

Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Political Legitimacy in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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Cleavage politics has emerged as one of the most defining features of Sri Lanka's party system and political behaviour since independence. Political commentators have identified several key fault lines that shape the country's electoral landscape: some emphasise caste, religion, and ethnicity as particularly crucial cleavages (de Silva 1981), while others highlight the pivotal role of language in driving cleavage politics, particularly as a catalyst for the country's prolonged ethnic conflict (DeVotta 2004).

A closer examination of post-independence Sri Lankan politics reveals numerous examples that substantiate these claims, with ethnicity and religion consistently serving as the primary drivers of major political transformations throughout the country's history. Politicians have repeatedly exploited ethno-religious divisions to mobilise popular support, as evidenced by their strategic use of both the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957 (Wriggins 1960) and the Dudley-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1965 as rallying points for ethnic mobilisation (Wilson 1979; Ollapally and Anandalingam 2023).

This pattern became institutionalised in 1972 when a coalition government, comprising the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), traditionally aligned with Sinhala Buddhist interests, and leftist parties that in principle rejected religion-based politics, adopted a new constitution that elevated Buddhism above other religions practiced in the country (Schonthal 2016). The exploitation of ethno-religious cleavages reached particularly stark expression during the violent civil unrest of July 1983, known as 'Black July'.

Then-President J. R. Jayewardene, leader of the United National Party (UNP), ironically a party with substantial minority voter support, openly exploited ethno-religious divisions by prioritising Sinhalese

sentiment over Tamil wellbeing. His candid remarks to the *Daily Telegraph* revealed this calculated approach:

I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna people... now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinion... the more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhala people will be here... Really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhala people will be happy. (Navaratnam 2018)

Entrenched pattern of ethno-religious cleavage politics

The dawn of the 21st century brought no respite from this deeply entrenched pattern of ethno-religious cleavage politics. If anything, these divisions became more pronounced and systematically exploited across successive electoral cycles. The 2004 parliamentary elections marked a significant milestone when the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a political party whose parliamentary candidates were composed primarily of Buddhist monks, successfully secured legislative representation by amplifying Sinhala Buddhist nationalist rhetoric (DeVotta and Stone 2008). This development demonstrated how ethno-religious identity could be directly translated into electoral power.

The trend continued with even greater intensity during Mahinda Rajapaksa's political ascendancy. In the 2010 presidential election, Rajapaksa masterfully leveraged Sri Lanka's military victory over the Tamil Tigers to mobilise overwhelming Sinhalese support and secure a decisive electoral victory (Edirisuriya 2017). Nearly a decade later, his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa employed a similar strategy with devastating effect, capitalising on the anti-Muslim sentiment that erupted following the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings to secure the presidency by appealing directly to Sinhalese majority fears and prejudices (International Crisis Group 2019).

These examples illustrate that, until arguably very recently, Sri Lankan politics remained fundamentally defined by ethno-religious cleavages. This enduring pattern has fostered the emergence and electoral success of numerous parties organised explicitly around ethno-religious identities, with many securing representation by appealing to specific communal loyalties rather than broad-based policy platforms.

However, this entrenched ethno-religious political system appeared to face a dramatic setback in 2024. Two years after the historic *Aragalaya*, the mass protest movement of 2022 that successfully toppled the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration, Sri Lanka witnessed a remarkable political transformation with the election of the National People's Power (NPP). Unlike the established political dynasties that had monopolised power through alternating cycles since independence, the NPP represented an alternative force that had long operated on the margins of the country's polarised political landscape. Crucially, the party positioned itself as a unifying movement committed to bridging Sri Lanka's deep ethno-religious divisions rather than exploiting them for electoral gain (Amarasuriya 2025). Consequently, the NPP's ascension to power sparked widespread optimism that the country was finally poised to embrace the transformative political culture the party had consistently championed throughout its campaign.

Given this context, this paper¹ examines whether traditional, historically rooted ethno-religious cleavages have truly run their course in the post-*Aragalaya* era by analysing the NPP's engagement with ethno-religious cleavages defined by Sinhala Buddhist nationalist interests and the continuing role of Buddhist monks in shaping political discourse. It argues that even a party like the NPP, which expects to play a reformist role, has been compelled to accommodate Sinhala-Buddhist symbolic interests; while also facing criticism from Buddhist monks for not adequately realising Buddhism's constitutional supremacy and for challenging some of the interests of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. This illustrates how historically embedded ethno-religious cleavages continue to find their way into what was expected to be a transformative political culture.

