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Why political parties fail

Subrata K. Mitra and La Toya Waha

Politics in contemporary South Asian states is marked by significant outbreaks of violence, mostly sparked by religious conflict. The violence that marked the partition of British India into two independent states of Pakistan and India on the basis of religion has had its sequel in terms of a string of violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims. The civil war in Sri Lanka that lasted almost 30 years shows how the pattern of communal violence repeats elsewhere. Breakaway fringe groups from political parties, or radical elements of society, often launch violent struggles against the state and religious establishments of opponents in the name of religion. Parties remain helpless, either to rein in their renegade supporters, or to express themselves firmly on the issues of militant groups acting in the name of religion. In India, Muslims were targeted for alleged illegal transportation or slaughter of cows. In Sri Lanka, anti-halal and cattle slaughter campaigns have been launched by such elements. In both post-colonial societies, these activities were accompanied by violence and death. The Buddhist–Muslim clashes in Aluthgama (2013), Galle (2017) and Kandy (2018) and the lynching of Muslims in cow-related violence in India, are only the most recent examples of the violence that lurks under the surface of democratic politics and breaks out sporadically. These political acts have pushed the states towards specialised agencies of security, bureaucracy and taken recourse to appeals to civil society. Political parties – the main, significant actors of democratic politics – besides expressing politically ineffectual homilies, have been conspicuously absent from the scene in terms of articulation of the issue, or its aggregation into their political agendas. When interests are ‘negotiated’ in the streets, rather than in parliament, or put on the hustings as electoral issues, for all practical purposes, parties have failed.

Political parties and religion in India and Sri Lanka

In both India and Sri Lanka, the role of religion has changed significantly since Independence from British colonial rule. India and Ceylon both started as secular states after they regained
their independence from British colonial rule in 1947 and 1948 respectively. Today, India’s major governing party is often described as a ‘Hindu nationalist’ party, and Sri Lanka – the name itself a concession to religious nationalism – provides Buddhism with ‘the foremost place’ since the rewriting of the constitution in 1972, and even the recent (2018) constitution-making process is unlike to change that.

Despite these successful implementations of central demands made by religious movements and groups in India and Sri Lanka respectively, religious violence perpetrated by the religious parties’ milieux frequently erupts along the way. Linked through religious-political organisations, riots and acts of violence appear to be no isolated incidents, but elements of repertoire in the contentious politics of religion in the post-colonial state. Key political parties in both countries are linked to those violent organisations in one way or the other, like the Bharatiya Janata Party (the Indian People’s Party, BJP) to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (the National Volunteer Force, RSS) in India and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party, JHU) to the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force, BBS) milieu in Sri Lanka. Despite those links, violence does not wither when these parties hold power in the state. The parties appear to fail in transporting the interests of religious agents successfully to the non-violent, constitutional decision-making process. So, why do established parties fail and religious parties – fringe groups that are actually political movements but contest elections under the label of ‘political parties’ – take up the space that should normally belong to political parties?

Violence in multiple forms linked to religion – ranging between mobilisation of angry crowds, bloody riots and suicide bombings – is today on the political agenda of many states. Extensive religious conflicts such as those in the Middle East are reminiscent of the Thirty Years War, which destroyed wide parts of Europe in the early seventeenth century. While the atrocities of the Thirty Years War resulted in the Westphalian peace, which made war the business of the state, and the subjects’ religion a private matter, religious violence at a non-state level has returned to many countries. In democratic states, political parties – key intermediaries between state and society and central element of political modernity – would be expected to moderate religious tensions by negotiation at the state level. Political parties should serve as a key link between the modern state and the society, convey interests from one to the other and provide the organisational framework for interest articulation, elite recruitment and persuasion (LaPalombara and Weiner, 1966: 3).

Religious rioting, which one may interpret as ‘mini-civil-wars’, often expresses the diverging interests of different religious communities. Here, it seems, the political parties are unable to transport the interests of the society into the state and vice versa. In the agenda setting, it seems, political religion slipped out. Instead, the issue is tackled by private entrepreneurs, who bring religious contention not to parliament but to the streets.

