There has been a terrifying ‘logic’ to the protracted civil war in Sri Lanka which came to its very sad conclusion in the third week of May 2009. It is easy to understand why people living in Colombo and the south-western part of Sri Lanka felt very relieved and even enthused by the brutal crushing of the Tamil Tiger after twenty-six years of insecurity and conflict. However, any sense of victory was tempered by the growing realization that as many as 20,000 civilians were killed in the final stages of the war between the Sri Lankan Army and the Tamil Tigers.\(^1\) Furthermore, the crushing of the Tamil Tigers could turn out to be a very pyrrhic victory indeed because the enormous cost to the civilian population has undoubtedly intensified intergenerational bitterness that could result in future violent uprisings in the country’s north-east.

The long and violent struggle between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tiger separatists reached its terrifying conclusion on a narrow stretch of coast centred on the town of Mullaitivu in the north-west corner of the island. Yet the bitter harvest of the prolonged civil war spreads right down the eastern side of the island to include the south-eastern province, which was said to be the first area ‘liberated’ from Tamil Tiger control in 2007. In the south-eastern province Tamil-speaking Hindus and Tamil-speaking Muslims live in almost equal numbers alongside smaller communities of Sinhalese Buddhists and Christians (who are both Tamil-speaking and Sinhalese-speaking). The struggle to incorporate this province in a separate Tamil-speaking nation of Eelam has had little support among the Muslims, and so the struggle between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers has left the Muslim and Hindu communities that have lived alongside each other for many centuries bitterly divided. Yet Tamils of the south-eastern province — both Muslim and Hindu — have bitterly resented the oppressive presence of the Sri Lankan army, which is entirely Sinhalese in composition. Travelling in the province with my Tamil-speaking colleague, Yaso Nadarajah, in 2007, 2008 and 2009, it became obvious that nearly all
the Tamils—especially the young—feel aggrieved at being treated as virtual aliens in their own land.

The south-eastern province suffered the greatest losses when the tsunami struck the island in December 2004, and yet the ethnic and political conflicts meant that more international relief was directed into the southern province than into this area. As a result there were hundreds of families who lost their homes in the tsunami who were still without permanent housing in the province in early 2009—more than four years after the tsunami! When Tamil-speaking people in the south-eastern province who survived the tsunami are asked about their future they invariably say that the political situation leaves them with little hope; notwithstanding the courageous efforts being made by some local organizations to build bridges between the divided communities.

What makes the deep divisions in the south-eastern province particularly sad is that this region, along with many other parts of Sri Lanka, has a long and proud history of peaceful coexistence. Of course there have been wars and conflicts in past eras as well, but recent work by Sri Lankan historians highlights long periods in which society on the ‘hybrid island’ could be seen as a model for coexistence. Because of its location on major global trading routes Sri Lanka also has a history of global connection, and expatriate Sri Lankan writer Qadri Ismael has suggested that there is enormous global goodwill for the troubled country. The land that Marco Polo once described as surely the most beautiful island of its size in the world has suffered a debilitating brain drain in recent decades, and yet the large Sri Lanka diaspora—both Tamil and Sinhalese—would flock back if the open wounds of conflict could be healed. During the rather fragile ceasefire between the army and the Tamil Tigers between 2002 and 2005, many exiles—especially from the Tamil diaspora—did indeed return. Yet the exodus began again once the ceasefire began to break down in 2006. Long years of warfare have been a massive drain on the nation’s economy and this has led to an overall exodus of young Sri Lankans—Tamil and Sinhalese—seeking work overseas.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were formed in the late 1970s and they rose to a position of dominance in the struggle for Tamil rights by ruthlessly eliminating their competitors. The LTTE stepped up its armed struggle for an independent Eelam following a wave of horrific violent attacks on Tamil people that spread like wildfire across the island in July 1983. However, the roots of the conflict go back to a very faulty process of nation formation that followed the claiming of national independence from Britain in 1948. The protracted civil war has its roots in the promotion of narrow and divisive forms of nationalism, and it is therefore important to understand how the promise of national independence could result in such a bitter harvest; important for all of us and not just Sri Lankans.
Narrow conceptions of nation formation

In sharp contrast to India, Sri Lanka had little trouble ‘winning’ its independence from Britain in 1948. As early as 1927 the British set up a commission, headed by English House of Lords member Lord Donoughmore, to draft a constitution capable of uniting the emerging nation, and over a period of two months it heard representations from around 140 individuals and delegations interested in protecting the identity and rights of different sectors of the population.2 Historian Nira Wickramasinghe has said that the work of the commission stimulated new forms of political activity in Sri Lanka aimed at promoting diverse ethnic identities3, and the commission found that the rights of ‘ethnic minorities’ should be given constitutional status. Ironically, however, the 1931 constitution that was based on Donoughmore’s recommendations led to a sharp decline in Tamil representation in the island’s legislative council because the earlier system of ‘communal representation’ was replaced by elections based on universal suffrage.4 The intention of the 1931 constitution was to establish the institutions of liberal democracy that could protect the rights of all ‘citizens’, and yet it created new tensions between Tamil and Sinhalese political representatives.

