
STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN SRI LANKA (SDSA)

A Brief Report

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Introduction

The study on the “State of Democracy in Sri Lanka” is a component of the larger study carried out in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka carried out under the theme ‘The State of Democracy in Human security in South Asia’ in 2004-2005.

The analysis presented in this Report is based on a survey carried out in late 2004 and early 2005.

The survey is only one component of the overall study which in methodological terms followed four different ‘pathways.’ They were as follows:

(i) Cross Section Survey: the survey aimed at arriving at a snapshot of the views and perceptions held by people in the five countries on what democracy meant to them, their confidence in various institutions of governance, levels of political activity, views on the status of minorities, and on personal safety, and the perceptions of material conditions of their families and the country.

(ii) Democracy Dialogues: Dialogues sought to obtain various positions and viewpoints of community, party, union and social activists who are engaged in reforming or radicalizing democracy. Dialogues were held on issues of political structures, political practices, social institutions, gender and diversity.

(iii) Case Studies: This allowed deep investigation into a selected case, or a puzzle, relating the experience of democracy. The purpose of case studies was to look at certain facts that went against the democratic wisdom, or were ‘inconvenient’ from the established viewpoint.

(iv) Qualitative Assessments: This component of the study sought to assess democracy in each country by a team of scholars. The scholar-experts were asked to give assessments of the experience of democracy in each country within a detailed framework. They covered four themes: the promise of democracy, institutional designs, working of democracy and futures.

Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted among 4500 respondents across the country excluding the districts of Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The sample was selected using a Stratified Random Sampling technique giving equal opportunity for each man and woman and all the age groups above 18 years in the surveyed districts to be selected to the sample. However, in the districts of Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Vauniya, the survey was only conducted in the government-controlled areas. Limitations on access and inability to deploy the same sampling method and more importantly to verify the quality of the field research prevented the surveying of LTTE-controlled areas¹. However, in addition to the random sample, a booster sample was used in the Northern and Eastern provinces to make a detailed analysis among the Tamil community in this region.

The sample was distributed among 75 of the 196 electorates in the country. The number of constituencies per district was decided based on the proportion of the population as well as the socio-political diversity of each district. A total of 6 polling booths were chosen from the selected constituencies using the Simple Random Sampling (SRS) technique. The latest voters’ lists were used as the sampling frame to select the respondents within a polling station. A total of 25 people were selected from each polling booth, and field researchers were advised to interview 15 of them. However, we anticipated an average of 10-12 interviews from a polling booth. Field researchers were instructed to stay in the field as late as possible and visit a selected respondent three times before ‘ignoring’ him/her from the respondent list.

A total of 80 field researchers from both genders and all four communities – Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Up-country Tamil - were involved in the data collection. Fieldwork was conducted during the period of September to October 2004. Field researchers were sent to the field after a three-day residential training programme on the questionnaire and field

techniques. Instruments like show cards and ballot boxes were used to enhance the quality of the field work. However, 10% field work was revalidated in the field before data analysis.

The Meaning of Democracy

The concept of 'democracy' is understood by different groups differently. As this study is 'a first of its kind' in the South Asian region, people were asked to describe what they meant by democracy. We asked the open-ended question, "What, if anything, does democracy mean to you?"

It is noteworthy that 37% of Sri Lankans surveyed were unable to, or did not, provide a definition for 'democracy.' This was the highest figure in South Asia.

The answers given to this open-ended question were categorized into the following broad themes: people's rule, parties and elections, the rule of law, freedom, equality, welfare, peace and security.

Of the Sri Lankans responding to this question, 78% associated democracy with freedom. Of them, 60.7% understood freedom in terms of the ability of 'everyone to speak and act freely.' Right to free speech and action seemed to be the dominant understanding of democracy among Sri Lankans. At the same time, 46%, 29% and 36% described democracy in terms of equality, welfare, peace and security, and people's rule, respectively.

It is noteworthy that only 1.3% of Sri Lankans saw democracy in negative terms. However, among other South Asian neighbours, Sri Lankans were least likely to define democracy in negative terms.