**Boundary conditions for moderation of religious conflict**

In post-colonial societies, political parties are often torn between the opposing poles of the formally secular credentials of the modern state and the political demands of their religious clients. Since the outset of independence, religious parties are between the poles of playing to the rules of the democratic state and discharging their duty to represent their voters’ interests, which are linked to the redefinition of the state’s values. We argue the field of tension lies in the incompatibility of the religious demands and the four factors required for parties’ political moderation.

The boundary conditions are: (1) an institutional arrangement that provides a secure territorial niche for identity demands; (2) an ecclesiastic order that is capable of ‘confining the storm troopers to the barracks’, i.e. restraining the fringe fanatics from upsetting the political limitations on their public activities that moderation entails; (3) the relative power of party managers vs. party activists:
the more the managers have room to manoeuvre, the more likely is moderation; and (4) a shared basis of values between state and society. The conditions will be discussed below in detail.

1 A secure territorial niche for religion, of the kind that the Westphalian peace provided to dominant religions, helps them moderate their stance and extend toleration to minorities. A condition for moderation is, thus, either a national state based on a dominant faith, or, within a state, power sharing, based, in particular, on federalism and the capacity of the regional government to accommodate the core values of religious activists. In India, the induction of Sikh values and leaders into high governmental office in the State of Punjab (e.g. the 1999 recognition by the Punjab government of Sikh religious values and leaders) took the sting out of religious extremism. Hindu nationalists drew their inspiration from Swami Dayanand who founded the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement in 1875. The core ideas of this movement were subsequently enriched and complemented by Vivekanand, the founding of Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (1915), and, of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1935. Hinduism, a coded word which merges Hindu religious values and community with the unity of India, is a key concept. The concept of swadeshi, originally formulated by Mahatma Gandhi and now co-opted into the pantheon of Hindu nationalism, was added as well as were political demands for a Uniform Civil Code, the reconstruction of the Ram Temple and the abolition of special rights to the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Buddhism in Ceylon, too, links religion to the unity of the country. Since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century political aims were formulated within the Buddhist revivalist movements. A central figure herein was Anagarika Dharmapala who spread the idea of a Buddhist nation, linking the Sinhalese to Buddhism and to the united island.

2 The second condition puts the onus on the inner organisational and power structure of the religion itself. The capacity of a political party to self-police, and encourage the more extreme elements into politically brokered moderation (or expel them) is a crucial part of the bargain. Such is the case of the Sikh religion, which is equipped with its one and only holy book (the Guru Granth Saheb), a religious order (the Khalsa) and religious properties (Gurdwaras), and is governed by a high administrative act and order, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. This institutional capacity is conspicuously lacking in Hinduism. The Hindu community, split among so many different sects, competing orders and belief systems and an ontology that conspicuously denies the existence of one ultimate and supreme truth, does not have a central coordinating body that can generate the basic agreement on scripture, sacred beliefs and symbols, in order to strike a deal with its adversaries. The two major religions of India, Hinduism and Islam, do not have such national organisations or bureaucracies that would have binding power over all the adherents of these religions. The major religious institution in Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism is the sangha, the monastic order of monks (and nuns) (Bechert, 1974). The sangha has great religious authority in the society but is divided in different sects, which share the basis of religious teachings, but derive from different lineages. These sects and their temples have head monks, the mahanayakes. While mahanayakes are quite influential in the Sri Lankan society, they have little handle with regard to monks’ expulsion. Repeatedly in Sri Lanka’s independent history, attempts were made to give the head monks a legal basis for excluding or ‘derobing’ monks in case of misconduct – each of which failed (Waha, 2018). In addition, the heads of the sects are not part of a unified authoritative body. Therefore, different
sangha authorities can support or reject different stances. Since the politicisation of the Vidyodaya and Vidyalanarka, the erstwhile major centres of monastic education, the sangha is divided with regard to party and ideological affiliations (see Seneviratne, 1999). While in Theravada Buddhism the monastic order, the sangha, plays a central role, it is divided and therefore lacks a singular religious authority, too.

3 Third, the relative power of party managers over party activists encourages moderation. Mobilisation along religious lines often works via the support of ‘related’ institutions or organisations. Potential deficiencies of the party, particularly its elite character, are overcome by its association with religious and charitable organisations. The BJP draws from the support of social service institutions (Thachil, 2014: 457) and the mobilisation capacities of the RSS. Similarly, SLFP and JHU gained from the support and legitimacy provided by the sangha and monk organisations (Wickramasinghe, 2014). This was particularly the case in the 1956 election, where the SLFP came to power with much support from Buddhist monks (see Manor, 1989; Wickramasinghe, 2014) and in the 2004 formation of the Jathika Hela Uruma (Waha 2018). For these religious parties, mobilisation capacity and legitimacy largely remain with the (religious) party activists and limit the party managers’ room to manoeuvre.

