes contributed significantly to the evolution of civic agency, economic governance, and democratic participation.

The Process of Norm Diffusion

The spread of governance, human-rights, and democratic norms from the United States into Sri Lanka's civil society did not occur through one pathway. It unfolded through multiple channels involving U.S. government agencies, democracy-promotion organisations, development programmes, and diplomatic processes. This diffusion was gradual, uneven, and often

[138] Vaughn, op. cit., 16–17.
[139] CIVICUS, *Sri Lanka's Harassed Civil Society* (Johannesburg: CIVICUS, 2013), 7–9, accessed April 16, 2023, https://www.civicus.org/images/Sri%20Lanka%20Report.pdf.

contested. It shaped civil-society practices in areas such as reporting, legal advocacy, documentation, public accountability, and community mobilisation. At the same time, civil-society groups adapted these external norms to local needs, blending global ideas with Sri Lanka's political realities.

One of the earliest and most visible channels was the U.S. State Department's annual human-rights reports. These reports documented issues such as disappearances, media intimidation, politicised policing, and restrictions on protests.[140] Civil-society organisations used these assessments to validate their own findings and strengthen advocacy campaigns. Because the reports were internationally recognised, activists relied on them to highlight violations and push for protection of rights such as due process, civilian oversight, and freedom of expression. Over time, the language and concepts used in these reports became part of the vocabulary of Sri Lanka's civil-society statements, court petitions, and policy submissions.

Norm diffusion also took place through Sri Lanka's engagement with the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) between 2012 and 2015, when the U.S. played a leading role in promoting resolutions on accountability and reconciliation.[141] Civil-society groups representing families of the disappeared, survivors of violence, and minority communities prepared submissions and documentation for these processes. Many relied on guidance from organisations supported by U.S. democracy-promotion institutions. Through this engagement, domestic activists adopted international legal language relating to transitional justice, truth-seeking, and institutional reform. Although the government rejected these resolutions as external interference, they helped civil society demand independent investigations and legal reforms.

Beyond international forums, training programmes and technical workshops became a major source of norm diffusion. USAID programmes on budget transparency, parliamentary oversight, community mediation, and local governance exposed activists to global governance standards.[142] These programmes encouraged evidence-based policymaking, public-finance monitoring, and participatory approaches to governance. Reports produced by organisations

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[140] U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013: Sri Lanka*, op. cit., 8, 26, 30

[141] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Promoting Reconciliation and Accountability in Sri Lanka*, Resolution 30/1 (A/HRC/RES/30/1), October 14, 2015, 1–4, accessed August 9, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session30/Documents/A_HRC_RES_30_1_ENG.doc.

[142] U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *Determination and Findings (D&F): Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability Project (SDGAP) in Sri Lanka*, signed August 5, 2019, 1–2, accessed February 6, 2025, https://imlive.s3.amazonaws.com/Federal%20Government/ID280875385551960372560426657448157736555/SDGAP_D%26F_signed_08_05_2019.pdf.

such as Verité Research and Transparency International Sri Lanka increasingly reflected comparative models and internationally accepted methodologies. In this way, U.S. assistance shaped civil society's research practices and professional norms.

Another important driver of norm diffusion was international networking. Through support from NED, IRI, and NDI, Sri Lankan activists participated in global exchanges, leadership programmes, and regional conferences where they learned about democratic engagement in other countries.[143] These interactions strengthened cross-border civic ties and helped activists interpret Sri Lanka's political struggles in a broader comparative context. Critics argued that these interactions imported foreign priorities, but civil-society leaders maintained that such networks improved their ability to navigate domestic political challenges.

Norm diffusion also occurred through media-freedom programmes. Organisations such as Internews, IREX, and Freedom House trained journalists in investigative reporting, digital safety, and fact-checking.[144] As a result, Sri Lankan media outlets improved their ability to expose corruption, procurement irregularities, and abuses of state power. Civil-society organisations often collaborated with journalists trained under these programmes, producing a stronger environment of public scrutiny and accountability. At the grassroots level, community-based civic mobilisation helped embed democratic norms in local practice. USAID programmes on reconciliation, youth leadership, and community mediation encouraged discussions about fairness, inclusivity, and non-discrimination. These initiatives adapted global concepts to local contexts, helping build trust in areas affected by conflict and marginalisation. Over time, communities began to express their grievances using the language of rights and accountability, showing that norm diffusion was not limited to elite groups.

The 2022 Aragalaya movement showed how these norms shaped civic mobilisation. Many youth leaders involved in the protests had previously participated in civic-education and leadership programmes supported by international partners. Their demands focused on anti-corruption, transparency, rule of law, and democratic accountability—principles that reflected years of exposure to global governance discourse. While the movement was locally driven and rooted in economic anger, its normative language aligned with broader democratic standards

[143] National Endowment for Democracy, *Asia Grant Listing FY2024* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, active grant agreements as of January 15, 2025), 37–38, accessed October 3, 2025, https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Asia-Grant-Listing-FY24.pdf.
[144] IREX, *Media Sustainability Index: Asia 2017—Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: IREX, 2017), 19, accessed June 21, 2023, https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-asia-2017-sri-lanka.pdf.

promoted by civil-society organisations and international programmes. However, norm diffusion also provoked strong counter-narratives. Political elites, especially under the Rajapaksa administrations, frequently accused civil-society organisations of acting as channels of foreign influence. Demands for transparency or accountability were sometimes framed as Western-driven agendas. These accusations sought to weaken civil society's legitimacy and discourage public support. In some cases, activists faced intimidation or administrative pressure, demonstrating that norm diffusion carried political risks.[145]

Despite this resistance, the long-term effects of norm diffusion are visible in the evolution of Sri Lanka's civil society. Activists now use clearer analytical frameworks, stronger evidence-based methods, and more structured advocacy approaches. Civil-society organisations have broader networks, improved technical capacity, and greater experience engaging with international institutions. They have also developed the ability to analyse complex governance issues, ranging from public finance to legal reform. Norm diffusion, therefore, has reshaped Sri Lanka's civil-society landscape by expanding its conceptual tools, strengthening organisational capacity, and embedding global governance norms in domestic debates. This process has been uneven and politically contested, but it has played a major role in shaping civil society's ability to demand accountability, defend democratic space, and confront institutional decline in post-war Sri Lanka.

Impact of External Factors on Sri Lankan Civil Society

The growth of Sri Lanka's civil society after the civil war was shaped by three interconnected processes: the expansion of capacity-building, the rise of contestation, and the emergence of coalition formation.[146] These processes did not occur separately. They developed together as civil-society groups interacted with U.S. governmental and semi-governmental institutions, responded to political pressures, engaged with international networks, and confronted shifting domestic conditions. The result was a civil-society landscape that became more skilled and confident, but also more politically exposed and internally divided. The combined influence of U.S. support, domestic political struggles, and geopolitical pressures produced a civic environment that was dynamic, contested, and increasingly central to Sri Lanka's governance

[145] Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and Social Indicator, *A Brief Analysis of the Aragalaya* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, May 2023), 25–27, accessed November 18, 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/A-Brief-Analysis-of-the-Aragalaya_Final-Report.pdf.

[146] Arjuna Parakrama, *Civil Society Governance Diagnostic Report on Sri Lanka: An Assessment of the Anti-Corruption Landscape of Sri Lanka* (Rajagiriya: Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2023), 5–7. Accessed October 18, 2024. https://www.tisrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GDA_REPORT_2023.pdf.

debates. Capacity-building played a central role in shaping the ability of civil-society organisations (CSOs) to engage with governance, economic reform, human rights, and community mobilisation. USAID's governance programmes, especially the Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability Project (SDGAP), became key platforms for developing skills in public-finance monitoring, audit processes, legislative analysis, and procurement transparency. [147]These trainings familiarised activists with international standards of fiscal oversight, enabling them to produce technical reports grounded in data, comparative analysis, and legal reasoning. Organisations such as Verité Research and Transparency International Sri Lanka used these skills to scrutinise budgets, evaluate debt transparency, and expose procurement irregularities. This marked an important shift from earlier advocacy that relied mostly on narrative or anecdotal commentary.

