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Representing nobody: Liberal exhaustion, NGOs and the UN in post-war Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper will demonstrate the ambiguous role held by NGOs in Sri Lanka, highlighting the extent to which they are caught in a much wider battle for influence between the Government of Sri Lanka and external donors. The result of this in the war-torn country’s post-2009 context, where the warfighting has ended but peace has yet to prevail, has been that the majority of INGOs and their personnel have become exhausted. Constantly treated as a security risk by the government and as a political tool by external donors, these organisations are prevented from representing their proclaimed beneficiaries. What this represents is a representation of the exhaustion of the liberal project, as introduced by Mark Duffield in his discussion of the phenomenon of resilience (Duffield 2011). However, at the same time, the UN appears to be increasing its rhetoric in calling for Sri Lanka to answer for its wartime human rights abuses (UNHCR 2013). Therefore, this paper will take a step towards challenging the notion that the entirety of the liberal project is exhausted, suggesting that it is becoming more remote and innovative, but it is not dead.

Keywords: liberal; illiberal; exhaustion; resilience; Sri Lanka; NGOs; donors; hybridity

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Introduction

Especially since the end of the war in May 2009, a virtual battleground for influence via civil society has emerged in Sri Lanka between the Government (GoSL) and external donors. This paper explores the ways in which international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have been prevented from being effective in their stated objectives. In also evaluating the role of the United Nations (UN) in Sri Lanka’s context, this paper will address an emerging trend in the liberal peace project and one only now beginning to emerge in the related literature: that of liberal exhaustion. It is important to note that civil society in this context will be represented by NGOs and that these NGOs will not be taken to be unproblematic, although NGOs are not as organisations necessarily charged politically (Belloni 2001: 178). As Alison Van Rooy observes, however, the study of civil society is a study of power relations and civil society organisations should be judged most of all on what they do (1998a: 200-201). This paper will proceed in three sections. The first section will form a brief literature review. The second section will argue that, in the face of the liberal peace project, NGOs globally have come to fail to represent their beneficiaries’ needs and views. The third section will explain how the liberal project has become exhausted in Sri Lanka, whilst also noting that this exhaustion is not total. This paper will conclude that, while the liberal project is in contention with the GoSL to the detriment of NGOs in Sri Lanka, liberal entities remain a key part of a hybrid Sri Lankan society.

Previous research

Currently, the literature around civil society and peacebuilding does not engage with the idea of the exhaustion of the liberal project. Critical literature around civil society tends to assume that the liberal project is capable of containing and/or overwriting incompatible forms of association (Coleman 2013; Selby 2007). Mark Duffield has argued that liberal intervention leads to the fundamental reordering of societies receiving such intervention along liberal frameworks (2002a: 1050, b: 157). Others feel that, instead, the project meets a certain level of resistance but also a measure of acceptance, thus creating a hybridity. Scholars such as Oliver Richmond have touched on this issue before (Kappler and Richmond 2011; Richmond 2010). However, whereas Richmond would argue that the liberal peace is taken and adapted to form a ‘post-liberal peace’ (Richmond 2010: 668-670, 2011: 117 et seq.) by the population to bring around a case of affairs they perceive as acceptable, this would not appear to be the case in Sri Lanka. By showing that the liberal project is effective in diverting the energies of NGOs away from their beneficiaries whilst also failing to bring any tangible change in the Sri Lankan context, this paper will put forward a case for the exhaustion of the liberal project. This will entail a critical analysis of civil society and NGOs.