This study was conducted through desk research examining the NPP's engagement with Sinhala Buddhist practices and the demands and complaints of Buddhist monks regarding the NPP government's conduct. It has six sections beginning with this context-setting. The second outlines the theoretical framework, explaining

how Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and Benedict Anderson (2006) help understand persistent ethno-religious cleavages post-*Aragalaya*. The third and fourth sections examine the NPP government's engagement with these cleavages, questioning whether this represents strategic positioning. The fifth explores how ethno-religious cleavages remain significant, driven by Buddhist monks operating beyond NPP influence. The final section concludes by examining how ethno-religious cleavages maintain relevance even under an expected reformist political culture.

Theoretical framework

This paper draws its theoretical insights from literature on political cleavages and nationalism. Regarding political cleavages, the work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) proves highly valuable. Analysing European politics, Lipset and Rokkan demonstrate that certain political cleavages are historically rooted and, once formed, tend to persist over extended periods. They illustrate this through the aftermath of the French Revolution, where both religiously mixed countries and purely Catholic ones witnessed widespread resistance, when control over education shifted from the Church to the secular state. This was one of the efforts to create a direct link between the citizen and the nation state. This transition toward compulsory public education under state authority directly conflicted with the Church's traditional role. The authors argue that, in this context, political parties supporting the church managed to secure greater support from "churchgoers" in the working class (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Lipset and Rokkan's framework of historically rooted and persistent cleavages offers crucial theoretical insights to understand how Sinhala Buddhist nationalism functions as an embedded political cleavage in Sri Lanka.

Complementing this structural perspective, Benedict Anderson (2006) explains how nationalism commands profound emotional legitimacy because it is historically rooted in broader cultural systems. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006), Anderson emphasises that nationalism should not be understood merely as a "self-consciously held political ideology" (12), but rather in relation to the larger cultural systems that preceded it and against which it emerged. He argues that religious communities and dynastic realms served as crucial cultural frameworks that laid the foundations for imagining modern nations. Anderson's framework complements Lipset and Rokkan's structural analysis by explaining the cultural mechanisms through which historically embedded cleavages persist.

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These dual theoretical insights allow us to critically analyse how ethno-religious cleavages are both structurally ingrained and reinforced by elite actions and public demand, particularly from key religious leaders and communities.

NPP as disruptor of ethno-religious cleavage politics?

The JVP, the main political party within the NPP, has a history of strategic engagement with Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology, through which the party contributed to ethno-religious cleavages from time to time. According to Dewasiri (2025), the JVP had a moderate Sinhala nationalist orientation from its inception, which became explicit during the 1987-89 insurgency, but was somewhat sidelined in the early-mid 1990s. However, in the latter part of the 1990s, the JVP strategically realigned with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism due to the revival of this ideology, particularly through the *Jāthika Chintanaya* movement, and as a tactical necessity to counter the threat posed by Champika Ranawaka's youth movement, which was more capable than it of articulating Sinhala nationalist ideology.

However, one may argue that the withdrawal of Wimal Weerawansa from the party in 2008, who was central to promoting Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology within the JVP, may have made the party less explicitly committed to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. On top of that, the JVP's forging of the larger NPP alliance, incorporating actors who did not share its ideology, may have contributed to the NPP being more loosely tied to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism by the time of the presidential election in 2019.

This shift was also demonstrated through the statements of NPP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake, who became JVP party leader in 2014. He has argued that politicians exploit people's religiosity for political gain, causing significant damage to Buddhism itself. In September 2019, approximately two months before the presidential election that year, the NPP leader reaffirmed his commitment not to use religion as a political weapon. During a televised debate, when asked by the presenter why he had not met the Maha Sangha after declaring his presidential candidacy, following the tradition observed by politicians, he declared:

We believe the greatest respect we can give religion is not to bring religion into the election battleground. I ask why candidates who go to meet the Maha Nayakas bring TV crews? We will not be like them selling religion at elections. We are not TV Buddhists. (Disanayake 2019)

Hence, by the time of the 2019 election, the JVP-led NPP represented a departure from the founding party's earlier strategic embrace of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, indicating that the NPP as a broader alliance was committed to not using religion as a political tool.