Capacity-building also strengthened internal organisational structures. USAID and partner institutions introduced trainings on strategic planning, financial stewardship, monitoring and evaluation, data protection, and project management. As a result, many NGOs upgraded their financial reporting, documentation systems, and human-resource frameworks. These improvements enhanced institutional resilience and reduced vulnerability to accusations of mismanagement—claims often used by political elites to discredit civil society. Stronger internal governance helped CSOs survive political repression, leadership transitions, and economic shocks. Another major area of capacity-building involved documentation practices. U.S.-supported training introduced activists to methodologies used by UN agencies and international courts, including standards for evidence collection, verification, and chain-of-custody procedures. These enhanced methods improved the credibility of human-rights documentation, particularly in the fields of enforced disappearances, detention practices, and land occupation. Such documentation became crucial during submissions to the UN Human Rights Council and in challenging state-produced counter-narratives.

Capacity-building also extended to grassroots networks. USAID's reconciliation programmes supported training for youth groups, women's collectives, local mediators, and district-level

[147] U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Sri Lanka and Maldives, *Determination and Findings (D&F): Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability Project (SDGAP) in Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: USAID, August 5, 2019), 1–3. Accessed May 9, 2025. https://imlive.s3.amazonaws.com/Federal%20Government/ID280875385551960372560426657448157736555/SDGAP_D%26F_signed_08_05_2019.pdf.

NGOs, especially in conflict-affected regions.[148] These programmes encouraged digital literacy, conflict mediation, civic education, and community mobilisation. Youth trained in these initiatives later became active in local governance consultations and community advocacy. In the North and East, community leaders became more vocal on issues such as land rights and reparations. In the South and plantation areas, trained youth played larger roles in mobilising communities around essential services and women's safety. A parallel dimension involved journalistic capacity-building. Internews, IREX, and Freedom House trained journalists in investigative techniques, digital security, fact-checking, and data journalism.[149] Improved journalistic standards supported civil-society advocacy by exposing corruption, procurement failures, and abuses of authority. The partnership between journalists and civil-society groups produced stronger public scrutiny and encouraged evidence-based public debate. Civil society also benefited from improvements in strategic communication. U.S.-supported training helped activists present complex governance issues in simple Sinhala and Tamil, use digital platforms effectively, counter misinformation, and engage rural audiences. This was essential during crises such as the 2018 constitutional crisis, the 2019 Easter attacks, and the 2022 economic collapse, when accurate public communication was critical. Capacity-building also strengthened legal literacy. Training in constitutional law, administrative law, and judicial review empowered activists and lawyers to challenge executive overreach and unlawful restrictions. These skills contributed to public-interest litigation concerning land occupation, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on protests. Finally, capacity-building encouraged the formation of issue-based coalitions, enabling NGOs working on governance, rights, environment, media freedom, and women's issues to collaborate. These strengthened networks became important during national crises and political turning points.

As civil-society capacity expanded, so did political contestations. Governments, especially under Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, frequently framed civil society as an instrument of foreign interference. Officials accused NGOs of promoting regime change, destabilising the state, or advancing Western agendas.[150] These accusations peaked during politically sensitive moments such as the impeachment of Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake (2013), UNHRC

[148] National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, "Youth Take Ownership of Reconciliation Process," *Newsletter* (November 2019): 1–2. Accessed January 14, 2023. https://www.peace-srilanka.org/images/newsletter/2019/November_2019_1_2.pdf;

[149] Internews Sri Lanka, *Introspection Newsletter*, no. 21 (Quarter 3, 2021), 2. Accessed March 11, 2023. https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SRI_Lanka_Introspection_Q3_2021.pdf;

[150] Jonathan Goodhand, Benedikt Korf, and Jonathan Spencer, "The Politics of NGO–Government Relations in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 8 (2015): 1520–22, accessed March 18, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1047193.

resolutions (2012–2014), the 2018 constitutional crisis, and the 2022 protests. Media outlets aligned with the state amplified these narratives, portraying CSOs as externally funded actors working against national security. This securitised framing had policy consequences. Governments introduced or sought to introduce tighter NGO regulations, expanded monitoring of foreign funding, and imposed travel restrictions on activists. Civil society viewed these measures as attempts to suppress dissent, especially in contexts of militarisation and allegations of rights violations.[151] CSOs relied on international networks to resist these restrictions, illustrating the dual nature of U.S.-supported engagement: it strengthened civil society while also making it a target for political scrutiny. Contestation also unfolded through public narratives. State-aligned media frequently alleged that NGOs received "millions of dollars" from Western donors to weaken the state or encourage separatism. These narratives intensified during elections and geopolitical tensions, affecting public trust in CSOs and complicating grassroots outreach. Geopolitical rivalry further shaped contestation. Chinese media and diplomats portrayed U.S.-supported civil society as part of a Western effort to counter Beijing's influence. At the same time, CSOs critiquing Chinese-funded projects were accused of serving U.S. strategic interests.[152] This dual labelling placed civil society in the crossfire of geopolitical narratives. Contestations also took place within civil society, reflecting ideological and strategic differences. Some organisations embraced external support to pursue reform; others feared external agendas or prioritised grassroots, locally rooted activism. These divides sometimes weakened coalitions and increased vulnerability to state repression. Legal harassment also became a tool of contestation. State-aligned petitioners filed cases accusing NGOs of misconduct or anti-state activities. While many cases lacked evidence, they imposed reputational and administrative burdens. Civil society responded by using legal avenues to defend their rights, demonstrating both vulnerability and resilience. The 2022 Aragalaya highlighted these contestations.[153] Civil society played a central role in articulating protest demands, providing legal aid, and documenting abuses. Government actors accused CSOs of working for Western donors and orchestrating the protests. Civil society countered by emphasising the domestic roots of the movement. During the 2022 economic crisis, contestation also centred on economic governance. CSOs analysing debt, IMF negotiations,

[151] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Peace* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019), 24–27, accessed July 6, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/298-sri-lanka-bitter-peace.
[152] Sarah Cook, Ellie J. Kim, and David Salvo, *Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Democratic Resilience* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2022), 38–41, accessed October 12, 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2022/beijings-global-media-influence.
[153] Ahilan Kadirgamar, "Sri Lanka's Aragalaya and the Crisis of the Post-War State," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53, no. 2 (2023): 215–18, accessed February 9, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2023.2174889.

and public spending were accused of either imposing austerity or obstructing reform. These criticisms reflected public anxieties about sovereignty and economic dependence.

Coalition formation became one of the most important outcomes of strengthened capacity and heightened contestation. After 2009, civil-society actors increasingly recognised that fragmented activism had limited impact in a centralised political system. Supported by training in research, legal documentation, communication, and advocacy, CSOs began forming cross-sector coalitions involving journalists, lawyers, women's groups, environmental activists, and minority-rights advocates. A major expression of these coalitions emerged during the 2015 electoral transition. Civil-society groups coordinated campaigns calling for constitutional reform, independent commissions, and limits on executive power. Their collective efforts contributed to the discourse surrounding the Nineteenth Amendment.[154] Coalitions also strengthened in the area of transitional justice. Organisations representing families of the disappeared collaborated with Colombo-based groups to produce unified documentation for UNHRC processes. These networks bridged regional, ethnic, and sectoral divisions. Media–civil society collaborations grew as trained journalists and researchers jointly exposed corruption, irregular procurement, and land issues. This evidence-based coalition shifted public debates away from partisan rhetoric toward factual scrutiny. Coalitions played a decisive role during the 2018 constitutional crisis, coordinating legal challenges, public statements, and awareness campaigns. These efforts helped ensure institutional checks and contributed to the Supreme Court ruling that the dissolution of Parliament was unconstitutional. Economic governance coalitions expanded during the financial collapse, as researchers and CSOs jointly analysed debt and fiscal policies. Their work pressured policymakers to adopt more transparent approaches to debt restructuring. Coalition formation reached its most visible expression during the 2022 Aragalaya, when lawyers, youth groups, trade unions, professionals, and CSOs mobilised around demands for accountability and reform. Civil-society training in communication, legal documentation, and organisation strengthened the movement's clarity and coherence. However, coalitions also faced internal tensions over strategy, ideology, and political alignment. These tensions sometimes fragmented collective action. Coalition formation itself became a target of state narratives, with political elites portraying coalitions as Western-funded networks manipulating national politics. CSOs responded by stressing the

[154] Asanga Welikala, ed., *The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution: Content and Context* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015), 34–37, accessed November 22, 2025, https://www.cpalanka.org/the-nineteenth-amendment-to-the-constitution-content-and-context/.

domestic roots of their advocacy. Despite these pressures, coalition formation significantly strengthened civil society's capacity to influence governance, articulate reform demands, and defend democratic institutions.