Contrary to the former consensus that civil society is necessarily an objectively ‘good’ phenomenon with the benign intent of empowering political subjects (Van Rooy 1998a, b; Van Rooy and Robinson 1998), an alternative strand of scholarly literature has emerged to
argue quite the opposite. Namely, autonomy has become something that must be absorbed, ignored or eliminated (Brown et al. 2010: 106-107; Evans 2008: 512) in order to ensure the normatively correct management of a liberal state. This has in the past been true not only of states managing their own societies, but also of states engaging in liberal peacebuilding. Mikkel Rasmussen rightly points out that since the 20th century, the ideology of peace has come to mean much more than a military victory; it now entails converting and remaking an entire society (2010: 180). While the literature covering this area is expanding (Belloni 2001; Chandler 1999, 2006, 2010; Howell and Lind 2009; Maina 1998; Pouligny 2005; Robinson 1998), it does not take account of the more recent developments especially in the 21st century signifying that this liberal project is now beginning to accept that its previous ambitions are no longer fully realisable. This paper, with the use of the case study of the situation in post-war Sri Lanka, will explore this recent development and its effects.

A wealth of literature covering the political situation and NGOs in Sri Lanka already exists. Much research has been completed regarding Sri Lanka’s history (Kloos 2003); divisions and ethnic tensions (Goodhand et al. 2000; Lewer and Ismail 2011; Uyangoda 2007); efforts to reach peace accords (Burke and Mulakala 2011; Goodhand et al. 2011; Uyangoda 2011); NGOs and peacebuilding attempts (Goodhand and Lewer 1999; Goodhand et al. 2011; Harris 2010; Harris and Lewer 2002; Orjuela 2003; Tiruchelvam 1996; UN 2011); and the current political situation following the downfall of the LTTE (Goodhand and Korf 2013). There has even been a study of the activities of NGOs in Sri Lanka in the late-20th and early-21st centuries (Goonatilake 2006). However, while these works often criticise the way in which services are delivered by NGOs, they do not problematise liberal peacebuilding as a whole (Christie 2013: 121) and certainly do not suggest that they are rendered ineffective by this association. However, arguably the NGO and the promotion of ‘civil society’ are inherent both to the donor’s mission to achieve social control and the government’s mission to discipline dissent (Coleman and Tucker 2012a). It is possibly because they are caught between the ambitions of these two behemoths, as this paper will elaborate, that the NGOs operating in Sri Lanka are unable to achieve representation of the wishes of their donors or their beneficiaries.

**Failing the beneficiaries**

Civil society, in Western thought holds two meanings. The traditional view of civil society is of a bottom-up process that empowers local populations (Belloni 2001: 163-168; Cox 1999: 10; Evans-Kent and Bleiker 2003: 103-104; Pouligny 2005: 496; Van Rooy 1998c: 1). However, this bottom-up view is juxtaposed with its opposite—a more critical view that reveals a top-down version of civil society in which ‘the dominant economic forces of capitalism form an intellectual and cultural hegemony which secures acquiescence in the capitalist order among the bulk of the population’ (Cox 1999: 7). The divergence of these two views has created a ‘perception gap’ between peacebuilders and subject populations (Belloni 2001: 169-170; Brown et al. 2010: 107; Donini 2007: 163-165). While the former definition
may be the more widely recognised viewpoint, the latter is more useful for the purposes of this paper. To use an example from another state, although the idea of a headstrong and representative civil society is attractive, the case of Colombia has shown that the excesses of imperial globality have produced a ‘gap between modernity’s displacement-producing tendencies and displacement averting mechanisms’ which is growing to a point of untenability (Escobar 2004: 216). The result has been an ever-increasing erosion of autonomy. This is not an isolated incident; it is representative of a wider trend that is occurring globally and that this paper will demonstrate to have occurred in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it is not so much a new process that has only recently started occurring, but rather the latest evolution of a thought process in Western ideology that has been refined over a number of centuries.