When asked as to what characteristics they identify as 'most essential' in 'democracy,' half of the Sri Lankans, stated that democracy means equal rights to all while for 24%, it was the opportunity to change the government through election. For 19%, the essential characteristic of democracy was the availability of basic necessities for everyone. However, 19% of Sri Lankans were unable to associate democracy with a clear single characteristic.

The above overall pattern of understanding of democracy was observable across all the age groups.

In understanding democracy, there are significant variations among ethnic groups. The Tamil community, both in the North-East and Up-country, identified 'equal rights' as the

most essential characteristic of democracy.¹ A majority of the Up-country Tamil community mentioned 'basic needs' as democracy's most essential characteristic. Meanwhile, a vast majority of respondents in the entire sample, 89%, without ethnic variation have also understood 'democracy' in terms of majority rule.

Sri Lanka's data and the meanings and attributes of democracy provide space for a variety of interpretations. One way to make sense of this is to compare them with data from other South Asian countries. Such comparison, as indicated in the following table, gives a picture of Sri Lankans attributing greater importance to equal rights and the ability of citizens to change the government. This contrasts with the overall picture in South Asia in which there was a greater emphasis on the capacity of the government to provide basic necessities as most essential to democracy.

Democrat Rank	National		Sri Lanka		Tamil		Muslim	
	Component	Component	Component	Component	Component	Component	Component	
People's rule	0.44	0.31	0.27	0.49	0.63	0.68	0.25	0.38
Minority leadership	0.34	0.01	0.14	0.80	0.07	0.57	0.57	0.75
Development	0.58	0.32	0.45	0.19	0.34	0.03	0.04	0.86
Religious freedom	0.07	0.05	0.20	0.85	0.14	0.17	0.55	0.01

Table 1: Method: Regression Analysis

The second observation is that the vast majority Sri Lankans related to democracy in association with two major themes, freedom and equality.

Other attributes of democracy are not insignificant. 14.8% liked democracy because it enables people 'to have control over the rulers.' Another 11.2% liked democracy 'since it protects interests of the minority communities.'

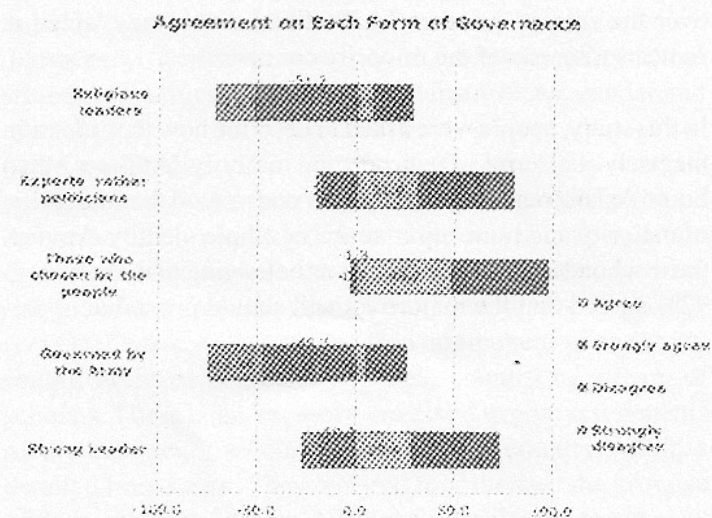
In this study, people were asked to describe how they identify themselves in terms of majority and minority. Unlike in other South Asian countries, Sri Lankans understood the categories of majority and minority in terms of ethnic identity. Among those who identified themselves as belonging to the majority, 93% agreed that the majority's will should prevail in

democracy. Quite interestingly, 69% of those who identified themselves as belonging to the minority also expressed the same view.

