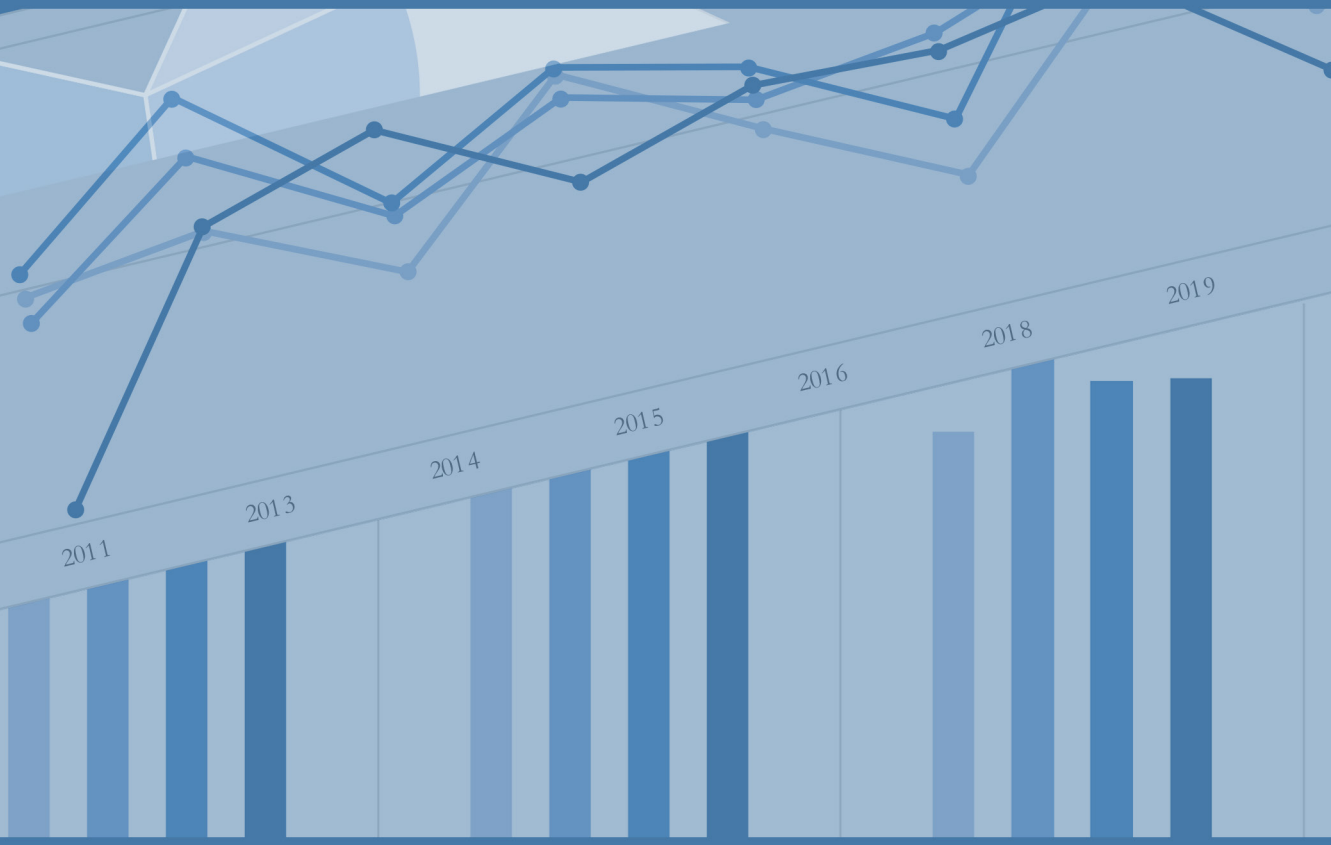
Shifting Tides

A Trend Analysis of Public Opinion on Reconciliation and Democracy in Sri Lanka



Centre for Policy Alternatives - Social Indicator

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A Trend Analysis of Public Opinion on Reconciliation and Democracy in Sri Lanka

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Contents

Introduction

Since its inception in 1999, Social Indicator (SI), the survey arm of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) has conducted a series of surveys that capture public opinion and perceptions of Sri Lankan political institutions, instruments and processes. SI has also conducted surveys on matters concerning the peace process, peacebuilding and conflict management in an attempt to provide silent majorities with a platform to influence public debate on matters that affect their lives by publicizing the results on popular media. The Peace Confidence Index (PCI) designed and implemented by SI was Sri Lanka's first ever systematic and scientific effort to capture public opinion not only on the peace process but also on broader political issues. This survey series continued from 2001-2008 and each year there were at least three waves of surveys conducted. Since 2001 SI-CPA has continued to survey public opinion on issues of peace, reconciliation and democracy using multiple survey instruments and is therefore in a uniquely advantaged position to discuss changing trends in Sri Lankan public opinion over the past two decades.

Public opinion forms the bedrock of democratic legitimacy and continuous polling provides the public with an opportunity to speak in between elections. By conveying popularly held views, polls enable policymakers to make sound decisions while also providing the public with an opportunity to hold rulers accountable before they are called upon to convey their decisions at the ballot box. The communicative role of polls becomes even more important when politicians have to make challenging choices on contentious issues in which polls can be used to convey tough decisions to masses. Therefore, the polling series of SI-CPA over the past two decades has both empowered policymakers to make correct choices and to be responsive to public aspirations.

Democratization has never been a linear development. As Huntington (1970) famously argued modern democracy evolved in waves of democratization followed by reverse waves. Therefore, conditions conducive for democracy seem to be in a constant flux and democratic consolidation remains an arduous task. In recent decades, there has been a proliferation of political regimes with many variants appearing in discussions concerning democratic regime classifications (Collier and Levitsky 1997). These variants termed democracies "with adjectives" (*Ibid*., 431), display both democratic and authoritarian tendencies highlighting difficulties inherent in democratic transitions. Continuous surveying of public opinion becomes imperative in such a context to understand people's support and preference for liberal democracy. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) aptly discuss democracies today no longer have explosive, dramatic deaths but rather die slow deaths through the gradual erosion of political institutions and norms. These continuous surveys therefore play a very important role in revealing the strength of the Sri Lankan democracy.

Sri Lanka's elite political transition from demos to ethnos is reflective of entrenched post-colonial readings of antagonistic nationalisms and the willingness on the part of political elite to exploit these grievances for electoral gains. The Sri Lankan state's ethnocratic nature (Uyangoda 2011; 2012 and 2013) continues to cater to the "twin solitudes" (Uyangoda 2012, 19) i.e. oppositional Sinhalese and Tamil worldviews to the detriment of finding a durable solution to the ethnic conflict. Ethnic outbidding (DeVotta 2005) remains an important tool of consolidation of power that systematically marginalizes minorities while political patronage plays a central role in electoral mobilization of voters who privilege personalities over policies at both local and national levels (Peiris 2022). The country continues to slide towards illiberalism (DeVotta 2021) punctuated by brief episodes of liberal promise (*Ibid*.).

The divided political debate is also reflected in the reconciliation discourse. Even after 15 years of ending the armed conflict, the Sri Lankan state has failed to make significant progress towards reconciliation with the country's minority Tamils. Issue of accountability remains unaddressed (Anketell 2012), crackdowns on Tamil commemorative events are widespread (Ganguly 2022; Shanmugathas 2023) and ad-hoc commissions of inquiry have proved unsuccessful in addressing reconciliation demands ("Sri Lanka: Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Rights" 2023). The country also has failed

to address concerns raised by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions while also continuing to resist international scrutiny ("Sri Lanka: UN Human Rights Council Resolution Upholds the Need to Maintain International Scrutiny and Seek Justice and Accountability" 2022). Discussions about the full implementation of the 13th Amendment have not reached any consensus (Bopage 2023) with land release, police powers and high security zones still being contentious issues. Continuous polling of public perception will assist policymakers to understand public opinion of these nationally divisive issues and make informed policy decisions about reconciliation.

It is in this context that the research team at SI-CPA ventured into this longitudinal analysis in order to examine the public opinion about democracy, reconciliation and inter-ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. The analysis focuses on two pertinent questions; As a country, have we learnt our lessons of a three-decades long war? Are we on the path to reconciliation and sustainable peace? All the surveys that have been used in this analysis provide scientifically rigorous estimates of opinions of each main ethnic community in the country. However, it should be noted that the findings of the surveys conducted during the period of the war only capture the public opinion outside the war torn areas i.e. only in areas under government control. Survey questionnaires were administered in both Sinhala and Tamil and the team of enumerators represent a broad spectrum of ethnic, gender, religious and linguistic diversity. Respondents were chosen randomly and data analysis was conducted using SPSS. A description of each survey used in this analysis is provided in the Annexure.

SI would like to thank Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu for his intellectual leadership and support provided for the survey series since 1999. We would also like to thank all the board members and various scholars particularly Prof. William Mishler of University of Arizona and Prof. Stephen Finkel of University of Virginia who provided intellectual assistance to develop the survey instruments and build the capacity of SI to successfully implement this sophisticated series of surveys. We hope that this trend analysis will contribute meaningfully to the larger discourse of reconciliation and democracy in Sri Lanka.

Majority-Minority Relations

'Ethnic Politics' has been a dominant feature of Sri Lanka's political landscape since the colonial period. The British rule in Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known) was characterized by "an extremely divisive and parochial form of limited representation based on caste, ethnicity and religion" (Perera 2001, 7). Since 1920s, the national level political discourse had ethnic undertones. In the 1921 Ceylonese Legislative Council, 8 out of 19 seats for elected unofficial members were communal seats (Jennings 1948). This communal representation continued until 1931 and was replaced by territorial constituencies under the Donoughmore constitution (*Ibid*.). Abolishment of communal seats did not automatically usher in a satisfactory answer to the concerns of the minorities. It in fact aggravated certain minority concerns by introducing territorial constituencies which again favoured the majority Sinhalese. The Donoughmore constitution was passed only with a majority of two votes and was boycotted by the Tamils given the lack of minority safeguards this new system carried with itself (*Ibid*.). Subsequent constitutional reforms too did very little to meaningfully address the ethno-political electoral polarization that had started to take root at the level of the masses. Soulbury constitution that enjoyed a life span of 25 years introduced a parliamentary executive with minority protection but was continuously put in jeopardy by manifold majoritarian political forces (Coomaraswamy 2020). The "embedded majoritarianism" (Kumarasingham 2013, 23-4) of the Ceylonese political landscape was only further highlighted by the passing of the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 that disenfranchised a sizeable proportion of Up Country Tamils (Wijeyeratne 1998) and the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 that made Sinhala the official language of the country (DeVotta 2003). Even though the hailing of linguistic nationalism marked a departure from colonial fetters that privileged English over native

languages, this created an irreversible gulf between the island's two main ethnic groups, further segregating them electorally, politically and socially (Coomaraswamy 2020).

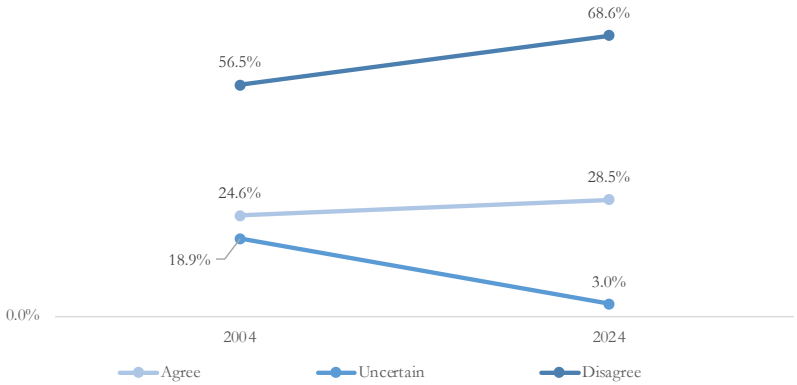
The succeeding First Republican constitution of 1972 which was couched in nationalist language did not do much to alter these dynamics. Ethnic outbidding (DeVotta 2005) for electoral gains continued to dominate Sri Lanka's political life intensifying this process of segregation. The 1972 constitution granted Buddhism the foremost place in the hierarchy of state religions (Coomaraswamy 2020), a position Buddhism enjoys to date. Higher education was also ethnicised in the 1970s in which a language based admissions system that severely curtailed the number of Tamil students enrolled in universities was introduced (Perera 2001). This policy was reversed in 1977 (*Ibid*.) but added to ethnic antagonisms that dominated the country. The 1978 constitution was introduced against a backdrop of unsuccessful political attempts at resolving ethnic antagonisms that culminated in a three decades long civil war between the Sri Lankan government (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that broke out within five years of the introduction of the constitution. Successive attempts at resolving the conflict including the 13th Amendment to the constitution (Suryanarayan, Manoharan, and Senadhira 2013), implementation of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Committee (LLRC) report (Mohammed, Kumarage, and Gunatilleke 2014) and the progress made on UNHRC Resolutions concerning the human rights situation in Sri Lanka (*Ibid*.) too proved to be unsuccessful pointing in the direction of the ethnocratic (Uyangoda 2011) nature of the Sri Lankan state in which ethno-nationalism continues to be the dominant form of "political imagination, competition and mobilization" (Uyangoda 2013, 4). Ethnic outbidding (DeVotta 2005) continues to be the foremost electoral weapon in post-war Sri Lanka (Pilapitiya 2022) while backsliding on pro-minority policies is commonplace (*Ibid*.).

A recent spate of Sinhala-Buddhist mobilization against the Muslims that culminated in a series of violent events is indicative of how the ethnocratic state uses second-order minority identities (Imtiyaz and Mohamed-Saleem 2015) to its advantage in pre-and post-conflict situations. Despite the change of focus on the 'other' i.e. from Tamils to Muslims, the state remains ethnocratic favouring its Sinhala-Buddhist hegemonic group. The divide between the ethnic communities was also evident in the visible absence of the North and the East in the country's historic *Aragalaya* protests in 2022

(Mihlar 2022).

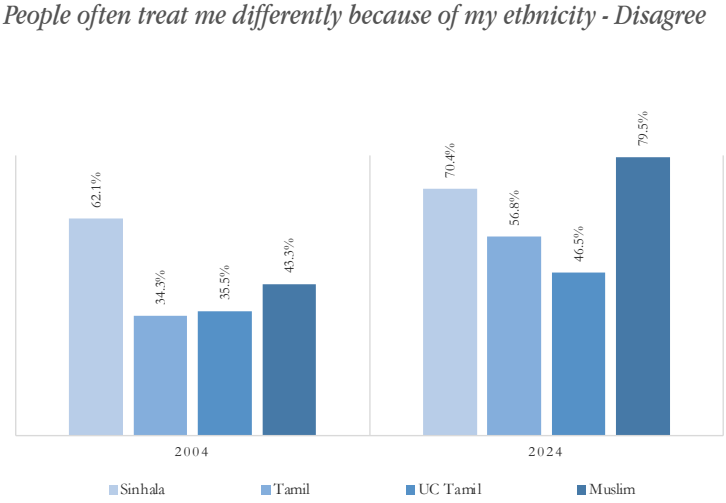
In order to understand how this national, political divide translates into the personal, everyday realm, SI-CPA conducted a survey series that captured the public opinion and attitudes towards their ethnic other. This survey series makes very important contributions to reconciliation attempts by providing perspectives of the general public on the issues of their identity and their identity based everyday experiences. We hope that these new insights will be useful to the public discourse about reconciliation by injecting the national level discourse with opinions of the public.