Scholarly analyses of the NPP's political strategy before they came to power in 2024 and during the initial period of their term present several interpretations of how the party successfully disrupted traditional cleavage patterns, including that based on religion.

One interpretation challenges prevailing assumptions about Sri Lankan politics, arguing that the NPP's rise represents a fundamental departure from ethno-religious political divisions. This perspective suggests that the NPP distinguishes itself from all preceding ruling parties through its self-conception as a vehicle for comprehensive societal transformation. The party's endorsement of progressive principles, which contrasted with regional trends and global right-wing populism, attracted citizens from across all communities throughout the country (Wickramasinghe 2025). This move was expected to finally transcend the characterisation of being a country confined to ethno-religious political divisions, suggesting that Sri Lanka could move beyond the divisive ethno-religious politics that had long defined its political landscape.

Another perspective suggests that the NPP strategically cultivated an anti-establishment cleavage, positioning itself as the authentic voice of ordinary citizens against a corrupt and self-serving political elite (Dass 2023). This populist framing represented a radical departure from the conventional ethno-religious divisions that had long dominated electoral competition.

Yet another perspective suggests that the *Aragalaya* fundamentally shifted the political discourse from identity-based concerns to economic issues. According to this interpretation, the NPP's success stemmed from its ability to capitalise on this transformed political environment by centring its campaign on tangible policy priorities of social justice, comprehensive economic reform, and systematic anti-corruption measures, rather than the symbolic politics of ethnicity and religion (Novellis 2024).

Beyond scholarly analyses, opposition parties and groups before the 2024 presidential election also argued that the NPP would not give prominence to Buddhism if it came to power, unlike previous political parties. One of the main criticisms levelled against the NPP was that, once in power, they would weaken the constitutional and symbolic status of Buddhism. During an election

campaign rally before the 2024 presidential election, Udaya Gammanpila, leader of the JHU-breakaway Pivithuru Hela Urumaya, claimed there was a plan to transform the country into a secular state by removing the priority given to Buddhism (Fernando 2024). As the presidential election approached, Venerable Ulapane Sumangala Thero who is the Convenor of the Teacher-Principal Trade Union Collective, with a history of engaging in nationalist activism, echoed similar concerns, stating that every previous government had acknowledged the protection of Buddhism in the Constitution, with the exception of the JVP (*Daily Mirror* 2024a).

However, in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election and beyond, the NPP has demonstrated accommodation of the symbolic and ritualistic interests of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. It is important to discuss what this role of accommodation entails, how it happened, and what it means for ethno-religious cleavages in the post-*Aragalaya* context.

NPP's engagement with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism: A strategic approach?

In the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election, it became evident that the NPP strategically engaged with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. This was most clearly demonstrated in how the NPP responded to criticisms alleging that they would remove Buddhism's constitutionally privileged status. For instance, speaking at a meeting with the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC), leading NPP member Vijitha Herath stated that the NPP had no intention of removing or amending Article 9 of the Constitution and reiterated the party's commitment to safeguarding and promoting Buddhism (*Daily Mirror* 2024b).

Article 9 of the 1978 Constitution grants Buddhism foremost place among all faiths. It stipulates that "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)". By granting Buddhism this status, the state effectively prioritises one religion above all others followed by its citizens. This constitutional hierarchy has created a foundation for breaches of religious freedom, where cases involving minority religions may be addressed in a discriminatory manner. The broad wording of the Article also allows for flexible interpretation and discretionary application (Gunatilleke 2018).

The NPP's position on maintaining Article 9 of the Constitution can be understood as consistent with the opinion of the Sinhala Buddhist population. According

to a 2024 survey by the National Peace Council, 90% of Buddhists support keeping Article 9 as a constitutional feature. Conversely, only 50% of Roman Catholics agree, and followers of Islam and Hinduism typically oppose prioritising Buddhism in the constitution (National Peace Council of Sri Lanka 2024). This difference in opinion between the numerically prominent ethno-religious group, Sinhala-Buddhists, and minorities in relation to Article 9 foregrounds it as a sensitive issue when it comes to political power.