What are the negative attributes of democracy? When asked about the most disliked attribute of democracy, 53.9% of Sri Lankans identified it as the 'increase in corruption.' For a significant minority of Sri Lankans, that is for 20.6%, the most disliked characteristic of democracy was that 'many parties divide the people.' Political parties as a divisive and therefore negative factor was also seen in the low public trust recorded in political parties. Only 36.9% had some or a great deal of trust in parties

Support for Democracy

This survey also elicited data on public support for democracy. Sri Lanka, as other South Asian countries, recorded an exceedingly high support for democracy. Nearly everyone thought of democracy in positive terms. Those who described democracy in 'negative' terms was just 1% in Sri Lanka, among those who answered the open-ended question, "What, if anything, democracy mean to you?" The relevant figures for other South Asian countries were 2, 7, 9 and 8, respectively, for Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Similarly, support for rulers elected by the people was overwhelming. It was 98% in Sri Lanka, compared with the average of 94% for South Asia. Very few appeared to doubt the suitability of democracy for Sri Lanka. 92% of Sri Lankans reported democracy as 'very suitable' (62%) and 'suitable' 30%). The overall South Asian figure for the suitability of democracy was 88%.



In this survey, people's preferences for different forms of government were obtained. 'Rule by the army' as well as 'rule by the king' too were included in the questionnaire, in addition to seeking people's 'preference for elected leaders.' Further, people were asked to indicate their agreement for three different statements that would indicate the degree of support for democratic rule. The three statements were: "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government," "in certain situations a dictatorial government is preferable to a democratic one," and "it does not matter to people like me whether we have democratic or non-democratic governance."

Based on the response given for the above questions, we developed a "Support for Democracy Index" with three categories, 'strong democrats' 'non-democrats' and 'weak Democrats or 'skeptics.' The "strong democrats" were those who prefer democracy and strongly disagree or disagree with army rule AND monarchy AND strongly agree or agree to 'rule by elected representatives.'

The 'non-democrats' are those who prefer dictatorial rule or who express that it does not matter for them whether the government is a democratic or a non-democratic one, while strongly agreeing or agreeing to army rule or monarchy. They also strongly disagree or disagree to the elected democratic form of governance.

The 'weak believers' in democracy are those who do not fit into any of the above-mentioned categories. Among the respondents there were also those who were in the category of 'not sure/can't say.' They had no opinion on their preference towards democratic or a non-democratic governance.

The results of the Support for Democracy Index are quite interesting, because they problematize the data on meanings and essential attributes of democracy. For example, according to this index, close to only one third, 36 %, of Sri Lankans fall into 'strong believers in democracy' while the majority, 50%, appears to be weak believers. There are 14% non-democrats. This is a worrying result for those observers who would want to see strong popular support for democracy in Sri Lanka. One satisfying outcome for Sri Lanka's democracy advocates is that in a South Asian comparison the percentage of Sri Lanka's strong democrats exceeds the average South Asian figure of 26%. It may be a great consolation to say that Sri Lanka's 36% strong democrats is numerically higher than the corresponding figures of 19, 22, and 10, respectively, for Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan.

India records the highest percentage of strong democrats with 41.

The fact that 14% of Sri Lankans preferred non-democratic alternatives may be compared with another result: 72% of Sri Lankans agree that the country should have a strong leader who does not have to bother about elections. However, this statement is somewhat ambiguous as it has two possible meanings. One such meaning would be 'a leader who has an agenda that does not focus on winning the next election.' The other would be 'a leader with great charisma who would take unpopular decisions as s/he is sure of winning the elections.'

It is interesting to note that 82% of Up-country Tamils and 72% of the Sinhala community agreed with a leadership of this nature, while 47% and 63% of Muslim and North-East Tamil communities too agree. The survey shows a 97% support among Sri Lankans for elected leaders irrespective of differences in age, gender and ethnicity.

The idea that all major decisions about the country should be taken by experts rather than politicians was supported by 79% of Sri Lankans.

This survey was conducted within five months after the General Elections held in 2004. One of the striking outcomes of the election was that for the first time a party comprised of Buddhist clergy was elected to parliament with nine seats. In this background, the respondents were asked to express their agreement/disagreement with the statement that 'all major decisions about the country should be taken by religious leaders.' Findings suggest that only 27% of Sri Lankans agreed while 63% expressed their disagreement. This outcome was recorded at the height of a political campaign by monks to win the parliamentary election.