Graph 01 – Perception of whether people treat me differently because of my ethnicity: National



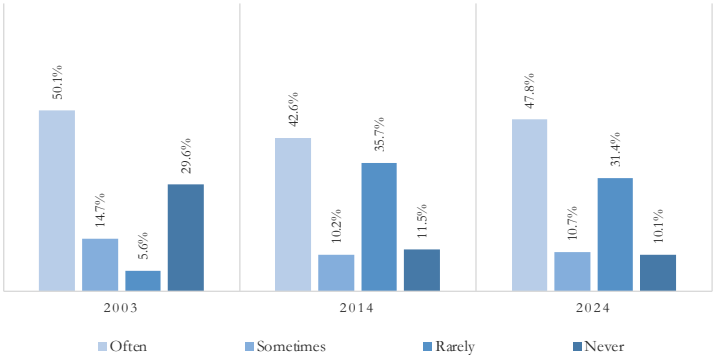
In order to examine how different ethnic groups felt about the existence of ethnicity based discrimination, the survey asked its respondents to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the statement that reads "People often treat me differently because of my ethnicity". The KAP Survey conducted in 2004, in the wake of failed peace talks between the GoSL and the LTTE, revealed that the majority (56.5%) did not believe that they were treated differently due to their ethnicity. However, close to a quarter of Sri Lankans (24.6%) felt that they were subjected to ethnic based discrimination. In 2024, even after 20 years since the initial KAP survey, data reveals that little over a quarter of Sri Lankans (28.5%) still believe that they experience ethnic based discrimination. On the other hand, there is a sizeable increase (12.1% from its previous 56.5% in 2004) in the numbers who deny the existence of ethnic based discrimination with a 68.6% disagreeing with the statement.

Graph 02 – Perception of whether people treat me differently because of my ethnicity: By Ethnicity



The ethnic disaggregation of data records the biggest shift in the Muslim community. While it was only 43.3% that denied the existence of ethnicity based discrimination in 2004, 79.5% deny such discrimination in 2024. There is also a sizeable change recorded within the Tamil community. Corresponding figures for the Tamil community record 34.3% in 2004 and 56.8% in 2024. From a reconciliation perspective of the average person, the data shows that all minority groups perceive the existence of ethnicity based discrimination to be less. This is therefore, indicative of a development in the right direction in fostering amicable, inter-communal relations. These sentiments are expressed against a backdrop of the ending of the war that paved way for increased interactions between average citizens of different ethnic groups as well as an economic crisis that is felt across ethnic divides and resulted in a civic awakening that at least fleetingly united these groups ("A Brief Analysis of the Aragalaya" 2023).

Graph 03 – Perception of interacting with someone of a different ethnicity :National



In order to understand how reconciliation is taking root in society in actual terms i.e. to capture the frequency of interactions (if any) respondents have with people of a different ethnicity as opposed to what they feel about the ethnic 'other', the survey asked "How often would you say that you interact with someone who is of a different ethnicity to you?". The bar that reads 'never' has significantly decreased thus highlighting a clear improvement in inter-communal interactions over the last 20 years. For example, in 2003 almost 1/3 of Sri Lankans (29.6%) claimed that they have not had any interactions with someone of a different ethnicity (please note that the 2003 survey only captured the opinions of people who lived in government controlled areas) while it has dropped to a 10.1% in 2024. Although reconciliation cannot be reduced merely to interactions among communities[1], it is clearly an important indication of enhanced exposure to different ethnic groups that can help foster co-existence in the long-term by helping counter negative stereotypes of the ethnic 'other'.

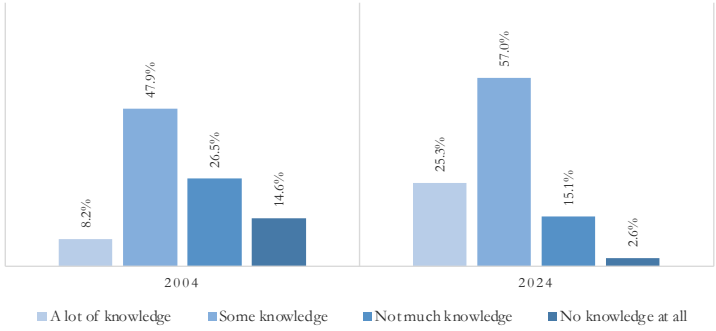
1 The nature of interactions can either be amicable or hostile which was not captured by this question. However, having interactions as opposed to purely constructing an opinion of the 'other' based on stereotypes is a welcome step towards co-existence.

Table 01 – Perception of interacting with someone of a different ethnicity: By Ethnicity

	2003				2014				2024			
	Sinhala	Tamil	UC Tamil	Muslim	Sinhala	Tamil	UC Tamil	Muslim	Sinhala	Tamil	UC Tamil	Muslim
Often	46.3%	50.8%	93.3%	82.2%	32.1%	64.8%	81.0%	84.0%	44.4%	48.2%	78.6%	63.9%
Sometimes	16.3%	9.2%	3.3%	7.9%	11.7%	5.7%	8.9%	4.0%	10.7%	8.0%	11.9%	14.5%
Rarely	5.5%	9.2%	0.0%	2.6%	42.4%	20.5%	8.9%	10.9%	33.7%	33.9%	9.5%	16.9%
Never	31.9%	30.7%	3.3%	7.2%	13.7%	9.0%	1.3%	1.1%	11.1%	9.8%	0.0%	4.8%
Base	1678	178	90	152	1426	210	79	175	803	112	42	83

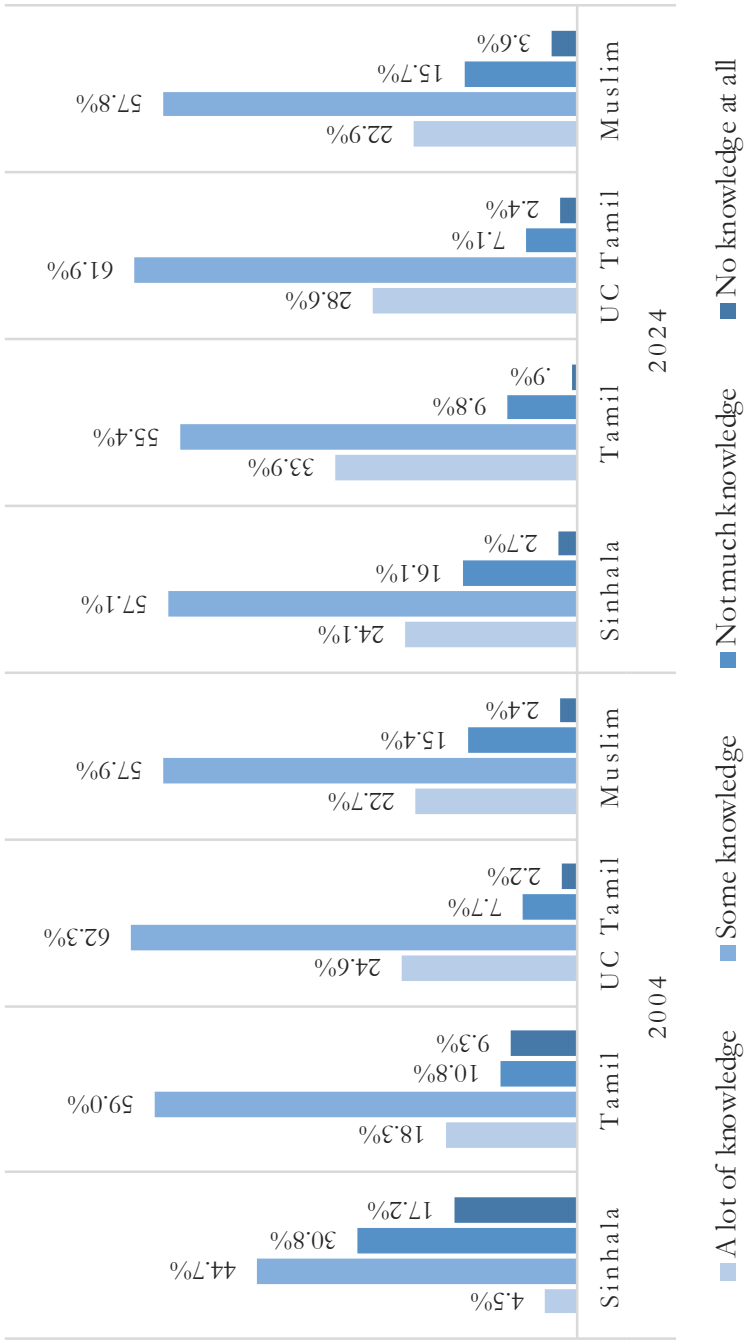
Ethnic disaggregation of the inter-communal interactions over the past 20 years shows that inter-ethnic interactions among Sinhalese and Tamils have improved significantly. For example, 20 years ago close to 1/3 of Sinhalese (31.9%) and Tamils (30.7%) claimed that they never had experience interacting with members of the other ethnic group. According to the survey conducted in 2024, only about 1/10 of both communities still claim that they have not had interactions with other communities. This can be considered a positive attribute of reconciliation. The ending of the war between GoSL and the LTTE and the subsequent connectivity of all parts of the country possibly enhanced interactions among different ethnic groups. During the war, relations between the Sinhalese and the Up Country Tamil and the Muslim communities that lived outside the North and East seemed amicable. Therefore, it can be assumed that these increased interactions are between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities who have been distanced for decades by "twin solitudes" (Uyangoda 2012, 19) i.e. divergent ethno-nationalisms that rendered them incapable of understanding each other and thereby making reconciliation a difficult task to achieve.

Graph 04 – Perception of how much knowledge one has about other ethnic groups: National



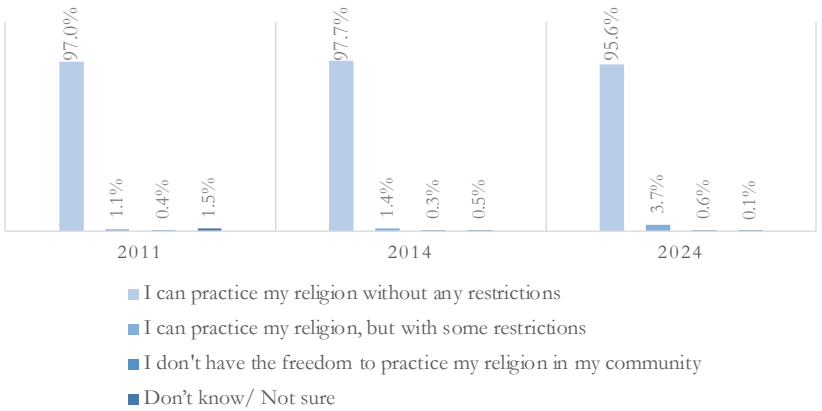
In order to understand how much the public is aware of communities outside their own ethnic group, the survey asked "How much knowledge do you feel you have about other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka?". National level data over a span of 20 years' reveals, significant improvement in the levels of knowledge the public possesses about other ethnic groups. While 14.6% had no knowledge at all about other ethnic groups in 2004, the number has dropped to 2.6% in 2024. A mere 8.2% that had a lot of knowledge about other ethnic groups has increased to 25.3% in 2024.

Graph 05 – Perception of how much knowledge one has about other ethnic groups: By Ethnicity



Ethnic disaggregation of data reveals a positive change towards reconciliation particularly between the Sinhalese and Tamils with the two communities having recorded to have more knowledge about other ethnic groups within the span of 20 years. For instance, 17.2% Sinhalese and 9.3% Tamils had no knowledge at all about other ethnic groups in 2004 while this number has dropped to 2.7% and 0.9% for Sinhalese and Tamils respectively in 2024. A closer reading of national level dynamics of inter-ethnic relations reveals that there was no drastic change in the political relationship between Up Country Tamils and other communities between 2004 and 2024. Data for the Muslim community records almost (with slight variations) similar trends regarding the knowledge they possess about other ethnic communities. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that this increased knowledge the Sinhalese and Tamils have is about each other given the contexts in which the surveys were conducted are very different with a telling impact on the relations between the Sinhalese and Tamils. In 2004, the survey was conducted against a backdrop of peace negotiations between the GoSL and the LTTE while in 2024, it was conducted 15 years after the ending of the war amidst an unfolding economic crisis that affected the entire country alike. This increased awareness is a welcome step towards reconciliation given that these communities and their political worldviews of the ethnic 'other' developed in complete isolation for decades at the national level (Uyangoda 2012).

Graph 06 – Perception of how free one feels to practice their religion in their community: National



To understand dynamics of freedom of religion, respondents were asked "How free do you think you are to practice your religion in your community?" National level data indicates positive trends with 97% in 2011 saying that they can practice without any restriction and 95.6% confirming the same in 2024.

Table 02 – Perception of how free one feels to practice their religion in their community: By Religion

		I can practice my religion without any restrictions	I can practice my religion, but with some restrictions	I don't have the freedom to practice my religion in my community	Don't know/ Not sure	Base
2011	Christianity (Non-RC)	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	19
	Christianity RC	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	169
	Islam	94.2%	3.9%	0.6%	1.3%	155
	Hinduism	96.0%	2.2%	0.4%	1.5%	274
	Buddhism	98.3%	0.8%	0.3%	0.6%	1375
2014	Christianity (Non-RC)	92.3%	7.7%	0.0%	0.0%	13
	Christianity RC	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	60
	Islam	86.9%	10.9%	1.1%	1.5%	175
	Hinduism	94.7%	2.8%	0.8%	0.6%	246
	Buddhism	99.5%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	1405
2024	Christianity (Non-RC)	87.5%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	24
	Christianity RC	83.9%	3.2%	12.9%	0.0%	31
	Islam	88.1%	10.7%	1.2%	0.0%	84
	Hinduism	92.0%	7.2%	0.8%	0.0%	125
	Buddhism	97.8%	2.1%	0.0%	0.1%	775

Religious disaggregation of data reveals that in general Sri Lankans do not consider freedom to practice one's religion to be hampered by the prevailing politico-social climate. However, a sizeable proportion of the Muslim community shares a negative view indicating that they practice their religion subject to certain restrictions. 3.9% of the Muslim community held this view in 2011. It has increased to 10.7% in 2024. Furthermore, 94.2% Muslims who believed they can practice their religion without any restrictions in 2011 has dropped to 88.1% in 2024. Since the ending of the war in 2009, Sri Lanka witnessed a growing incidence of anti-Muslim violence and Islamophobia with the rise of Sinhalese-Buddhist ultra-nationalism fuelled by extremist groups such as the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) (Morrison 2020; Aliff 2015). Among many incidents of violence and discrimination against the Muslims were anti-Muslim riots in Beruwala and Aluthgama in 2014 (Colombage 2014), false accusations levelled against Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen for illegally sterilizing Sinhalese women ("The Tragedy of Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen" 2022; "Doctor Arrested For 'Sterilising' Women In Sri Lanka Was Framed: Probe," n.d.), *Wanda pethi/koththu* saga that incited a series of violent attacks on the Muslim community in Ampara and Kandy districts in 2018 ("The Politics of Hate" 2021; Jeyaraj 2023), controversies surrounding the issuance of the Halal certification by the All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama (ACJU) ("Peaceful Coexistence More Important than Halal-ACJU," n.d.; "Halal Certificate Not Required, SLS Is Sufficient – Gnanasara Thero" 2020), demonization of the Muslim community after the Easter attacks (Ethirajan 2019), and Covid-19 forced cremations of Muslims (Ganguly 2021).