It is important to understand the position held by civil society discourse within the evolutionary timeline of liberal rationality: it is used subtly, replacing outdated previous discourses, to regulate life in a statebuilding context. In this way, it achieves the same objective as immediately previous cultural understandings (and racial framings before them). However, whereas cultural and racial discourses understood social problems as being a product of deeply rooted irrationality, civil society discourse brings the focus to the rational individual. Liberal peacebuilders assume that post-conflict subjects make rational choices that in turn are made irrational by the institutional context—under this logic, institutions must be reformed along liberal lines. Civil society is only achieved when, guided by liberal institutions, the subject makes the ‘right’ or ‘civil’ choices required to be classed as rational (Chandler 2010b: 179-180). Once again, a number of case studies demonstrate this evolution of discourse, which has been observed in Africa, where NGOs have infused societies with Western ideology since the 19th century. Over time, this objective has not changed, but the justification for their presence has evolved from ‘civilising’ Africans to ‘developing’ their societies (Manji and O’Coill 2002: 571-572). A similar transformation was observed in the case of Afghanistan (Baitenmann 1990: 77; Goodhand 2002: 841-845). Therefore, the civil society discourse represents a new stage in the liberal peacebuilding agenda only insofar as it is a new justification for the same practice of securing the non-liberal terrain ad infinitum.

The ‘peace’ that is being built is designed to secure external connections between liberal states (Duffield 2001: 10), not to safeguard or enhance individual autonomy within civil society. For that reason, the institutions created in the peacebuilding process are likely to harness civil society in order to reaffirm these connections. ‘Political aid’, tied to neoliberal reforms, has been used to yoke the civil societies of intervened countries in order to steer societies both economically and socially in directions responsive to Western interests (Belloni 2001: 176; Robinson 1998: 83). The West’s encounters with Kenya during the 1990s marked the first occurrence of donors exerting control over democratisation through aid flows (Maina 1998: 153-155). More broadly, donor agencies and foreign experts have come to take over many critical functions of governance (Evans-Kent and Bleiker 2003: 105; Mertus and Sajjad 2005: 123) and the donor has transmogrified into an ‘alternative state’ (Maina 1998:
Hence, the civil society receiving intervention becomes subject to the same global economic mechanisms as the donor.

Since the achievement of competitiveness in the world market has become the primary method of ensuring the survival of liberal states, neoliberalism holds hegemony in the areas of ideology and policy (Cox 1999: 12). This is no secret; donor support to civil society is often justified publicly as a direct measure to create economic individuals and liberal economies (Van Rooy and Robinson 1998: 36-37). State subsidies to NGOs in particular ‘incline the latter’s objectives towards conformity with established order and thus enhance the legitimacy of the prevailing order’ (Cox 1999: 11). In other words, the most ‘popular’ causes to promote are generally the most moneyed (Mertus and Sajjad 2005: 122). Therefore, ‘the world economy is wherever social forces meet world ordering’ (Drainville 2012: 20, emphasis removed). This ordering comes to define civil society’s subservience to the global economy.

As neoliberal reforms take place, the population that is meant to express its autonomy in this situation is paradoxically turned into a tool. Under this system, whose parameters are defined by economic necessity, the market plays a governmental as well as an economic role. Individual rights, accordingly, are tied to economic functions and those who cannot be assimilated into this regime of neoliberal contractualisation are deemed surplus and then excluded (Coleman 2007: 210-11, 2013). In such a system, the community forms ‘an ensemble of predefined parts, places and functions, and of the properties and capabilities linked to them’ (Rancière 2004: 6). Where resistance is exerted against these predefinitions, power will ‘flash up and highlight most clearly the making and un-making of global subjects’ (Drainville 2012: 20). Thus, where civil society attempts to exercise genuine autonomy in a post-conflict environment, this dissent will be disciplined.

The liberal peacebuilding agenda sets forth a binary understanding of civil society, which must either seamlessly fit into the framework of the liberal peace or otherwise be destroyed. Thus, the force of state and economic power encourages client populations to survive in existing conditions rather than making revolutionary commitments (Cox 1999: 11) in a vertically-organised and controlled structure (Robinson 1998: 106). Where ‘rebellious’ self-expression is preferred by civil society actors, this dissent will be subjected to a disciplining process whereby action is muted. Dissent is first delegitimised and then crushed by violent (but exceptional and therefore apparently legitimate) means (Coleman and Tucker 2012b: 11-13). This is an elaborate and far-reaching process, which applies in post-conflict environments where liberal states intervene, as will be demonstrated below.

