

Sri Lanka's political monks rage against reduced clout

Saturday 26 August 2023, by [GUNASEKARA Tisaranee](#) (Date first published: 30 June 2023).

After the 2022 protests and the fall of the Rajapaksas, Sri Lankan monks are politically adrift and looking to project new threats - including Christians

In November, Ranil Wickremesinghe went where no Sri Lankan leader has gone since the tectonic shift in the country's politics in 1956, when Sinhala nationalism had its coming-out party. Wickremesinghe asked monks to stick to their job – instead, it was implied, of dabbling in politics. He also referred to some demonstrating monks as robe-wearing kids. “It is not possible to gain special protection by merely wearing robes and acting against the Dhamma,” he chided.

The fact that Wickremesinghe could get away with such a statement is a mark of the times. Sri Lanka's monks, for decades deeply enmeshed in its politics, reached the apotheosis of their influence in the 2019 and 2020 elections, when the Buddhist clergy was the most visible, vocal and committed component of the Rajapaksa support base. Monks worked tirelessly for the victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the 2019 presidential election, and of Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) in the 2020 parliamentary election. Buddhist temples across the land were transformed into de facto propaganda offices. Voting for the Rajapaksas was depicted as not just a patriotic but also a religious duty.

Then, after the Rajapaksas' misrule sank Sri Lanka into an economic and existential crisis, and the massive protests of 2022 forced the brothers out of power, political monks began to distance themselves from the Rajapaksa family. Some lapsed into silence; others remade themselves as virulent Rajapaksa critics. The Aragalaya, the mass movement that overthrew the Rajapaksas, was initially non-religious. When a prominent political monk tried to join a protest near the parliament building in Colombo, he was respectfully told to leave. A hand-drawn poster held up by a young protester in Kandy expressed the new mood: it depicted a rogues' gallery of top pro-Rajapaksa monks, with the caption: “Become Ordained at least now.” The implicit message, as in Wickremesinghe's statement in parliament, was to stop playing politics.

But monks and priests made inroads into the movement, and before long many leading Aragalaya activists sought validation from Buddhist prelates, visiting them with gifts rather like the politicians they claimed to despise. The Aragalaya was transformed from non-religious to multi-religious, with mostly Buddhist and Christian as well as some Muslim clergy joining the fold. Saffron robes and cassocks became prominent at press conferences held by movement activists. (Meanwhile, women were either absent or only nominally present; the Aragalaya's public faces were almost all male – and Sinhala.)

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The movement's motto and common mission was ejecting Gotabaya from the presidency. With this

achieved, it fell into disarray. Some activists withdrew, and those remaining were forcibly dispersed by the police and army after Wickremesinghe took up the presidency. Now, post-Aragalaya, Sri Lanka's political monks are adrift, a force searching for a space to exert itself.

With the economic crisis still devastating Sri Lanka, the public is mired in the struggle for survival. For the first time since 1956, economics is predominant in political concerns. People are more interested in inflation and the value of the Sri Lankan rupee than in threats or enemies. Political parties continue to pay obeisance to monks – the SLPP even made a monk its new chairperson – but the nexus between monks and politicians, which played a key role in Sri Lanka's downfall, seems to be in abeyance. For the first time in a long time, there's no competition between the government and the opposition for the backing of political monks. This may be why many political monks are affecting an independent mien and damning all politicians and political parties as corrupt.

But the monks are not familiar or happy with the role of angry spectators. It is not in their nature to remain mute and inactive. They will do whatever it takes to regain their relevance.

Try, try again

In December 2022, Walavahangunawave Dhammarathana, the chief incumbent of the Mihintale Temple – who had called Wickremesinghe a leader with “foresight” just months earlier, and before that praised Gotabaya Rajapaksa for his “wise leadership” – gave the government an ultimatum. Either provide relief to the suffering people within a month, or he would lead the people in a new Aragalaya to throw out the government and all 225 parliamentarians. The grace period was to end on 8 January.

The Wickremesinghe administration ignored the ultimatum and refused to engage with the monk. Despite a media blitz, the deadline came and went with no new relief measures and no mass opposition from the people.

Omalpe Sobhitha – another political monk and veteran of campaigns against Tamils, Muslims and Christians – also tried to use the public's economic distress to bolster his political fortunes. The government increased electricity rates drastically in August 2022 and again in January, and refused a request by the Buddhist clergy, including four chief prelates, to provide special relief to temples. Sobhitha threatened to build a people's movement against the government unless it repented and reformed, but though the rate hike was and remains hugely unpopular, the monk's threatened new Aragalaya failed to get off the ground.

