

## **Secularism: A Need for Sustainable Peace in Sri Lanka**

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## **Background:**

The ending of military operations in Sri Lanka in May 2009 was looked on as the end of an ethnic conflict that had spanned almost three decades. Despite the rejoicing and fanfare however, lasting peace did not materialise. With tensions appearing between communities, this time along religious lines, the quest for reconciliation between the many groups that make up this multi-racial multi-religious nation seems an increasingly remote dream. While there seems to be a tacit understanding that all ethnic groups can lay claim to a measure of equality, there seems to be a move on the part of some groups to bring out religious differences. Complicating the issue is the constitutional provision that the state protect and nurture the main religion, Buddhism, which seems to be staying the hand of the authorities from acting against blatant acts of sometimes criminal persecution of minority religious communities and place of worship.

## **Research Problem:**

When a collective drive towards progress and development is the need of the hour, the phenomenon of tensions along religious lines have appeared, threatening to break the prevailing tenuous peace. Overt acts of certain groups to create tensions and divisions and the passive acceptance of the authorities, if unchecked, may lead to an escalation of violence that can cause the nation to regress to a state of full blown conflict.

## **Objectives:**

### General:

To analyse the situation that exists in Sri Lanka at present with regard to inter-religious harmony and to examine the role and effectiveness of the prevailing system of governance with regard to existing and potential conflicts or tensions along religious lines.

### Specific:

To analyse as per peace theory, the situation that exists in Sri Lanka today

To analyse the relationship between the situation in Sri Lanka and the Non-Secular nature of the existing system of governance

## **Research Methodology:**

The hypothesis of this research is that ‘the Non-Secular nature of the system of governance in Sri Lanka is a barrier to national reconciliation.’

The premise, as proposed by Galtung, that the presence of structural violence is the distinguishing factor between positive and negative peace was taken as the basis of the study. Thus the research focused first on establishing the existence of structural violence. This was achieved through the analysis of neutral, objective moderated data spanning the whole period under review, specifically the post 2009 period.

Secondly, the research shows that the structural violence is a direct result of the non-secular constitutional provisions which elevate one religion over others.

Finally, it was the endeavour of the researcher to point out that the concept of equality is a fundamental requirement for reconciliation and that in the presence of structural violence, the concept of equality is not viable or present.

## **Key Findings:**

The results of a number of studies by reputed international organizations referred to and listed below, pointed to a pattern of religiously motivated violence and an environment of hostility with regard to minority religious groups and their practices, and thus the presence of structural violence against minority religions in Sri Lanka post 2009. A report submitted to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights by the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was also used to corroborate the findings of the above studies, the data cited in which was also consistent with the findings of the aforesaid studies. The data also supported the premise that the presence of structural violence is always due to institutional and as in the case of a nation, constitutional provisions and compulsions and that in such a context, the structural violence is justified and rationalised to the point that to change it would appear to be an attempt to violate the constitution and an act of disloyalty or even treason. Analysis of actual constitutional provisions as compared to credible, authoritative writing in constitutionalism helped establish that the prevalent constitution in Sri Lanka contributed to structural violence and that it created an environment where equality could not exist or be realised.

The second component to be accomplished was to argue that positive peace is not achievable in the context of the present system of governance, specifically due to its non-secular nature. To this end, it was observed and pointed out that the inherent non secularity of the prevailing system of governance, not only compels any elected government to give priority to the protection and promotion of

Buddhism, but also inter alia prevents authorities from acting against those who violate other constitutional provisions which assure liberty to practitioners of all other faiths. This, it was pointed out, fosters an atmosphere where there is no hope for reconciliation for such would necessitate equality which is not possible where one group is placed at an elevated state of privilege over others.

### **Conclusion:**

The study concludes that the inherently non-secular nature of the prevailing constitution of Sri Lanka acts contributes to a situation of structural violence base along religious lines, and act as a foil for elements that strive to restrict the constitutional rights of those that belong to minority religious groups. Thus, it was pointed out, the non-secular nature of the system of governance impedes and inhibits the achievement of equality, and effectively serves as a barrier against reconciliation between the groups that make up the multi-ethnic, multi religious populace of Sri Lanka, and therefore the achievement of positive peace.

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