Civil society dissent, whether it takes the form of feminist anti-globalisation movements (Maiguashca 2012: 145-146), art (Robertson 2012: 89) or more conventional street protests (Policante 2012: 74), will be neutralised and pacified. This is justified by a semiotic association that casts dissent as unjustifiable, irrational, meaningless and only stoppable by continuous state surveillance (Policante 2012: 74-75). The unwillingness to be controlled is also classed as dissent. For example, members of the Global Campaign Against Poverty
Malawi were publicly scolded by United Nations Development Programme representatives ‘for not attending enough government consultations’ (Gabay 2012: 104). Thus, extant subjectivities are destroyed in order to be integrated, making instead subjects that are incapable of autonomous action, binding them to ‘a false sense of global purpose and unity’ (Drainville 2012: 22), all justified under an ‘ideology of pragmatism’ (Choudry and Shragge 2012: 116). It is this vale of pragmatism that allows for certain forms of ‘dissent’ to exist legitimately. Such ‘legitimate’ action is only a projection of autonomous opposition. Its physical being is harmless to the established order because it is non-existent.

For the reasons given above, NGOs have consistently failed, despite their attempts, to represent the genuine views and wishes of their supposed beneficiaries, and for the most part this can be attributed to the overpowering influence and restrictions of the liberal project, whether in collusion with national governments or not. Such control and collusion has been tried in Sri Lanka, but has failed with an ‘illiberal peace’—that is, the peace advocated by the GoSL—rising in its wake (see Lewis 2010). Some suggestions have been made that this amounts to a hybrid order with elements of the liberal peace forming an admixture with elements of an illiberal peace—‘hybrid peace governance’ (Höglund and Orjuela 2012: 91). Hybridity, though, implies that in addition passing on some of their characteristics, the two parent peace projects have equal levels of control over their respective elements of the hybrid peace. This is not the case, and while some have suggested that this constitutes the end of the liberal peace as it is known, such accounts do not fully concede the complete exhaustion of the liberal peace project. For example, Oliver Richmond terms such a hybrid order a ‘post-liberal peace’ (2010: 689-690). While the ‘post-liberal’ element of this phrase concedes that the liberal peace is no longer what it originally was, the change that it is describing is of the adaption of its elements by local actors, as opposed to its superordination by an opposing order, as has occurred in Sri Lanka. This latter situation is known as ‘liberal exhaustion’.

Liberal exhaustion?

The architecture of the INGO and local NGO community in Sri Lanka says much about the state of play for liberal actors within an illiberal context. As a general rule, one finds the most prolific critical INGOs close to the centre of Colombo (the capital city) in unlabelled buildings. In contrast, the most outspoken large local NGOs are generally found on the outskirts of the capital, in residential areas down quiet roads, likewise unforthcoming with their branding. It is not uncommon to find the gates to such buildings fortified with a manned security room located between the entrance and the reception area. Contrast the architecture of such organisations’ buildings with their counterparts (in some cases headquarters or subsidiaries of the same organisations) in the UK, which are usually bold, overt and heavily branded, often with their campaigns advertised (see Images 1 and 2 overleaf for a comparison between the types of locations).
It is not just NGOs that are apparently feeling this threat. International donors and the UN are also undergoing what Mark Duffield might term ‘bunkerization’ (2011). Drawing on a visit to Sudan in 2008, Duffield notes that he noticed ‘the widespread withdrawal and encampment of donors, UN agencies and the larger international NGOs into what are, in effect, fortified aid compounds’ (2011: 455). These compounds can be easily distinguished also in Sri Lanka. Image 3 depicts the US Embassy in Colombo, the US being a major donor to various aid programmes in Sri Lanka through USAID. Image 4 gives an example of the reason why the UN and other liberal actors feel the need to bunkerise: a government-supported protest outside the UN office in Colombo. The overall representation is of a total rejection of the liberal peace project in Sri Lanka. This may not be immediately apparent, but can be tested by looking at the case of NGOs in Sri Lanka, which receive different treatment according to their affiliations and actions.