4 Finally, the opponent and the shared basis of values matter. In Europe, the position of religion was fought over brutally in the Thirty Years War. In India, the Muslim–Hindu divide and the subsequent partition left Pakistan as an explicit Muslim state, and India as a secular state. Congress, initially the major political party – and for long the only party with direct political power – regarded Muslims, who had remained in India without political leadership, as its ‘guaranteed’ electorate. The perception of no ‘secure niche’ for Hinduism in a Hindu majoritarian state, which required persistent consideration for Muslim sentiments, would not allow for the overcoming of religious cleavages. Separate Muslim marriage laws instead of a shared civil code underlined the lack of consensus on values. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil demand for autonomy and the separation of the country juxtaposes the idea of a unitary state. These demands have been pursued by military force and international support. In addition, the adaption of Muslim marriage laws to human rights regulations led to protests from Muslim organisations, and emphasised again the lack of a shared basis of values. In addition, the political demands by the Muslim minority for an autonomous region based on religious identity, encouraged Buddhists to politicise their opposing religious demands. Similarly, one can hardly expect Hindu nationalism – tied together with political Islam in an action-reaction-syndrome – to be willing to conceptualise, specify, institute and deliver a moderation deal when a similar deal from India’s Muslims is not yet forthcoming.

India: religion in a ‘secular cage’?

The Indian state upholds the idea of secularism, yet, for the first time in three decades, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gained a single-party-majority in 2014. Even more, Narendra Modi, who was a full-time activist (pracharak) of the RSS, the former Chief Minister of Gujarat, who is alleged to have been connected to the communal clashes there in 2002, became Indian prime minister.

The constitution of India recognises a diversity of cultures, creeds and religions, none of which is accorded a status of superiority over the others. That makes India, in terms of the formal structure of the country, a multi-cultural and multi-religious state. The word ‘secular’ was inserted into the preamble to the constitution in 1976. In India, it implies both a wall of separation between the ‘church’ and the state (dharmanirapekshta) and an equal status for all religions (sarva dharma samabhava). Consequently, though in terms of the data generated by
India’s decennial census India is a Hindu ‘majority’ country, this fact does not give a special status or hegemony to Hinduism. Hindus themselves are divided into many sects and denominations as well – to the point where some scholars question the status of Hinduism as a distinctive religion altogether.

The Indian independence struggle headed by the Indian National Congress (INC) und the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, had sought to unite different social strata for the common cause. Organisations representing religious interests had also formed and sought to shape India. Particularly Hindu and Muslim organisations had formed and evolved as a reaction to diverging interests and increasing conflicts. Already in the nineteenth century Hindu demands, such as cow protection, were articulated (Kulke and Rothermund, 2006: 398). The RSS, an important Hindu organisation promoting Hindutva, was founded in 1925. The idea of a Muslim nation and the claim to require protection from a Hindu majority, too, had furthered the agitation of the All-India Muslim League for the separation of India and the formation of a separate Muslim state, Pakistan, on the basis of Muslim majoritarian provinces. After independence and partition, the INC sought to accommodate minorities, find consensus and establish a meaningful equilibrium of forces within the realm of the secular state.

The RSS was banned following Gandhi’s assassination by an RSS member, while Hindu religious interests were prevented from taking a direct influence on political decision-making in the state via their own political party. When the ban on the RSS was lifted, Hindu nationalists were free to seek election in the elections of 1951–1952. They were led by the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), a party founded by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee to act as the political wing of the RSS.\footnote{14}

While during the ‘Congress System’, religious interests could be indirectly articulated into the political decision-making process, the BJP provided the opportunity for the voter to transport religious interests directly to the political arena. Keeping informal relations to the RSS, the BJP could mobilise along the religious cleavage and drew on the desire of many Hindus to see a more prominent role for Hindu culture within the institution of the secular state and to deny special treatment for minorities, and a special status for the Muslim majority State of Jammu and Kashmir (Mitra, 2017: 154).