In this context, Vijitha Herath, following the NPP's victory in the presidential election, reaffirmed their position, stating that the "Government is bound to carry out all necessary activities to protect Buddhism" in accordance with Article 9 (*Ministry of Mass Media* 2024). This commitment became evident in a series of events that took place within a relatively short timeframe, demonstrating that some ethno-religious cleavages could be sustained as political cleavages even under an NPP government that was expected to be reformist.

The NPP's commitment to uphold the prominent status of Buddhism became visible when the new president, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, followed a practice that had been observed by former presidents. Typically, upon being sworn in, newly elected presidents seek the blessings of the Maha Sangha. Anura Kumara Dissanayake maintained this tradition: upon his inauguration as president in September 2024, he visited the *Dalada Maligawa* and received blessings from the Maha Sangha (*Sri Lanka Mirror* 2024). These visits by newly elected presidents serve to cement their authority (Ekanayake 2025); and Dissanayake's adherence to this tradition also demonstrates his ritualistic acceptance of Buddhist symbols as essential to the political legitimacy of Sri Lankan rulers.

Furthermore, in April 2025, President Dissanayake requested a *Dalada Pradarshanaya* (a public exposition of the sacred Tooth Relic) for the first time in 16 years (Fernando 2025). This can be read as an important religious and political gesture. The body politics of the relic is vital in this context. As scholars note, the Tooth Relic is not only a sacred object but also a living symbol of the Buddha's presence. Rulers who associate with it, symbolically align themselves with the Buddha's sanctity, thereby gaining moral and religious legitimacy (Ekanayake 2025). The timing of this exposition, occurring just weeks before the May 2025 local government elections, suggests the NPP was willing to cautiously engage with Sinhala Buddhist nationalist sentiment (Ekanayake 2025), following a practice historically used to legitimise political power.

The last such exposition was held in March 2009 during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (*Sunday Observer* 2009), a politically significant moment coinciding with the final stages of the Sri Lankan war.

This utilisation of the Tooth Relic as a political tool has antecedence. As historian Lorna Dewaraja (2018) points out, during the colonial period, the Tooth Relic held utmost political importance as a symbol of sovereign legitimacy. Its value was acknowledged by the British in the Kandyan Convention of 1815, which ceded the Kandyan Kingdom to British rule while promising the protection of Buddhism. The British understood that their *de facto* role as “guardians” of the Tooth Relic was essential to securing the allegiance of the Sinhala people (Dewaraja 2018). The Dalada Maligawa has long been regarded as a centre of political authority in Sri Lanka, and there has historically been an unwritten understanding, predating independence, regarding the relationship between state rulers and the Tooth Relic, and the responsibility the former bears toward the latter.

In June 2025, just a few months after the *Dalada Pradarshanaya*, the *Poson* festival took place with full state sponsorship, during which President Dissanayake was awarded the title *Maha Mahendra Prasadani* (මහා මහේන්ද්‍ර ප්‍රසාදිනි) by the chief monk of Mihintalawa, in recognition of his support for the celebration. During this event, the president mentioned that Buddhism made Sri Lankans a cultured population and that culture should be preserved at all cost (*Daily Mirror* 2025).

This repeated acknowledgment of the supremacy of Buddhism has been articulated by other key government officials as well. In early August, Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya briefed the chief prelates of the Amarapura and Ramanna chapters on the government’s education reforms. During this meeting, the chief prelates were informed about the national significance of the much-debated new education policy (*Ada Derana* 2025). This briefing can be understood as an extension of the established practice whereby political leaders keep the Maha Sangha informed about significant government decisions. Subsequently, the prime minister held similar discussions with His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith and Catholic bishops (*Newswire* 2025b), which emphasised that the importance accorded to religious bodies in state affairs continues to be a significant factor under the NPP government as well.

Therefore, despite expectations that the NPP would transcend existing ethno-religious cleavages and maintain a separation between religion and politics, their responses to opposition criticism during the election

period and their subsequent political conduct indicate an accommodation of established symbolic ritualistic practices and acceptance of Buddhism’s constitutional prominence, which enables the continuation of ethno-religious cleavages in the post-*Aragalaya* context.