Conclusion

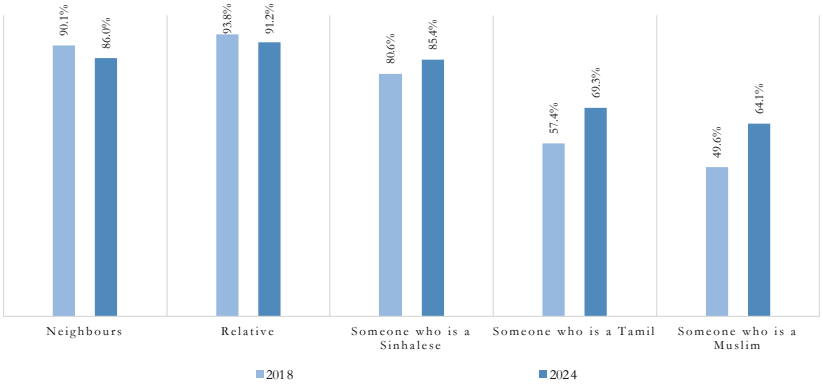
This section records positive trends between inter-group interactions. This is not a linear improvement and has developed in response to many a hurdle the country had to face including but not limited to (failed) peace negotiations, the Tsunami disaster, ending of the war in 2009, inability of successive governments to address the ethnic question in a manner satisfactory to all ethnic groups post-2009, failure to implement LLRC recommendations as well as UNHRC resolutions, Anti-Muslim riots, Easter Sunday attacks and most recently the economic crisis. While the relationship with Muslims has taken a negative turn, there seems to be clear improvement between the relations of the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

Social Trust

Protracted conflicts require trust to overcome hostile boundaries and conflicting identities and interests those have given rise to (Sagherian-Dickey 2021; Husted and Just 2022). While the exact mechanisms of political reconciliation are context-dependent, literature suggests trust to be a crucial element in creating solidarity and depoliticizing relationships in divided communities (Sagherian-Dickey 2021; Alon and Bar-Tal 2016; Kelman 2005). Galtung (1969) discussing direct and structural dimensions of violence posits that structural (legal/institutional) violence or violence built into the structure of a society results in systemic marginalization of certain groups. He goes on to term this social injustice. 20 years later introducing a violence triangle, Galtung (1990) added a further dimension of cultural violence i.e. "any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form" (291). Cultural violence gives rise to the internalization of stereotypes and manifests in inter-personal relationships characterized by scepticism of and antipathy towards the 'other'.

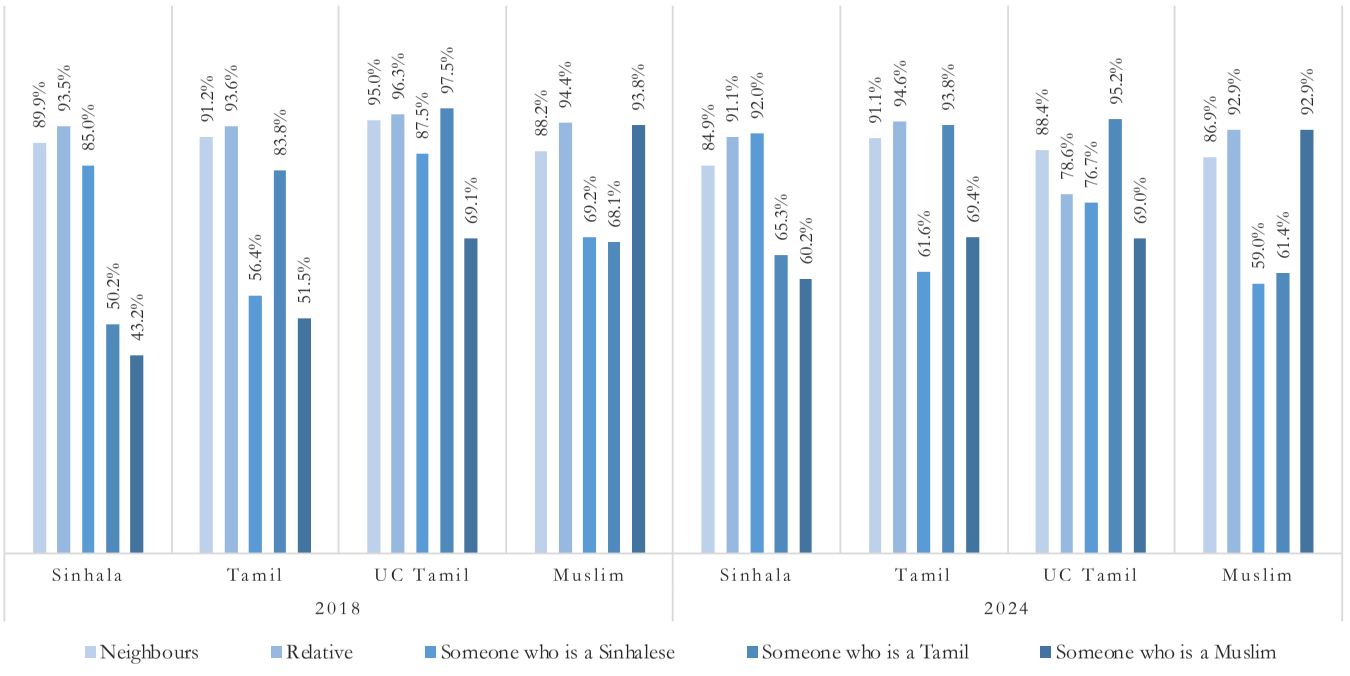
In Sri Lanka, as the previous section elaborated, a routinized cycle of discrimination against minorities is indicative of the presence of structural and cultural dimensions of violence and has resulted in a growing distrust among communities. Politicization of ethnicity (de Silva, Haniffa, and Bastin 2019) along with the political elite's role in capitalizing on and fanning ethnic rivalries (Imtiyaz and Stavis 2008) has turned Sri Lanka into an ethnocracy (Uyangoda 2011) that has weaponized culture to "legitimate rival nationalisms" (Ramachandran 1993, 9). These antagonistic narratives and distancing of communities for electoral gains (Imtiyaz and Stavis 2008) subsequently led to a three decades long war that only further cemented the alienation minority communities suffered at the hands of the state. The divisive narratives thus translated into a spatial distance as well with the North and the East been referred to as minority areas. This section aims to understand how these nationalist narratives of distrust have taken root in society by capturing public perceptions of the prevalence (or lack thereof) of social trust.

Graph 07 – Trust in receiving personal assistance from someone: National



In order to understand trust between people, respondents were asked "If you were to seek personal assistance from someone, to what extent would you trust the following persons?" and were presented with 5 options ranging from neighbour to relative/someone from their caste to someone who is a Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim. The national level data reveals that identity-based trust has improved while relationship-based trust has declined. In 2018, 80.6% trusted a Sinhalese in receiving personal assistance while it has increased to 85.4% in 2024. Recording a significant improvement, figures for the Tamil and Muslim communities respectively are 69.3% and 64.1% in 2024 while the figures in 2018 were 57.4% and 49.6% respectively. Relationship based trust has suffered minor setbacks with trust in a neighbour dropping to 86% in 2024 from 90.1% in 2018 and trust in a relative dropping to 91.2% in 2024 from 93.8% in 2018.

Graph 08 – Trust in receiving personal assistance from someone: By Ethnicity



Irrespective of the ethnicity, people generally tend to trust their neighbours and the relatives the most. The overall trust between different ethnic groups too has increased in 2024 as compared to 2018. Survey carried out in 2018 reveals that the Sinhalese and Tamils trusted each other more than they trusted the Muslim community. In 2018, 50.2% Sinhalese trusted Tamils with only 43.2% Sinhalese trusting Muslims. For Tamils, 56.4% trusted Sinhalese with only 51.5% trusting Muslims. However, this has changed in 2024 with the Tamils and Muslims trusting each other more than the Sinhalese. In 2024, 69.4% Tamils trust Muslims with only 61.6% trusting the Sinhalese. 61.4% Muslims trust Tamils with only 59% trusting the Sinhalese. This perhaps explains the lack of popular support the *Aragalaya* protests that was mainly perceived as a struggle of the Sinhalese middle class, received from the Tamil and Muslim dominated North and East.

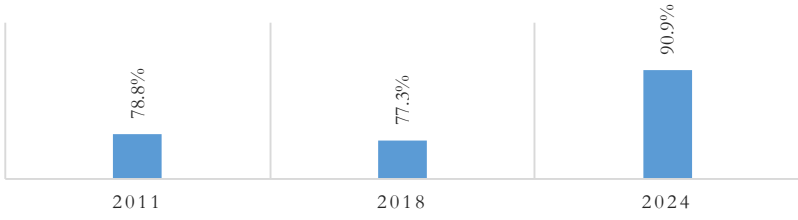
Conclusion

This section captures an overall improvement in levels of social trust. National level data records identity-based trust to have improved more than relationship-based trust while ethnicity wise disaggregation of data records positive trends on both fronts. Minorities however tend to trust each other more than they trust the majority Sinhalese. The data is recorded against a backdrop of unfulfilled political demands of minority communities as well as organised violence for political gains against minorities; Tamils since independence and Muslims since the ending of the war in 2009.

Political Safeguards for Minorities

Democracy in its design caters to procedural majoritarianism in that "one man, one vote" translates into a rule characterized by a numerical majority. Principle of majority rule as Mill argued is a "basic qualitative requirement of democracy" (Mill 1861 as quoted in Lijphart 1997, 144) that runs the risk of turning into an "undemocratic minority rule" (*Ibid*.). It is therefore necessary to have strong constitutional restrictions to limit majority rule (Hayek 1978) from being applied in a manner detrimental to the substantive quality of democracy. In divided societies with permanent, dominant majorities[2], it becomes even more important to have 'effective' constitutional safeguards to avoid a "tyranny of the majority" from prevailing. Reforms of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state have been far from satisfactory and those have only further ethnicized the state (Uyangoda 2013) reinforcing widespread systemic discrimination against minority groups. Since the 1950s, Sri Lanka's political elite used "ethnic outbidding" (DeVotta 2005) to cater to majority Sinhalese demands that also orchestrated an institutional decay (*Ibid*.) that became the ideal recipe for the subsequent armed rebellion (that later on turned into a civil war) of Tamil youth against the state in the 1980s. Power-sharing was introduced only through the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord of 1987 (Srinivasan 2020). The political success of exclusionary politics thus seems to be acting as a disincentive to the political elite to effect meaningful changes that address the ethnic question. This section aims to capture public perception regarding the necessity of minority safeguards in the constitutional and political arenas, essential prerequisites of reconciliation.

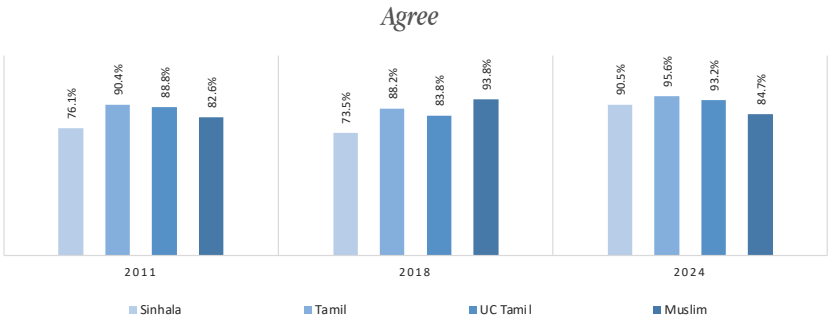
Graph 09 – The rights of minority groups should be protected even if the majority in the area do not agree: National



2 "Based on some stable pre-political differences (for example on ethnic or religious divisions)" (Lagerspetz 2017, 173).

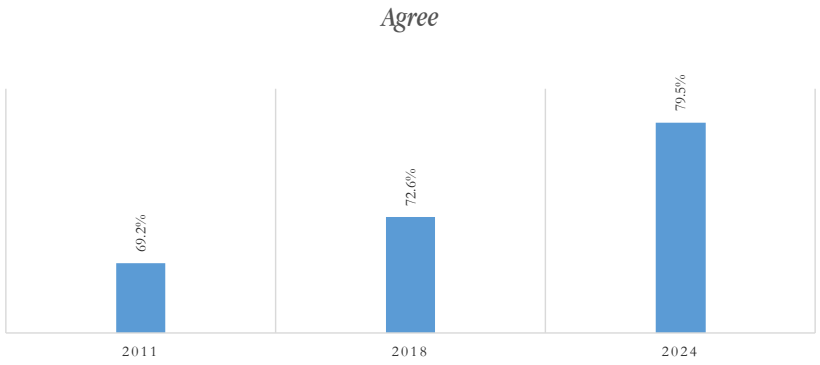
In order to understand public perception regarding minority safeguards at the political level, respondents were asked if they agreed with the statements "The rights of minority groups should be protected even if the majority in the area do not agree" and "Each ethnic group should have the right to elect a certain number of members to the Parliament (proportionate to their respective ethnic population)." National level data records a significant increase in the numbers who agree with the fact that minority groups should be protected even if the majority disagrees. 78.8% agreed with the statement in 2011 while it increased to 90.9% in 2024.

Graph 10 – The rights of minority groups should be protected even if the majority in the area do not agree: By Ethnicity



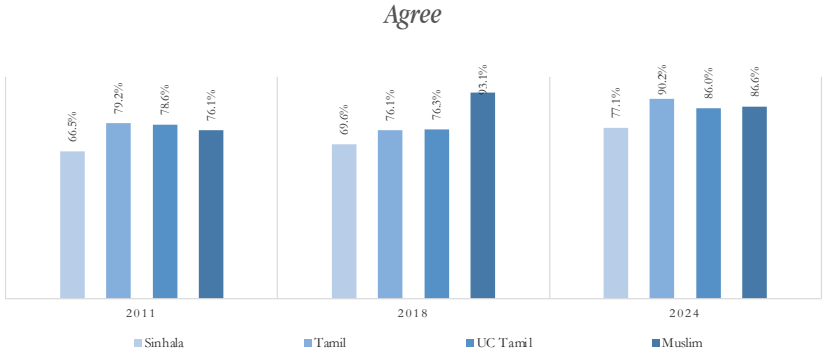
In general, the support for protecting minority rights even if the majority disagrees has increased over the past decade and this positive transformation can be observed among all ethnic groups especially the Sinhalese. The agreement for minority protection among Sinhalese has increased by almost 15% over the past ten years. As expected this opinion remains the same among minority communities and they are in agreement with the fact that the rights of the minorities need to be protected irrespective of the opinion of the majority.

Graph 11 – Each ethnic group should have the right to elect a certain number of members to the Parliament: National



National level data records almost a 10% increase in numbers that agree with the right each ethnic group has to elect Members of Parliament (MP) in proportion to their respective population figures. This figure was 69.2% in 2011 and it is 79.5% in 2024.

