

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

SYNOPSIS OF THE THESIS SUBMITTED TO JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY FOR THE
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Background of the Study

Civil society in Sri Lanka has evolved within a complex and layered political landscape shaped by colonial legacies, postcolonial state formation, protracted ethnic conflict, and shifting patterns of democratic governance. From the moment of independence, civic life in Sri Lanka developed alongside a strong and centralised state, where political authority, nationalism, and institutional power frequently intersected with social organisation. While associational life, voluntary organisations, religious bodies, trade unions, and professional groups have long been part of Sri Lankan society, their political significance has remained deeply contingent upon broader state–society relations rather than autonomous civic agency. As a result, civil society in Sri Lanka has never existed as a clearly demarcated or uniformly progressive sphere but has instead been embedded within contested structures of power.

The outbreak and prolongation of ethnic conflict further transformed the nature of civil society engagement in Sri Lanka. During the years of armed conflict, civic space was shaped by emergency regulations, militarisation, and securitised governance, which constrained public dissent and limited the capacity of civil society actors to operate independently. At the same time, the conflict also generated new forms of civic mobilisation, particularly in relation to humanitarian relief, peace advocacy, minority rights, and human rights documentation. These developments produced a civil society landscape that was both responsive to social crises and vulnerable to political repression, reinforcing its dependence on state tolerance and international support.

The end of the armed conflict in 2009 marked a significant rupture in Sri Lanka’s political trajectory and generated renewed expectations regarding post-war reconstruction, reconciliation, and democratic consolidation. Civil society was widely perceived as a key actor in facilitating these processes, particularly in addressing issues of accountability, transitional justice, development, and governance reform. However, the post-war period did not result in an unambiguous expansion of civic space. Instead, it witnessed the consolidation of executive power, intensification of surveillance, and increasing regulatory oversight of civil society organisations, especially those engaged in rights-based and accountability-oriented activities. The state’s approach towards civil society during this phase was characterised not by outright elimination but by selective accommodation, co-option, and marginalisation.

Successive political regimes, particularly under the Rajapaksa administrations, redefined the boundaries of permissible civic action through legal instruments, bureaucratic mechanisms,

and discursive delegitimisation. Civil society actors were frequently portrayed as politically partisan, externally influenced, or inimical to national sovereignty. This environment compelled many organisations to adapt their strategies, reframe their agendas, or retreat from overtly political engagement. As a consequence, civil society in post-war Sri Lanka became increasingly fragmented, cautious, and uneven in its capacity to articulate dissent or mobilise collective action.

At the same time, Sri Lankan civil society became more deeply embedded within global and transnational networks. International non-governmental organisations, donor agencies, multilateral institutions, and diaspora groups played a significant role in funding, advocacy, and agenda-setting, particularly in areas related to human rights, reconciliation, and governance. These global–local interactions expanded material resources and international visibility for certain civil society actors, but they also intensified tensions around legitimacy, accountability, and political vulnerability. Engagement with transnational actors often exposed local organisations to heightened state scrutiny and accusations of foreign interference, complicating their domestic positioning.

The presence of religious institutions adds another critical layer to the understanding of civil society in Sri Lanka. Buddhist monastic orders, alongside Christian, Hindu, and Muslim religious organisations, have historically occupied influential positions within social and political life. These institutions have been actively involved in welfare provisions, education opportunities, and community mobilisation, while simultaneously engaging with nationalist discourses and electoral politics. Their participation in civil society thus, challenges conventional distinctions between civic engagement and political power, revealing how religious authority can both enable mobilisation and reinforce exclusionary or majoritarian narratives.

Gender-based civil society movements further illustrate the uneven and hierarchical nature of civic participation in Sri Lanka. Women’s organisations and feminist collectives have consistently engaged with issues of militarisation, economic precarity, social inequality, and post-war vulnerability. Despite their sustained interventions, gender-focused civic activism has often been marginalised within dominant political narratives and constrained by patriarchal social structures and securitised governance frameworks. These limitations have shaped both the visibility and the transformative potential of gender-based civil society engagement.

The economic crisis that intensified after 2019 and culminated in the mass mobilisation of 2022 marked another critical juncture in Sri Lanka's civil society trajectory. The unprecedented scale of economic collapse, coupled with widespread public discontent, generated new forms of collective action that extended beyond formal civil society organisations. The Aragalaya movement brought together diverse social groups, cutting across ethnic, class, and generational boundaries, and relied heavily on spontaneous mobilisation, digital platforms, and decentralised participation. This moment challenged existing models of NGO-centric civil society and exposed both the latent capacities and structural limitations of civic engagement in Sri Lanka.