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With economic activism not working out for them, political monks returned to the familiar grounds of nation, race and religion. Wickremesinghe's stated intent to implement the 13th Amendment in full – devolving more powers to provincial governments, and so meeting a key demand of Tamils in the country's North and East – gave them a chance to unfurl the patriotic banner. In February, a procession of monks headed to the parliament, where Wickremesinghe was inaugurating a new session. Prevented by police from entering the parliament grounds, the monks proclaimed that they will not permit the full implementation of the 13th Amendment even if all 225 parliamentarians are in favour of it. Ignoring this would turn Sri Lanka into “a lake of blood,” they warned. The public remained indifferent.

When, on 18 May, the Canadian prime minister made a statement to mark Tamil Genocide

Remembrance Day, Balangoda Kashyapa, a young monk who was a constant presence in the Aragalaya, led a group of protesters to the Canadian High Commission in Colombo. If the president and prime minister did not take immediate action over this insult to “war heroes”, he warned, monks would go from temple to temple organising a nation-wide mass struggle. But this too was a non-starter: the government did nothing, the public didn’t care.

Also in May, the chief incumbent of Mihintale demanded more financial support from the government for a state-sponsored, week-long annual festival to be held at the temple in June. The money allocated this year was grossly inadequate, he proclaimed, insisting on more funds and a 50-percent reduction on the electricity bill for the festival. The government refused, citing financial difficulties. The power and energy minister suggested that the monk use temple funds to finance the festival instead. The monk, visibly angry, refused the allocated support and went to town with his begging bowl – he later said that he collected LKR 10 million from the public.

The festival was held. Addressing the faithful, the chief incumbent issued a call to arms. “In future it may not be possible to have ceremonies like this with kings such as this,” he said tearfully, clearly referring to Wickremesinghe. “Therefore all the people of the land, unite. We will give leadership. [We] won’t contest. ... The time has come for a system change. We will not take weapons or do Hartal. People, line up. Venerable monks, line up.”

It was against the backdrop of these multiple failures that a recording started to circulate on social media of Jerome Fernando, self-declared prophet and head of the Glorious Church in Colombo, claiming that Jesus was the light that the Buddha sought. Many political monks jumped into the fray, including Galagoda-Aththe Gnanasara of the Sinhala extremist Bodu Bala Sena. Fernando left the country before he could be arrested under the ICCPR Act for being “disrespectful” of Buddhism (as well as Hinduism and Islam). The public responded with a collective shrug, and the issue seemingly died away.

Then, in late May, a clip of an unwise joke at an April Fool’s show by the comedian Nathasha Edirisooriya went viral. Political monks are now hard at work depicting her remarks as a Christian crime and reviving the old bogey of an evangelist conspiracy. Galagoda-Aththe Gnanasara has warned that some 20 or 30 Christian priests are masquerading as Buddhist monks and that Buddhists are being converted to Christianity through unfair means. He wants a “religious police” and an anti-conversion bill. Some political monks claim there is an American plan to unleash religious war in Sri Lanka so that the United States can boost its flagging arms sales.

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Edirisooriya was arrested for “insulting” the Buddha and remanded under the ICCPR Act. The next morning, Akmeemana Dayarathana, who was key to inciting a wave of anti-Muslim hatred and violence that ran through the 2010s, warned of a new religious war. Such warnings have been frequent since Jerome Fernando fled, but even so Dayarathana’s statement stands out. A “born-again clique similar to an extremist-terrorist organisation”, funded by NGOs and international forces, is conspiring to provoke Buddhists, he claimed. If these conspirators are not arrested, “hot-headed” Sinhala Buddhist boys will be provoked into “killing and dying” in defence of their faith. “There will be a huge conflict. A non-Buddhist will not be able to walk on the road.”

Unlike on other recent occasions, some politicians are also getting in on the act. One SLPP parliamentarian wants Edirisooriya and others like her to be publicly executed. Others want tougher laws to criminalise and punish any remark deemed offensive to Buddhists. There are demands to

arrest audience members who laughed at the joke. The wife of another comedian has lodged a complaint with the Criminal Investigation Department about threats to her family, including three young daughters, because her husband had attended the controversial show.

Edirisooriya's LinkedIn page shows several articles she has written on how to use storytelling to promote social change. She is not alone in heeding its power. In the early 2000s, political monks and extremist politicians started to tell a story of an American and Western conspiracy to convert Sri Lanka into a Christian country. It soon gained traction, resulting in attacks on churches and a wider wave of anti-Christian violence. When Gangodawila Soma, a political monk notorious for his anti-Muslim and anti-Christian views, died while on a visit to Russia, Christians were accused of murdering him. A group of Sinhala Buddhist extremist politicians, led by Champika Ranawaka and Udaya Gammanpila, donated their political party to the clergy. That party put forward a monk-only slate for the 2004 general election with the promise of building a Dharma Rajya - a righteous state - and many of today's leading political monks entered national politics via this opening. For a while, things went well for the monks, but the entire effort ended in ignominy after several party activists were implicated in a grenade attack on a show by the Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan in 2004, which left two dead.

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Something of a replay might now be in the works. After backing off (perhaps temporarily) from fanning anti-Muslim sentiment in recent years, political monks are setting Christians up as the enemy again. Is this the way they see back to relevance?