Thereby, the issue related to the contested sacred space in Ayodhya became – and remained – a part of the BJP’s election manifesto. Having set the construction of the Temple of Rama in Ayodhya on the political agenda, the BJP’s room to manoeuvre was limited by constitutional frames and the party anyway failed to implement its promise. Compromises on the sacred places could not be found and made. While the party political representation of this radical Hindu interest failed to produce the desired result, private entrepreneurs furthered the creation of precedents. Consequently, the issue was taken out in the streets and resulted in the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a global Hindu activist organisation, and not the BJP was the main force behind this, though, many prominent leaders of the BJP have alleged to have been involved.

In relation to the failed erection of the Ram Temple, and Hindu–Muslim strikes and counter-strikes, violence escalated in Godhra in 2002.\footnote{15} The BJP, led by Narendra Modi, was in power in Gujarat at the time. The election campaigning on this issue and the soft stance taken by the BJP government towards the perpetrators of violence, had provided a fertile ground for the escalation of means on the Hindu site. While some ministers of the BJP were alleged to be responsible for instilling violence, the wider party leadership’s involvement could not be confirmed. Yet, the BJP government accepted the political responsibility (Juergensmeyer, 2017: 104–109).

Beyond the ambiguous relation to the violent organisations and communal violence, the BJP moderated its stance once in power. Indian coalition politics required moderation to retain power and office. The commitment to moderation was repeated when the BJP was re-elected
as the largest party in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 1999. Yet, rather than cultural and confessional issues, the BJP turned to the promotion of good governance (Mitra, 2017: 154).

In 2004 and 2009, the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance won elections. Restoring the pattern of single-party majority, the BJP returned to power in 2014 as the largest party (Mitra and Schöttli, 2016). However, the BJP, which had garnered handsome political dividends from its invocation of Hindutva, moved on to *vikasvad* – development in Hindi – once in office, at the head of a 14-party coalition. However, when under electoral pressure, the party’s organisation wing, with the support of the RSS, moved to promote Hindutva. While in the BJP’s 2014 election manifesto traditional BJP positions were softened, like the stance taken on Ram Mandir, the Uniform Civil Code and the rejection of the special rights given to Jammu and Kashmir (Article 370), the issue of cow slaughter became a part of the political agenda. Violent actions were taken by religious activists acting in their personal capacity and not in the name of the BJP, to try to settle the issue. Despite the BJP government’s focus on development, it made efforts for legislation in this regard. Giving in to the pressure of activists’ demands, the government sought to implement a nation-wide ban on slaughtering cows. Again, the party was caught between the opposing poles of rule of a democratic secular state and the representation of electoral demands. Although the courts ruled that the ban had to be lifted, activists again took the issue to the streets.

### Sri Lanka: the violent underbelly of the Buddhist state?

Sri Lanka, originally called Ceylon, started as a secular state with a strict separation of state and religion. At the time of independence in 1948, political parties were not overtly concerned with religion and the political leadership of the major party, the United National Party (UNP), sought to prevent religion from entering the political scene. Today, Sri Lanka’s constitution provides for religious freedom, but gives Buddhism the ‘foremost place’. Since 2004 the parliament and successive governments have encompassed a political party led and mainly filled by Buddhist monks, and a new party has emerged from the radical Buddhist monk organisation, Bodu Bala Sena, explicitly borrowing its model (and name) from the BJP and RSS in India.

In contrast to India, the religious majority in Sri Lanka is not divided along the lines of ethnicity or language. To the contrary, the religious and ethnic identifications of the majority are widely interlinked. The *mahavamsa*, Sri Lanka’s great chronicle, relates the Sinhalese, Buddhism and the country to one another and links the fate of the Sinhalese to the continuation of Buddhism on the island. As distinct from India, independence movements in Ceylon did not unite different ethnic and religious communities. To the contrary, the politicisation of wider parts of the Sinhalese society had occurred in the context of the Buddhist revivalist movements and related campaigns, such as the Temperance movement, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Organisations like the Sinhala Maha Shaba, powerful due to their mobilisation capacities among the masses, yet, were not allowed to play a leading role, neither in the attainment of independence nor in shaping the constitution. Similar to the Indian Congress, the UNP sought to be a party without a particular ethnic or religious label.