People also appeared to support more than one type of governance. For example, person who supported an elected leader could also support a strong leader who does not need to bother about elections.

The following table provides a component matrix generated by a simple factor analysis. It attempts to explain what this combination means and what these combinations mean for each community.

Most Essential Attributes of Democracy

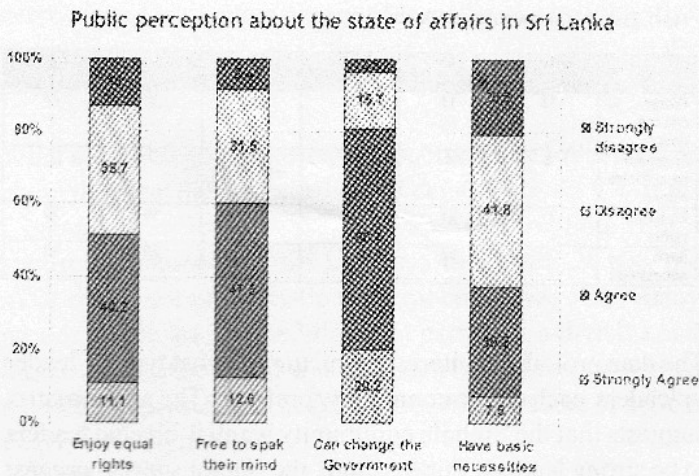
	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslim	All (SD)	Religious	Democratic
Power change goes better	12	13	15	12	12	23
Director to effective rule	6	4	7	6	9	9
Strong leader	37	11	24	11	48	35
Religious leader	28	55	43	54	75	25

The data provide an interesting picture of what type of leader or leaders each ethnic community preferred. The above matrix suggests that the Sinhala community wanted elected leaders to be strong leaders. Furthermore, the 'factor scores' suggest that people who supported military rule supported the religious leaders as well. On the other hand, the North-East Tamil community identified strong and military leaders as the same category of leaders. They negatively correlated with elected leaders. For the North-East Tamil community, strong leaders were the same as military leaders because they are undemocratic.

As for the Muslim community, those who supported strong leaders supported religious leaders as well. They also did not mix them with the elected leaders. However, the more striking finding here is that the Muslim community did not see 'strong' or 'religious' leaders as necessarily undemocratic, though they refrained from identifying the three groups together.

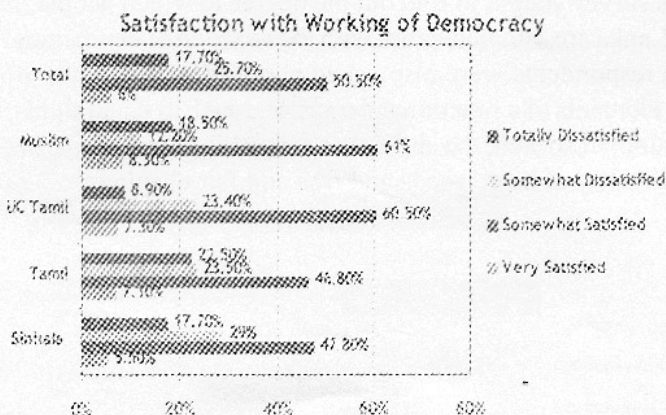
Satisfaction with the working of democracy

This survey sought to find out the degree to which people in Sri Lanka are satisfied or not with the working of democracy. The respondents were also asked about their perception of key elements of a functional democracy such as equal rights, freedom of speech, the ability to change the government, the availability of basic needs and free and fair elections.