While the 2022 mobilisation demonstrated the potential for broad-based civic action, it also revealed enduring constraints. The absence of sustained organisational structures, ideological coherence, and institutional pathways limited the long-term political impact of the movement. Moreover, entrenched political elites and institutional power structures proved resilient, underscoring the limits of episodic mobilisation in effecting structural transformation. The Aragalaya thus emerged as both a rupture and a continuation within Sri Lanka's civil society history, reflecting long-standing tensions between popular mobilisation and institutionalised power.

Against this backdrop, the study approaches civil society in Sri Lanka not as a singular democratic force nor merely as a victim of authoritarian governance, but as a contested and dynamic arena shaped by historical legacies, domestic political strategies, global interventions, religious authority, gendered hierarchies, and economic crisis. By situating civil society within these intersecting contexts, the study seeks to move beyond normative assumptions and examine how civic actors navigate shrinking and expanding spaces, adapt to changing political conditions, and renegotiate their relevance within an evolving political order.

The background to this study therefore lies in the need to understand civil society in Sri Lanka as an evolving political phenomenon rather than a fixed institutional category. Through a longitudinal and context-sensitive analysis, the study examines how civil society has been continuously reshaped by conflict, post-war governance, global–local interactions, and crisis-led mobilisation, and how these processes define both the possibilities and limits of civic action in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is defined by its temporal, spatial, and thematic focus on the evolution and functioning of civil society in Sri Lanka within a post-conflict and crisis-driven political context. Temporally, the study primarily examines developments from the end of the armed conflict in 2009 to the period following the economic and political crisis culminating in the mass mobilisation of 2022. This timeframe allows the study to capture multiple phases of political change, including post-war consolidation, authoritarian tendencies, regime transitions, economic collapse, and popular protest. While the post-2009 period forms the core analytical focus, the study also draws upon pre-war historical trajectories where necessary in order to contextualise the structural conditions under which civil society has operated.

Spatially, the study is located within Sri Lanka as a national political and social space, while simultaneously recognising that civil society in Sri Lanka cannot be understood in isolation from transnational and global influences. The analysis therefore incorporates the role of international actors, donor agencies, diaspora networks, and global advocacy platforms insofar as they intersect with domestic political processes and shape the operational environment of civil society organisations. The study does not pursue a comparative framework; rather, it treats Sri Lanka as a single, in-depth case through which broader questions of civil society, power, and political transformation are explored.

Thematically, the study focuses on civil society as a heterogeneous and contested domain rather than a unified or normatively democratic sphere. It examines formal and informal civil society organisations, advocacy groups, professional associations, religious institutions, gender-based movements, and emergent forms of popular mobilisation. Particular emphasis is placed on understanding how civil society actors engage with state power, negotiate regulatory and securitised environments, and adapt to changing political and economic conditions. The scope of the study is deliberately delimited to analysing civil society's political role and structural constraints, rather than offering an exhaustive sociological mapping of all associational life in Sri Lanka.

Research Gap

Despite a substantial body of scholarship on Sri Lanka's civil war, post-war governance, and democratic challenges, the role of civil society remains insufficiently examined in a comprehensive and longitudinal manner. Much of the existing literature tends to approach civil

society either as a normative agent of democratisation and peacebuilding or as a sector constrained by authoritarian governance. Such approaches often rely on static or idealised understandings of civil society, overlooking its internal contradictions, hierarchical structures, and differential relationships with power.

Furthermore, post-war analyses of Sri Lankan civil society have largely concentrated on the immediate aftermath of the conflict, particularly in relation to reconciliation, transitional justice, and development interventions. There has been comparatively limited engagement with how civil society has evolved over a longer period marked by shifting political regimes, increasing securitisation, economic crisis, and popular mobilisation. The 2022 mass protests, in particular, have often been treated as an exceptional or spontaneous event rather than situated within broader continuities and constraints shaping civic action.

Another significant gap lies in the insufficient integration of domestic and global dimensions in civil society analysis. While some studies focus on international influence and donor-driven agendas, and others emphasise internal political repression, fewer analyses examine how these forces intersect to produce ambivalent and contested outcomes for civil society actors. This study addresses these gaps by offering a context-sensitive and longitudinal analysis that situates civil society at the intersection of domestic power structures, global interventions, religious authority, gendered hierarchies, and crisis-led mobilisation.