A subsequent commission, headed by English Lord Soulbury and established in 1944, set up a bicameral parliament based on the Westminster model with executive power vested in a prime minister and cabinet—although the British Governor General retained the power to appoint the members of cabinet until independence in February 1948. Although the Soulbury Report stressed that Sri Lanka should see itself as a ‘unitary state’, it reaffirmed the importance of protecting the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. Critics of the constitution that was based on the Soulbury Report say that it introduced an adversarial political culture in place of a requirement to negotiate across ethnic and religious boundaries.5 Certainly Lord Soulbury simply assumed that the principles of liberal democracy as they had evolved in Europe could be easily transposed to Sri Lanka, without taking into account the long and complex history of identity formation on the island. However, as we shall see below, it is surely an exaggeration to blame the Soulbury Constitution for the political culture that evolved after independence.

It is important to note that although the leader of the Tamil Congress G.G. Ponambalam agreed to join the independence government led by Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake after 1948, many Tamil leaders did not support the concept of the ‘unitary state’ and several of them formed the Federal Party in 1949 to push the establishment of semi-autonomous provinces across the island. In 1957 the Federal Party managed to convince the government led by Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike to set up Regional Councils, including separate Regional Councils in the Tamil-dominated northern province and in the eastern province where Tamil Hindus and Tamil-
speaking Muslims make up the majority. Politically active Buddhist monks condemned the agreement reached between Bandaranaike and the leaders of the Federal Party, and rumours spread that the Tamils were preparing for an invasion of the ancient and sacred Sinhalese cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. The false rumours sparked violent conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamil people in the border areas between the north and central provinces, which soon turned into anti-Tamil riots that spread across the island in 1958; an early sign of how easily the ethnic tensions could turn into violence. Under pressure from the political Buddhist monks, Bandaranaike revoked his agreement with the leaders of the Federal Party in 1958, and devolution of power was off the agenda for a while.

Solomon Bandaranaike is a pivotal figure in post-independence Sri Lankan politics because although he himself was born into a wealthy family in which English was the primary language, he subsequently adopted all the trappings of Sinhalese nationalism to win a base of support in the southern and western provinces. Promoting himself as a devout Buddhist, Bandaranaike invoked the legacy of the man who is commonly seen as the father of an early twentieth century Buddhist revival movement Anagarika Dharmapala, and in the 1930s he formed the radical Buddhist organisation called Sinhala Maha Sabha. Although he was elected to parliament as a member of the ruling United National Party, Bandaranaike formed a breakaway Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1951 which, in turn, became the dominant partner in a coalition that almost annihilated the UNP in the 1956 elections. A supreme populist, Bandaranaike pitched his appeal at the religious piety of the rural Sinhalese masses, predominantly in the south and west, and he conflated the struggle for national independence with the Sinhalese Buddhist revival movement popularized by Dharmapala. One of his early acts as prime minister was to introduce a law to make Sinhala the official national language, and he worked to give Buddhism an equally privileged position. Ironically, Bandaranaike was assassinated in 1959 by a Buddhist priest who thought he had not gone far enough in making Sri Lanka a Buddhist nation. However, his widow, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was subsequently elected prime minister, and in two terms (1960-65 and 1970-77) she continued with the policies that her husband had initiated.

Ironically, the promotion of Sinhalese nationalism did little to improve living standards for the Sinhalese masses, and in 1971 the rather charismatic Rohana Wijeweera—who drew inspiration from both Che Guevara and Mao Zedong—managed to convince thousands of young people to join in a revolt in which they attempted, with predominantly home-made weapons, to take over ninety-three police stations and military posts, resulting in the deaths of sixty-three police and military personnel. Of course the insurrection failed—resulting in reprisals that killed well over 5000 ‘insurrectionists’—but the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) that Wijeweera formed continued to promote a rather extreme form of Sinhalese nationalism, and in the mid-1980s they launched a more sustained armed uprising, especially in
the south. In part, the JVP uprisings reflected caste divisions in Sinhalese society, and it is rather ironic that disaffected young people from the fishing caste (Karavas) in the south became such fervent Sinhalese nationalists. This is less surprising, however, when it is understood that their interpretation of national history inverted the relationship between Karavas and the more traditionally dominant Goigama caste.