The discussion of U.S. influence on Sri Lanka's civil society shows a relationship that is layered, changing, and often tense. It did not produce simple outcomes or one clear story of "help" or "interference." Instead, U.S. engagement interacted with Sri Lanka's own politics, institutions, conflicts, and aspirations. The result was a civil society that became more skilled and visible, but also more closely watched, criticised, and contested. A central effect of U.S. involvement was the strengthening of civil-society capacities. Through governance projects, leadership and legal training, and technical support, organisations improved their skills in policy analysis, public advocacy, documentation, media work, and internal management. This made them more confident and effective in national debates on constitutional reform, economic policy, human rights, and transitional justice. Stronger internal governance also increased their credibility and helped them survive periods of political pressure. At the same time, governance norms such as transparency, accountability, rule of law, separation of powers, and rights protection gradually entered civil-society language and practice. These norms came through diplomatic engagement, UN processes, training programmes, and contact with international networks. Civil-society actors used this vocabulary to frame local grievances in ways that connected Sri Lanka to wider global conversations. But this was not simple imitation. Activists selectively adapted external ideas to local realities, keeping what seemed useful and resisting what felt intrusive or ill-suited. As civil society became more professional and norm-based, it also became more organised. Coalitions formed across sectors and regions, bringing together journalists, lawyers, economists, youth leaders, women's groups, environmentalists, and minority-rights advocates. These coalitions were crucial at key turning points, such as the 2015 reform moment, the 2018 constitutional crisis, and the 2022 economic and political upheaval. They showed that civil society could act as a collective force, not just as scattered single-issue groups. Yet these same gains attracted stronger backlash. Governments, especially during nationalist periods, accused NGOs of serving foreign agendas and undermining sovereignty. Regulatory proposals, financial scrutiny, and hostile media campaigns were used to narrow civic space. Geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China added another layer of suspicion, as civil-society positions on rights, debt, or development were read through strategic lenses. Despite this, civil society showed resilience. Starting from adaptation, decentralisation, to building alliances, they stayed engaged. Overall, U.S. influence helped not only to expand

civic capacity and voice but also intensified contestation. Civil society emerged not as a passive product of foreign support, but as an evolving actor negotiating a difficult and shifting political landscape.

Negotiating the Global-Local Interface in Civil Society Operations

Sri Lanka's civil society has long operated at the intersection of global discourses and deeply rooted local moral worlds. International norms, such as human rights, transitional justice, gender equality, and participatory governance, enter the country through donors, INGOs, multilateral institutions, and transnational activist networks. Yet these frameworks rarely travel unchanged. Instead, they encounter local expectations, cultural idioms, and entrenched social hierarchies, producing hybrid civic cultures that are neither fully global nor entirely local. As Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake observes, global interventions tend to be refracted through "localised histories, meanings and power relations," creating outcomes that diverge sharply from donor assumptions.[155]

This interface often generates tension. Scholars such as Camilla Orjuela argue that donor-driven civil society during the conflict and post-war period produced a "peace industry" whose professionalised language and procedural demands sometimes clashed with grassroots political realities. Many community actors perceive externally funded organisations as elite spaces dominated by English-speaking, urban professionals, limiting the resonance of rights-based campaigns among rural or marginalised groups. This misalignment does not mean that global ideas are rejected entirely; rather, they are frequently reinterpreted to fit local narratives of justice, duty, or community responsibility.[156]

Local activists also strategically navigate this interface. Kanchana Ruwanpura's work on gender and labour politics shows how Sri Lankan women's groups translate global feminist vocabularies into culturally grounded appeals, emphasising dignity, moral obligation, and community welfare, to secure acceptance in conservative contexts. This selective translation strengthens local legitimacy while allowing engagement with international advocacy networks. Similarly, Tamil and Muslim community organisations often frame human-rights claims

[155] Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Between Reality and Representation: Women, the State and Conflict in Sri Lanka," in *Women and Conflict in South Asia*, ed. Rita Manchanda (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 111–113, accessed 7 August 2024, https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132100757.n7.
[156] Camilla Orjuela, "Dilemmas of Civil Society Aid: Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia* 1, no. 1 (January 2005): 4–7, accessed 19 October 2024, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/pdsa/pdf/pdsa_01_01_02.pdf.

through idioms of collective suffering, memory, and dignity rather than abstract legal frameworks, creating resonant bridges between local experience and global politics.[157] However, the global–local encounter can also provoke resistance. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) hearings revealed frequent suspicion of NGOs, with several community participants echoing the view that externally funded organisations advance agendas "not necessarily aligned with national priorities." Such narratives have been amplified by nationalist political actors who cast global norms as threats to sovereignty or cultural identity. This scepticism shapes civic culture by restricting the space in which certain global ideas, particularly around accountability or minority rights that can be publicly expressed.[158]

Despite these tensions, hybrid civic practices continue to emerge. Local organisations adopt donor language to secure funding but embed programmes in everyday practices of reciprocity, temple or mosque-based legitimacy, and community endorsements. Youth groups use global social-media activism techniques while framing grievances in culturally meaningful ways. Diaspora networks advocate internationally yet remain anchored in local histories of displacement, loss, and aspiration. This multi-layered negotiation produces a civic sphere that is fluid and adaptive, shaped by both transnational flows and local moral economies. Ultimately, the global-local interface in Sri Lanka is not a one-way transmission of norms but a process of reinterpretation, negotiation, and contestation. Understanding this interplay reveals how civil society actors' manoeuvre between international expectations and culturally grounded practices, generating forms of mobilisation that are both globally connected and locally intelligible. This dynamic also prepares the ground for examining how broader structural forces shape civic life across regions and communities.

Regional Mapping of NGOs and INGOs

The regional distribution of NGOs and INGOs in Sri Lanka is closely tied to patterns of inequality, war-affectedness, and state centralisation. National-level governance, rights, and policy-oriented organisations are heavily concentrated in Colombo and the Western Province, where ministries, courts, media houses, and diplomatic missions are located. Organisations such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Transparency International Sri Lanka, the National

[157] Kanchana N. Ruwanpura and Jane Humphries, "Mundane Heroines: Conflict, Ethnicity, Gender, and Female Headship in Eastern Sri Lanka," *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 2 (2004): 173–177, 188–193, https://doi.org/10.1080/1354570042000212633 (accessed May 18, 2024)

[158] Sri Lanka, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation* (Colombo: Government of Sri Lanka, November 2011), paras. 8.148–8.152, accessed 16 April 2024, https://groundviews.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/FINAL-LLRC-REPORT.pdf.