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 primary objective of this study is to critically examine the transformation of civil society in Sri Lanka within the contexts of post-conflict governance, political change, and economic crisis. The study aims to analyse how state strategies of control, securitisation, and regulation have reshaped civic space and influenced civil society practices since 2009. It also seeks to assess the impact of global, regional, and transnational actors on domestic civil society dynamics, particularly in relation to legitimacy, agenda-setting, and political vulnerability. An additional objective is to examine the roles played by religious institutions and gender-based movements within Sri Lanka's civil society, highlighting their contributions as well as their structural constraints. Finally, the study aims to situate the 2022 mass mobilisation within a broader historical and political framework, evaluating its significance for understanding both the possibilities and limits of civil society in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach in order to examine the role, functioning, and transformation of civil society in Sri Lanka within a post-conflict and crisis-driven political context. The qualitative nature of the research is grounded in the study's emphasis on processes, meanings, institutional practices, and power relations rather than on quantifiable variables. The research design is therefore oriented towards understanding how civil society operates within specific political, historical, and socio-economic conditions, and how civic actors negotiate constraints imposed by the state, global interventions, and shifting governance frameworks.

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data have been generated through semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals associated with civil society organisations and related civic initiatives. These interviews were designed to capture experiential insights into the functioning of civil society, the challenges faced by civic actors, and their interactions with state institutions and external actors. In order to ensure ethical integrity and confidentiality, the identities of interviewees have been anonymised wherever requested, and references are made using non-identifying descriptors. Interview material is used to contextualise and substantiate broader analytical arguments rather than to produce generalisable claims.

In addition to interviews, primary sources include official government documents, policy statements, legal and regulatory frameworks, public communications, and reports relevant to the governance and regulation of civil society in Sri Lanka. These materials provide insight into state practices, institutional discourses, and formal mechanisms through which civic space has been structured and contested. Secondary sources comprise news reports, academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, and reports produced by national and international organisations. These sources are used to situate the study within existing scholarly debates on civil society, post-conflict governance, and state–society relations, and to contextualise empirical observations within broader analytical frameworks. Methodologically, the study relies on textual and content analysis to examine policy documents, organisational reports, press briefings, and transcripts of interviews. Where relevant, interpretive design is used in the research to trace patterns, continuities, and shifts in the ways civil society is framed, regulated, and engaged across different political phases. The study is conducted longitudinal in nature, allowing to reflect on changes over time rather than treating civil society as a static entity. Sri Lanka is extensively analysed as a single, in-depth case within the South Asian societal context. This approach enables a detailed examination of the interaction between civil society, state power, and global influences within a specific national context. Rather than pursuing comparative generalisation, the study prioritises analytical depth and contextual specificity. The methodology acknowledges limitations related to access, representation, and the evolving nature of political developments. These limitations are addressed through careful triangulation. Throughout the study, attention is paid to maintaining analytical consistency and methodological transparency.

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

Chapter One establishes the theoretical foundations of the dissertation and directly engages the first research question concerning the dominant ideas on the emergence and scope of civil society, as well as the limitations of those ideas. It traces the evolution of civil society as a concept across classical, modern, and contemporary traditions, and critically examines how these frameworks have been shaped by European historical experiences and liberal-democratic assumptions. The chapter emphasises that these theoretical lineages are not neutral: they carry particular historical conditions, institutional experiences, and political expectations that cannot be mechanically transferred to postcolonial contexts. A key contribution of this chapter is its sustained attention to the limits of dominant civil society theories when applied to postcolonial and conflict-affected societies. Rather than treating civil society as a naturally autonomous sphere that stands outside state power, the chapter develops the conceptual tools necessary to see civil society as politically embedded and historically contingent. This analytical lens becomes central for the thesis as a whole, because it allows the study to interpret Sri Lankan civil society not through a normative “democratic ideal” frame, but as an arena shaped by negotiation, constraint, and adaptation.

The findings consolidated in the Conclusion reinforces the necessity of this conceptual grounding. The dissertation ultimately shows that civil society in Sri Lanka cannot be adequately understood through assumptions of uniform autonomy or linear democratic function. Instead, civil society emerges as a dynamic and contested space, shaped by historical legacies and political conditions that reconfigure what civic action can mean, what it can achieve, and how it is positioned against (or within) structures of power. Chapter One thus provides the conceptual entry point through which the later empirical chapters are interpreted, ensuring that the thesis does not artificially impose external models to understand Sri Lankan political realities but builds its analysis from within those realities.

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

Chapter Two examines the evolution of civil society in Sri Lanka by providing a historically grounded analysis of how civic life developed under shifting political contexts. It situates Sri Lankan civil society within longer historical processes, tracing how associational activity emerged and developed within structures shaped by governance traditions, socio-cultural institutions, and political formations. The chapter maps the emergence and changing roles of welfare organisations, trade unions, professional bodies, and religious associations, locating them within Sri Lanka’s specific political context rather than treating them as universal equivalents of civil society institutions elsewhere. A key emphasis in this chapter is that civil society in Sri Lanka must be understood through both continuity and change. Civil society does not appear as a singular bloc; it is shaped by institutional histories, social hierarchies, and political environments that condition participation and legitimacy. The chapter also examines how the civil war altered civic engagement, and how civil society adapted to violence, displacement, and securitised governance environments. These historical layers matter because they establish the groundwork for understanding the post-war period that becomes central to later chapters.