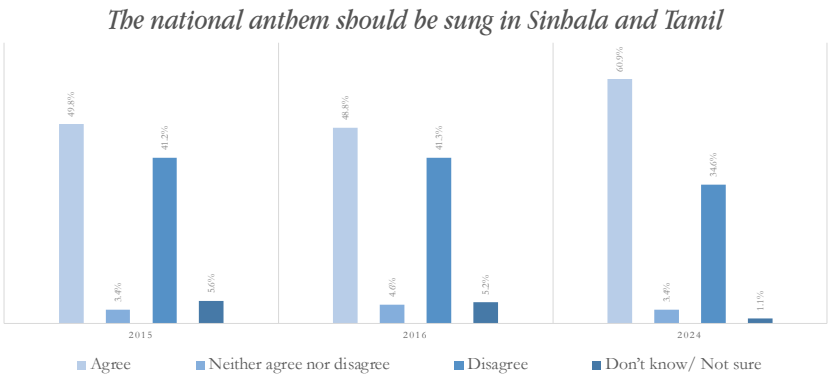
Graph 12 – Each ethnic group should have the right to elect a certain number of members to the Parliament: By Ethnicity



Ethnic disaggregation of data reveals that all ethnic groups are supportive of groups possessing the right to elect MPs in proportion to their population

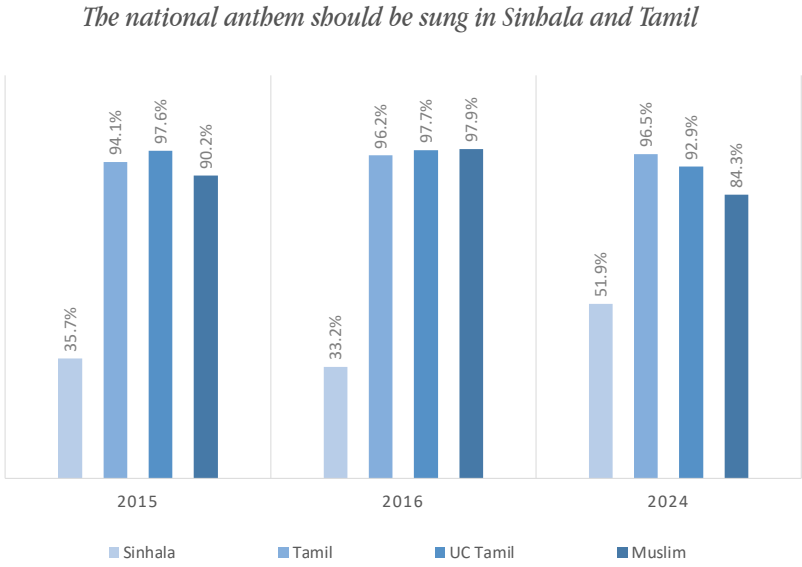
figures. This is indicative of a change of perception towards reconciliation with respondents being supportive of wider political representation for each ethnic group. In 2024, 77.1% of Sinhalese, 90.2% of Tamils and 86.6% of Muslims support this idea. Figures for the three groups in 2011 were 66.5%, 79.2% and 76.1% respectively. This change of perception echoes liberal undertones of inclusivity and indicates an acceptance of different group identities. However, one must also be mindful of the fact that while inclusion of more voices from different ethnic groups is a welcome move in the direction of reconciliation, group-based representation also carries with itself the risk of further ethnic polarization, a process the Sri Lankan polity has suffered from since the colonial era.

Graph 13 – Public perception about singing the national anthem in Sinhala and Tamil: National



In order to capture sentiments of the public regarding the language in which the national anthem should be sung in the public realm, the survey asked the respondents if they agree with the statement "The National Anthem should be sung in Sinhala and Tamil." Even though the statement garnered majority consensus with 49.8% in 2015 and 48.8% in 2016, the figures were yet to reach 50%. In 2024, marking a positive turn in the public mind-set, 60.9% agreed with the statement with numbers disagreeing dropping by almost 7% from its previous 41.3% in 2016.

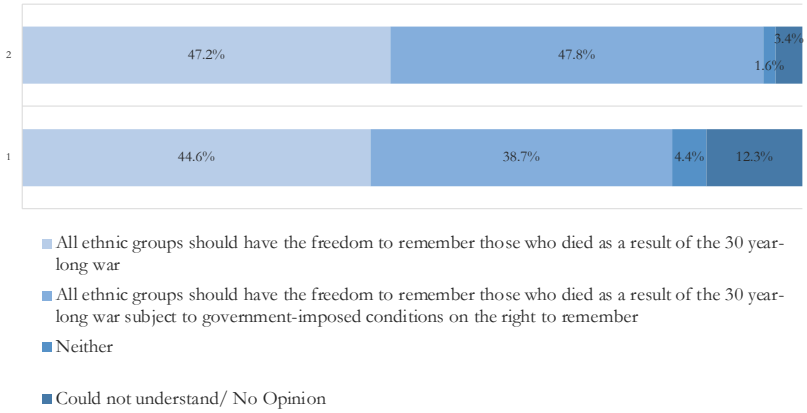
Graph 14 – Public perception about singing the national anthem in Sinhala and Tamil: By Ethnicity



Linguistic rights of ethnic communities have always been a topic of controversy in the Sri Lankan political and public discourses. The history of the Tamil version of the national anthem dates back to 1951, the year in which the official Tamil translation was done by Pundit M. Nallathamby (Gonsalkorale 2020). Even though the 1978 constitution adopted the Sinhala version as the official version, constitutional recognition was extended to the Tamil version too (Senaratne 2019). In 2016, the Tamil version of the national anthem was sung alongside the Sinhala version during the Independence Day celebrations under the Sirisena government (*Ibid*.), a welcome change towards reconciliation. Unfortunately, this was discontinued by the Rajapaksa government in 2020 (Jeyaraj 2021) making at least the symbolic achievement of an inclusive nationhood a farfetched dream. Ethnic disaggregation of data reveals that in 2024, the majority of minorities agree with singing the national anthem in both languages (96.5% of the Tamil community and 84.3% of the Muslim community), similar to the sentiments expressed in both 2015 and 2016. The most positive trend is found in the sentiments echoed in the Sinhalese opinion with 51.9%

agreeing with the statement of which the previous figures were as low as 35.7% in 2015 and 33.2% in 2016. These figures are recorded against an economic crisis that has led to a civic awakening that cuts across ethnic divides and has forced some groups to leave behind their ultra-nationalist stances ("A Brief Analysis of the Aragalaya" 2023).

Graph 15 – Public perception of the freedom to remember: National



The freedom of memory including the freedom to remember without being controlled by the state is a crucial component of the Right to Truth as well as reconciliation. In order to understand the public perception regarding the freedom to remember, the respondents were asked if they agree with the two statements A) "All ethnic groups should have the freedom to remember those who died as a result of the 30 year-long war" and B) "All ethnic groups should have the freedom to remember those who died as a result of the 30 year-long war subject to government imposed conditions on the right to remember." While 47.2% agrees with statement A) in 2024, a slight increase from its 2022 figure of 44.6%, data records almost a 10% increase in the opinions that are in agreement with statement B) highlighting a negative trend in reconciliation. 47.8% is thus in agreement with government imposed restrictions on the right to remember.

Table 03 – Public perception of the freedom to remember: By Ethnicity

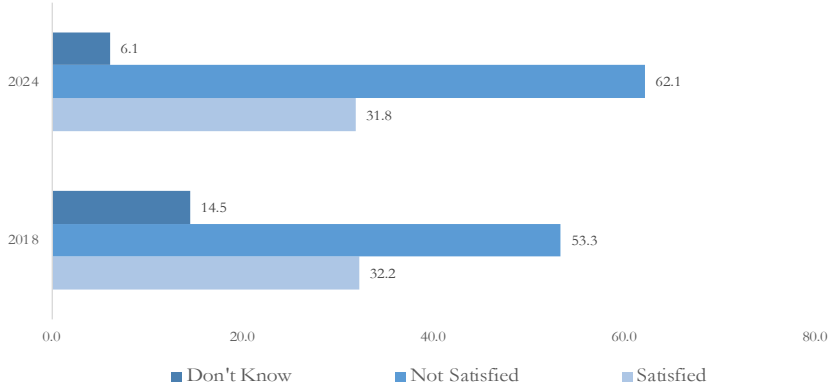
	2022				2024			
	Sinhala	Tamil	UC Tamil	Muslim	Sinhala	Tamil	UC Tamil	Muslim
All ethnic groups should have the freedom to remember those who died as a result of the 30 year-long war	40.1%	85.5%	39.7%	58.8%	42.1%	76.8%	67.4%	45.8%
All ethnic groups should have the freedom to remember those who died as a result of the 30 year-long war subject to government-imposed conditions on the right to remember	43.2%	7.9%	35.9%	23.8%	55.4%	10.7%	20.9%	37.3%
Neither	4.6%		10.3%		1.5%	1.8%	4.7%	1.2%
Could not understand/ No Opinion	12.1%	6.6%	14.1%	17.5%	1.0%	10.7%	7.0%	15.7%
Base	833	76	78	80	801	112	43	83

Sri Lanka has been falling behind on its commitments to ensure the Right to Truth ("Sri Lanka: Time to Ensure the Right to Truth" 2015) including guaranteeing of freedom to remember. Among many attempts of the Sri Lankan state to shirk off its responsibility to address the Right to Truth are a lack of willingness to probe into alleged war crimes committed during the final phases of the war ("Sri Lanka's President Asks Tamils to 'Forget the Past'" 2014), a spate of enforced disappearances that continue to go unaddressed (Fernandes, n.d.), and banning of and military crackdowns on commemorative events of the Tamil community to remember the war dead ("Sri Lankan Troops Break up Tamil Remembrance of Civil War Dead" 2021; "Sri Lanka Arrests Tamil MP for Commemorating Separatist Rebel" 2021). The *Aragalaya* protests of 2022 witnessed a fleeting moment of Sinhalese attempts to remember Tamils killed during the final stages of the war (Basu 2022). However, no concrete attempt has yet been made by the Sri Lankan state. Ethnic disaggregation of data is indicative of a strong support on the part of the minorities specifically the Tamils of the freedom to remember. In 2022, 85.5% Tamils agreed that all ethnic groups should have the freedom to remember those who died during the war and this figure is 76.8% in 2024. Corresponding figures for the Sinhalese were 40.1% in 2022 and 42.1% in 2024. While in 2024 only 10.7% of Tamils agreed that the right to remember should be subject to government imposed restrictions 55.4% Sinhalese

upheld this view which is almost an 8% rise from the 2022 figures. Opinion of the Sinhalese thus seems to be divided regarding the right to remember.

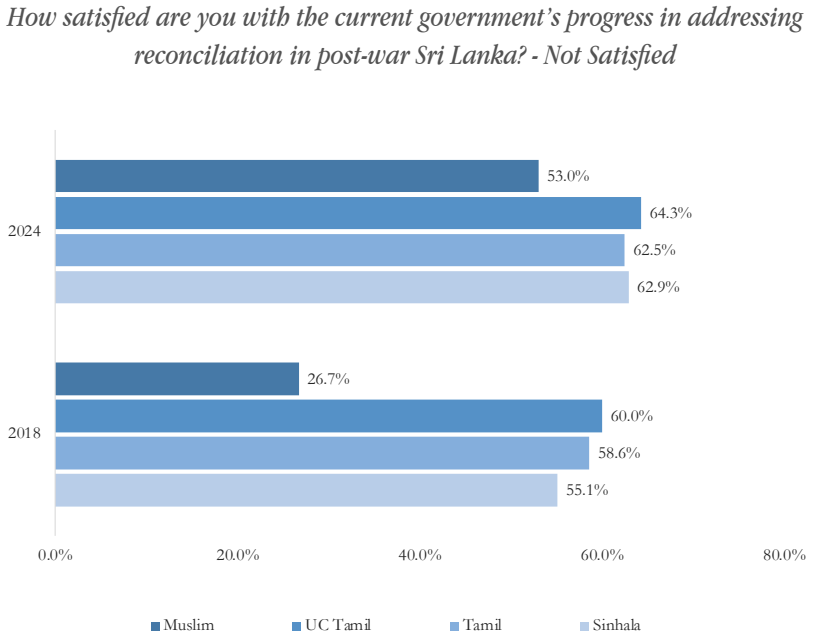
Graph 16 – Public perception of the government's progress in addressing reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka: National

How satisfied are you with the current government's progress in addressing reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka?



In 2018 during the final phase of the *Yahapalanaya* regime and in 2024 amidst the ongoing economic crisis that has overshadowed many other important political discourses, respondents were asked the question "How satisfied are you with the current government's progress in addressing reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka?". In both years, majority respondents (53.3% in 2018 and 62.1% in 2024) indicated they are not satisfied with roughly 1/3 of the population indicating they are satisfied.

Graph 17 – Public perception of the government's progress in addressing reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka: By Ethnicity



In 2024, 62.9% Sinhalese, 62.5% Tamils and 53% Muslims have indicated that they are not satisfied with the progress the government has made in reconciliation. Corresponding figures for 2018 were lower than the current figures for all 3 ethnic groups with 55.1% Sinhalese, 58.6% Tamils and 26.7% Muslims indicating their dissatisfaction with governmental efforts towards reconciliation. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the positive attitudes towards reconciliation are only reflected at the individual level i.e. in relations, interactions and encounters that characterize the everyday. But when asked about the progress that has been made at the state level, individuals tend to answer in the negative. This indicates that the society is shifting in the direction of co-existence while also displaying scepticism about the progress the state has made in political reconciliation which is a vital component of any meaningful reconciliation initiative.

Conclusion

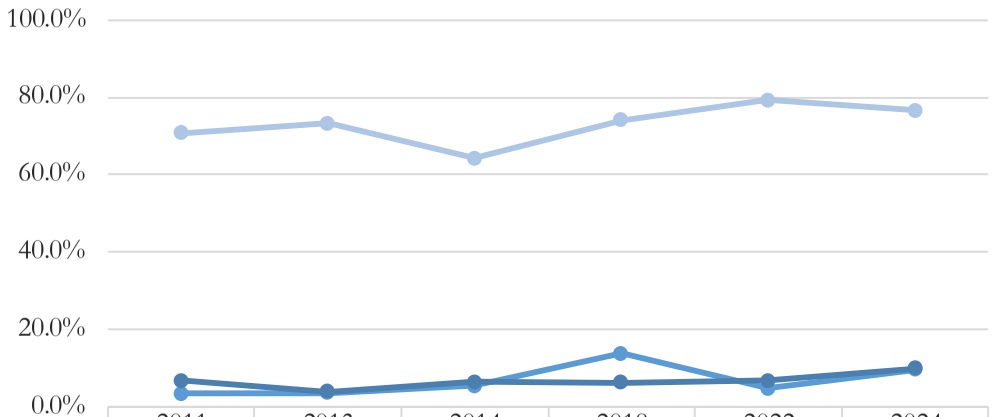
This section records significant positive trends in public perception regarding the necessity of minority safeguards. From substantive safeguards concerning political representation to symbolic safeguards related to singing of the national anthem, all ethnic groups uphold a view that favours minority protection. While the support for minority safeguards is more among minority communities, the majority opinion too seems to be making incremental progress in a positive direction. However, all communities remain sceptic about the progress made at the state level concerning reconciliation thus highlighting the rigidity of the ethnocratic state that resists reforms needed for meaningful reconciliation.