The NPP’s strategic engagement with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism was also evident through their passive approach to some of the interests of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. A notable example involves Buddhist monks’ assertions of ownership over lands and archaeological sites in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, particularly in areas with significant Tamil and Muslim populations. These land claims have occurred within a broader context of what Tamil and Muslim communities describe as an ongoing Sinhalisation process, including the systematic construction of Buddhist religious infrastructure in predominantly non-Buddhist areas (PEARL 2021). Research by Fonseka (2024) documents the establishment of 32 Buddhist temples within the Kuchchaveli Divisional Secretariat division alone, encompassing more than 2,500 acres of privately-owned land belonging to Tamil families. Many of these sites remain under monastic control.

Unlike some previous governments, the NPP government cannot be seen supporting these initiatives. Yet, the NPP has refrained from substantially challenging them, suggesting a calculated strategy of avoiding confrontation with Buddhist nationalist interests on issues that could provoke significant backlash from their Sinhala Buddhist constituency during the first year of their rule. This selective engagement, accommodating symbolic Buddhist interests while remaining passive on substantive territorial claims, illustrates the complex navigation required within a majoritarian political system where challenging certain Buddhist nationalist positions carries significant electoral risks.

This strategic engagement by NPP suggests that religion, particularly Buddhism, cannot be easily divorced from politics or separated from state affairs without incurring significant electoral costs and risking political legitimacy. This pattern aligns with scholarly observations that Sinhalese politicians’ use of Buddhism as an electoral symbol, while effective for achieving electoral success, tends to reinforce ethnic and religious tensions in the country (Imtiyaz 2013).

Lipset and Rokkan’s framework suggests that, in contexts such as Sri Lanka, ethno-religious cleavage is particularly reinforced through constitutional provisions such as Article 9. Given that political parties have historically leveraged Sinhala Buddhist nationalism for electoral mobilisation, this theoretical

perspective explains how such cleavages continue to fundamentally shape the country's political landscape; and resist dismantling, once embedded in the political and legal fabric of the state. This framework suggests that, despite the *Aragalaya*'s transformative power, post-uprising reforms face challenges from the historically influential role that Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has played in state affairs, creating potential tension between state policies and citizen expectations when interventions occur without engaging Sinhala Buddhist nationalist actors, much like the enduring influence of the Church in post-revolutionary European societies regarding education policy. For a party like the NPP, which has transitioned from a marginal electoral force to one seeking mass legitimacy among the Sinhala Buddhist majority, engaging with this cleavage becomes a legitimising strategy within a majoritarian society shaped by deep historical and institutional ethno-religious alignments. This explains the party's apparent realignment toward affirming some Sinhala Buddhist values as a strategic adaptation to this enduring political reality.

However, it is important to note that the NPP government has avoided some practices used by previous governments to maintain ethno-religious cleavages rooted in Sinhala Buddhist nationalist interests. This approach has subjected the NPP to criticism from Buddhist monks on the basis of not giving Buddhism adequate prominence. These monks play a crucial role in mobilising the majority Sinhalese Buddhist population.

This engagement by Buddhist monks to assert their authority and Buddhism's place helps us understand that demands for ethno-religious cleavages in politics can sustain even in the post-*Aragalaya* context. These demands could also operate beyond the NPP government's direct control yet exert sustained pressure on the party to accommodate the ideological and cultural demands of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism or to create space for political actors who would be more willing to serve the interests of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

Buddhist monks and ethno-religious cleavages in politics

This section examines the sustained political influence of Buddhist monks in the post-*Aragalaya* era to understand how ethno-religious cleavages persist in politics beyond the NPP government's direct control, and why even a party expected to be reformist like the NPP finds itself compelled to accommodate some of them. The analysis focuses on how Buddhist monks use their cultural and political authority to influence

public sentiment, continuously contributing to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism by creating space for ethno-religious cleavages in politics. Anderson's thesis on nationalism emerging from below can be used here to understand how the Buddhist monks have acted as the representatives of the common people and how they have mobilised the masses towards a Sinhala-Buddhist centred state.

Historically, Buddhist monks have played a crucial role in shaping Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and creating demand for ethno-religious cleavages in politics.

Seneviratne (1999) describes how Buddhist monks in the 1930s and 1940s departed from Buddhism's universal compassion, instead promoting exclusive Sinhalese ownership of the country while disregarding minority suffering (Velupillai 2006).