The break-away of D.S. Senanayake from the Ceylon National Congress and the formation of the UNP were intended to present a new start, with which the relations between the majority and the minorities should be strengthened (de Silva, 2014: 602). Despite the evident tensions between the ethnicities and the existence of powerful Buddhist forces, the Sinhalese leadership decided not to form a special Sinhalese or Buddhist party. The UNP included members of the ethnic and religious groups and sought to establish a secular state and a balance of power between the communities.
In India, under the leadership of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, a modicum of unity was achieved between Hindus and Muslims. It failed to keep India united, but succeeded in keeping the rump Indian state that emerged from colonial rule, formally secular. In contrast, in Ceylon, the democratic and secular state had come under attack from two contentious claim makers, the Tamils and the Sinhalese Buddhists, after independence. The idea that it is the Sinhalese’s given duty to protect the existence of Buddhism on the island, suggested Buddhist nationalist movements to demand the protection of Buddhism by the state and all over the whole island. The UNP’s moderation furthered the resentments held by Buddhist groups. But D.S. Senanayake was, like Nehru in India, able to link state and society by his personality. With the trust put in him, the UNP leader and first prime minister of independent Ceylon was able to establish a fragile equilibrium between the religious and ethnic communities. After Senanayake’s death in 1952 and his successors’ failure to publicly respect Buddhist sentiments, religious issues became key components of political differences.

Under the guidance of the SLFP led by the widow of the prominent politician, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike’s widow, a new constitution was established in 1972. Its provisions included the stating of Buddhism’s foremost place. This provision was taken over by the UNP’s reformulation of the constitution in 1978. To appease the minorities, proportional representation was introduced, which secured a favourable political representation for the minorities. At this point, religion and state could, from a Buddhist perspective, have found equilibrium. Yet, the calls for a separate Tamil homeland grew louder and challenged the security of Buddhist dominance over the whole island. The Sinhalese’s interests for the security and unity of the sacred Buddhist land and the mainly Hindu Tamils’ interests for a homeland and their own secure niche were so adverse that any attempts to moderate were considered by many Sinhalese to be betrayal. No shared consensus on Buddhism’s place could be achieved. Buddhism’s dominance in Sri Lanka was fundamentally contested by the Tamils’ demand for autonomy. Political turmoil spilled over into the streets.

The brokered peace negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the early 2000s incentivised further politicisation of the Muslim identity for political gains. The parties involved in the talks would not consider religious communities’ interests, neither those of the Muslims nor of the Buddhists. The violent repression by the LTTE and the negligence thereof in the negotiations, provoked the demand for their own Muslim Thesam in the east of the country. The simultaneous moderation by both major political parties, the party organisers’ inability to tame the radical fringes, and the implicit prohibition to use religion in partisan politics by media and international agents, created the basis again for negotiation of religion’s place to be taken from the party level to the public level. In addition, the support of certain segments within the sangha helped to raise awareness that Buddhism was ‘in danger’.

The claim of the whole island for Buddhism led to the formation of new political parties, and more moderate parties found things electorally challenging. By the early 2000s, both major parties were losing legitimacy and support among Buddhists. In response, certain Buddhist religious actors – monks – formed a political party to capitalise from the discontent. For the first time monks collectively engaged directly and actively in party politics, leading and contesting elections within their own political party. Thus, religion has now taken a new and prominent place in the modern state of Sri Lanka. The 2004 electoral success of the then newly formed Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) reflected the party’s ability to channel the extreme interests into party politics – and gain from representing radical religious interests.

Although the JHU had achieved a prominent position, it joined the SLFP-led coalition, together with Muslim parties. As a member of the coalition government the JHU moderated its stance. Dissatisfaction with the JHU’s political achievements led to a break-away of extremist
fringes. Low-level violent interactions in the course of the contestation of sacred Buddhist land between religious groupings began to grow. In the course of an increasing cleavage along the lines of religion, Buddhist extremist organisations emerged, the most prominent of which is the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). The lack of ability of the sangha leadership to ‘call back the Buddhist monastic stormtroopers’ – even the initial support of the organisation by high-ranking sangha representatives – encouraged this development.