Trust in Democracy and Institutions

Effective democratic governance lies in generalized trust (Jamal and Nooruddin 2010). Trust provides an incentive for collective action by improving inter-group ties (*Ibid*.; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994), strengthens political confidence in democratic governance (Levi and Stoker 2000; Jamal and Nooruddin 2010) and inculcates an appreciation for democratic rule (Norris 1999; Jamal and Nooruddin 2010). The political utility of generalized trust is enhanced by the presence of strong, effective and impartial political institutions that facilitate the relationship between generalized trust and support for democracy (Jamal and Nooruddin 2010). Liberal democratic institutions therefore sustain both social and political trust (Vallier 2021) as well as safeguards basic human rights (*Ibid*.). Distrust of political institutions thus is indicative of their incompetence as well as a lack of fairness ("Trust and Democracy" 2020) as experienced by all sections of society.

However, in divided societies that permanently exclude minorities from power and authority, political institutions suffer from a 'legitimacy deficit' in which institutional rules are either not respected or receive weak support (Amenta, Nash, and Scott 2012) by segments of society. The existence of contested political visions translates into varying levels of satisfaction about institutional performance as experienced differently by social groups. Therefore, ethnically, racially or religiously fractionalized trust indicates institutionalization of discrimination in the eyes of the respective communities. A general loss of trust in institutions is a matter of democracy while a fractionalized loss of trust in institutions points to the ethnicized nature of the state. This section aims to capture public perception of democracy and institutions in order to evaluate the reconciliation trajectory Sri Lanka is on.

Graph 18 – Public perception of democracy: National



	2011	2013	2014	2018	2022	2024
Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government	70.8%	73.3%	64.3%	74.0%	79.2%	76.7%
In certain situations, a dictatorial government can be preferable to a democratic one	3.3%	3.4%	5.3%	13.6%	4.7%	9.4%
It doesn't matter to me whether we have democratic or non-democratic government	6.6%	3.8%	6.3%	6.2%	6.6%	9.8%

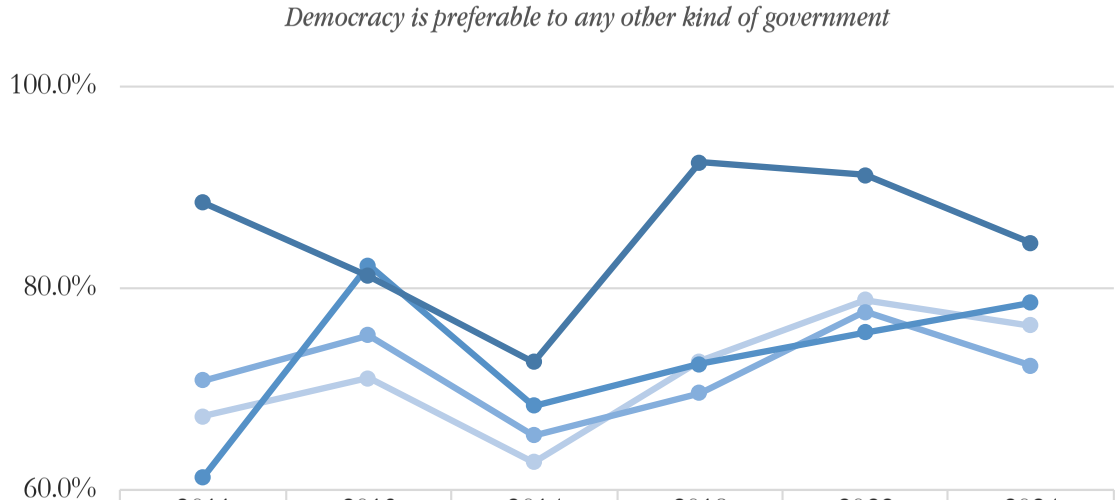
At the national level, Sri Lankans express a clear and strong support for democracy. 70.8% who were supportive of democracy in 2011 has increased to 76.7% in 2024. Sri Lanka (Ceylon as it was then known) was termed a third world "model democracy" (Gamage 1993, 107) after independence and since then the country's transfer of executive and legislative powers, has always been through elections[3]. Despite been punctuated by episodes of high political uncertainty[4], Sri Lanka always remained true to her procedural democratic commitments. On average, voter turnout in elections also tends to be relatively high (Keethaponcalan 2022), an indicator of this strong support for democratic rule. However, at certain junctures, a small percentage of Sri Lankans have indicated their preference for dictatorial regimes. For instance, against the backdrop of the 2018 constitutional crisis[5], 13.6% Sri Lankans have agreed with the statement that "In certain situations, a dictatorial government can be preferable to a democratic one."

3 Sri Lanka's association with democracy pre-dates independence and as South Asia's oldest democracy, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) got universal franchise in 1938 (Gamage 1993).

4 For instance, "between 2019 and mid-2022, when a major shift toward military rule seemed possible" (Moore 2024).

5 See Welikala 2018 and "Sri Lanka: Stepping Back from a Constitutional Crisis" 2018 for more on the constitutional crisis.

Graph 19 – Public perception of democracy: By Ethnicity



	2011	2013	2014	2018	2022	2024
Sinhala	67.3%	71.1%	62.8%	72.7%	78.8%	76.3%
Tamil	70.9%	75.4%	65.4%	69.6%	77.6%	72.3%
UC Tamil	61.3%	82.3%	68.4%	72.5%	75.6%	78.6%
Muslim	88.5%	81.2%	72.7%	92.5%	91.3%	84.5%

Ethnic disaggregation of data reveals that all ethnic communities extend overwhelming support for democracy. Interestingly, this support is higher among the Muslim community. In 2014, support for democracy reached the lowest between 2011 and 2024 for the Muslim community, with only 72.7% supporting democracy. This is a point in time when all ethnic communities are seen to be following a similar pattern. The corresponding figures for the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities too record their lowest in 2014 with only 62.8% Sinhalese and 65.4% Tamils supporting democracy. This is indicative of the fact that the support for democracy does not carry ethnic connotations. 2014 was immediately before the *Yahapalanaya* government came into power when calls for reforms (fuelled to some extent by the political parties in the run up to elections) had peaked and a growing antipathy towards corruption, nepotism and the related institutional decay characterized Sri Lanka's political landscape.

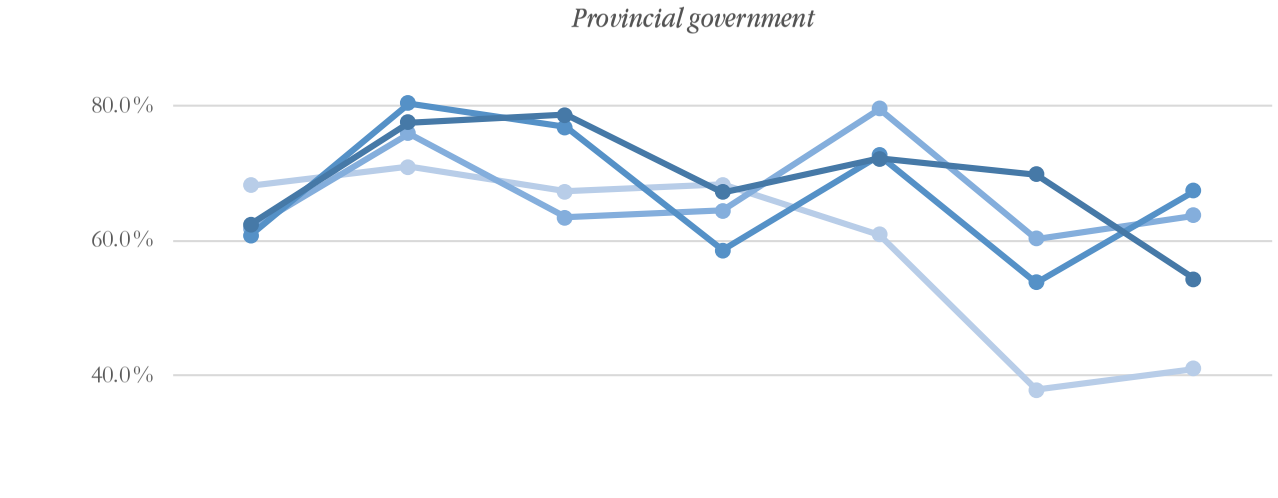
Table 04 – Public trust in institutions: National

Institutions	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019	2024
National government	76.9	84.2	78.5	74.5	68.7	38.8	-	40.1
Provincial government	66.8	72.7	68.2	67.4	64.6	43.6	-	45.5
Local government	69.2	73.0	66.1	67.9	65.5	51.6	-	54.7
Civil service	78.5	87.3	81.9	84.8	80.2	64.3	-	73.2
Police	67.5	73.5	67.8	71.6	63.5	56.4	70.5	66.9
Army	83.6	86.4	81.4	79.1	79.0	81.9	86.1	84.5
Courts	77.8	82.8	76.0	86.2	79.7	73.5	85.4	79.2
Parliament	63.0	68.3	57.9	60.7	48.0	25.5	24.1	22.4
Political parties	55.6	44.1	42.7	45.1	36.7	22.9	24.1	19.0
Election Commission	46.7	41.8	38.6	62.3	54.8	57.5	64.5	49.2
NGOs	45.5	37.8	39.6	41.8	44.1	-	65.4	49.7
Base	1993	2053	1899	1987	2102	1875	1292	1040

In order to understand the level of trust the public has in institutions, respondents were asked to what extent they trust 11 political and non-political institutions (mentioned in Table 04). For a better comprehension of the data, we will only select 5 institutions including 2 political (parliament and provincial government) and 3 non-political (army, police and courts) institutions and will elaborate on these in the subsequent analysis. At

the national level, army enjoys the highest level of trust (84.5% in 2024). Trust in the parliament has significantly declined. In 2011, 63% trusted the institution and this is only 22.4% in 2024, recording an almost 40% drop in 13 years. In 2024, police (66.9%) and courts (79.2%) too enjoy relatively high levels of trust. Overall, political authorities seem to have recorded the least amount of trust from the public.

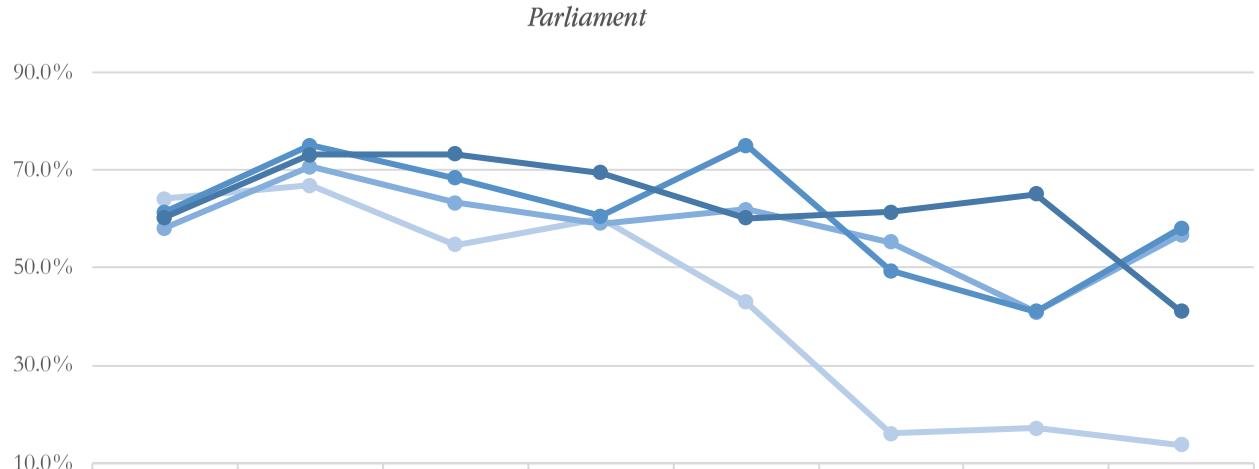
Graph 20 – Public perception of trust in Provincial Government: By Ethnicity



	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2024
Sinhala	68.2%	70.9%	67.3%	68.3%	60.9%	37.8%	40.9%
Tamil	61.8%	76.0%	63.4%	64.4%	79.7%	60.3%	63.7%
UC Tamil	60.8%	80.4%	76.9%	58.5%	72.7%	53.8%	67.4%
Muslim	62.4%	77.6%	78.7%	67.2%	72.2%	69.8%	54.2%

Ethnic disaggregation of data reveals that minorities have relatively higher levels of trust in Provincial Councils (PCs) than the majority Sinhalese. In 2024, 40.9% Sinhalese, 63.7% Tamils and 54.2% Muslims trusted provincial government. Trust in PCs has declined among the Sinhalese community particularly after 2015. PCs were introduced through the 13th Amendment to the constitution primarily to address grievances of the Tamil population by devolving political and administrative powers (De Alwis 2020) and therefore, were viewed by the Tamils as an important mechanism of minority political autonomy. However, the North-East PC had a short life span and was dissolved in 1990 (*Ibid*.) In 2006, a Supreme Court order separated the North and East PCs, and elections were subsequently held for the Eastern PC in 2008 and the Northern PC in 2010 (*Ibid*.). Despite been proposed as a solution to the ethnic question, PCs thus failed to operate in the minority dominated provinces for almost two decades. Since its inception, there has been a divided opinion regarding the PCs with the majority Sinhalese opposing it and minority Tamils supporting extensive devolution of powers (Mudalige and Abeysinghe 2021).

Graph 21 – Public perception of trust in the Parliament: By Ethnicity



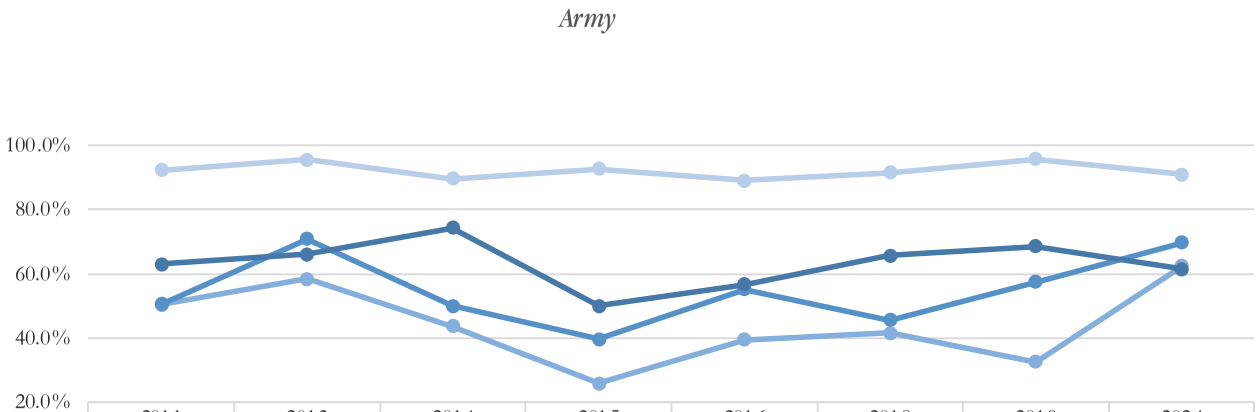
	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019	2024
Sinhala	64.1%	66.8%	54.6%	59.9%	42.9%	16.0%	17.1%	13.7%
Tamil	58.1%	70.7%	63.2%	59.0%	61.9%	55.2%	40.9%	56.8%
UC Tamil	61.3%	75.0%	68.4%	60.5%	75.0%	49.4%	41.0%	58.1%
Muslim	60.3%	73.1%	73.3%	69.4%	60.1%	61.4%	65.0%	41.0%

Data reveals that in post-war Sri Lanka the Sinhalese majority is continuing to lose their faith in the parliament as an institution while the trust minorities have placed in the parliament has not changed dramatically. In 2024, only 13.7% Sinhalese trusted the parliament with 56.8% of the Tamil and 41% of the Muslim community trusting it. Data speaks to an increasing level of frustration Sinhalese are experiencing with their elected representatives. This declining trust is recorded against a political backdrop characterized by large-scale corruption, lack of accountability and destabilising and unconstitutional attempts to consolidate power of certain factions to the detriment of the parliament's sovereignty[6]. The 2022 popular *Aragalaya* uprising too confirmed a deep rooted discontent the public had with all levels of the government (Gamage 2023) including the parliament that was responsible for the devastating economic crisis the country went through.