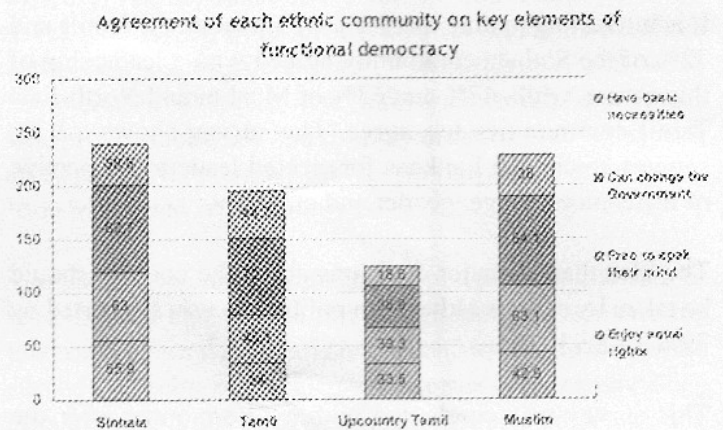
Among all ethnic communities, 56.5% reported that they were satisfied with the way democracy works. Contrary to our common-sense knowledge, the survey data suggest that minority communities were satisfied with the working of democracy either equally or more than the majority.

Among the Sinhalese only 53.30% were 'very satisfied' and 'somewhat satisfied' with the working of democracy while North-East Tamil, Up-country Tamil and Muslim communities record higher figures with 53.90, 67.80 and 69.30, respectively. One way to interpret this finding is to suggest that the minorities were more supportive of democracy in Sri Lanka. This is the general picture in South Asia as well. For them, democracy is also an aspiration.



The way in which different ethnic groups felt they enjoy democratic rights has significant variation. Overall, 51.2% of Sri Lankans said that they enjoy equal rights. However, this opinion varied among different ethnic groups. While a majority of the Sinhala community (53%) agreed enjoyed equal rights, North-East Tamil (64.3%) and Upcountry Tamil (69.8%) communities disagreed with it. The Muslim community expressed a mixed feeling with 44% agreeing and 50% disagreeing.

Agreement of each ethnic community on key elements of functional democracy



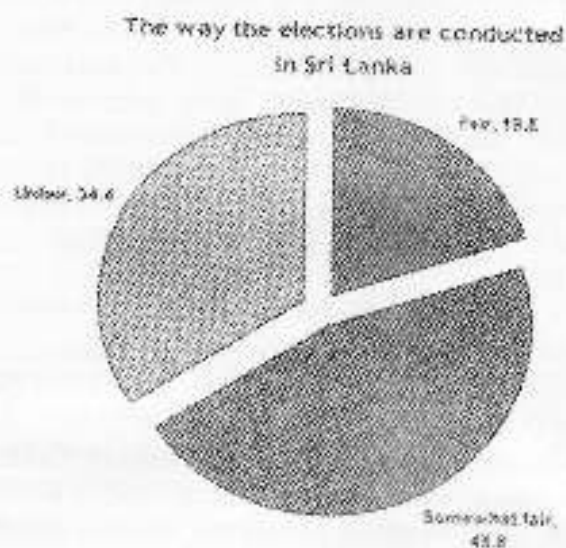
Among all respondents, 60.1% believed that people are free to speak their minds without any fear. From an ethnic community perspective, a majority of Muslims (60.6%) and Sinhalese (58.7%) believed that they are free to speak their minds without fear, while the North-East Tamil (54.5%) and Up-country Tamil (55.2%) communities largely disagreed with it.

One of the experiences of democracy that the Sri Lankan people seemed to appreciate most was their ability to change the governments they do not like. 80.9% of Sri Lankans agreed with this dimension of democracy. This perception can be seen across all the ethnic groups. However, the North-East Tamil and Up-country Tamil communities recorded a slightly lower agreement with this than the Sinhala and Muslim communities.

It is interesting to note that 62.4% disagreed that most people have basic necessities under democracy. This disagreement is approximately ten points higher among the Up-country Tamil community in comparison with other ethnic communities.