Peace Council and the Law & Society Trust largely operate from this metropolitan hub, focusing on governance, constitutional reform, anti-corruption, and policy advocacy. By contrast, Northern and Eastern organisations have grown out of long-term exposure to armed conflict and displacement. Jonathan Goodhand and Bart Klem show that, during the war and immediate post-war years, aid flows and NGO activity were concentrated in these war-affected regions, with many local groups specialising in relief, housing, land issues, psychosocial support, and livelihood recovery.[159] The Suriya Women's Development Centre in Batticaloa, for example, emerged to work with conflict-displaced women and continues to support Tamil and Muslim women through legal aid, counselling, and cultural activism.[160] Similarly, the Jaffna Social Action Centre (JSAC) serves vulnerable communities across the Jaffna peninsula and wider Northern Province, focusing on infrastructure, training, and support for internally displaced persons.[161] In the Central highlands, the regional profile of civil society is shaped by the plantation economy and the marginalisation of Tamil estate communities. Organisations such as the Human Development Organisation in Kandy and related human-development NGOs work on housing, education, and migration, particularly rights advocacy for plantation workers.[162] Their agendas differ from Colombo-based governance NGOs, as they prioritise socio-economic rights and everyday survival in an area marked by structural inequality. The Southern and other rural regions host a different set of actors, often linked to broad-based movements like the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. Sarvodaya's network of village-level societies spans thousands of villages and emphasises community development, self-help, and disaster response, giving the South and many rural districts a dense layer of local organisations that are closely integrated into local social structures and reliant on volunteer engagement, while promoting participation and locally driven self-reliant initiatives.[163]

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[159] Jonathan Goodhand and Bart Klem, with Dilrukshi Fonseka, S. I. Keethaponcalan, and Shonali Sardesai, *Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka, 2000–2005* (Colombo: Asia Foundation and Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, August 2005), 74–77, accessed 21 October 2024, https://tamilnation.org/conflictresolution/tamileelam/norway/0508Goodhand.pdf.

[160] International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War*, Asia Report no. 289 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 28, 2017), 13 accessed 6 May 2024, https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/289-sri-lankas-conflict-affected-women-dealing-with-the-legacy-of-war.pdf

[161] Karen Iles, *Sri Lanka Post-Closure Evaluation Report* (London: Voluntary Service Overseas, September 2015), 198, accessed 14 March 2024, https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/sri_lanka_post-closure_evaluation_report.pdf

[162] Peace Insight (Peace Direct), "Human Development Organisation (HDO)," last updated October 2016, accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/human-development-organisation-hdo

[163] Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, "About Us," accessed December 27, 2025, https://www.sarvodaya.org/about-us/

Taken together, this regional mapping shows that civil society in Sri Lanka is not simply divided into Colombo and "the rest," but differentiated across North, East, Central, South and Western/Colombo regions by mandate, constituency, and historical experience. Colombo-based organisations dominate national advocacy and engagement with international actors, while regional NGOs and community groups in the North, East, Central highlands, and South respond more directly to the scars of war, plantation labour hierarchies, rural poverty, and local development needs.

Impact of Regional and Intra-Regional Players

Post-war civic landscape in Sri Lanka was shaped by continuous exchanges between powerful external actors like, India, China, the United States and diaspora as transnational actor and the island's own political cultures, institutional histories, and social cleavages. These interactions shaped one another and produced a civic environment that expanded at certain moments, contracted at others, and continually adapted to shifting pressures. Thus, Sri Lanka's civil society cannot be understood as an independent domestic formation. Instead, it must be seen as a product of dynamic encounters between the global and the local, where global strategies intersect with local identities, and where civic actors negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist the influence of external powers.

India's presence in Sri Lanka offers one of the clearest examples of this mutual shaping. India's influence is rooted in centuries of cultural, linguistic, and religious ties, but the post-war period saw new layers added to this relationship. India framed its engagement through ideas of regional solidarity and shared civilisational heritage, presenting its support as a natural extension of geographic proximity and historical connection. At the same time, India remained guided by strategic anxieties linked to its rivalry with China and concerns about instability in its southern neighbourhood. Civil society experienced these influences in varied ways. Tamil civil society often regarded India as a necessary partner in debates on devolution and political settlement, drawing on the history of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and India's continued rhetorical support for power-sharing. Sinhala-majoritarian groups frequently viewed India's engagement with suspicion because of memories of intervention and pressure on political reforms. Organisations involved in development and welfare work saw India's post-war

assistance, particularly housing for war-affected communities and emergency support during the 2022 crisis, as tangible contributions to local needs. Yet India's expanding presence in ports, energy projects, transport corridors, and economic connectivity created new debates on transparency, land use, and environmental risks. Civil-society organisations had to make sense of these shifts, often pushing for greater accountability and public consultation in the face of technically complex agreements negotiated at high political levels.

The rivalry between India and China intensified these debates further. Geopolitical competition led to accelerated project approvals, centralised decision-making, and reduced channels for public scrutiny. Civil society found that strategic considerations often outweighed participatory governance, making it harder to ensure that local communities had a voice in decisions that affected their land, livelihoods, and environment. India's influence therefore became neither entirely positive nor negative. It created new opportunities for collaboration, provided critical support during national crises, and opened pathways for regional connectivity. However, it also contributed to a political environment in which civic oversight became more difficult, especially when governments framed external partnerships in strategic terms that sidelined community concerns.

China's presence in Sri Lanka produced another major set of transformations that deeply affected civil society. Chinese interest in ports, expressways, industrial zones, and real-estate expansion reshaped the economic landscape and introduced new forms of dependency. These projects had both immediate and long-term consequences. They created infrastructure that facilitated economic activity, but they also generated debt burdens, legal complexities, and social disruptions. Civil-society responses reflected this mix. Environmental groups, local advocacy networks, and policy analysts highlighted issues such as land acquisition, ecological stress, insufficient consultation, and opaque contract processes. The Hambantota Port became a powerful symbol of these concerns. The decision to lease it out raised questions about long-term sovereignty, financial vulnerability, and the concentration of decision-making power among political elites. Similar debates emerged with the Colombo Port City project, which introduced an exceptional legal regime that civil society viewed as potentially undermining regulatory authority and democratic oversight.

At the same time, Chinese engagement was not limited to infrastructure. Beijing cultivated soft-power relationships with Buddhist institutions, media organisations, and cultural bodies. This widened China's reach beyond government circles and created social constituencies that

viewed Chinese involvement positively. Chinese funding for temples, cultural exchanges, and media initiatives generated goodwill in some quarters, even as other groups interpreted them as attempts to influence public opinion. Defence cooperation between China and Sri Lanka added another dimension to these perceptions. Visits by Chinese naval vessels, agreements on military assistance, and training programmes for security forces created unease among groups advocating demilitarisation and human-rights oversight. These developments demonstrated that China's influence could not be reduced to economics alone. It produced a layered impact that touched on sovereignty, environmental justice, media freedom, and security governance, all of which shaped the conditions within which civil society operated.

The United States represented a different type of external influence. While the U.S. did not engage primarily through large-scale infrastructure, its impact was felt through governance programmes, human-rights advocacy, development assistance, and strategic frameworks related to the Indo-Pacific. U.S. institutions such as the State Department, USAID, and the Embassy became important channels for strengthening civil-society capacity. Through support for transparency, budget monitoring, community mediation, women's leadership, media training, and youth engagement, the U.S. helped develop a more professional and technically skilled civic sphere. Semi-governmental organisations such as NED, IRI, and NDI expanded this support by providing training, research resources, and international networking opportunities. These interventions contributed to the rise of a civil society capable of producing rigorous research, engaging in evidence-based advocacy, and participating in policy debates that had previously been the domain of state technocrats.

Yet American influence also became politically contentious. Governments portrayed U.S.-supported NGOs as tools of foreign interference, particularly during periods of political crisis. Agreements such as ACSA, SOFA, and the MCC Compact triggered intense public debate on sovereignty, militarisation, and economic reform. Civil society was drawn into these disputes, analysing the legal and economic implications of these agreements while confronting accusations that they were aligned with external agendas. The result was a civic environment in which global support strengthened organisational capacity but also exposed activists to politicisation and surveillance. Despite these challenges, U.S. programmes expanded the analytic and organisational tools available to civil society, enabling more robust scrutiny of the state, greater public engagement, and a stronger defence of democratic space.

Across all these major powers, one understanding portrayed that, global influence becomes meaningful only through its encounters with Sri Lanka's internal structures. The country's centralised executive, historic patterns of majoritarianism, uneven development, and entrenched patronage systems shaped how global pressures were received and contested. Civil society operated within a political order where access to information was often restricted, where militarisation shaped life in many regions, and where democratic institutions faced periodic erosion. Global actors introduced resources, ideas, and strategic interests, but local structures determined which influences took root, which were resisted, and how civic actors navigated the resulting political environment.