The promotion of Sinhalese nationalism has triggered the emergence of a new form of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. In both their origins and evolution the Tamils centred on Jaffna in the north and Batticaloa in the east are quite different to each other, and yet the idea of an independent Tamil state of Eelam in the north and east began to gain popular Tamil support in the 1970s. Almost mirroring the formation of the JVP in the south and west, the Tamil Students Federation that was formed in 1970 morphed into the Tamil New Tigers in 1972 and then into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1975. In a provocative gesture the Tigers chose their animal emblem because it had been the emblem of the Chola kings of southern India who had invaded Sri Lanka in the eleventh century. Like the JVP they promoted the path of armed insurrection, but they were far more effective in building an armed wing because they could raise funds in nearby Tamil Nadu and from the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora spread across many countries. In an interesting interview conducted in 1981, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabakaran said that his heroes included Chola kings and Napoleon Bonaparte, and he is widely acknowledged as being an effective military leader. Under Prabakaran’s leadership the LTTE set out to eliminate their Tamil political opponents, sometimes violently, and after a massive wave of anti-Tamil violence spread across Sri Lanka in July 1983, they began an armed struggle that has periodically ‘liberated’ parts of the north and east from rule by Colombo. The Tigers lost much of their support in India when they admitted responsibility for the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1997, but they were able to turn back repeated assaults by the Sri Lankan armed forces and it seems that they established fairly efficient local government in the areas under their control. The Tigers promoted an extreme form of Tamil nationalism, and they effectively killed off a promising peace initiative when they called for a boycott of the presidential elections in 2005. However, their extremism can partly be seen as a response to equally extreme and divisive forms of Sinhalese nationalism. Such extremism on both sides has radically eroded the middle ground.

False starts on devolution

After many years of populist rule by the Bandaranaike family, the wealthy businessman J.R. Jayawardene came to power at the head of the United National Party in 1977, and, under the guise of getting the country moving, again he introduced a new constitution to create a Gaullist-style presidential system. Under this reform, adopted in 1978, the president, who would be elected by popular vote every six years, would become both head of state
and head of the executive, with the power to appoint members of cabinet. Jayawardene served in that position from 1978 to 1988. He was succeeded by Ranasinghe Premadasa, who made full use of his presidential powers until he was killed by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1994. Sri Lankans suggest that both President Premadasa and President Chandrika Kumaratunga (who came to power soon after Premadasa) were able to exercise political leadership on some important issues. However, it is equally certain that the centralization of political power has led to increased corruption, lack of transparency and open abuse of power. The populist president elected in 2005, Mahinda Rajapakse, has managed to shore up a majority for his party in parliament by appointing political opponents as well as two of his own brothers to positions in cabinet. By 2008 Sri Lanka had a cabinet with over one hundred members, which possibly makes it the biggest in the world!

With political power so firmly entrenched in Colombo it is hardly surprising that other developments have also centred on the capital and the surrounding district. For example, some 55 per cent of the nation’s GDP is generated in the western province surrounding Colombo—when it only accounts for 28 per cent of the population. Even more dramatic is the fact that some 60 per cent of the nation’s medical practitioners operate in Colombo. The migration from rural to urban areas is higher than at any time in Sri Lanka’s history, and Colombo is growing at a faster rate than any other population centre in the country.

There have, of course, been numerous efforts to end the war between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the forces of the LTTE. In order to neutralize support for the LTTE in Tamil Nadu President Jayawardene sought the intervention of the Indian government and, concerned with long-term unrest in a neighbouring country, the government led by Rajiv Gandhi agreed to intervene provided that new action would be taken at a national level to restore the rights of the Tamil minority. In 1987 India sent in a massive ‘peace-keeping force’ to the Jaffna Peninsula, and President Jayawardene introduced the ‘Thirteenth Amendment’ to the Constitution to restore both Tamil and English as ‘official languages’ and to set up Provincial Councils in nine different provinces across the island—based on the model of federalism operating in India. Not surprisingly, military intervention from India raised fears and concerns among the Sinhalese majority, who commonly invoke the eleventh century invasions by Chola kings to suggest that India harbours a desire to annex the island. Furthermore, the Tamil Tigers put up unexpectedly fierce resistance to the presence of the Indian peacekeepers, and it soon became apparent that the presence of these troops had only served to inflame the situation. Although some efforts were made to officially acknowledge the use of Tamil and English as secondary languages, Sinhalese retained its dominance, and opposition to the Provincial Councils scheme, especially from the LTTE, meant that it was dropped.
Proposals for devolving power in Sri Lanka have cropped up repeatedly since the Donoughmore Constitution of 1931. However, many of these proposals have failed to reach the point of implementation and others have been rather token in their intent and impact. As already mentioned, the Federal Party was established by Tamil politicians in 1949 to promote devolution and it succeeded in reaching agreements— firstly in 1957 with the government led by Solomon Bandaranaike and again in 1967 within the government led by Dudley Senanayake— aimed at establishing a system of provincial or district councils. However, both pacts were scuttled by the resistance put up by opposition political parties, and the Federal Party disappeared after a poor showing in the national elections of 1970. President Jayawardene’s 1978 proposal to set up District Development Councils (DDCs) also ran into stiff political resistance, and when these councils were eventually set up they had little authority and little impact. Jayawardene revived the idea of Provincial Councils in 1984 and included them in the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution that was driven by the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. Under this proposal the national president held the power to appoint the head of each Provincial Council and to dissolve them, and in an attempt to woo Tamil separatists it was also proposed that formerly identified northern and eastern provinces would be amalgamated into one province with a clear Tamil majority. However, this scheme did not win over the LTTE and its growing base of support in the north and east, so once again resistance led by opposition political parties prevented its implementation.