The perception of a large segment of Sri Lankans, as demonstrated in this survey was that the conduct of elections has not been either free or fair. Only 19.8% thought they were free and fair. While 45.8% thought that elections have been 'somewhat fair,' 34.4% felt that they have not been fair. Looking at the ethnic perspectives, majorities in all ethnic groups felt elections are conducted in a 'somewhat free and fair' manner. The study shows that the belief that elections are conducted in a free and fair manner was higher among villagers than among the urban population. However, one-third of both social groups thought that elections are held in an unfair manner.

The way the elections are conducted in Sri Lanka



The study also attempted to understand the public assessment of each political party's contribution toward building the country's democracy. People were asked to rate each political party using a ten-point scale 'no contribution' being 0 value and 'maximum contribution' given a value of 10.

The political parties that the respondents were asked to rate were the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Jathika Hela Urimaya (JHU), New Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), and Sri Lanka Mahajana Congress (SLMC). Among the listed parties, the SLFP (mean score=5.64) and UNP (mean score=5.05) contributors have been appreciated the most. It is interesting to note that the role of these two parties was recognized across all ethnic groups, despite their past history of discrimination against the ethnic minorities. The Sinhala community rated the SLFP slightly higher than the UNP, while the ethnic minority communities appraised the UNP

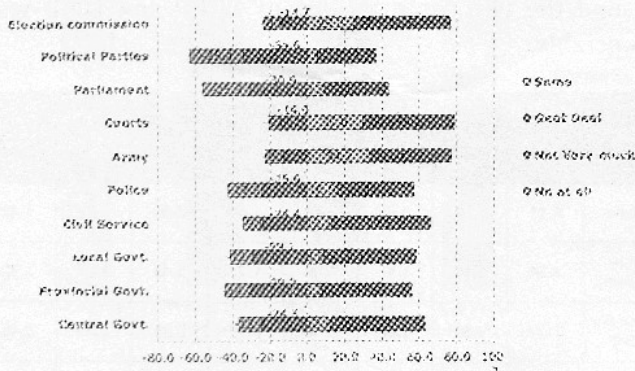
role the over SLFP. This perhaps reflected the electoral shift of the minorities toward the UNP in recent years. The JVP, the third largest political party, was evaluated as the third contributor (mean score=3.49) though the gap between the JVP and the two main parties of SLFP and UNP was considerable.

	Mean Scores (SDP=10)							
	SLFP	UNP	JVP	JHU	NSSP	TNA	CWC	SLMC
Sinhala	6.11	5.00	3.35	2.72	1.67	0.90	1.24	1.47
North East Tamil	3.14	5.15	1.44	1.00	1.71	3.45	3.52	3.30
Upcountry Tamil	2.30	2.85	2.67	0.44	0.49	0.95	2.73	0.46
Muslim	5.47	6.35	2.27	1.59	1.91	3.38	3.09	5.81
Total	5.64	5.05	3.49	2.30	1.62	1.67	1.79	1.59

Trust in Institutions

This study assessed the degree of public trust in a group of selected public institutions. They were the National Government, the Provincial Government, Local Government, Civil Service, Police, Army, Courts, Parliament and Political Parties. The survey also assessed the degree to which people trusted the government-controlled media for 'telling the truth.'

Trust in Institutions



There are some surprises in the findings on the people's trust in public institutions. A quarter of Sri Lankans did not seem to trust the central government. Political parties and parliament recorded a very high level of public mistrust, with figures of 63% and 56.2%. The police, with all the stories of corruption and abuse of power, was trusted by 57%.

62.1% of Sri Lankans placed some or a great deal of trust in the central government. From an ethnic perspective, the Up-country Tamil community (74.8%) placed the highest trust in the central government followed by the Muslim community (70%), Sinhala community (64.4%), and the North-East Tamil community (49.5%). When asked to what extent they trust the provincial government, 56.1% expressed that they have either some or a great deal of trust. From an ethnic perspective, the Sinhala and Tamil communities placed the lowest trust in the provincial government. The Up-country and Muslim communities placed higher trust in the provincial government.