The architecture of NGO buildings in Sri Lanka is in part a representation of the threat—genuine or implied—ascertained by the organisation. Images 1 and 2 demonstrate in very simple terms the difference between what a the building of an NGO campaigning for peacebuilding the UK looks like and what the location of one campaigning for a similar cause in Sri Lanka might look like. Image 3, however, is a photograph of one of the locations of a large local NGO in Sri Lanka called Sarvodaya, which describes itself as ‘Sri Lanka’s largest people’s organisation’ (Sarvodaya n.d.). The mind-set of this organisation is obviously quite different to the secluded organisation and this is due to a different perception of threat. Sarvodaya, like many other NGOs, works towards post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka, and yet its architecture suggests that it does not suffer from a significant perceived or actual threat to its security (see Image 5).

The fact that Sarvodaya is not threatened like other organisations carrying out similar activities may well be partially related to the fact that the organisation rejects Western models of funding and reform (Bond 2006: 153-154; Thodok 2005: 4), but really the reason why the organisation avoids being threatened is primarily due to the fact that it simply remains uninvolved in politics (Hayashi-Smith 2011: 172). This is a key point: the threat to NGOs operating in Sri Lanka results not from the very fact of their existence but rather from their politicisation. Therefore, NGOs addressing development needs without becoming politically involved or influenced by Western donors (even if they accept Western funds)—in other words, those focussing only on technical development—are relatively free to do so. The GoSL does not resist development per se; it simply rejects the liberal peace project. The NGOs affected by liberal exhaustion are affected precisely due to their causal links with Western donors and therefore the liberal project as a whole.
Image 1: A narrow street in Colombo, Sri Lanka

Source: http://thumbs.dreamstime.com/x/narrow-street-colombo-sri-lanka-22460049.jpg

Image 2: An NGO’s office in London, UK

Source: Author’s own photograph

Note that, for the sake of protecting NGO workers’ identities, this is a photograph of a miscellaneous street in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which the author felt was representative of the type of street on which one might find major NGOs’ offices there. This photo is illustrative of the anonymity of some NGO offices in Sri Lanka.
Representing nobody
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Image 3: US Embassy in Colombo

Source: Author’s own photograph

Image 4: A protest outside the UN Office in Colombo

Source: http://www.asianews.it/files/img/SRI_LANKA_(F)_0707_-_UN_-_Protest_(600_x_399).jpg
All of the GoSL resistance to the liberal peace project has led, to an extent, a certain resilience amongst liberal actors, which in turn amounts to what Duffield terms ‘the exhaustion of the liberal project’, that is, in his words:

Liberalism is no longer concerned with changing the world. Ideas of progress have been displaced by the need to simply adapt to an international terrain that policy makers tell us they no longer fully understand and at every turn, they find threatening. Resilience is about the collapse of the liberal frontier and a retreat—as it were—from the external world. Rather than expansion, a more apt term would be bunkerization. (2011)

Duffield’s point about the exhaustion of the liberal project therefore is that liberalism is no longer seeking to actively promote and spread its ideology, but rather, its turn to resilience implies an understanding that its ideology is no longer automatically accepted. This is difficult for a project that is premised on the Western need and right to help other, less developed peoples and nations (Escobar 2012: 3-4). The alternative, Duffield has suggested, is for NGO workers on the ground to accept that the agenda that they are working towards will no longer necessarily be adopted by the societies in which they are working. Their only choice in this situation is to become resilient to this rejection and threat to their existence (2010: 459).
This is a depressing analysis indeed for the project of liberalism and its inbuilt ideas of progress. The Western imaginary of infinite progress has for long been the justification for the idea that the West is somehow superior to the rest of the world (Rist 2008: 254). The threat to the liberal project, therefore, is the rejection of the West’s idea of progress, without which the liberal project lacks ideological support. In its restrictions on donors, the GoSL is ensuring that the liberal project fails to implement its ideological agenda. This does not mean that it does not accept funds from the donors. In 2010 Norway, a major donor and a chief peacemaker in Sri Lanka gave bilateral aid of nearly €23million to the GoSL, yet the following year the GoSL turned down Norway’s request to be involved in the reconciliation process (UN n.d.). Meanwhile, restrictions on the operation of donors and NGOs alike are causing Western-funded NGOs and/or organisations with headquarters in Western cities to scale-back their projects or even close-down completely due to the lack of progress they are making in their operations (Samath 2011). A number of NGO workers who I spoke to during my time in Sri Lanka admitted experiencing exhaustion and depression and feeling that the work that they were doing was pointless.