The voting out of office of President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2015, who allegedly profited from support of the BBS, and the electoral victory of a never-seen-before coalition led by moderate forces of the two major parties, UNP and SLFP, including minority parties and the JHU – which had withdrawn support from the president – seems to have curtailed religious radicalism. Even today, however, members of the governing coalition of moderate parties keep an ambivalent political stance on Buddhism, torn between the modern state and religious interests of their electorate, much like their equivalents up north in India.

Conclusion: why do parties fail?

The modern state was born in South Asia as a result of a relatively peaceful transfer of power, and not the 30-year bloodbath of all against all in the name of religion that gave birth to the modern national states of Europe, which eventually became liberal, democratic and secular. Still, both India and Sri Lanka took over parliamentary democracy and first-past-the-post electoral rules. Despite the tendency of convergence towards the position of the median voter and a structural incentive to moderate, the logic of moderation has built into it the seeds of resentment on the part of potential losers on the extreme flanks of religion-inspired political groups competing for office against the tendency towards moderation. Post-industrial liberal democratic societies with deeply rooted modern political institutions seek to overcome the potential danger to legitimacy through a combination of techniques, aimed at co-opting the ‘naysayers’ (as the German CDU co-opts the Bavarian CSU), the second ballot system (as in France) neutralising opposition to the core values of the system through legislation, or keeping the extremists out of the arena through explicit or implicit rules of exclusion. However, whereas the rules of exclusion are applied fairly across the ideological spectrum, if they end up excluding a substantial number of voters and candidates through restrictive electoral laws, results of these elections cannot claim full legitimacy from the underlying society. The rules of exclusion, the price that liberal democracy and communal violence has to pay to sustain moderation, can imperil a fragile democracy, particularly in a post-colonial democracy.

Seen from this angle, Indian democracy in the 1950s was put under a double bind. In the first place, its electoral rules had to rein in anti-system forces to balance representation, effective law making and governmental coherence. In addition, the new post-colonial state, lacking the credibility that comes through long and incremental evolution, had to generate trust from the vast, new, inchoate, sprawling and often physically inaccessible national electorate. The ‘Congress System’, in this sense, was a masterly invention that maintained a personal linkage with the society through the founding generation of the state like Nehru who had led the national struggle for decades prior to Independence. The one-party dominant system that resulted gave the Congress Party a hegemonic position from which to steer the society from colonial rule towards popular democracy. As the Congress Party started losing strength in the 1960s, the alienated and excluded flank voters started moving towards a new, radical, anti-system dimension. The availability of large anti-Congress coalitions helped mobilise the discontented into large anti-regime blocs which in some instances produced chronic instability. Similarly, the Modi government appears to have generated the conditions for a return to the mobilisation of
all anti-government forces under one umbrella. The memory of the 1960s when a grand coalition of the extremists brought a new, anti-system dimension to Indian politics remains fresh in the strategic calculations of dissidents in current Indian parties as one can see in the elections held after the 2014 victory of the BJP-led NDA coalition and serves to keep up their hopes to gain power without having to become moderate.

In Sri Lanka, the secular state came first and the negotiations about the place of religion in state and society came later. Repeatedly, the moderation of major parties in these ‘negotiations’ and the attempts by party managers to ignore the radical fringes in favour of an understanding with the minorities led both to the formation of new parties and the outbreak of violence. The sangha is a mobilising factor, and the willingness of certain parts of the sangha to support groups which claim to protect Buddhism in face of an unresponsive, incapable or corrupted elite, allows party organisers little room to manoeuvre with regard to making concession against Buddhist interests. The Sri Lankan case shows the necessity of an agreement between different groups for shared values and the rule for interaction within the state. Banning the identity interests of the majority from the political agenda, while simultaneously allowing for claims based on identity by the minorities, leads to an imbalance, which the majority is unlikely to tolerate for long. If major political parties seek the consensus with the minorities by dropping the majority’s religious interests, private entrepreneurs are likely to ‘negotiate’ the issue violently.

The political systems of both post-colonial states, Sri Lanka and India, have incentivised coalition building between diverse parties. While coalition building is able to ‘turn rebels into stakeholders’ and allows for the moderation of extreme parties, which in turn can further the stability of the system, the moderation of extreme religious parties prevented them from constitutionally accommodating central values held by a religious community. When parties, which had rallied on religious cleavages, thus turned to consensus building and moderation, the electorate, who had hoped to express religious interests through parties, felt betrayed. At the same time, it has been shown, the links between the party cadre and the extreme – and at times militant – organisations remain. While the parties fail to implement central values and vote promises with regard to religious dominance and programmes, they provide patronage and support for the radical organisations.