The institutionalisation of monastic political engagement became evident with the Eksath Bikshu Peramuna in 1956, which supported S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's 'Sinhala Only' Policy and rallied voters with explicitly ethno-religious appeals: "A vote for the UNP is a vote for the Catholics; a vote for the MEP is a vote for the Buddhists." This marked Buddhism's transformation from a religion focused on moral practices into a cultural and political possession (Tambiah 1992).

In recent decades, Venerable Gangodawilla Soma Thero became particularly influential in the 1990s and early 2000s, articulating threats to Sinhala identity from Christian missionaries, foreign NGOs, Tamil separatists, and globalisation. His declaration that "The Sinhala nation and the Dispensation of the Buddha are in the blood that runs throughout my body" demonstrates the monks' role in linking religion and nationalist identity (Berkwitz 2008).

In the post-war period, Buddhist extremist groups like the Bodu Bala Sena continued this pattern, particularly targeting Muslims through "one country, one law" rhetoric that influenced mainstream political discourse around the 2015 and 2019 elections (Gamage 2021; Keenan 2021).

This continuous pattern of monastic political engagement demonstrates how Buddhist monks have historically created space for ethno-religious cleavages in politics.

The contribution of Buddhist monks to a violent form of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism may have diminished somewhat in the post-*Aragalaya* context, as activities of some Buddhist extremist groups such as the Bodu Bala

Sena have decreased. However, the historical role of Buddhist monks in influencing politics and state affairs continues, as they demand state involvement to secure the interests of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

In early June 2025, during a Buddhist event attended by Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, Kotapitiye Rahula Thero, who is a senior professor in the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Peradeniya and a prominent monk in making political commentaries, emphasised the obligation of Buddhist monks to safeguard the nation's *ananyathawaya* (identity), grounded in Buddhist principles. The thero observed that traditional cultural practices have been declining in prominence. He illustrated this point by citing the importance of offering *pansil* during significant national cultural events. Furthermore, the thero expressed that singing the national anthem in multiple languages is inappropriate, considering it ill-suited to the country's cultural context. He also indicated that it is customary for Buddhist monks to advise the government on pertinent issues, and that such advice has historically led to corrective actions. He urged the prime minister to work towards restoring public trust in the government and to actively protect the nation's cultural heritage. At another event, he mentioned that the foremost place given to Buddhism in the Constitution cannot be seen in practice. He stated that the services provided by the armed and civil security forces to temple activities have been withdrawn, which the monks consider a loss of prestige that they had earned through their historical contributions to the country's development. This illustrates how Buddhist monks expect institutional support beyond symbolic recognition, demanding the same concrete backing for Buddhist institutions that previous governments provided.

Kotapitiye Rahula Thero's appeal is noteworthy, as it urges the NPP to recognise the prominent role of Buddhism in state affairs, beyond the party's demonstrated commitment to some interests. It underscores the persistent demands of Buddhist monks to safeguard Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and their tendency to hold the government accountable whenever they perceive a shortfall, even after measures have been implemented to address some of these interests.

In late June 2025, the Patriotic and Nationalist National Convention (දේශප්‍රේමී ජාතිමාමක ජාතික සමුළුව) was held in Colombo, featuring prominent Buddhist monks led by Medagama Dhammananda Thero. The monks expressed concern about the actions of the NPP government. Dhammananda Thero raised several issues, including addressing war heroes as soldiers without using the term 'war heroes', and attempting

to introduce interfaith education in schools without consulting them (Ada Derana Sinhala 2025a).

Also, in the aforementioned meeting where Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya briefed the chief prelates of the Amarapura and Ramanna chapters about education reforms, the chief prelates emphasised to the prime minister that contributing to these reforms constitutes a national responsibility of the Maha Sangha, given that such changes extend beyond the education sector to bring about constructive transformation for the entire country. The monks further stated that they expected that any modifications to the briefed proposals would not occur without informing them beforehand (Amarasuriya 2025). This demonstrates that Buddhist monks not only expect to be kept informed about important government decisions but also position themselves as stakeholders whose awareness and approval are essential for policy implementation, thereby underscoring their privileged status and significant influence in state affairs.