With regard to trust in local government, 58.6% expressed either some or a great deal of trust in it. It is interesting to note that it is trusted largely by minority communities— Up-country Tamil 74.2%, Muslim 68.4%, and Tamil 61.6%. The greater trust that the three minority communities place in provincial and local governments suggests the importance they attributed to the devolution of power and local government institutions.

65.8% of Sri Lankans expressed some or a great deal of trust in the civil service. This is observable across all ethnic groups

(Up-country Tamil 78.1%, Muslim 70.4%, North-East Tamil 66.3%, Sinhala 63.6%). Interestingly, the majority community (Sinhala 63.6%) had the lowest trust in the country's civil service.

The survey shows that only 57% of Sri Lankans placed their trust in the police. It is somewhat surprising that the Muslims (68.8%) and Up-country Tamils (58.7%) placed the highest trust in the police while only 54% of Sinhalese did so. The fact that only 51.1% of North-East Tamils trusted the police may not be surprising in view of the context of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

The army has been identified as the second most trusted institution by Sri Lankans (77.4%). However, when looking at ethnic perspectives, there is a stark difference between the trust in the army among the majority Sinhala and minority Muslim communities, as opposed to the minority Tamil communities. Among the Sinhala community 86.6% place trust in the army while among Muslims it is 72.6%. In sharp contrast, the trust in the army among Up-country Tamils was 37.6%, while among the Tamils in the North and East it was only 35.1%.

Sri Lankans across all ethnic groups placed a higher degree of trust in the courts. 79% of Sri Lankans stated either they have some or a great deal of trust in the courts. Despite this, Sri Lankans placed low trust in the parliament. Overall, 43.8% expressed either some or a great deal of trust in Parliament. From an ethnic perspective Muslims (59.2%) seemed to trust the parliament most, followed by North-East Tamils (49.9%), Sinhalese (41%) and Up-country Tamils (41.1%).

According to the survey, political parties seem to be the least trusted institution in Sri Lanka. Only 36.9% had some or a great deal of trust in parties. However, when compared to other ethnic communities, Muslim community (52%) seemed to have slightly higher trust in political parties. 76.6% of Sri Lankans placed some or a great deal of trust in the elections commissioner. This could be a reflection of violence-free election that was held a few months before the survey.

The findings on the trust in public institutions point to an interesting paradox of democracy in Sri Lanka. People had the least trust in representative institutions (political parties and parliament) and greater trust in unrepresentative and unelected institutions of governance (courts, the army, elections commissioner and public service). Another puzzle is the relatively low degree of trust that the majority Sinhala

community seemed to place in public institutions except the army. The other side of the puzzle is that ethnic minorities seem to maintain a robust degree of trust in all public institutions except the high mistrust of the army among the Tamils in the North and East.

Ethnic Conflict

To what extent do the Sri Lankan people support a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict? When this survey was carried out in 2004, the peace process of 2002 had come to a halt and the UNP government that engaged in negotiations with the LTTE had been electorally defeated. A new coalition that saw negotiators and the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE as a costly political mistake had come into power.

Quite surprisingly, this survey indicated that the support for a negotiated political settlement continued among a significant majority of the Sri Lankan people. 61.2% of Sri Lankans stated that the best way to achieve peace in Sri Lanka was to negotiate a solution based on a devolution of power. Of the North-East Tamil community 83.3%, of Up-country Tamils 81.5%, of the Muslim community 73.5% and the Sinhala (56.6%) supported this idea. Only 7.4% of the Sinhala and 3.7% of the Muslim communities supported a solution through a military defeat of the LTTE. Meanwhile, 15.9% of Sinhala and 12.3% of Muslim communities believed that peace could be achieved through a combination of military and negotiated approaches.