The nation-states of South Asia have not evolved through the violent purges of minorities and religious pogroms that Europe saw. To get the kind of state–religion linkage that Europe established in 1648 and gradually refined over the years as societies, democratised South Asian states will first need to understand the enormity of the ‘religious problem’, and move firmly both in the direction of power-sharing and constitutional conflation of the sacred and the secular. Political parties have a critical role to play in the creation of an institutional arrangement and cultural basis of the state that can take religions seriously enough to write it into its basic structure and in the process, and take it off the sound and fury of everyday politics.

Notes
3 According to ‘Chapter – II Buddhism’ of the Sri Lankan constitution: ‘The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and...
foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e).’ (See also online at www.parliament.lk/files/pdf/constitution.pdf). This was introduced in 1972 and kept since the constitution of 1978.

4 See for a quite encompassing analysis Münkler (2017).

5 See Mitra (2013) for the formal derivation of these conditions.

6 Concerning INC and BJP, a kind of ‘syphoning’ of the sacred values from one another, a ‘political osmosis’ leading to value consensus between adversaries has been observed (see cow slaughter ban in several states).

7 A major theoretical foundation for the movement was provided by Vināyaka Dāmodara Sīvarakāra’s concept of Hindutva articulated with great force in his book Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu? (1949 [1925]).

8 See a collection of Dharmapala’s writings in Guruge (1965).

9 Compared to Semitic religions, Hinduism’s commitment problems are enormous. The status of Hinduism as a ‘religion’ itself remains a subject of scholarly controversy.

10 The demand for more autonomy in a ‘Muslim Thesam’ (homeland) was proclaimed in the Oluvil Declaration in 2003. Reflecting the rejection of the claim, newspapers compared it to the Vadduk-koddai Declaration made by TULF in 1976, which furthered the escalation of the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese representatives. See for example The Sunday Leader, 9 February 2003, ‘Oluvil declaration proclaims advent of Muslim Thesam’ (www.thesundayleader.lk/archive/20030209/issues.htm, last accessed 21 August 2018). For a detailed analysis see Waha (2018).

11 Splits among Shias, Sunnis, Ahmadiyas, divided on lines of caste and language, lacking a national order or even a consensus on the validity of a national order is reminiscent of the pre-independence split between the Deoband and the Aligarh Schools. Muslims of India were left leader-less when the Muslim League left India for the happy hunting ground of the promised land of Pakistan. For Muslims who were left ‘stranded’ in India, the state, claiming to be secular, remained aloof in the beginning, and in little incremental steps, acquired a Hindu majoritarian lustre. The continuation of the Ramjannabhumi—Babri Masjid dispute is only a further indicator of this problem of an ambivalent co-existence of non-moderating Hindu nationalism and non-moderating Islamic extremism, living cheek-by-jowl.

12 Indian People’s Party


14 The RSS’s own constitution prohibits its direct participation in politics.

15 For a detailed description of the events, which due to a lack of space cannot be given here, see Jaffrelot (2003) and Juergensmeyer (2017).

16 For details of the campaign and electoral outcome, see Mitra and Schöttli (2016).

17 See Mitra and Schöttli (2016: 618) for an analysis of the BJP’s 2014 election manifesto.

18 As mentioned above, Sri Lankan Buddhist collective identity in wide parts inextricably links the island, the Sinhalese and Buddhist faith to one another. In the revivalist movements this notion has been spread or refreshed among the local Buddhist Sinhalese population. Identifications along regional lines, for example as Kandyan or Low-Country Sinhalese, have played a significant role in political representation during British colonial rule, but were covered by the shared identification as Buddhist-Sinhalese in the political realm.

19 In the early 2000s both major parties, the UNP and SLFP, converged in their programme at the median. Despite the Sri Lankan Army’s recurring war activities with the LTTE, the parties sought to make concessions to Tamil’s autonomy demands in order to gain the support of the more moderate Tamil actors. The insecurity for Buddhism’s place in the state allowed new political entrepreneurs to seize the opportunity. Until the military conclusion of the civil war in 2009, the JHU was able to bind the radical Buddhist fringes.

References


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