Findings also highlight a gulf between the majority and minorities in terms of their expectations of and experiences with the legislature. While the trust of the Sinhalese community is on the decline, trust minorities have placed in the parliament seems to be relatively unaffected by the prevailing political climate. This raises some crucial questions regarding the nature of the legislature of South Asia's oldest democracy. Does this unaffected trust indicate that minority aspirations are truly represented in the parliament? Or are minority expectations of the parliament different from those of the majority? These questions become ever more important in an ethnocracy that caters to a majoritarian political imagination (Uyangoda 2013) where institutions too are dominated by particular ethnic readings.

6 As was witnessed especially during the 2018 constitutional crisis.

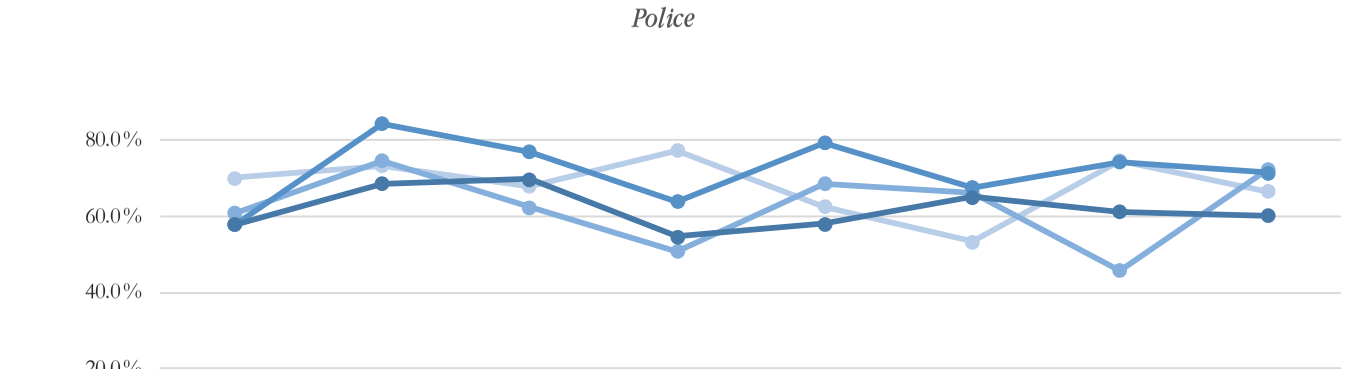
Graph 22 – Public perception of trust in Army: By Ethnicity



	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019	2024
Sinhala	92.2%	95.5%	89.7%	92.6%	89.0%	91.4%	95.8%	90.9%
Tamil	50.4%	58.5%	43.7%	26.0%	39.6%	41.7%	32.6%	62.5%
UC Tamil	50.7%	70.8%	50.0%	39.8%	55.2%	45.6%	57.5%	69.8%
Muslim	63.0%	66.0%	74.3%	50.0%	56.7%	65.6%	68.6%	61.4%

Despite enjoying the highest level of trust at the national level, a closer ethnically disaggregated reading of the army indicates that the support the army receives is highly ethnicized. The army is perceived by the minorities in a different light than it is being perceived by the majority. In 2024, while 90.9% of the Sinhalese trusted the army as an institution, it was only 61.4% Tamils and 62.5% Muslims that trusted them. The trust the Tamil community has in the army reached its lowest in 2015 (with only 26%) and 2019 (32.6%). Data thus indicates that the army's legitimacy as an institution is compromised since they derive their legitimacy largely from the majority Sinhalese.

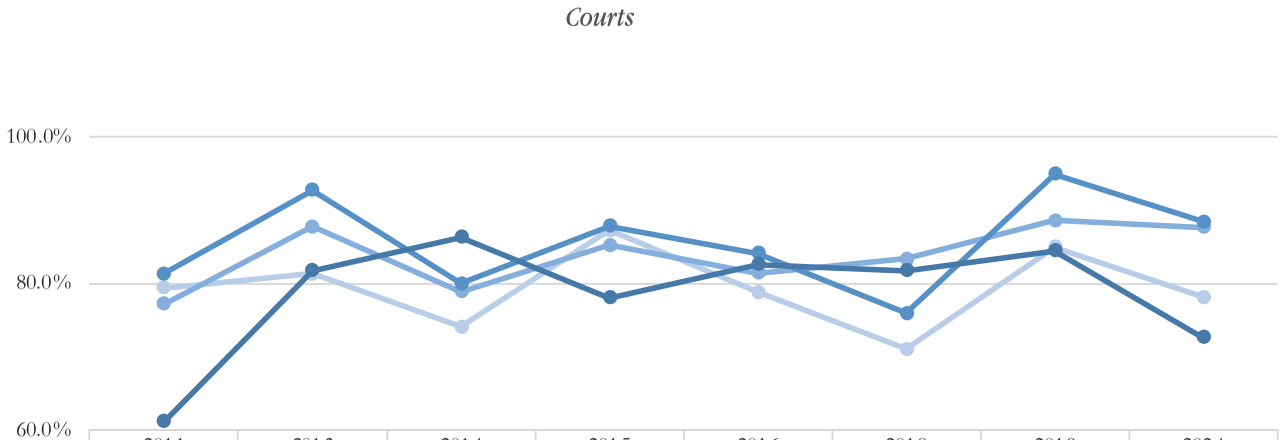
Graph 23 – Public perception of trust in Police: By Ethnicity



	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019	2024
Sinhala	70.0%	73.3%	67.9%	77.3%	62.6%	53.4%	74.5%	66.5%
Tamil	60.9%	74.6%	62.4%	50.9%	68.6%	66.2%	45.9%	72.3%
UC Tamil	57.9%	84.4%	76.9%	63.9%	79.3%	67.5%	74.4%	71.4%
Muslim	57.8%	68.5%	69.7%	54.6%	58.0%	65.0%	61.2%	60.2%

Unlike the army, the trust placed in the police as an institution does not seem to be ethnicized. There is a mixed opinion regarding the police since they deal with the average citizen related to matters of law enforcement. In the period captured through the survey, all ethnic communities uphold similar attitudes towards the police. In 2024, 60.2% Sinhalese, 72.3% Tamils and 60.2% Muslims trust the police. The trust the Tamil community has in policing is a welcome sign towards reconciliation since the opinion is recorded against a backdrop of many allegations levelled against the police including corruption, lack of accountability and independence from political authorities ("SRI LANKA: POLICE ON TRIAL: Exercising Authority without Accountability" 2022).

Graph 24 – Public perception of trust in Courts: By Ethnicity



	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019	2024
Sinhala	79.3%	81.3%	74.1%	87.2%	78.8%	71.1%	85.0%	78.2%
Tamil	77.2%	87.7%	78.9%	85.2%	81.4%	83.3%	88.5%	87.6%
UC Tamil	81.3%	92.7%	80.0%	87.8%	84.1%	75.9%	94.9%	88.4%
Muslim	61.2%	81.7%	86.3%	78.0%	82.6%	81.8%	84.5%	72.6%

Sri Lankan courts enjoy public trust irrespective of the ethnicity. While data records periodic fluctuations in the patterns of trust, courts in general have been successful in inspiring trust across ethnicities which is a positive trend. In 2024, 78.2% Sinhalese, 87.6% Tamils and 72.6% Muslims have indicated that they trust the courts. It is however important to note that there have been instances that have undermined judicial integrity and independence in the period the survey captures. Some of these include the procedurally flawed impeachment of Justice Shirani Bandaranayake, the 43rd Chief Justice of Sri Lanka[7], appointment of Mohan Peiris as the succeeding Chief Justice[8] and continuous parliamentary action that undermines the independence of the judiciary ("Sri Lanka: Parliamentary Action Undermines Independence of the Judiciary" 2023).

Conclusion

This section records mixed findings. While there is overall support for democracy across ethnic groups, trust in institutions has received mixed responses. Army as a non-political institution receives the highest level of trust but this however is ethnicized and the trust mainly comes from the majority Sinhalese. Police and courts as the two other non-political institutions have been successful in inspiring public trust despite certain allegations levelled against their impartiality and independence. This is a positive step towards reconciliation. Political institutions have secured the least amount of trust indicating the failure of the political machinery to successfully provide answers to political issues in general and the ethnic question in particular. This trust deficit acts as a hindrance to the successful achievement of political reconciliation.

7 See "Impeachment against Chief Justice Dr. Shirani Bandaranayake and the Issue about the Independence of the Judiciary in Sri Lanka" 2013 for more on this.

8 See "Sri Lanka: Appointment of New Chief Justice Undermines Rule of Law" 2013 for the opposition of the International Commission of Jurists to this new appointment.

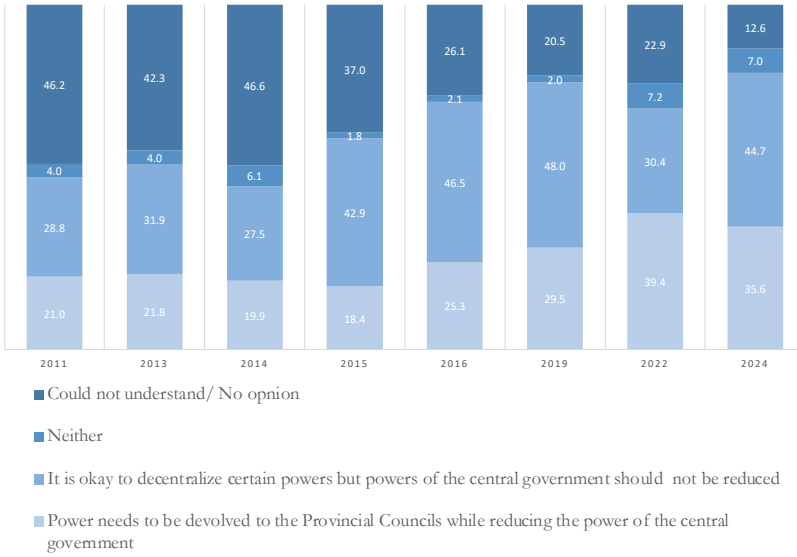
Power Sharing

There is extensive literature on the origins of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and the inability of successive governments to address ethnic minority grievances until these found expression in a three decades long separatist war that demanded self-determination for the country's North and East (Gunawardena and Lakshman 2008; Tambiah 1991; Mayer, Rajasingham-Senanayake, and Thangarajah 2003; Abeysekera and Gunasinghe 1987). Like in many protracted conflicts, the question of state power lies at the heart of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and the political reform process (Uyangoda 2005). The Indian mediated current power sharing debate in Sri Lanka mainly emerged in response to the ethnic problem (Slater 1997) and it introduced PCs through the 13th Amendment to the constitution in 1987. PC system attempted to address demands of the minority Tamil population by devolving certain powers of the centre to the provinces thus creating a second level of government (Gunawardena and Lakshman 2008; Slater 1997).

This dualistic structure when initially proposed was a novel introduction to the host of political settlements Sri Lanka had attempted since this was the first time power was devolved as opposed to earlier attempts of decentralization and deconcentration (Gunawardena and Lakshman 2008; De Alwis 2020). However, the North and East, the very provinces to which devolution was proposed, did not get to have their own PCs for almost two decades owing to the war (Slater 1997; De Alwis 2020). The combined North-East provincial council was aborted shortly after its introduction in 1990 (De Alwis 2020). 16 years later in 2006, through a Supreme Court decision, North and East PCs were separated and the East went on to establish its first PC in 2008 with the North following suit in 2010 (*Ibid*.). Even after 37 years of its

introduction the PCs "remain weak, underdeveloped and subjected to the central government" (Uyangoda 2005, 984). The effective implementation of the 13th Amendment is marred with controversy with the centre still retaining extensive powers thus failing to "resolve the conflicting pulls of centralization and devolution … [thereby] creating an inefficient dualistic system of sub-national governance" (Gunawardena and Lakshman 2008, 117). Efficiency arguments aside the most colossal failure of the devolution debate is the inability to de-ethnicize the collective political imagination of the Sri Lankan state that is still governed by rival ethnic nationalisms and their resultant separate ethnic enclaves (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999) of political deliberations. This section aims to capture public perception regarding the devolution debate to see if things remain the same or has changed since the introduction of the 13th Amendment in 1987.

Graph 25 – Public perception of devolution of power: National

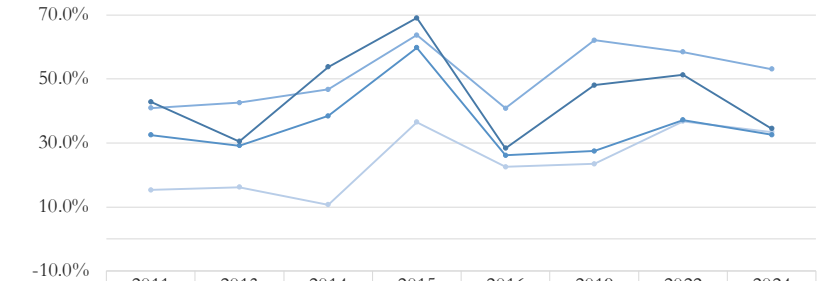


Even after 4 decades of introducing PCs, public opinion is divided on the matter of devolving state powers to the provinces. As the above graph depicts, over the past three decades the ambiguity concerning devolution of powers has gradually reduced (the figure which was 46.2% in 2011 is only 12.6% in 2024) i.e. more people seem to now understand the debate surrounding

power sharing. However, the opinion still remains divided. Majority of Sri Lankans still support devolution while retaining the powers of the central government (44.7% in 2024). There is also a significant improvement in the numbers supporting devolution while reducing the powers of the centre. This number was 21% in 2011 and is 35.6% in 2024.