The robe and the wearer

According to Buddhist literature, Siddhartha Gautama was born with two mutually exclusive destinies: Buddhahood and Universal Kingship. He turned his back on secular power and chose the path to enlightenment instead.

Not so his disciples in Sri Lanka two and a half millennia on. For these monks, political activism is an integral component of a monk's legacy, and any attempt to remove monks from politics is a conspiracy against Buddhism and the Sinhala nation.

The genesis of the political monk can be traced to a debate about the role of the Buddhist clergy in the 1940s and 1950s - a time of political and societal transition for Sri Lanka. At the heart of it was the question of whether monks should be politically active or limit themselves to spiritual and social activities. The loci of the debate were the Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara pirivenas, the foremost monastic educational institutions of the time. In one of those ironies history delights in, the country's then-powerful Left was in alliance with the Vidyalankara monks, who claimed that a bhikku had the right and the responsibility to provide not only spiritual but also political leadership to the nation. The pro-imperialist and capitalist United National Party, together with the Vidyodaya monks, opposed bhikku involvement in politics.

Vidyalankara monks (and their Left supporters) introduced a new term into the Buddhist and political lexicon: progressive monk, a bhikku who would drive "progressive" reforms. But, as history would demonstrate, the progressive monk was merely the chrysalis for the patriotic monk, a bhikku whose main task was not spiritual salvation but the salvation of the nation and religion from dire internal and external threats - that is, minorities and their foreign backers. The manifestations of the

transformation were soon apparent: a report by the Universities Commission of 1962 concluded that political monks were “responsible in large measure for inflaming the racial and religious passions that erupted in such sickening fashion in the early part of 1958,” when mass anti-Tamil pogroms swept Sri Lanka.

The two mutually-exclusive destinies of Siddhartha Gautama were thus, in the eye of Sri Lanka’s monks, fused into one. Over time, the political monk would evolve into a potent barrier against progressive political and social reforms, from the devolution of powers to introducing sex education into school curricula.

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The fusion also distorted the Buddha’s teachings. Take, for example, the concept of blasphemy. Buddhist scripture shows his way of responding to insults was not anger or retaliation, but benign indifference. In the Akkosa Sutta, a Brahmin called Akkosa Bharadvaja scolds the Buddha in “foul and harsh words.” The Buddha waits until the tirade is over, then asks what happens when visitors to Akkosa’s house refuse the refreshments he offers them. Then the refreshments return to him, Akkosa replies. Says the Buddha, “You are abusing us who do not abuse, you are angry with us who do not get angry, you are quarrelling with us who do not quarrel. All this of yours we do not accept. You alone, Brahman, get it back; all this, Brahman, belongs to you.”

Wickremesinghe, whether intentionally or not, touched upon another distorted Buddhist teaching when he told monks they could not expect special treatment for just wearing robes without following the Dhamma. According to the Buddha, “Whoever dons the saffron robe with mind purged of all defilements, restrained and truthful, he indeed is worthy of the saffron robe.” But according to what has become the Sri Lankan tradition, anyone wearing the saffron robe is a monk, worthy of worship and special treatment because he wears the saffron robe. The man underneath the robe is immaterial.

It is now popular practice among political monks to refer to the saffron robe as *arhat dajaya* – the standard of enlightened monks. This marks another step in invoking blanket immunity for monks both from the law and from public scrutiny and criticism.

Agalakada Sirisumana, a monk and a professor of Sinhala at Colombo University, made a telling statement during the demonstration against the 13th Amendment outside parliament. He accused Wickremesinghe of trying to create racial conflict by promoting devolution. “Leaders cannot be allowed to do such things the way they want,” Sirisumana declared. “If they do, only the monks can throw you out on your ear.”

Even at their most powerful, monks were a subordinate force in Sri Lankan politics. As the scholar H L Seneviratne has pointed out in *The Work of Kings*, his study of the Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy in modern times, monks lack overarching and unifying social structures, so “by its very nature the Sangha cannot be a power. It can only be a handmaid of power.”

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Upending this equation and placing themselves in the dominant position has always been the goal of

political monks. It is worth recalling that S W R D Bandaranaike, the first major Sri Lankan politician to form a nexus with monks, was assassinated by a monk due to his refusal to accede to various demands. Since the public today is angry with all politicians (or at least claims to be so), political monks might nurse the belief that the time is opportune for them to become the masters. After all, if all politicians are irredeemably corrupt, who better to shoulder the task of national leadership than monks who are free from corruption due to the power of the robe? To clinch matters, as the chief incumbent of Mihintale proclaimed last month, the country is the property of the *sanghika*, or monkhood; it was donated to the monkhood three times by ancient kings, making it the only monk-owned country in the world. Who better to rule over a monk-owned country than monks?

Tisaranee Gunasekara is a political commentator based in Colombo.

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