The most ambitious plan for devolution to date was that put forward by the government led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1995, which centred on the formation of Regional Councils and a new role for a regional governor appointed by the national president on the advice of the elected Regional Council Chief Minister. Under this proposal Regional Councils would be given designated powers that would be listed and defined as an amendment to the national constitution. Although this proposal attracted the support of moderate political parties and many Muslim leaders, it was again opposed by the LTTE—and it was effectively scuttled by an intransigent attitude adopted by United National Party leader Ranil Wickramasinghe, who described it as a threat to national unity. Ironically, Wickramasinghe was elected as prime minister in 2001, while Kumaratunga was still in the position as president, and he unexpectedly initiated peace talks with the LTTE, independently mediated by Norway. A ceasefire agreement was signed in February 2002 and this was followed by drawn out negotiations between the government and the LTTE over conditions for peace, that would once again include a devolution of power. By July 2003 proposals were on the negotiating table for new Provincial Administrative Councils and an Interim Self-Governing Authority for the combined provinces of the north and east. Although President Kumaratunga had played an active role in getting the LTTE to the negotiating table, her Sri Lanka Freedom Party
(SLFP) began to criticize the peace proposals, under pressure from Sinhalese nationalists in the south and east, and now it was Kumaratunga’s turn to block Wickramasinghe’s initiatives.

After the populist SLFP leader Mahinda Rajapakse succeeded Kumaratunga as president in 2005, the peace negotiations slowed to a halt and the ceasefire agreement steadily unraveled. Rajapakse sought to take advantage of a deep split in the LTTE between the leaders in the northern and eastern provinces by dissolving the merger of the two provinces and by announcing that elections would be held for a Provincial Council in the ‘liberated’ eastern province in May 2008. With support from the SLFP, the leader of the LTTE break-away party—the TMVP—was elected as chief minister of the province. However, this left Muslims, who form a majority in the southern half of the eastern province, unhappy, and their political leaders began demanding a separate Muslim ‘unit’ in the south-east.17

From this account it is clear that political gamesmanship—from various sides—has consistently undermined attempts to implement some form of devolution that will surely be part of any meaningful resolution to the conflict over identity and territory in Sri Lanka. Failings in political leadership can be attributed to the populism of the ‘moderate’ political leaders who are thus unable to build a consensus that lies somewhere between the extremes of Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil separatism. However, the failure of political leadership reflects a much longer failure—dating back to the early part of the twentieth century—to build some kind of consensus about what Sri Lanka might look like as an independent but multicultural nation.

The rise of an ‘illiberal democracy’

An excellent analysis of the failings of nation building in Sri Lanka offered by Sisira Edirippulige18 points out that the path towards national independence that began with the Donoughmore Commission of 1927 meant that Sri Lanka has adopted the trappings of democracy but very little of its reality. He draws on the work of Fareed Zakaria in saying that an overt commitment to the principles of liberal democracy have masked the emergence of a very ‘illiberal’ form of democracy in Sri Lanka; as in many nations in the under-developed world.19 Zakaria has suggested that ‘illiberal democracy’ has been a ‘growth industry’ in the modern world, especially in nations that won their independence in the period following World War II. Sri Lanka has been better than many of the ‘new nations’ in giving the appearance of democracy—and it can still boast of a relatively high commitment to freedom of expression. However, Edirippulige demonstrates that the term ‘illiberal democracy’ still fits the Sri Lankan model as it has evolved over the last fifty to sixty years.

Of course, liberal democracy was born of the European Enlightenment and its principles do not always work well in Third World settings.
Old traditions (for example, caste divisions in India and Sri Lanka) cut across principles of representation and equal rights, and the very concept of the nation may be weak in societies with much older social institutions. Furthermore, as Gupta has pointed out, the state ‘must play an interventionist role’ in emerging nations with weakly developed national economies and this can lead to ‘the phenomenon of command politics’.20 We have seen in Sri Lanka that ‘command politics’ and centralized economic development tend to go hand-in-hand and that this has undermined any meaningful attempts to devolve political power.