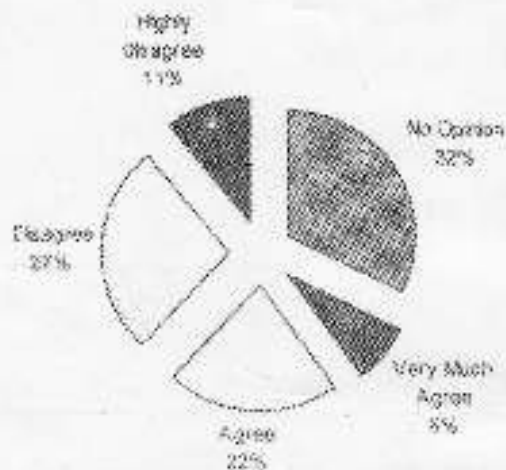
People saw democracy to be central to a solution to the ethnic conflict. In this survey, 77.8% of Sri Lankans expressed the belief that democracy can be most helpful in the country's search for a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict. This belief was widespread among the minority communities and less so among the Sinhalese. Of the respondents from the Sinhala community, almost 50.3% stated that democracy was very important to resolve the ethnic conflict while another 23% still stated democracy to be important.²

When analysing responses to the question on a solution to the ethnic conflict in relation to their 'support for democracy,' three appear to be three sub-groups of respondents. The first are those who preferred democracy to any other form of governance. The second group held the view that the non-democratic governance is sometimes better than the democratic form of governance. The third group did not have a special preference either towards democracy or the non-democratic form of governance.

The first group of respondents expressed the highest support (68.9%) for a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict. The second group too preferred a negotiated settlement but showed the highest preference (28%) for a combined approach (negotiations and militaristic) toward resolving the conflict.

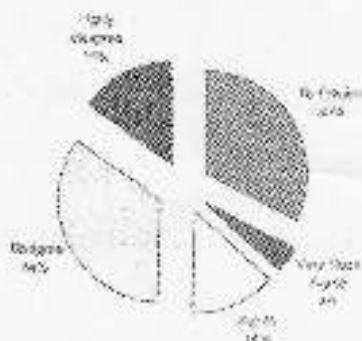
At the time of data collection for this study, the government and the LTTE agreed to explore a solution within a federal framework. Hence the study intended to evaluate the support for 'federalism' and 'asymmetrical federalism' through the following two statements:

Federalism: "The powers of provincial councils should be increased even by reducing the powers of the central government."



Asymmetrical Federalism: "Powers of some provincial councils should be increased in comparison to powers of other councils".

Asymmetrical Federalism: "Powers of some provincial councils should be increased in comparison to powers of other councils"



In this survey, 43.2% of Sri Lankans supported the idea of federalism. This support was overwhelming among the minority communities (North-East Tamil 81.6%, Up-country Tamil 83.3%, Muslims 76.1%) while only 34.4% of the Sinhala community supported it. On the contrary, only 26.2% of Sri Lankans supported asymmetrical federalism. However, the support for asymmetrical federalism was higher among the minority communities.

Some Key Lessons

- There was widespread support for the idea of democracy, but the people's support for the institutional forms of representative democracy was not deep.
- Ethnic minorities, more than the majority community, continue to have confidence in democracy, despite the negative experience with democracy among some minority communities. The majority Sinhala community demonstrated a lesser degree of satisfaction with the way democracy has worked in Sri Lanka.
- Sri Lankans of all communities were majoritarian democrats in their understanding of democracy.
- A majority of Sri Lankans were weak believers in democracy. Only about one-third were strong believers.

- The twin idea of freedom and equality, associated with basic needs, were the three key themes through which Sri Lankans appeared to understand, value and relate to democracy. This combines both procedural and substantive dimensions of democracy.

- Sri Lanka has an elaborate set of public institutions for democratic governance. Yet, public attitudes toward them constitute a on usual puzzle. Institutions of democratic mediation and representation had a lesser degree of public trust and legitimacy than the unrepresentative institutions of governance. Similarly, among public institutions, those that command lowest public confidence are those whose functioning involves regular public interaction.

- Despite setbacks to the peace and negotiation processes, there is substantial public support for a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic conflict. State reforms in the direction of power-sharing had a crucial support base. However, commitment to federalist state reforms was stronger among ethnic minorities.

- Those who supported democracy were also supporters of a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic conflict. Democrats were a solid support base for peace. ■

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