A few days later, at another event held at Temple Trees with members of the Samastha Lanka Sasanarakshaka Mandalaya, the prime minister discussed the proposal to award additional marks for university admission to students who have passed *Dharmacharya* examinations (NewsFirst 2025). While news reports do not clarify who initially proposed this measure that would benefit Buddhist students alone, the fact that such proposals are being discussed between Buddhist monks and the prime minister demonstrates that Buddhist monks are continuously engaging with the NPP government on potential policies that favour Sinhala Buddhists over other ethno-religious communities, even though these measures ostensibly target increasing youth interest in dhamma education.

In another significant incident, the NPP government appears to have reversed its decision regarding the alleged withdrawal of security protection for Panamure Thilakawansa Thero due to pressure from Buddhist monks. Panamure Thilakawansa Thero is a monk based in the Eastern Province who advocates for the preservation of archaeological sites contested by Buddhist clergy and local Tamil and Muslim communities. When he publicly declared on social media that his security detail had been removed (Karma 2025a), it sparked immediate backlash from the Buddhist establishment. Galagama Kusaladhamma Thero, another monk dedicated to protecting Buddhist heritage in the Eastern province, expressed his dismay through his YouTube channel, arguing that this decision undermined efforts to safeguard Buddhist archaeological sites. Kusaladhamma Thero criticised

the move as characteristic of what could be expected under NPP governance and provocatively titled his YouTube commentary: “If something happens to the life of the Arisimale Thero [Panamure Thilakawansha Thero], there could be an Aragalaya of 70% instead of an Aragalaya of 3%” (Karma 2025b). This statement can be interpreted as an implicit threat, highlighting the potential for mass Sinhala Buddhist mobilisation against the government. According to Kusaladhamma Thero, the security protection was subsequently reinstated following sustained pressure from Buddhist monks and their supporters. While the Sri Lanka Police denied that any security had been removed (*Newswire* 2025a), this episode demonstrates the considerable influence Buddhist monks wield in compelling the government to accommodate Sinhala Buddhist nationalist demands, illustrating the political risks associated with policies perceived as undermining majority Buddhist interests.

Buddhist monks’ efforts to maintain ethno-religious cleavages in politics both pressure the NPP to accommodate Sinhala Buddhist nationalist interests and create opportunities for other political actors to exploit identity politics for electoral advantage. For example, regarding the alleged removal of security for Panamure Thilakawansha Thero, opposition politician and media mogul Dilith Jayaweera claimed the monk had personally contacted him about this issue, questioning how Buddhist heritage in the Eastern province could be protected under such circumstances. Jayaweera criticised the NPP, stating they had never respected the country’s heritage (Ada Derana Sinhala 2025b), and participated in the Patriotic and Nationalist National Convention that criticised the NPP government (Ada Derana Sinhala 2025a).

This demonstrates the broader political context within which the NPP’s accommodative approach to Sinhala Buddhist nationalist interests must be understood. The sustained demand for ethno-religious nationalism operates beyond government control, creating persistent space for ethno-religious cleavages in politics that any ruling party must navigate carefully to maintain legitimacy within Sri Lanka’s deeply embedded cultural framework.

This role played by Buddhist monks aligns closely with Benedict Anderson’s (2006) concept of the imagined community, where cultural symbols and narratives practised at the societal level play a crucial role in constructing national identity. The evidence presented in this section demonstrates how Buddhist monks function as independent cultural agents who generate grassroots demand for ethno-religious cleavages in politics. Through their commentary on

state policies, influence on electoral discourse, advocacy for heritage preservation, and coordination of symbolic rituals, monks actively reinforce the Sinhala Buddhist nation while shaping public expectations and exerting considerable influence on political elites. Their ability to mobilise public sentiment, as exemplified by the security controversy involving Panamure Thilakawansha Thero and the broader demands articulated by figures like Kotapitiye Rahula Thero, illustrates how they operate as intermediaries between the Buddhist community and the state.

In the Sri Lankan context, the use of religion as a political cleavage therefore operates not merely through elite political strategy but through sustained grassroots cultural demand generated by Buddhist monks, who function as guardians of the crucial cultural framework that sustains Sinhala Buddhist nationalism across generations. As in Anderson’s discussion of nationalism from below, these monks, who maintain deep connections with the general public through temples, media platforms, and community networks, exert strong influence on political elites’ commitments to accommodate Sinhala Buddhist nationalist interests. Therefore, the NPP’s accommodation of some of these interests may represent a strategic response to nationalism emerging from below, as such accommodation proves vital for political legitimisation within a society where Buddhist monks possess significant cultural authority. This also demonstrates how ethno-religious cleavages can persist in the post-*Aragalaya* context through sustained grassroots cultural demand generated by Buddhist monks, even in instances where the NPP does not actively promote ethno-religious cleavages.