Civil society became both the mediator and the battleground of these encounters. Civic organisations translated global governance norms into local campaigns, used international visibility to protect activists during political repression, and mobilised communities affected by mega-projects. They interpreted external involvement through the lens of local realities such as ethnic inequalities, post-war militarisation, regional disparities, and historical grievances. Tamil groups, Muslim organisations, Sinhala-Buddhist civic networks, and multi-ethnic advocacy groups responded differently to global influence because their concerns, memories, and priorities differed. These varied responses demonstrate that civil society in Sri Lanka is not a uniform category, but a diverse set of actors shaped by distinct political histories.

Within the wider interaction between global and local forces, diaspora groups emerge as distinctive transnational civil society actors rather than as conventional external institutions or state representatives. Their activities demonstrate how global influence is mediated through networks rooted in social ties, political commitments, and shared identities that remain connected to domestic realities. Diaspora engagement has helped maintain international scrutiny on questions of accountability, rights, and political reform, while also altering the conditions under which local civil society operates. At the same time, such activism has deepened contestation within Sri Lanka's civic space, as state actors and majoritarian groups have frequently portrayed diaspora involvement as a form of outside intrusion. In this sense, diaspora participation reinforces the core argument of this chapter: global forces shape Sri Lanka's civil society not through external pressure alone, but through ongoing interaction with local histories, power relations, and identities mediated by actors who operate across national boundaries.

Conclusion

The long-term implications of these interactions are significant. Civil society has acquired stronger technical skills, more clearly defined advocacy strategies, and deeper international networks. It now plays a much larger role in public debate and policy reform than it did in the earlier decades after independence. At the same time, civil society has become more politically exposed. Accusations of foreign influence, surveillance by security agencies, and administrative obstacles have shaped the risks associated with activism. Geopolitical competition further complicates this environment, as organisations critical of Chinese projects may be portrayed as Western proxies, while those analysing U.S. agreements may be accused of supporting rival powers. Civil society therefore operates in a climate where trust, neutrality, and legitimacy are continually contested.

Despite these difficulties, civil society remains central to the country's democratic life. During the 2022 Aragalaya movement, civic actors, youth groups, professional bodies, and community networks played a crucial role in articulating demands for transparency, reform, and accountable governance. Their ability to mobilise came from years of organisational strengthening, exposure to global governance norms, and experience in engaging with international actors. This illustrates how the global and local dimensions have reinforced one another, even if the relationship has been contentious. Global engagement did not override local agency; rather, it provided tools and ideas that civil society adapted to local struggles.

Thus, Sri Lanka's civil society is shaped by the constant, multi-directional flow between global agendas and local concerns. India brings historical closeness, strategic ambitions, and developmental support. China brings infrastructure, finance, and symbolic authority. The United States brings governance models, rights-based language, and institutional strengthening. Local political structures filter, negotiate, and sometimes resist these influences, producing a civic sphere that is dynamic, contested, and deeply shaped by global–local entanglement. Civil society stands at the centre of this process, absorbing global ideas, expressing local needs, and challenging both domestic and international actors when necessary. This intersection of global and local forces defines the evolution of civil society in post-war Sri Lanka and will continue to shape its future trajectory as the country navigates political reform, economic recovery, and shifting geopolitical currents.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has historically traced the Western theoretical frameworks explaining the emergence and scope of civil society and thereafter mapped the nature and dynamics of civil society in Sri Lanka in the colonial, post-colonial and post-civil war eras. The dissertation has argued that Eurocentric paradigms theorizing the functioning of civil society are inadequate in the South Asian context, especially in case of Sri Lanka. While on the one hand, state-centric definitions of civil society have become outdated, myriad intermeshing of political, religious, socio-economic and cultural dynamics informing the local context on an everyday basis necessitate a bottoms-up approach to understanding civil society in Sri Lanka to gauge its actual potential and ability to impact the island country beset with innumerable challenges. The dissertation examined, in a critical manner, the interface of domestic and foreign forces in the everyday functioning of civil societal actors, especially in the post-civil war context. The study explored how internal political structures, historical legacies, and socio-cultural conditions intersect with external actors, geopolitical interests, and transnational influences to shape the character and trajectory of civil society in Sri Lanka. By focusing on this domestic–foreign interface, the dissertation has tried to move beyond conventional analyses that treats civil society either as a phenomenon purely internal to the state, or as an arena excessively shaped by external forces Instead, it has advanced the argument that Sri Lankan civil society must be understood as a dynamic and contested space where domestic and foreign forces interact continuously, producing outcomes that are neither wholly endogenous nor externally imposed.

While the argumentative core of the dissertation is primarily situated in the post–civil war period, particularly the end of armed conflict in 2009, the study has deliberately avoided treating this phase in isolation. The post–civil war era represents a critical juncture in Sri Lanka's political development, marked by the consolidation of state power, the restructuring of governance institutions, intensified global engagement (especially foreign capital), and evolving forms of civic mobilisation. The word 'civil' in 'civil war' simply denotes the internal conflict which raged within the nation, as articulated by the Western imagination of conflict and security. But the connotation of the word 'civil' in civil society is much broader and more profound, especially for nation as heterogeneously defined as Sri Lanka. Therefore, the dissertation has argued that the dynamics of post–civil war civil society cannot be comprehensively understood unless it is situated within the broader, conceptual scope of civil

society in general, and the history of the evolution of the diverse strands and trends in Sri Lankan civil society in particular.

Civil society in Sri Lanka did not emerge suddenly in the aftermath of the war, nor did its post-war forms arise independently of earlier intellectual debates, colonial legacies, or long-standing patterns of state–society relations. For this reason, the dissertation first engaged with the evolution of the theoretical concept of civil society in general. This conceptual engagement was not undertaken as an abstract theoretical exercise, but as a necessary analytical step to clarify how different intellectual traditions in social sciences have understood civil society's relationship with the state, the market, power, and social order. By tracing the development of civil society across classical, modern, and contemporary theoretical traditions, the study highlighted that civil society has never possessed a singular or uncontested meaning. Instead, it has been variously conceptualised as a moral community, a realm of voluntary association, a site of hegemony and resistance, and a space of public deliberation. These debates reveal that civil society is inherently shaped by the political and historical contexts within which it operates. This is particularly noteworthy for the scope of the present dissertation on Sri Lankan civil society.

This theoretical exploration was particularly important for a study grounded within Sri Lanka, which is geographically, culturally and historically a South Asian nation. Much of the dominant strands of the literature on civil society is rooted in European historical experiences, especially those associated with liberal democracy, industrial capitalism, and relatively stable state formation. Applying these frameworks uncritically to post-colonial societies risks obscuring local specificities and reproducing normative assumptions that do not adequately reflect lived political realities. The dissertation therefore used theoretical debates not as prescriptive models but as tools of critical analysis, selectively drawing upon them to illuminate the conditions under which civil society operates in Sri Lanka. This approach allowed the study to foreground questions of power, exclusion, identity, and contestation that are central to understanding civil society in post-colonial and conflict-affected societies.

Having established this conceptual grounding, the dissertation then contextualised the historical evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka. This historical engagement was essential for demonstrating that Sri Lankan civil society has deep roots that predate contemporary development discourses and donor-driven frameworks. Civil society formations in Sri Lanka have historically been embedded in kinships, religious institutions, community practices,

voluntary associations, and political movements, long before the emergence of modern non-governmental, voluntary associations. Colonial rule reshaped these formations through new administrative structures, educational institutions, and political hierarchies, while also lay the foundations for conscious expressions of ethnic allegiances, mobilisation of nationalist sentiments and identity-based politics.

The post-independence period further transformed civil society as it became increasingly entangled with state-building processes, ethnic relations, and competing visions of national identity. The rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, Tamil mobilisation for greater political representation, and later revolutionary armed conflict against the state fundamentally altered the nature of civic engagement. Civil society during this period cannot be framed simply on a continuum of democratic consolidation or social harmony. Instead, it functioned simultaneously as a site of political and ethnic mobilisation, exclusion, resistance, and accommodation, reflecting broader political struggles within the Sri Lankan society. By situating civil society within this historical trajectory, the dissertation demonstrated that contemporary civic dynamics are shaped by long-standing patterns of politicisation, fragmentation, struggle for hegemony, breeding mistrust and alienation on contending understandings of interest and harm.