Eric Meyer has suggested that at the time of independence Sri Lanka was in a far better position than India to build a prosperous modern nation.21 These advantages included higher levels of education and literacy, weaker influence of the divisive caste system, the use of English as a national ‘link language’ that also facilitated international communication, and long-established trading and cultural links with many other parts of the world (partly reflecting Sri Lanka’s location on the planet). However, the failure to resolve the deadly conflict that morphed into a civil war after 1983 suggests that Sri Lankan democracy is built on very flimsy foundations and many of the advantages listed by Meyer have been forfeited.

The government led by President Mahinda Rajapakse has argued that political reform is impossible as long as the Tamil Tiger ‘terrorists’ continued to threaten national unity, and in the wake of the military victory over the LTTE he has promised to address the grievance of the Tamil minority. However, the resilience of the LTTE would suggest that these grievances are deep-seated and any attempt to paper over the ethnic divisions will fail. Furthermore, violent conflicts have left a legacy of division that spreads across the island. University of Colombo sociologist Professor Siri Hettige has warned, for example, that the conditions that led to the JVP-led youth rebellions of 1971 and the mid-1980s are being constantly reproduced in the way that the education system operates in Sri Lanka today22 and that there are other divisive consequences flowing from the fact that education is ‘ethno-linguistically segregated’.23 While it is difficult to break the cycle of violence that has plagued the country for so long, there is little doubt that a sustained outbreak of peace would lift sagging spirits inside the country and untap a wellspring of international goodwill. A national dialogue aimed at creating a new plural identity for Sri Lanka will attract strong international interest.

Rethinking hybrid identities

Demographic data is not collected very frequently or systematically in Sri Lanka, and identities are defined by a rather inexact mix of linguistic, religious and cultural criteria. Broadly speaking we can say that the Sinhalese make up around 74 per cent of the population and that most people in this category identify as being Buddhist and use Sinhala as their primary language. The traditions and habits that came to prevail in the
area ruled by the kings of Kandy came to be seen as the most ‘authentic’ expressions of Sinhalese culture because this was the last region to fall under the influence of European colonizers. Writers such as the historian Nira Wickramasinghe have argued that this notion of authenticity masks a much more complex and interesting story of identity formation for the Sinhalese. Furthermore, Bruce Matthews has pointed out that the ‘united’ Sinhalese identity is cross cut by other identity formations related primarily to caste and religious affiliation, and any sense of unity largely stems from the Buddhist revival movement led by the priest Dharmapala in the early part of the twentieth century. Yet Sinhalese may be the least problematic category of ‘ethnic’ identity in Sri Lanka.

Tamil-speaking Hindus make up around 14 per cent of today’s population, and historians now agree that Tamils have been in Sri Lanka as long as those who now identify as Sinhalese. However, the Tamil Hindu communities centred on Jaffna and those centred on Batticaloa, for example, are quite distinct from each other in their origins and historical evolution, and Tamil society in Sri Lanka has taken different forms to Tamil society in southern India, especially in regard to caste structures. To complicate matters even further the British brought in different communities of ‘low-caste’ Tamil Hindus to work on the tea plantations of the central highlands, and so by the time British rule was coming to an end there was little basis for a common sense of Tamil identity across Sri Lanka. As Kandy became the centre of ‘authentic’ Sinhalese culture, Jaffna set itself up as the centre of ‘authentic’ Sri Lankan Tamil culture and eventually the heartland of Tamil Eelam. Any sense of a united Tamil identity in Sri Lanka has only arisen as a reaction to the hegemony of Sinhalese identity, and the idea of a Tamil ‘homeland’ centered on Jaffna is a very recent phenomenon. Although Tamil-speaking Hindus have prevailed in the coastal communities stretching from Jaffna to Batticaloa for a very long time, a territorial segregation of Tamil and Sinhalese identities is really the product of the ‘ethnic conflicts’ that have escalated into prolonged violence since 1983. Before 1983, Tamils were more widely dispersed across the island.

The third major ‘ethnic’ identity in Sri Lanka is defined even less precisely as, simply, Muslim, and this category makes up around 7 per cent of the population. The majority of Sri Lankan Muslims trace their origins back to India and they use Tamil as their primary language. However, there are also Muslims who can trace their origins back in time to the Malay peninsula and they include Malay as one of their languages. Sri Lankan ‘Burghers’ make no secret of their hybridity because their surnames often reflect the fact that they have Dutch or Portuguese ancestors. The Dutch or Portuguese influence extended to the fact that most Burghers adopted Christianity as their religion. However, there is no use of Dutch or Portuguese language, and most of the Burghers speak both Sinhala and English. To complicate matters a little further many of the ‘low-land Sinhalese’ (that is, those not
connected to the Kandy kings) have Dutch or Portuguese ancestors as well, as demonstrated in the prevalence of surnames such as De Silva or Pereira.