The Conclusion’s synthesis of findings strengthens this chapter’s importance by emphasising that Sri Lankan civil society is best understood not as a stable institutional sector but as an arena formed through constraint and negotiation. Rather than treating civil society as uniformly oppositional or uniformly progressive, the dissertation shows that civic life is shaped by the wider political environment and by internal differentiation. In other words, civil society’s “nature and dynamics” are historically produced and politically mediated—an insight that Chapter Two provides as the 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 domestic political and social conditions that shape civil society in Sri Lanka. Building on the historical grounding of the previous chapter, it focuses on internal structures that condition civic life and civic space. The chapter examines the role of the state, institutions, and governance mechanisms in defining the boundaries within which civil society operates. It analyses how policy, regulation, and political practices structure civic possibility, and how domestic power relations shape access, legitimacy, and participation. A key focus here is how domestic contexts influence civil society through mechanisms such as securitisation, surveillance, and the management of dissent. The

chapter's analysis submits how civic mobilisation and civic voice do not occur in an abstract public sphere but within institutionalised environments that can expand or shrink civic space. It further explores how social hierarchies and internal differentiations within civil society shape participation and power, demonstrating that civil society is not internally uniform and that its capacity and vulnerability vary across actors and contexts.

The concluding findings of the dissertation consolidate and sharpen these claims. They show that civil society in Sri Lanka is shaped profoundly by domestic power structures, and that civic space is negotiated within the parameters established by governance, political authority, and institutional practices. The Conclusion also underscores that post-war political conditions and securitised governance arrangements contributed to narrowing civic space and redefining civic practice, often encouraging safer forms of engagement and pushing certain kinds of civic action away from political contestation. In this sense, Chapter Three is essential to the thesis's wider argument in the thesis that Sri Lankan civil society must be understood as emerging "from within," shaped by domestic political realities 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 the intersection of global and local forces in shaping Sri Lankan civil society. The chapter analyses how international norms, development assistance, transnational advocacy, and geopolitical interests influence civic space and civic action. It explores the role of international organisations, donors, and diaspora networks in shaping funding patterns, agendas, and modes of civil society engagement. A crucial move in this chapter is that it does not treat global influence as unidirectionally imposed. Instead, it examines how global forces interact with domestic political structures, legal frameworks, and social norms, and how global ideas are adapted, resisted, or reinterpreted by local actors. By integrating global and domestic factors in a single analytical frame, the chapter demonstrates that civil society in Sri Lanka is shaped through the continuous negotiation between external pressures and internal political realities.

The findings synthesised in the Conclusion deepen this chapter's argument by emphasising the ambivalence of global–local interaction. The dissertation's overall findings highlight that external engagement is not simply enabling or empowering; it is also shaped by the political, economic, and normative priorities of external actors themselves, and it can intensify domestic contestation and suspicion around legitimacy. At the same time, the Conclusion underscores

that civil society is not static under these pressures: it evolves through adaptation and hybridity, combining global norms with local repertoires of civic action. This process also produces internal differentiation within civil society, varying degrees of autonomy, vulnerability, and political positioning, rather than a single uniform civic sector. Chapter Four also provides the thesis with a framework to interpret crisis periods, particularly when global–local interactions become more visible and contested. The Conclusion’s treatment of crisis and civic mobilisation reinforces the argument that civil society’s role is not fixed; it is reconfigured by political and economic rupture, by shifts in governance, and by the changing nature of domestic–external engagement.

Conclusion

The concluding chapter brings together the findings of the four substantive chapters and revisits the research questions and hypotheses in a consolidated form. It demonstrates 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 within postcolonial and post-conflict settings. The Conclusion emphasises that the dissertation challenges dominant theoretical assumptions by grounding civil society analysis in Sri Lanka’s specific political and social context. It highlights the importance of examining domestic and global factors together, especially in periods of crisis that reveal new forms of civic practice and contested civic space. The concluding findings also draw attention to civil society’s internal differentiation and to the complex relationship between civic action and shifting political environments, particularly when state strategies, socio-cultural structures, and external forces jointly shape what civil society can do and how it is positioned. Finally, the Conclusion reflects on the broader relevance of the study’s findings for understanding civic life in other conflict-affected contexts, while identifying future research directions that emerge from the dissertation’s framework and empirical observations. In doing so, the thesis closes by reaffirming its central argument: Sri Lankan civil society must be analysed not through imported assumptions, but through the historically and politically embedded realities that structure civic space, civic agency, and civic limitation.