The difficulty for NGO workers in an environment where the liberal project is present but exhausted is that they are rendered unable to represent anyone. This is not to suggest that they are having a novel experience of being unable to represent the local population; as has been established, this was never truly possible given their operational and funding restrictions. What is new is that NGOs not only fail to represent the local population, but they cannot represent their liberal funders either. Paradoxically, this leaves NGOs at once unable to satisfy the goals of their benefactors or the needs of their beneficiaries (which in some but not all cases will be one and the same). Given these circumstances, there can be little wonder why NGO workers feel exhausted and are at least considering closing their operations down. But despite all of this exhaustion, the donors—along with the UN—remain in the country, continuing their operations. The UN’s recent criticism of Sri Lanka’s handling of the war and the post-war situation (UNHCR 2013), in particular, suggests that it continues to exert its desires against Sri Lanka’s will. It would seem wrong in this situation to conclude that liberal exhaustion is total.

Although some have indicated otherwise, arguably the best way to characterise the situation outlined above is as one of hybridity. Since the end of Sri Lanka’s war, and following the failure of liberal peacebuilding in the state, Sri Lanka has been described as ‘illiberal’ (Goodhand and Korf 2013: 13-15; Lewis 2010: 665-666). This suggests that the liberal project has failed and been overridden by the illiberal order. However, this is arguably a far too simplistic way of thinking about the Sri Lanka. The view put forward by Christine Höglund and Camilla Orjuela is somewhat more nuanced, arguing not that (international) liberal peace has been superseded by (local) illiberal peace in Sri Lanka, but rather that the state features elements of both types of peace, leading them to conclude that what prevails in Sri Lanka is ‘hybrid peace governance’. Their conception of hybridity, however, extends far beyond a mere combination of liberal and illiberal peace. To them, Sri Lanka’s situation is hybrid insofar as it exists as a society caught also between war and peace, a society divided
between ethnicities, between those favouring and opposing international intervention and even between the international actors themselves (2012: 91-97). Sri Lanka’s peace is most certainly characterised by this hybridity, and therefore to label the liberal project as entirely exhausted would be inaccurate. It is still in Sri Lanka, along with many other elements of society. That the liberal element is demonstrably under attack does not mean that it is on its way out; rather it means that it is in contention with other elements of Sri Lankan society. This is to the detriment of NGOs, whose operations are arguably hindered by this contention thanks to their position as a pawn within a wider game of power relations between the aforementioned elements.

**Conclusion**

In the hybridisation of Sri Lankan politics and society, NGOs have suffered tremendously. Trying to make themselves and their projects compatible with conflicting liberal and illiberal projects, NGOs have found themselves effectively paralysed and unable to deal with either side. The constraints placed upon NGOs in this context make it impossible for them to represent the wishes of their beneficiaries or their benefactors. While suggestions have been made that the failure of NGOs to function properly has in some cases been automatically taken *prima facie* to represent the exhaustion of the liberal project, their paralysis is in fact not connected with the liberal project’s failure but rather its success. The perpetuation of the liberal project in Sri Lanka is through hybridity, and it continues to exist alongside other factors in a diverse society.
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