Sinhalese nationalism has been based on a mythological claim that the Sinhalese people are north Indian (or Aryan) in origin and that they settled in Sri Lanka before the Tamils started to come. Crucial to the mythology surrounding Sinhalese identity is the story of how the Sinhalese king of Anuradhapura, King Devanampiyatissa, converted to Buddhism in the third century BCE, because, it is suggested, a ‘pure form’ of Buddhism was then preserved in Sri Lanka after it went into decline in India. The Rajarata kings of central Sri Lanka, it is suggested, subsequently faced a long and difficult struggle to preserve Sinhalese Buddhist identity against repeated incursions from southern India, particularly at the time of the Chola empire in the eleventh century CE. In view of this mythological account of identity formation, Nira Wickramasinghe points out that it is quite ironic that the traditions and customs adopted by the Kandy kings came to be seen as the most authentic expression of this identity, because they show very clear influences from southern India. The Kandy kings developed a close relationship with the Nayakkar empire centred on Madurai in Tamil Nadu and commonly went to Madurai to find a wife. At one point a Nayakkar was even invited to take the throne in Kandy. According to Wickramasinghe, the irony is that a mix of Kandy and south Indian/Nayakkar influences is thought to produce a more ‘authentic’ form of Sinhalese identity than the mix of ‘low-country traditions’ and European influences that prevailed in the south and west of the country. As Wickramasinghe points out, this irony is made even more complete by the fact that the British played a key role in selecting Kandy as the heartland of the most ‘unspoiled’ form of Sinhalese culture, because this then encouraged Sinhalese nationalists of the twentieth century to do the same in campaigning for their independence from Britain.

While the Sinhala language appears to be more closely related to northern Indian languages than to Tamil, the kinship structures of Sinhalese society are much more clearly south Indian in origin. There is little doubt that the Sinhalese identity emerged in Sri Lanka through a mixing of influences brought from several parts of India and that influences from both Tamil Nadu and Kerala are clear. A seminal article written by Leslie Gunawardena in 1990 suggested that the term Sinhalese probably referred first to a particular ruling house or dynasty and only subsequently came to refer to all the people in that kingdom. As already mentioned, an injection of southern Indian cultural influences continued within Sinhalese culture right through to the time of the Kandy kingdoms in the nineteenth century. In other words, Sinhalese identity is clearly hybrid in its origin and evolution, and it is also clear that Sri Lankan Tamil identities have taken different forms to what is found in Tamil Nadu through a process of cultural evolution and interaction with emerging Sinhalese cultural formations. This history of hybridity and interaction undermines many of the myths used to promote rival forms of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka, and this in turn
makes possible a new and much more dynamic way of thinking about the nation’s complex and multilayered identity. This, then, is a crucial starting point for promoting a new national dialogue that can unlock the current gridlock.

Sri Lankan scholars who are promoting the concept of hybridity as a way of breaking the deadlock over competing nationalisms are drawing on the work of leading international cultural theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Robert Young. They are also suggesting that Sri Lankan anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere was a pioneer in this way of thinking, as revealed in work published in the 1970s and ‘80s. There are also other scholars of Sri Lankan identities who have made a significant contribution in this area, and Bruce Matthews and Dagmar Helmann-Rajanayagam are prominent among them. They include people who have shown a determination to ‘abide by Sri Lanka’ in its troubled times.

Of course, it is important not to discount the role of mythology in creating a robust sense of identity, and Bruce Kapferer has rightly stressed that it would be impossible to unravel the mix of history and mythology—passed through many generations—that underpins current Sri Lankan identities. Indeed, any attempt to discredit mythology per se in Sri Lanka is likely to make it even more influential, as Kapferer has suggested. However, the recent history of violent conflict might be enough to demonstrate the importance of drawing a clear distinction between history and mythology and the valuable role that each can play. Mythology can produce rich and evocative stories of self-identification but it becomes dangerous if used to deny the validity of other forms of identity formation; largely because it is not interested in dialogue. More contestable accounts of history, on the other hand, can promote dialogue and increase respect for cultural diversity.

Deepening democracy

A fundamental rethinking of complex and layered identity formation in Sri Lanka is critical for breaking the deadlock between sharply competing forms of nationalism that have escalated in the period since independence in 1948. The breaking of this deadlock could, in turn, end a period of intense introspection (caused by the intractable internal conflict) and allow Sri Lanka to rethink its opportunities for global connectedness, which Eric Meyer identified as the opportunity born of the country’s unique history and its location in the world. An enduring end to violent conflict would lift the sagging spirits of people living in Sri Lanka, lead to the return of many emigrants, and help to revive the flagging economy. After nearly thirty years of violence, it should be clear that a military ‘solution’ to the conflict will not bring about enduring peace and that a political solution is essential. So what are the key ingredients of a political solution?