This historical grounding was particularly crucial for analysing the post–civil war period. The end of armed conflict in 2009 did not produce a clean rupture with the past. Instead, it ushered in a phase marked by both continuity and change. On the one hand, the cessation of large-scale violence created new possibilities for reconstruction, reconciliation, and civic engagement. On the other hand, the post-war period was characterised by the consolidation of executive power, heightened militarisation, and shrinking civic space, especially for organisations engaged in rights-based advocacy and dissent. Civil society in this context was forced to adapt, recalibrate its strategies, and negotiate its survival within an increasingly constrained political environment.

At the same time, the post–civil war era intensified Sri Lanka's engagement with global and regional actors. The country's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, its post-war reconstruction needs, and its growing economic vulnerabilities drew the attention of major powers such as India, China, and the United States. These external engagements reshaped not only state policy and economic priorities but also the operating environment of civil society. Monetary funding patterns, development discourses, human rights advocacy, and geopolitical narratives

increasingly intersected with domestic political dynamics, producing complex and often contradictory effects on civic space. The dissertation therefore treated the post–civil war period as a phase in which domestic and foreign forces became even more tightly interwoven in shaping civil society.

Within this broader intellectual architecture, the dissertation was guided by a set of research questions and research hypotheses introduced at the outset of the study. These hypotheses questions were designed to move systematically from tracing the conceptual ideation of civil society to appreciating the various historical analyses in dominant literature, and finally to a detailed examination of Sri Lankan civil society, underlined by a cross-current of global–local interactions. Rather than treating these questions as isolated enquiries, the dissertation has tried to address these aspects in an interconnected manner. Each chapter has addressed a specific hypothesis and question while contributing to the overarching objective of understanding how and why civil society in Sri Lanka is shaped by the interaction of domestic and foreign forces.

The first hypothesis of the dissertation was that the conceptual remit of civil society can be ideationally traced back to earliest western political thinkers. Accordingly, the first research question was what are the dominant theoretical ideas on the emergence and scope of civil society and what are its limitations. Chapter one of the dissertation tried to understand how the idea of civil society has evolved across major theoretical traditions, including contemporary observations by political theorists, sociologists and economists. The chapter observed that the idea of civil society has gone through multiple phases of cognitive churning whereby its independent existence as a social reality has been slowly carved out from the dominant idea of the state being the most important element of public life. The evolution of intellectual thinking on civil society also bear testimony to the fact that civil society was never contextualized in political thought as “private”; rather it was always conceptualized within the domain of the public, and by extension the political. However, the dissertation poses the Sri Lankan context to challenge this understanding and ask whether the function of the civil society really remains untouched by the private preferences, ideological bias and the loyalties of the individual who constitute civil society. The dissertation poses the question that if the nascent ideas of civil society emerged from the context of political community, then how does the individual inform these understandings and theoretical definitions on civil society. The classical theories by Western political thinkers are contrasted with contemporary ideas on civil society put forward by Habermas and Putnam to highlight that the individual is more relevant for understanding civil society; and that the individual can never act as a complete political animal. Rather, the

perversions of virtues and personal, private biases impact on individual behavior which in effect, impacts the functional scope of civil society operations in any country. The chapter demonstrated that civil society has never been a singular, uncontested idea; rather, it has been shaped by changing historical contexts, political struggles, and philosophical debates about the relationship between the individual, society, and the state. By engaging with classical notions of civic life, liberal interpretations centred on individual rights and voluntary association, and critical perspectives that emphasise power, hegemony, and discourse, chapter one showed that civil society cannot be understood as a neutral or universally democratic sphere. Instead, it emerges as a terrain of negotiation where social forces, ideologies, and institutional arrangements intersect. The chapter further explored how dominant civil society theories were developed in European historical contexts marked by specific trajectories of state formation, capitalism, and citizenship.

The central finding of chapter one was that civil society in Sri Lanka must be understood through a contextualised theoretical lens rather than through imported normative models. Chapter two was premised on this finding and tested against the complex realities of South Asia. The chapter submits at the outset that when applied uncritically to South Asia, Western theoretical frameworks risk obscuring the realities of post-colonial societies characterised by ethnic pluralism, uneven development, and contested state legitimacy. Chapter two established that civil society in South Asia operates within dense social hierarchies, strong state presence, and historically embedded identities that shape civic participation. As a result, civil society in Sri Lanka cannot be assumed to be autonomous from the state, uniformly progressive, or inherently democratic. This theoretical insight lays a foundational observation which exposes the limitations of dominant discourses on civil society and which decisively shapes the rest of the dissertation by providing an analytical framework capable of capturing the complexity, ambivalence, and contradictions that define Sri Lankan civil society.

The second hypothesis of the dissertation was that the evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka can be attributed to a range of factors temporally stretching from the colonial, post-colonial, civil war, post-civil war periods. Accordingly, the second research question was Which range of factors inform the dominant understandings on the evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka. Chapter two thereafter focused on the historical evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka, delineating how colonial legacies, ethnic conflict, nationalism, and state policies shaped its transformation from the colonial period to the post-war era. It traced Sri Lanka's broader political and social history to understand the evolution and changing dynamics of civil societal

actors. Rather than treating civil society as a modern or externally introduced phenomenon, the chapter traced its roots in indigenous forms of collective action, religious institutions, and community-based associations that predated colonial rule. The chapter showed that colonial governance significantly altered these formations by introducing new administrative structures, legal frameworks, and educational systems, which reconfigured patterns of civic engagement. In the post-independence period, civil society in Sri Lanka became increasingly politicised, aligning itself with competing nationalist projects and ethnic identities. Sinhala-Buddhist organisations, Tamil political and cultural associations, trade unions, and student movements all emerged as influential civic actors, but their trajectories were shaped by the growing centrality of ethnic politics and state power. A key finding of chapter two was exploring how the civil war has profoundly restructured Sri Lankan civil society. Prolonged violence, militarisation, and repression fragmented civic space and limited the capacity of civil society to function as a mediating force. During this period, many organisations shifted their focus toward humanitarian relief, human rights documentation, and peace advocacy, often operating under severe constraints and state-induced repression. The end of the war in 2009 did not automatically result in the expansion of civic space. Instead, the post-war period was marked by heightened surveillance, de-legitimisation of dissent, and selective engagement with civil society by the state. The principal finding of chapter two was that civil society in Sri Lanka evolved not in a linear or progressive manner, but through cycles of expansion, contraction, adaptation, and resilience. Civil society was shaped as much by state policies and political regimes as by social conflict and identity politics. This historical understanding demonstrated that post-war civil society cannot be understood in isolation from the legacies of war, nationalism, and authoritarian governance that continue to influence civic life in Sri Lanka. This observation also set the premise for chapter three and four, as it necessitated an exploration of local and global factors which specifically impact civil society formation and functioning in Sri Lanka.

The third hypothesis of the dissertation was specific domestic factors in the colonial post-colonial, civil war and post-civil war periods have consistently shaped the functional scope of civil society in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the third research question was what are the specific domestic factors which play a determining role in the emergence and functional scope of civil society in Sri Lanka in the colonial, post-colonial and post-civil war period. Chapter three focused on a wide spectrum of domestic factors which deeply influence civil society in Sri Lanka. The chapter argued that broadly, civil society is domestically impacted simultaneously

through two sets of factors: in a top-down manner through structural institutions and political trends, and in a bottoms-up manner through social processes and cultural trends. These two categories of influences subsume a range of factors, including trends in centralised executive power, majoritarian nationalism, and securitised governance structures as witnessed in Sri Lanka since the late 1970s. These features have directly influenced the boundaries of civic space, effectively shrinking its scope and clamping down its autonomy from time to time. Periods of strong presidential authority have often been accompanied by heightened surveillance of civil society organisations, the politicisation of regulatory frameworks, and the de-legitimisation of rights-based activism. Nationalist discourse has further framed certain segments of civil society—particularly those engaged in minority rights, transitional justice, or international advocacy—as suspicious or externally driven. These domestic conditions have not merely restricted civil society activity; they have actively shaped the forms of engagement deemed acceptable, pushing many organisations toward depoliticised service delivery or technocratic development work.