Graph 26 – Public perception of devolution of power: By Ethnicity

Power needs to be devolved to the Provincial Councils while reducing the power of the central government



	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2019	2022	2024
Sinhala	15.3%	16.2%	10.7%	36.5%	22.5%	23.5%	36.8%	33.4%
Tamil	40.9%	42.6%	46.7%	63.7%	40.9%	62.1%	58.4%	53.1%
UC Tamil	32.5%	29.2%	38.5%	59.8%	26.1%	27.5%	37.2%	32.6%
Muslim	42.9%	30.5%	53.7%	69.0%	28.4%	48.0%	51.3%	34.5%

Minorities seem to favour the view that more devolved powers should be given to the PCs than the Sinhalese community. This support is particularly high among the Tamil respondents. In 2024, 53.1% Tamils favour this view while it is only 33.4% Sinhalese supporting this view. However, over the past 13 years, the support of the Sinhalese for more devolution has gradually increased. In 2011, only 15.3% Sinhalese supported this view. This figure has increased to 33.4% in 2024. It is also important to note that there is renewed discussion about the devolution debate in an attempt to please minorities for electoral gains with an election looming on the horizon as well as to appease India who has extended considerable support during the economic crisis. In August 2023, President Ranil Wickremesinghe convening an all-party conference over the issue of reconciliation highlighted the importance of meaningfully implementing the 13th Amendment while also acknowledging that prioritising sensitive matters concerning land and

police powers of the PCs might obstruct the space for a mutual agreement on the matter of devolution ("More 'Practical' to Start with 13th Amendment Without Police Powers: Sri Lanka President" 2023).

Conclusion

Though incremental, this section records positive trends concerning the debate about devolution of power which is a crucial step towards the attainment of meaningful reconciliation. Even though the devolution debate has continuously been weaponized by successive governments for electoral gains, public perception seems to have changed in the positive direction with more numbers extending support for devolution without falling victim to 'ethnic outbidding'. The numbers in the Sinhalese community who support devolution while reducing the powers of the central government too are on the rise indicating a positive shift in the attitudes of the general public.

Secular Constitution

In divided societies with multiple conflicting socio-political cleavages, the constitution plays an important role in promoting a common identity (Wijayalath 2018). While stipulating institutional structures, constitutions also have foundational provisions that determine the character of the state including reference to the relationship between the state and religion (Lerner 2010; Wijayalath 2018). Conventional liberal wisdom suggests that this should take a secular character confining religion to the private sphere of individuals and not making it a concern of the state. In divided societies with competing ethno-nationalist claims, secularism meets with fierce opposition. Sri Lanka is no exception.

Starting her journey as a secular state under the Soulbury constitution, post-colonial constitution-making of Ceylon/Sri Lanka witnessed a heavy politicization process that favoured majoritarianism to the detriment of the constitution's secular origins from the 1950s (Schonthal 2012). The Soulbury constitution had "very few explicit provisions regarding religion" (*Ibid*., 204). Section 29 (2)[9] of the Soulbury constitution retained the secular character of the state by barring the parliament from passing laws that would discriminate minorities. This however was not without criticism. Sinhalese-Buddhists believed this did not effectively protect Buddhism while minorities believed that there were no sufficient minority safeguards (Wijayalath 2018; Schonthal 2012; Schonthal and Welikala 2016). Despite the criticism, the Soulbury constitution was in effect until the introduction of the First Republican Constitution of 1972.

9 See https://www.scribd.com/document/497904755/Soulbury-Constitution-1947 for the full text of the Soulbury constitution. Also see "Report of the Soulbury Commission" 2023 for the complete report of the Soulbury Commission.

The 1972 constitution was influenced by the politicization process of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the 1950s and 60s (Schonthal 2012) and enshrined Buddhism as a state religion (Coomaraswamy 2012) while also removing the minority protection clause of the Soulbury constitution (Guruparan 2015). The first home-grown constitution not only made it an affirmative duty of the state to protect Buddhism but also provided constitutional standing to the role Buddhism played in Sri Lanka's post-independence landscape (Coomaraswamy 2012). Section 6[10] of the 1972 constitution thus read

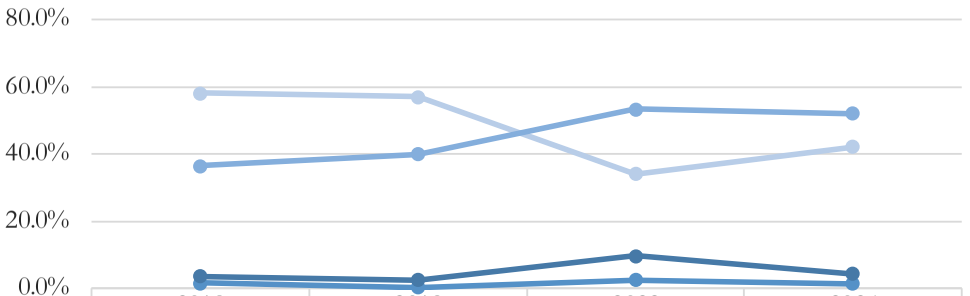
> The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Section 18(1)(d).

This provision along with Sinhala being the only official language came under heavy criticism of the country's minorities (Coomaraswamy 2012). The Second Republican constitution of 1978 only further reinforced the position Buddhism enjoyed in Sri Lankan politics by introducing Article 9[11] that yet again gave Buddhism the foremost place while assuring protection to all religions as granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e) ("The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka-Revised Edition 2023," n.d.). The state thus continues to remain ambiguous in its equal treatment to all religions. The separatist war, systemic discrimination against the Tamil community and more recently, a spate of violent events against the Muslim community unfolded against this majoritarian backdrop. This section aims to capture public perception of the secular nature of the constitution in order to understand if public attitudes have marked a shift away from majoritarianism and in the direction of reconciliation.

10 See "The Constitution of Sri Lanka-1972," n.d. for the full text of the First Republican constitution.

11 See "The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka-Revised Edition 2023," n.d. for the full text of the 1978 constitution.

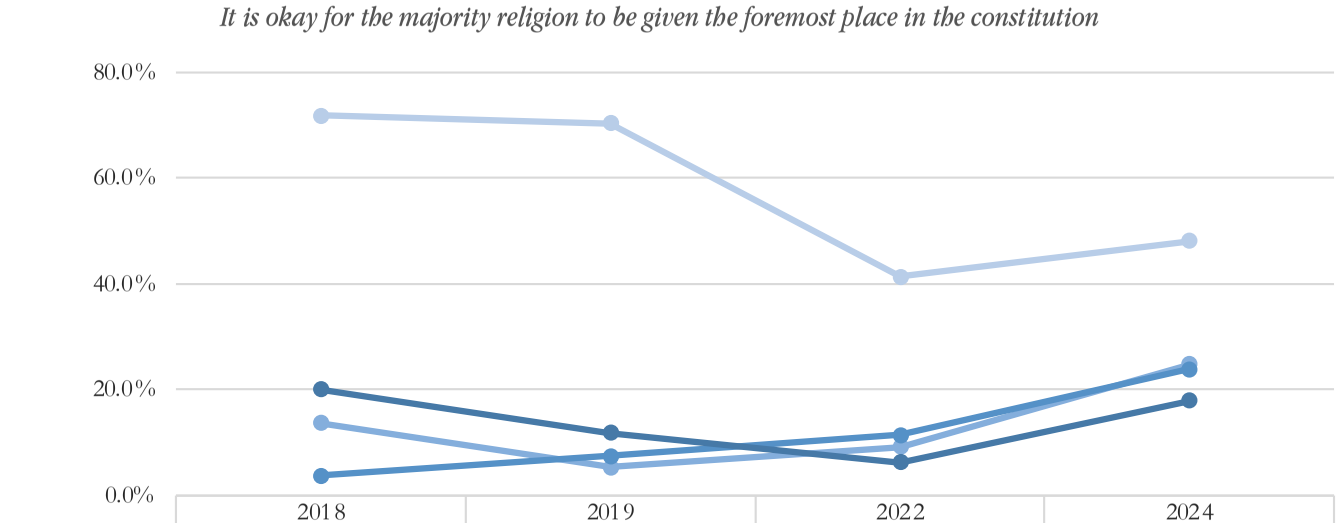
Graph 27 – Public perception of religion being given the foremost place in the constitution: National



	2018	2019	2022	2024
It is okay for the majority religion to be given the foremost place in the constitution.	58.2%	57.1%	34.1%	42.2%
In order to maintain every citizens' right to equality, no religion should be given the foremost place in the constitution	36.5%	40.1%	53.5%	52.0%
Neither	1.6%	0.3%	2.6%	1.4%
Could not Understand / Don't Know/ No Responses	3.6%	2.5%	9.8%	4.4%

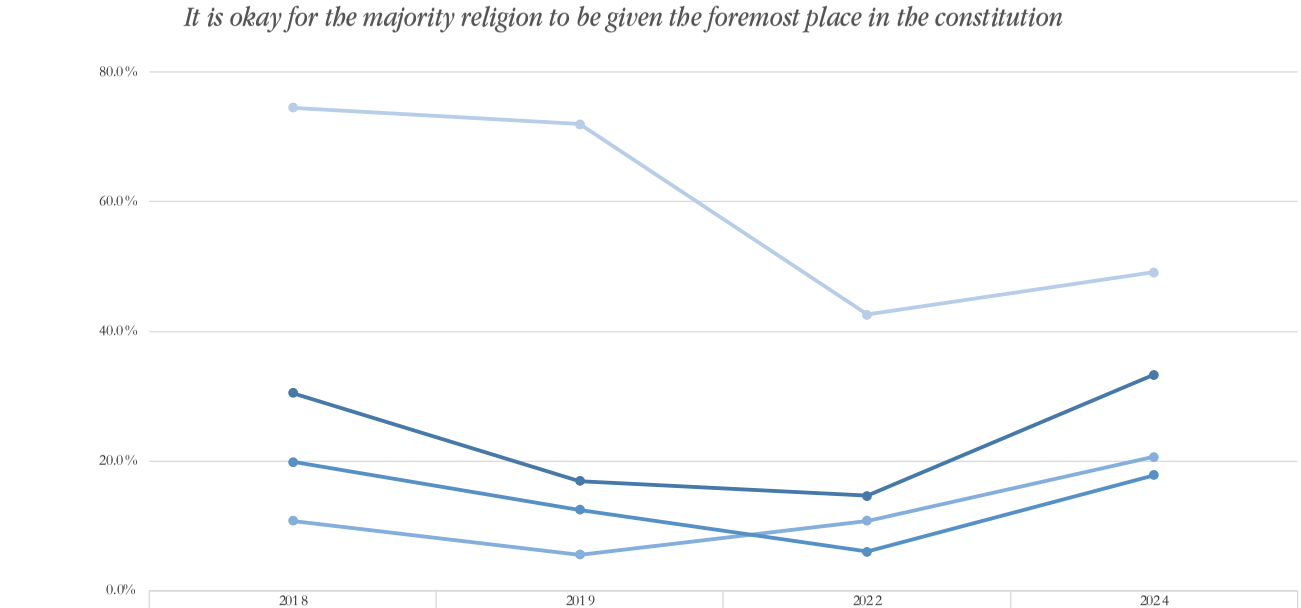
Post-2019, national level data related to constitutional accommodation of (majority) religion displays positive trends from a reconciliation perspective. 58.2% in 2018 and 57.1% in 2019 believed that it was "okay for the majority religion to be given the foremost place in the constitution." These figures have dropped to 42.2% in 2024. The lowest 34.1% was however recorded in 2022 thus displaying shot-term fluctuations in the opinion. Numbers agreeing with the statement "In order to maintain every citizen's right to equality, no religion should be given the foremost place in the constitution" has risen to 52% in 2024 from its previous 36.5% in 2018. The figure reached the highest in 2022 recording 53.5%. Data thus is reflective of a mutating public opinion in response to changing political circumstances including the Easter attacks and the 2022 economic crisis. These fluctuating opinions are not necessarily indicative of a long-term attitudinal change.

Graph 28.1 – Public perception of religion being given the foremost place in the constitution: By Ethnicity



	2018	2019	2022	2024
Sinhala	71.8%	70.4%	41.3%	48.1%
Tamil	13.7%	5.3%	9.2%	24.8%
UC Tamil	3.8%	7.5%	11.4%	23.8%
Muslim	20.0%	11.9%	6.3%	17.9%

Graph 28.2 – Public perception of religion being given the foremost place in the constitution: By Religion



	2018	2019	2022	2024
Buddhism	74.6%	72.0%	42.6%	49.1%
Hinduism	10.8%	5.6%	10.8%	20.6%
Islam	19.9%	12.5%	6.0%	17.9%
Christianity (RC)	30.5%	16.9%	14.6%	33.3%

Ethnic and religious disaggregation of data reveals that minority ethnic and religious opinions have remained constant regarding the majority religion being accorded the foremost place in the constitution while the Sinhalese Buddhist opinion has changed. While the Sinhalese and Buddhists continue to support the idea that "it is okay for the majority religion to be given the foremost place in the constitution", these figures have dropped remarkably after 2022. 71.8% Sinhalese and 74.6% Buddhists believed that majority religion should be given the foremost place in the constitution in 2018. The corresponding figures for 2024 are 48.1% for the Sinhalese and 49.1% for the Buddhists. This is an almost 20% drop in the figures. 2022 and 2024 change of opinion of the Sinhalese and Buddhists was recorded against the backdrop of an economic crisis.

Conclusion

This section records positive views of religion's place in the constitution. Most views expressed indicate preference for a secular constitution that respects equality of all ethnic/religious groups. Support for the majority religion being accorded the foremost place in the constitution is on the decline since 2022 and the numbers still upholding this view largely come from the majority Sinhalese and Buddhist groups. This change of opinion takes place in a larger context of an economic crisis and thus is not necessarily reflective of a long-term attitudinal change.

Support for Reforms

Though not sufficient as a stand-alone remedy, constitutional engineering plays an important role in addressing grievances of divided polities. As legal, political and social instruments, constitutions do more than stipulating rights of the citizens and the institutional architecture of a state. These documents reflect the character of a state (Hedling 2017) and evolves overtime, adapting to changing circumstances. Since independence, Sri Lanka has been "suffering from a crisis of constitutionalism" (Edrisinha 2015, 932), and the country's constitutional reform debate "has been oscillating between hope and disenchantment, and often encounters crisis" (Peiris 2019, 144). Among many failures of the 1972 and 1978 constitutions was entrenched majoritarianism (Edrisinha 2015), that has prevented the country from arriving at a political settlement to the ethnic problem[12].

The Tamil response to constitutional reforms has changed overtime; an initial demand for equality of representation prior to 1949 changed to challenging the majoritarian nature of the Sri Lankan state demanding a federal settlement and an independent statehood subsequently (Guruparan 2015, 434). The majority Sinhalese views concerning constitutional design addressing the ethnic problem continue to resist change[13] (Peiris 2019)

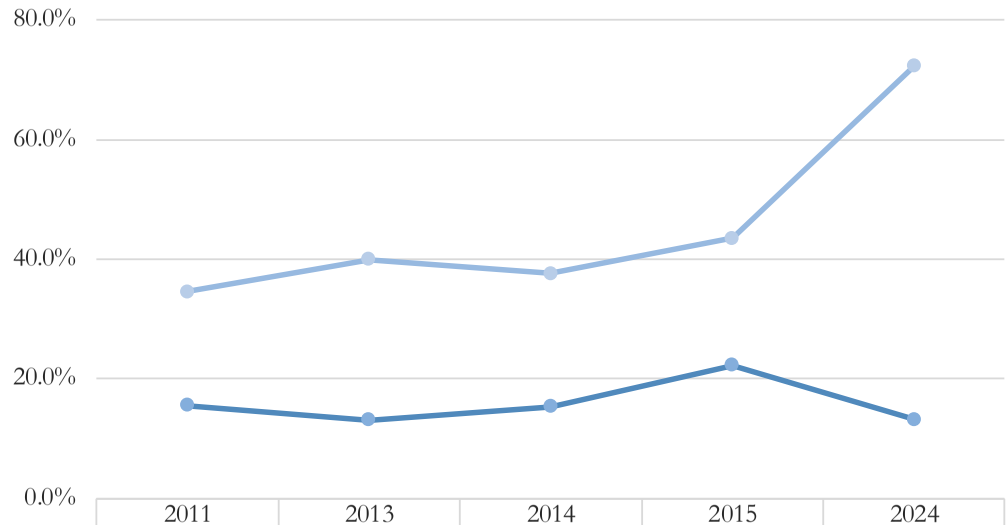
12 For instance, the lack of success in the implementation of the 13th Amendment to the constitution.