As already suggested above, it must involve a serious commitment to a devolution of political power that has non-partisan political support in
Colombo. The old emphasis on the need for a ‘unitary state’ to prevent the fragmentation of Sri Lanka should be abandoned because the conflict of the last thirty years has created very strong momentum towards fragmentation and entrenched division, rather than the reverse. Internationally, there are many models of national constitutions that are based on the principles of federation and that have helped to prevent, rather than cause, internal conflicts. It is surely time to go beyond gestures towards the establishment of semi-autonomous provinces into something real and sustained.

Increasing centralization of government in Colombo has also weakened the capacity of local government in Sri Lanka, and this weakness hampered the efforts to respond to the devastating impacts of the tsunami. For example, the national announcement (which came within days of the tsunami) that a 100-metre building-free buffer zone would be created around the entire coast of Sri Lanka caused enormous difficulties for local authorities, to the extent that the inflexible national policy was eventually abandoned. Similar difficulties arose over the role of the central government in allocating land for new settlements for tsunami victims and in setting building standards for the new constructions. Perhaps the preoccupation with the ethnic conflict means that little serious attention has been given to increasing the capacity of local government in Sri Lanka, and the post-tsunami experience should be enough to make this a higher priority.

Fortunately, years of conflict and centralization of political power have not destroyed ‘civil society’ in Sri Lanka. There are many effective non-government organizations that remain independent of government, there is still a relatively free national media (despite some incidents of violent intimidation), and the work of critical scholars can still be published in Sri Lanka, with their books freely available inside the country. Many critical scholars write regularly for Sri Lankan newspapers, especially those published in English, and many of them argue that there is a critical need to deepen democracy in the country. Sri Lankans, it might also be noted, retain a robust sense of humour that often makes fun of their political leaders. However, an emphasis on identifying the key ingredients for a healthy ‘civil society’ may not pick up more subtle shifts in the moods of public discussion or perceived constraints on what can and should be discussed. It is not hard to detect a growing politicization of public discussion over the last thirty years that tends to undercut dialogue and the expression of dissident ideas.

There is, of course, widespread pessimism about Sri Lanka’s future, and this also tends to suppress debate and discussion. While civil society has not been dismantled, the ‘space’ for public discussion has been eroded. There was a notable exception to this in the period immediately following the tsunami when a perceived need to put aside old divisions was discussed very widely and with considerable enthusiasm. This change of mood, it can be argued, led to a change in the rhetoric of political leaders on both
sides of the Sinhalese/Tamil divide. However, when the politicians began to revert to the ‘blame game’, the mood shifted to greater pessimism and an opportunity was lost. 46 As Margo Kleinfeld has noted 47, it is impossible to keep a ‘humanitarian space’ separate from ‘political space’, at least for any length of time, and so the failure to build on the post-tsunami spirit of unity was a failure of political leadership rather than a failing of civil society. In hierarchically organized states it is all too easy for political leaders to close or radically confine the space in which civil society can operate.

In order to reconceptualize civil society as a ‘space’ in which the discussion of ideas can thrive it is useful to refer to Jeffrey Alexander’s recent work on what he has called the ‘civil sphere’. 48 Taking his lead from French sociologist Emile Durkheim, Alexander is interested in exploring the conditions in which ‘feeling for others’ (or solidarity) can override self-interest in order to create a society in which coexistence and respect for others become the norm. For Alexander, it is not enough to simply note the existence of civil society or the existence of a ‘public sphere’ in which ideas can be freely debated but rather to promote the norm of solidarity as a ‘common secular faith’. He wants to enrich Jurgen Habermas’s conception of the ‘public sphere’ with the normative conception of solidarity to create what he has called the ‘civil sphere’. This broader and more normative conception of the space in which civil society can operate seems to capture something of the essence that is currently missing from public debate in Sri Lanka. When religious and ethnic identities have become so divisive it might be useful indeed to promote a ‘common secular faith’ that values coexistence and respect for diversity. Alexander devotes a considerable portion of his massive book to the idea of ‘civil repair’ as a response to deep social division, and Sri Lanka can be seen as society in which civil repair is urgently needed.

Despite the complexities of cross-cutting hybrid identities, it is clearly important in Sri Lanka to create more inclusive communities at all levels—from the local to the national. The ‘civil sphere’ can also be seen as the space in which inclusive expressions of community can be shared and contested without losing a shared commitment to the norm of peaceful coexistence.

Habermas’s notion of the ‘public sphere’ has been used to promote a conception of democracy (most commonly called ‘deliberative democracy’) in which ideas about good governance would be more openly and more transparently debated before being turned into policy and law. The Australian scholar John Dryzek, for example, has promoted the idea that policy formation needs to reflect competing discourses that represent a broad array of interests and concerns that are often ignored by elected politicians who see themselves as the representatives of society. 49 It is dangerous, Dryzek warns, to allow any single discourse (for example, the discourse of neoliberalism) to become hegemonic, and so competing discourses, each following a different logic, need to be considered by
policy-makers. In his recent work Dryzek has argued that processes of deliberation are particularly important in societies that have become deeply divided by a failure to respect a diversity of views and this certainly reflects the experience of Sri Lanka.