The fourth hypothesis of the dissertation was in the civil war and post-civil war periods, civil Society in Sri Lanka has been deeply impacted by certain global factors and local civil society stake holders have responded to external influences. Accordingly, the fourth research question was what are the global factors which influence civil society in Sri Lanka and how do they interact with the local or domestic forces. To that end chapter four set forth to explore the set of global or external forces which interact with local factors to play a determining influence on Sri Lankan civil society. It examined in detail the role played by India, China, and the United States as key external forces influencing civil society actors rooted in Sri Lanka. While dominant discourses tend to focus on the role of these countries in influencing state to state exchanges, the chapter highlighted how their influence percolates below the level of the state and extends to the realm of civil societal actors. The chapter also explored the role of the diaspora, particularly Tamils and Muslims and other global and transnational actors which interact with local political institutions, social identities, and community-level practices to cast decisive influence on organizations and actors. The chapter demonstrated that global actors influence Sri Lankan civil society through multiple channels, including development assistance, diplomatic engagement, strategic partnerships, and normative discourse. These influences shape the material conditions, legal frameworks, and discursive environments within which civil society operates. At the same time, the chapter showed that global engagement is not uniform in its effects. Different external actors prioritise different agendas,

creating uneven opportunities and constraints for civil society organisations. The chapter also established that local socio-political structures play a decisive role in shaping how global influences are received. Civil society actors interpret external engagement through the lens of domestic political narratives, historical memory, ethnic identity, and institutional context. The chapter illustrated that civil society in Sri Lanka is not merely shaped by global forces but actively negotiates with them, sometimes leveraging external attention to advance domestic claims, and at other times resisting what is perceived as interference or conditionality. The central finding of chapter four was that Sri Lankan civil society is constituted through an ongoing process of global–local interaction. External actors reshape civic space, but their influence is always mediated by domestic political structures and social relations. This finding underscored the importance of analysing civil society as a dynamic field shaped by both international geopolitics and local agency.

In the light of findings from the chapters, the dissertation submits the following arguments. It primarily points out that the interrelationship between domestic and foreign factors shaping Sri Lankan civil society must be understood as a dynamic and mutually constitutive process rather than a unidirectional flow of influence. Domestic political institutions, ideological frameworks, and regime practices condition the way foreign engagement is received, interpreted, and operationalised. At the same time, sustained foreign involvement alters domestic political incentives, redistributes resources, and reshapes the normative environment in which civil society functions. Civil society is poised at this intersection as a space that is simultaneously constrained and enabled, vulnerable and adaptive, reactive and generative. Foreign actors have played a significant role in reinforcing, complicating, and sometimes counterbalancing these domestic dynamics. External engagement has introduced new resources, discourses, and institutional linkages in Sri Lankan civil society. Development assistance, humanitarian intervention, diplomatic pressure, and transnational advocacy have expanded the operational scope of some organisations while simultaneously exposing them to political backlash. Foreign involvement has therefore resulted in uneven effects, strengthening certain segments of civil society while marginalising others. More importantly, this influence has rarely been neutral; it has been shaped by the strategic, economic, and normative priorities of external actors themselves.

The interactions between domestic and foreign forces have been particularly visible in the post-2009 period, when Sri Lanka's geopolitical significance increased markedly. The country's location in the Indian Ocean, along vital maritime routes, has attracted sustained attention from

regional and extra-regional powers. This attention has had indirect but profound implications for civil society. Large-scale infrastructure projects, security cooperation, and economic partnerships have altered the political economy of the state, often centralising decision-making and limiting public consultation. Civil society actors operating in areas such as environmental protection, labour rights, land use, and fiscal accountability have therefore found themselves engaging not only with domestic authorities but also with the broader geopolitical logics underpinning development choices.

At the same time, civil society has not remained static in the face of these pressures. External engagement has reshaped organisational strategies, advocacy methods, and discursive framing within the sector. Some organisations have increasingly adopted international rights language and global governance frameworks to advance their claims, while others have deliberately grounded their work in local idioms, religious institutions, or community-based practices to maintain legitimacy. These strategic adaptations reflect an awareness of both domestic sensitivities and foreign expectations. Civil society's evolution in the post–civil war era is thus marked by hybridity, combining global norms with local repertoires of action.

This process of reshaping has also produced internal differentiation within Sri Lankan civil society. Organisations differ significantly in their access to resources, international networks, and political protection. Colombo-based NGOs, professional associations, and research institutions often operate within a different political economy from grassroots organisations in the North, East, and peripheral regions. Foreign funding and visibility can enhance capacity and influence, but they can also generate dependency, competition, and fragmentation. As a result, civil society has become a diverse and uneven field rather than a unified actor, with varying degrees of autonomy and vulnerability.

The post-civil war period has further highlighted the tension between civil society's role as a mediator and its role as a challenger. In some contexts, civil society has functioned as an intermediary, translating international expectations into domestic discourse and facilitating engagement between the state and external actors. In other contexts, it has emerged as a site of resistance, contesting both domestic authoritarianism and externally driven development models. These dual roles underscore the impossibility of assigning a singular political identity to civil society. Instead, civil society must be understood as a plural and contested arena shaped by overlapping domestic and foreign influences.

This analytical framework becomes particularly salient when examining recent political developments in Sri Lanka. The economic crisis and subsequent mass mobilisation that culminated in the *Aragalaya* movement marked a critical juncture in the country's civic and political life. The protests demonstrated that civil society, in its broadest sense, extends far beyond formal organisations. Informal networks, professional groups, students, religious actors, and ordinary citizens collectively mobilised to challenge entrenched political authority. This moment disrupted long-standing assumptions about political apathy and civic weakness in Sri Lanka, revealing latent capacities for collective action that had been underestimated.

The dissertation submits that the significance of *Aragalaya* lies not only in its immediate political consequences but also in its broader implications for the relationship between civil society, the state, and external actors. The movement emerged in response to domestic governance failures, yet it unfolded within a global context shaped by economic dependency, debt restructuring, and international negotiations. Civil society activism during this period interacted with external diplomatic engagement, international media attention, and multilateral financial processes. This convergence reinforced the central argument of the dissertation: that domestic and foreign dimensions of Sri Lankan politics are deeply intertwined, with civil society functionally pivoted at the intersection.

As Sri Lanka enters a new political phase under left-wing President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the dissertation observes that civil society is poised at the crossroad. The political transition from majoritarianism to a minority-backed government presents possibilities for political reform, institutional recalibration, and renewed civic engagement. At the same time, structural economic constraints continue to have a determining influence. Economic vulnerability, geopolitical competition, and entrenched political interests continue to retard the parameters for introducing radical change. This dissertation submits that civil society's role in the future would depend on its ability to sustain momentum, navigate internal diversity, and engage strategically with both domestic institutions and external actors.

Sri Lanka's position as the 'Pearl of the Indian Ocean' ensures that foreign interest in the island will persist. The presence of extra-regional powers such as the United States, alongside regional actors like India and China, creates a complex strategic environment. India, as a regional power with deep historical, cultural, and political ties to Sri Lanka, occupies a particularly complex position. Sri Lanka's engagement with India has been shaped by cooperation as well as mistrust, influenced by memories of intervention, expectations regarding ethnic reconciliation,

and contemporary economic dependencies. Civil society perceptions of India vary across communities and political orientations, reflecting broader domestic debates about sovereignty, regional influence, and national identity. These perceptions matter because they shape how foreign policy initiatives are received and legitimised at the societal level. China's role, driven largely by infrastructure development and economic engagement, has similarly reshaped Sri Lanka's political economy and governance environment. While Chinese involvement has contributed to visible development outcomes, it has also raised concerns regarding debt, transparency, and long-term sovereignty. Civil society responses to Chinese engagement have ranged from pragmatic acceptance to critical scrutiny, particularly among groups concerned with environmental sustainability, labour rights, and accountability. These responses illustrate how external economic relationships intersect with domestic civic activism and public debate. The United States, as an extra-regional power, has engaged Sri Lanka through a combination of strategic, political, and normative frameworks. Its emphasis on governance, human rights, and democratic institutions has influenced segments of Sri Lankan civil society, particularly in the post-war period. At the same time, U.S. engagement is often viewed through the lens of global power politics, generating ambivalence and selective acceptance. Civil society actors engage with these external narratives in ways that reflect domestic political realities rather than external prescriptions alone.