13 An analysis of data of a CPA survey conducted in 2019 revealed that a constitutional reform process endorsed by popular public opinion can only contain minimal, uncontroversial issues and for constitutional reforms addressing minority grievances, this support remains weak and such reforms can only be attained through elite bargaining and not through popular participation (Peiris 2019, 178).

while they support discussions about reforms that strengthen the democratic character of the state (Wickramaratne 2021; Senaratne 2019; Welikala 2019). For instance, 17th and 19th Amendments to the constitution primarily aimed at restoring accountability in good governance[14]. The debate surrounding constitutional reforms continues to be informed by divided opinion with some calling for a new constitution while others favour the retention of the current constitution with some changes. This section aims to explore the public perception regarding the constitutional reform process in order to assess how Sri Lanka is faring in her response to inclusion and reconciliation.

14 There are also instances of ruling political elite using constitutional reforms to centralize power and to undermine democratic institutions as was the case with the 18th and 20th Amendments to the constitution.

Graph 29 – Public perception of the political solution for Sri Lanka: National

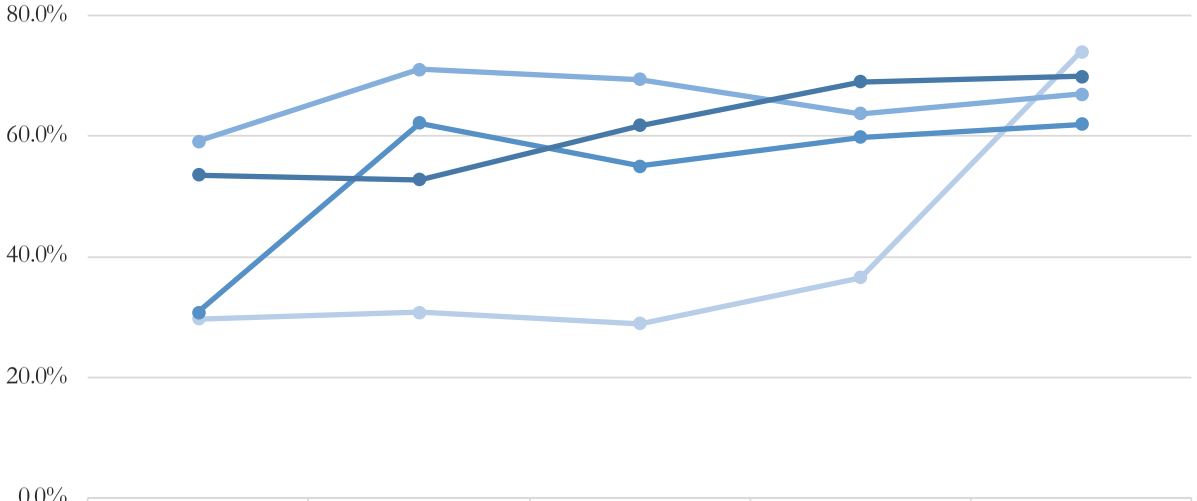


	2011	2013	2014	2015	2024
The Constitution should be changed based on recommendations made by an all party committee to produce a political solution to the country's ethnic problem	34.6%	39.9%	37.6%	43.5%	72.3%
There is no need for a political solution as the LTTE was completely defeated militarily	15.6%	13.1%	15.3%	22.2%	13.2%

National level data reveals an overwhelming support (72.3% in 2024) for constitutional reforms based on recommendations made by an All-Party Conference (APC) to produce a political solution to the ethnic problem. 13.2% still believes that there is no need for a political solution to the ethnic problem since the LTTE has been defeated reflecting the existence of polarized ethno-political readings that govern the collective psyche of the Sri Lankan population. APCs have been proposed and experimented with under many regimes in an attempt to address the ethnic conflict. An APC was convened in 1983 under President J.R. Jayewardene (Ayub 2022; Rao 1988) but was dissolved in December 1984 due to intensifying ethnic violence (*Ibid*.). The second APC convened in 1989 by President R. Premadasa (Arudpragasam 2013; Ayub 2022) ended in failure due to the inability of representatives to reach a consensus regarding 1) repealing of the 6th Amendment to the constitution that made it "compulsory for the Parliamentarians and the State officials to take oaths against separatism" (Ayub 2022) and 2) dissolution of the merged North-East PC (*Ibid*.). In 2006, under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, a third APC with extensive political representation of 15 political parties was convened (Arudpragasam 2013). It held 63 sessions and produced an interim report in 2007 (Ayub 2022). This too ended in failure with the escalation of armed violence. An unofficial final report released without government approval in 2010 (Arudpragasam 2013) contained some important suggestions regarding devolution nonetheless. There is renewed talk about an APC under President Ranil Wickremesinghe who convened one in July 2023 but this too seems to be stuck at the 13th Amendment with no agreement on the devolution of land and police powers been reached (Kuruwita 2023). It is in this context that the national level data indicates support for constitutional reforms based on recommendations of an APC.

Graph 30 – Public perception of the political solution for Sri Lanka: By Ethnicity

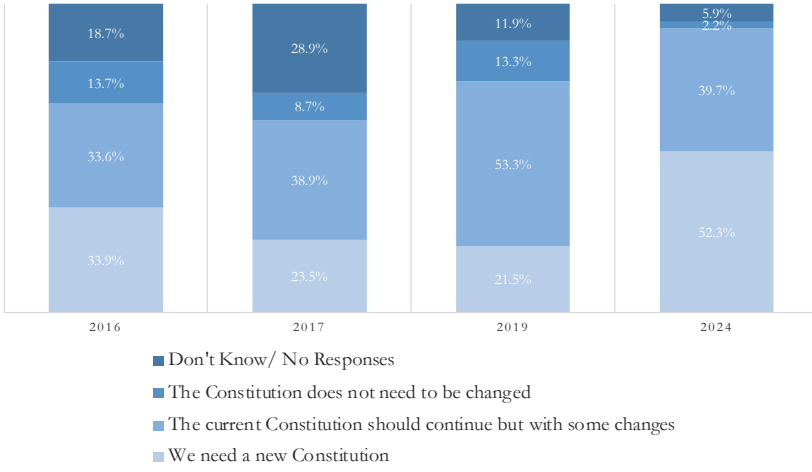
The Constitution should be changed based on recommendations made by an all party committee to produce a political solution to the country's ethnic problem



	2011	2013	2014	2015	2024
Sinhala	29.7%	30.8%	29.0%	36.5%	74.0%
Tamil	59.1%	71.0%	69.3%	63.7%	67.0%
UC Tamil	30.8%	62.1%	55.0%	59.8%	61.9%
Muslim	53.5%	52.8%	61.7%	69.0%	69.9%

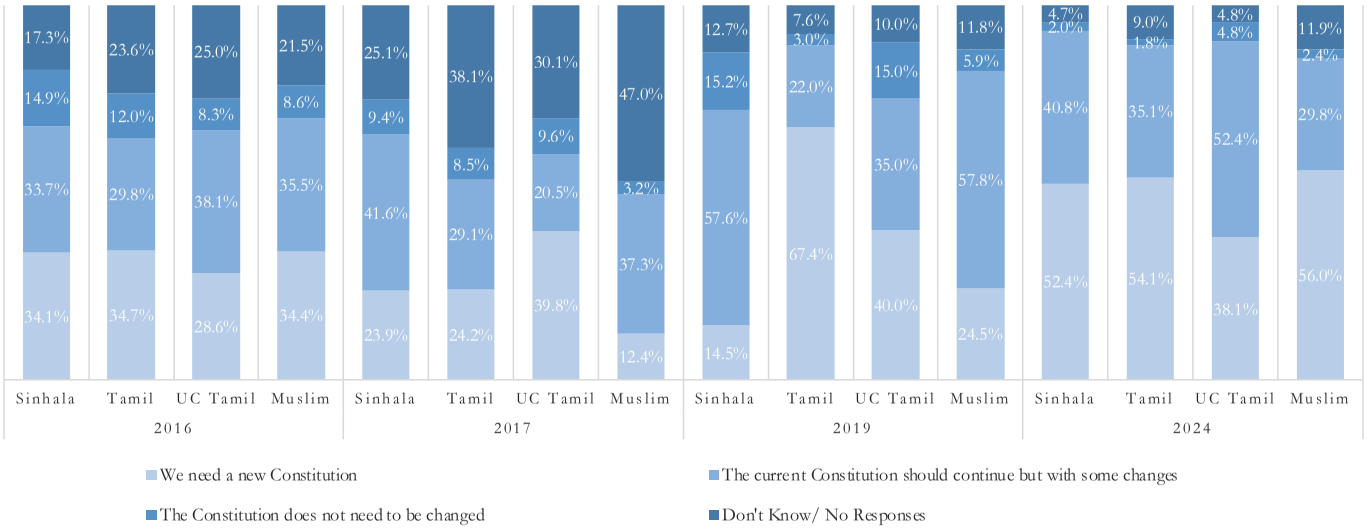
Ethnic disaggregation of data indicates that minorities have throughout supported constitutional reforms based on APC recommendations. In 2024, 67% of Tamils and 69.9% Muslims supported this idea. The most remarkable change is in the Sinhalese opinion with 74% which is also the highest number supporting this idea. Sinhalese support has not always been this. In 2011, only 29.7% Sinhalese supported constitutional reforms based on APC recommendations and this figure has gradually increased throughout the years. In little more than a decade the opinion has recorded an almost 44% increase. It is also important to note that the Sinhalese opinion is recorded within the larger context of an unfolding economic crisis that has given rise to a civic awakening.

Graph 31 – Public perception of the constitution: National



At the national level, there is strong support for the constitution. Latest survey data shows that over 90% of Sri Lankans support constitutional change either by retaining the current one with some changes or replacing it with a new one. In 2024, 52.3% called for a new constitution and 39.7% called for changes in the current constitution. Even though there was majority support for constitutional change in the previous years, the percentage of respondents who felt the need for a new constitution was relatively less. But now it has the highest percentage indicating a loss of faith in the current constitution.

Graph 32 – Public perception of the constitution: By Ethnicity



According to the latest survey, all ethnic groups strongly support a new constitution. With the 2022 popular uprising, civic consciousness as well as the majority stance on many earlier divisive matters seem to have changed for the better. In 2024, more than 50% Sinhalese support a new constitution signalling a growing public discontent with the current state of affairs. 54.1% Tamils and 56% Muslims are also in support of this view. The findings suggest that the Sri Lankan political elite have now been presented with a historic opportunity to turn a new leaf in Sri Lanka's nation-building process by introducing a new constitution that can ensure an inclusive and just society for all Sri Lankans irrespective of their ethnicity, caste and creed.

Conclusion

The final section on support for reforms too is indicative of positive trends in the direction of reconciliation with more numbers than those of a decade ago supporting a new constitution as well as APC recommendations on a new constitution. Significant changes have occurred in the opinion of the majority Sinhalese aligning with minority views and thus presents a historic moment for meaningful political reforms that can de-ethnicize the Sri Lankan polity.

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ANNEXURE

Year	Project	Sample size	Field Duration	Sample Selection	Districts
2003	Knowledge, Attitudes, Practice (KAP) Survey on the Sri Lankan peace process	2980	From 1st of June to 31st June 2003	Random sampling technique Within each GN, interviewers followed a random-walk procedure, beginning at a selected landmark such as a school or a hospital, and Interviewing every second household. *	21 districts
2004	Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices (KAP) Survey on the Sri Lankan Peace Process	3513	From July to August 2004	Random sampling technique **	21 districts
2011	Survey on Democracy in Post-War Sri Lanka	2000	From 23rd of March to mid-June 2011	Random sampling technique In the case of the Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, Mannar and Vavuniya districts, respondents were selected using the snowball sampling method	All 25 districts
2013	Survey on Democracy in Post War Sri Lanka – Wave 2	2200	From 14th of August to mid-September 2013	A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique A maximum of 15 respondents were selected for interviews using the 2008 Voter Registry of the Department of Elections. Respondents in the Northern Province were selected from each polling booth using the snowball sampling method.	All 25 districts
2014	Survey on Democracy in Post-War Sri Lanka – Wave 3	2000	From 9th June to 31st July 2014	A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique	All 25 districts
2015	Survey on Democracy in Post- War Sri Lanka – Wave 4	1987	From 03rd of March to 31st of March 2015	A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique A semi-structured questionnaire was administered through face to-face interviews.	All 25 districts
2016	Survey on Democracy in Post- War Sri Lanka – Wave 6	2102	From 18th of February to March 03rd 2016	A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique At each selected household, a respondent was determined using the last birthday method.	All 25 districts
2016	Opinion Poll on Constitutional Reforms	2002	From 29th of August to 23rd of September, 2016	A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique From each selected polling Centre the starting point (first household selected for the survey) of the survey was selected randomly from the 2008 Voter Registry. At each selected household, a respondent was determined using the last birthday method.	All 25 districts
2017	Survey on Constitution Reforms (Wave 3)	1992	From 14th to 19th March 2017	A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique The Population Proportionate Sampling (PPS) method wasused.	All 25 districts
2018	Values and Attitudes Survey on Post-Independence Sri Lanka	2300	From 10th of August to the 10th of October 2018	Random sampling technique	All 25 districts

2019	Survey on the Constitution of Sri Lanka (Wave 4)	1300	From the 24th of January to the 14th of February 2019	A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique	All 25 districts
2022	Survey on Aragalaya	1000	From 22nd of September to 10th of October 2022	A multi-staged random stratified sampling technique	All 25 districts
2024	Survey on Democracy and Reconciliation	1350	From 4th to 22nd of January 2024	A multi-staged random sampling technique	All 25 districts

*Minority ethnic group members were systematically over-sampled, and interviews were conducted with 494 Tamil, 439 Up-Country Tamil and 472 Muslims. Excluding only those areas in Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Jaffna which at the time of the survey were not under Government control.

**Excluding only those areas in Ampara, Batticoloa, Trincomalee and Jaffna, which at the time of the survey were not under government control. These restrictions prevented interviews from being conducted in LTTE controlled areas in the North and East. Shortly after the Colpetty bombing and the departure of Karuna from Batticoloa.

*** Fieldwork in the Southern Province, as well as interviews with the Muslim community in other districts were temporarily halted after the communal riots in Aluthgama on the second week of June (15th) and resumed in the second week of July.

Social Indicator (SI) is the survey research unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and was established in September 1999, filling a longstanding vacuum for a permanent, professional, and independent polling facility in Sri Lanka on social and political issues. Driven by the strong belief that polling is an instrument that empowers democracy, SI has been conducting polls on a large range of socio-economic and political issues since its inception.

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