Conclusion

The *Aragalaya* of 2022 gave many Sri Lankans hope that a new political culture was possible. The NPP, which came to power in the post-*Aragalaya* context, was expected to make this hope a reality. Political commentaries about the NPP’s position as of 2019, despite the JVP’s history of strategically aligning with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, suggested the party was not interested in using ethno-religious cleavages for political gain and seemed to mark a decisive break from past political practices. Yet, as this paper has illustrated, the reality regarding the use of ethno-religious political cleavage has been far more complex. While the NPP positioned itself as an alternative to traditional politics, its actions after assuming power reveal a strategic shift. The party now accommodates some symbolic and ritualistic aspects of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism while remaining strategically silent on other nationalist

interests. This development is unsurprising. As Lipset and Rokkan (1967) note, deeply rooted historical and institutional cleavages resist dismantling. In Sri Lanka, Buddhism's constitutional status, politicians' historical recognition of Buddhist authority in state affairs, and religion's strategic electoral use continue to define political legitimacy and governmental credibility, challenging the expected change in the political culture in the post-*Aragalaya* era.

Furthermore, the story extends beyond top-down political strategy. The ongoing influence of Buddhist monks and the cultural authority they command over the general public creates spaces for politicians to utilise religion as a political cleavage; failure to do so risks losing legitimacy. Buddhist monks serve as guardians of the historical relationship between Sinhala Buddhism and the state and ensure that governments follow established traditions.

Buddhist monks' criticism in their guardian role indicates that the NPP has also challenged some Sinhala Buddhist nationalist interests despite symbolic accommodations. Monks' demands for greater application of Buddhism's constitutional recognition create ongoing political pressure. This opens opportunities for other actors to exploit ethno-religious cleavages electorally while influencing the NPP's political conduct, sustaining ethno-religious cleavages in post-*Aragalaya* politics. As Anderson (2006) reminds us, nationalism is sustained not only by elite strategies but by the lived practices of communities, daily rituals, festivals, and collective memories. In Sri Lanka, the continued influence of monks ensures that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism remains embedded in everyday life, making it difficult for any government, including the NPP, to disengage from these deeply rooted patterns. Although monks do not possess formal political power, their cultural authority enables them to significantly influence politicians both during elections and between electoral cycles, positioning them as crucial intermediaries between citizens and the state who have the capacity to shape public opinion and mobilise communities against governments that fail to serve their interests.

Also, the criticism from Buddhist monks regarding the NPP's political conduct reveals an important distinction in how the party engages with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. While the NPP accommodates symbolic and ritualistic expressions and constitutional recognition of Buddhist supremacy, such as participating in religious ceremonies, maintaining Article 9, and seeking blessings from the Maha Sangha, it appears to be withdrawing from some other forms

of support that previous governments provided. This includes reducing institutional backing for Buddhist establishments (such as security services for temples). This selective approach creates a complex dynamic: the NPP attempts to maintain legitimacy among Sinhala Buddhist voters through symbolic gestures while potentially challenging some expectations of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, resulting in criticism from monks who expect concrete institutional support beyond mere ceremonial recognition. This engagement reveals the strategic complexity facing the NPP as it attempts to fulfil its expected reformist role while navigating between its commitment to political transformation and the enduring influence of historically embedded ethno-religious cleavages.

This analysis demonstrates that neither transformative political moments like the *Aragalaya* nor parties like the NPP that are expected to play a reformist role can easily overcome historically embedded cleavages when they are institutionally reinforced and culturally sustained. The persistence of ethno-religious cleavages in post-*Aragalaya* Sri Lanka suggests that Lipset and Rokkan's framework remains relevant for understanding how deeply rooted political divisions constrain even reformist political movements, while Anderson's concept of imagined communities helps explain the cultural mechanisms through which these constraints operate. These findings contribute to the understanding of the conditions under which political cleavages persist despite significant political upheaval, highlighting the importance of both institutional embedding and grassroots cultural reproduction in maintaining cleavage salience across political transitions.

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