The dissertation offers by way of observation that what emerges from this complex geopolitical environment is the recognition that civil society and foreign policy are increasingly intertwined. As Sri Lanka balances its relationships with India, China, and the United States, domestic perceptions, civic legitimacy, and public trust become critical variables. Civil society shapes these perceptions by influencing public discourse, mobilising opinion, and framing debates around development, sovereignty, and accountability. In turn, foreign engagements affect the operating space of civil society by shaping economic conditions, regulatory environments, and political narratives.

Based on these arguments, the dissertation concludes that as Sri Lanka manages its foreign relations within this geopolitical context, civil society is likely to play an increasingly important role in mediating external engagement, influencing policy outputs and shaping public debate. The dissertation submits that the research hypotheses stand validated by the research findings of each chapter. All the research questions also find comprehensive answers through the research undertaken which urge for further critical explorations on this theme in the future. Perceptions of legitimacy and dissent produced by civil society organizations are likely to

cumulatively influence Sri Lanka's political choices on the one hand, and how they are accepted by the international political audience. The dissertation further submits that in the contemporary political landscape, Sri Lankan domestic and foreign policies shall remain deeply intertwined with the functional output of civil society actors. Civic actors would influence how power is contested, how accountability is demanded, and how external relationships are interpreted. Civil society's momentum, shaped by historical experience, contemporary struggle, and global engagement, will continue to condition the country's political options. The dissertation therefore concludes that civil society is not going to count as a peripheral variable in Sri Lanka's post–civil war transformation, but rather as a core factor through which the interplay of domestic and foreign dynamics will continuously be negotiated and accommodated.

Sri Lankan civil society today is standing at a moment of transition, shaped by the cumulative effects of war, post-war authoritarian consolidation, economic crisis, and having witnessed an unprecedented wave of popular mobilisation in the recent past. The emergence of a new political regime marks a potential turning point, though it remains uncertain whether this transition will lead to substantive reforms or merely recalibrate existing power structures. This dissertation asserts that what is clear, however, is that civil society has emerged from the post-2022 period with renewed visibility and political significance. The *Aragalaya* movement represented a critical rupture in Sri Lanka's post-war political landscape. The conditions that produced the movement were not sudden or accidental; rather, they were the outcome of long-term structural pressures, governance failures, and accumulated public frustration that had been building over decades. Unlike earlier episodes of civic mobilisation that were often fragmented along ethnic, ideological, or organisational lines, *Aragalaya* brought together a broad cross-section of society. Youth, professionals, workers, students, women, religious groups, and informal networks participated in a collective expression of dissent that challenged entrenched political authority. This mobilisation did not emerge solely from formal civil society organisations but drew heavily on informal networks, spontaneous solidarities, and new forms of civic expression. In doing so, it expanded the very meaning of civil society beyond institutionalised NGOs and advocacy groups, demonstrating that civic agency in Sri Lanka is deeply embedded in everyday social life. The political significance of *Aragalaya* lies not only in its scale but also in its implications for how civil society is understood within Sri Lankan politics. The movement revealed the limits of governance models that rely on centralised authority, elite bargains, and exclusionary political narratives. It showed that civil society

cannot be reduced to a marginal or externally driven actor, as it has often been portrayed by political elites. Instead, it underscored that civil society possesses the capacity to articulate collective grievances, shape national discourse, and compel political change under conditions of crisis. Even though the movement did not culminate in a complete restructuring of the political system, it altered the relationship between citizens and the state in ways that are likely to have lasting consequences.

At the same time, the post-*Aragalaya* moment has exposed the internal challenges facing Sri Lankan civil society. The diversity that enabled broad mobilisation also generated tensions around leadership, representation, and political direction. Questions linger on how spontaneous civil societal energy can be translated into sustained institutional force without being co-opted or fragmented. These challenges reflect long-standing dilemmas within Sri Lankan civil society, particularly the tension between grassroots mobilisation and formal organisational politics. Nevertheless, the experience of *Aragalaya* has reinforced the argument advanced throughout the scope of this dissertation: that civil society in Sri Lanka is neither weak nor irrelevant, but rather constrained and determined by domestic and foreign geo-political, socio-cultural and economic environments within which it operates.

Thus, it may be asserted that Sri Lankan politics, whether domestic or foreign, cannot be understood independently of the momentum and direction of civil society. Civil society acts as both a mirror and a mediator of broader political processes, reflecting social grievances while also shaping how power is contested and negotiated. In the post–civil war and post-crisis era, this role has become more pronounced rather than diminished. The transitional moment facing Sri Lanka presents both risks and opportunities: risks of renewed authoritarian consolidation and civic fragmentation, and opportunities for reform, accountability, and inclusive political engagement. Whether Sri Lankan civil society can sustain the momentum generated by Aragalaya and translate it into long-term institutional change remains an open question. What is evident, however, is that civil society has firmly established itself as a central actor in Sri Lanka's political landscape. Its interactions with domestic institutions and foreign powers will continue to influence the country's trajectory in the years to come. In this sense, the study reaffirms the core argument of the dissertation: that civil society in Sri Lanka is not a peripheral domain but a dynamic and contested space through which the country's political future is being shaped continuously.

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Civil Society Narratives in Sri Lanka: Exploring the Intersection of Domestic and Global Factors Introduction Background of the Study Civil society has long been regarded as the key sphere through which citizens organise collective interests, bargain for power, and articulate claims to be fulfilled by the state. Across different historical and political contexts, it has been associated with trends in participation, accountability, and social trust. Yet, the meaning and function of civil society can never be fixed. It has evolved in response to changing political contexts and dispensations. Political authority, economic organisation, social hierarchies, and global norms have also significantly shaped civil society formations. In postcolonial and conflict-affected societies, these dynamics have been especially complex, as civil society has emerged in the web of inherited institutional legacies, uneven socio-economic development, external political and military pressures. In recent decades, global debates on civil society have been shaped by two parallel trends. On the one hand, civil society has been promoted as a vehicle for democratic deepening, social inclusion and civil rights protection. International organisations, donors, and policy frameworks have often positioned civil society actors as partners in governance, development, and peacebuilding. On the other hand, many states have condemned civic mobilisation as disruptions of law and order and responded with increased regulation, surveillance, and restriction. This tension between the ideal role of civil society and political realities within which it operates has become a defining feature of the current theoretical discourses on civil society. Sri Lanka presents a particularly instructive context for examining these dynamics. As a postcolonial state that experienced a prolonged civil war, Sri Lanka's political and social institutions have been shaped by overlapping legacies of colonial governance, nationalist mobilisation, and militarised conflict. Civic activity in the island has historically taken diverse forms, ranging from religious patronage and social welfare associations to trade unions, professional bodies, social movements, and rights-based organisations. These forms of organisations were embedded in local social structures, cultural norms, and moral economies, often operating alongside, rather than in opposition to, the state. Over time, however, the scope, visibility, and political connotations of civil society expanded, particularly in response to changing development strategies, donor engagement, and shifts in state–society relations. The period of civil war fundamentally altered the terrain of civic engagement in Sri Lanka. As violence escalated and the state increasingly framed dissent and mobilisation through the language of security, civil society organisations were compelled to navigate within a shrinking space for action. While some groups aligned themselves with humanitarian relief, development, or service delivery, others engaged in advocacy related to human rights, displacement, and peace. These activities unfolded under conditions of intense political polarisation, surveillance, and contestation. The end of the war in 2009 did not resolve these tensions. Instead, post-war governance was characterised by a strong centralisation of power, an expanded security apparatus, and marginal tolerance for critical civic voices, even as the language of reconstruction and reconciliation gained prominence. At the same time, Sri Lanka's civil society has not been uniform entity. It reflects deep social, regional, and ideological differences. Colombo-based