Advocates of ‘deliberative’ or ‘radical’ democracy want to flush out the powerful influence of largely hidden and cashed-up lobby groups who have inordinate influence on politicians, and they argue that much greater transparency in policy debates will radically reduce all forms of political ‘corruption’ (from the subtle and legal to the extreme and criminal). The concentration of political power in the office of the presidency in Sri Lanka has made it difficult to properly pursue allegations of corruption made against leading members of government over the last twenty years or more, and so steps to increase transparency and to reduce the influence of cashed-up lobby groups would be valuable. A combination of devolution and transparency is needed to reverse the dangerous trends towards centralization of political power that were discussed earlier in this essay.

Very large Sri Lankan diasporas have played a problematic role in Sri Lankan politics over the last twenty to thirty years. It is widely acknowledged, for example, that the Tamil diaspora—spread across Asia, Europe, North America and Australia—has played a crucial role supporting armed struggle by the LTTE and that part of the Sinhalese diaspora located in western countries supported rebellions by the JVP in the 1980s. It is probably even easier for people who are no longer living in the country to engage in ideological ‘warfare’ because they are remote from the consequences of violent conflict and because their conception of Sri Lankan identity might be based more on distorted, even romanticized, memories rather than the realities of daily life in difficult circumstances. At the same time, the loyalty of expatriate Sri Lankans for their ‘homeland’ can also be seen as ‘asset’ that has not been used wisely by Sri Lankan governments focused on internal problems. There has been a rapid growth in the numbers of people who leave Sri Lanka temporarily to support their families through remittances and many of these people retain their Sri Lankan citizenship, even if they live abroad for years at a time. Like it or not, the large and growing Sri Lankan diaspora will continue to have a big influence on the country’s future, and Sri Lankan identity has already taken on some transnational characteristics. As Eric Meyer noted, Sri Lanka has always been more open than neighbouring India to cultural influences from abroad and this gives Sri Lankan society a more cosmopolitan flavour.

By dint of necessity and opportunity, then, it seems important for Sri Lanka to think about ways to engage more actively with its diasporas. Such an engagement will not be productive, however, if the internal divisions are not resolved and the opportunity to ‘re-engage’ the diasporas in a productive way may only come when a meaningful peace has been consolidated. At the same time, a meaningful engagement of the diasporas in the peace
process could give that process greater momentum and revive international enthusiasm for the future of the country. As Mark Whitaker has pointed out, the high profile developed by the independent Tamil news and discussion website, tamilnet.com, shows how internet technology can facilitate discussion across transnational diasporas.

The idea of engaging diasporas in the internal politics of the ‘homeland’ is very new, and recent initiatives in this regard, for example by Italy, need to be carefully assessed. However, the idea of extending democracy to a transnational constituency may also become a way of deepening democracy in the homelands. As John Dryzek has suggested, the challenge for democracy in an increasingly insecure and divided world is to become more transnational, and Sri Lanka could potentially lead the way in this regard.

Endnotes
1. Accurate figures regarding the number of casualties were not available at the time of writing but relief agencies were estimating that the number could be as high as 20,000.
3. ibid.
7. The term angarika refers to a status in Buddhism that is between that of a priest and a lay person.
9. ibid.
13. ibid.
14. Statistics cited in this section were included in a presentation given by Colombo University Professor Siri Hettige at RMIT University, Melbourne in March 2008.
15. ibid.
17. As reported widely in Sri Lankan media in the aftermath of the provincial council elections in May 2008.
28. ibid.
31. ibid.
32. See Guneratne, ‘What’s in a Name?’
33. ibid.
34. The article by Gunawardana, titled ‘The People of the Lion: the Sinhala Identity and Ideology in History and Historiography’, is cited by Guneratne, pp. 35-36.
35. See, for example, Silva, *The Hybrid Island*.
37. According to Silva, ibid.

40. The difficulties encountered in post-tsunami recovery have been identified in research conducted by the author since 2004.

41. ibid.

42. This view has been expressed strongly by Colombo University Professor Siri Hettige in a presentation given in Melbourne in March 2008.

43. See, for example, Hasbullah and Morrison, eds, *Sri Lankan Society in an Era of Globalization*.

44. For example, in an article in the *Daily Mirror* in July 2008, K. Godage wrote that democracy in Sri Lanka is ‘a mere shell of the real thing; the kernel has been removed by our politicians’.

45. This observation is based on the author’s monitoring of media debates and discussions in the month following the tsunami.

46. This is based on the observations of the author during trips to Sri Lanka in 2005 and 2006.


51. The term ‘radical democracy’ was coined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantalle Mouffe in their work in the 1980s.


