



## **BOOK REVIEW TITLE: THE IDENTITY POLITICS OF PEACEBUILDING: CIVIL SOCIETY IN WAR-TORN SRI LANKA**

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### **Abstract:**

The book examines civil society and peace movements in the context of the country's identity-based violent conflict. It explains why civil society organisations working for peace tend to focus on the political sentiments engendered by the pursuit of peace to instil a sense of security in people, rather than challenging the fundamental structure of conflict.

**Keywords:** Civil society; NGOs; Peace; Actor; Author; Book

The book discusses civil society's potential role in promoting peace while also questioning the idea of civil society and highlighting the difficulties it has in fulfilling this function in Sri Lanka. Social actors in the country are attempting to contribute to peace by addressing ethnic differences and public opinion through education and awareness programmes as well as ethnic dialogue initiatives, addressing economic issues through reconstruction and development, and approaching politics through popular mobilisation, advocacy work, and informal diplomacy. However, political patronage and the long-running conflict in Sri Lanka have de-escalated civil society. It is ethnically split, as is this society, and the populace has been mobilised in a nationalist and aggressive manner, rather than in a peaceful manner. While civic peace organisations strive to play a role in peacebuilding, their efforts are frequently project-based and top-down rather than mass-based and bottom-up. This book is based on an in-depth understanding of emotionally charged documents, as well as interviews with 150 individuals and civil society leaders who are major players in Sri Lanka's reconciliation process. By critically analysing civil society's role in promoting peace, it helps to bridge the gap between civil society's inner enthusiasm for promoting peace on the one hand, and a lack of comprehensive knowledge of the work's significance and influence on the other. The author uses a constructivist perspective to highlight the hazards of romanticising interethnic understanding in peace efforts and ignoring identity politics during ephemeral peace movements.

Camilla Orjuela, the author, has a PhD in peace and development research and is currently a professor at

the University of Gothenburg's School of Global Studies. She formerly worked as a journalist and a development consultant. Since the mid-1990s,

e has focused on Sri Lanka studies. Identity-based conflicts, diaspora mobilizations, the role of civil society in peacebuilding, transnational justice, development assistance, post-war reconstruction and reconciliation, and corruption and conflict are among her research interests. Her current study focuses on persons seeking justice abroad and the diaspora's dedication to transitional justice. She also does research in Burma and Sri Lanka on political transformation and religious extremism. She is in charge of PhD and Master's students. Civil society and peacebuilding, conflict analysis, conflict resolution, development cooperation and conflict sensitivity, identity conflicts, diaspora politics, nationalism and ethnicity are some of her primary teaching topics.

The author acknowledges that the book is the culmination of a long research and writing process that led to this book, which is written in the normative peace research tradition, which views nonviolent conflict resolution as desirable and peace movements and individuals speaking out against war as hopeful. This work may be regarded as part of her lifetime commitment to and concern for Sri Lankan peace. However, it should be noted that a single book is insufficient to grasp all of the intricate realities of, and various viewpoints on, conflict and peacebuilding.

The book's initial chapters relied heavily on diverse thoughts and concepts, as well as experiences in various parts of the world, as primary building components. It also complements the work of the later chapters, which deal with Sri Lanka from different



angles and perspectives. The first chapters' works are a compilation of various writers' ideas and views in support and intention of the author's work, which serves as armour for his defence.

The civil society in this book functions as both a practitioner and a supporter of peace in general. Civil society is defined in the book as a sphere in a society where voluntary mobilisation and organising take place. It represents optimism, as well as peace-building forces that monitor and operate in war zones. The majority of sections perceive it as peace groups and the efforts of heroic peace advocates who challenge nationalist and militaristic beliefs that encourage conflict. It demonstrates that a robust civil society acts as a deterrent to military rule in society. On the other side, it is presumed and argued that they are advocates of terrorists who are utilising foreign funding to persuade the populace to accept a country partition. However, using Sri Lanka as a case study, this book offers a critical assessment of civil society organisations' efforts to contribute to the end of the conflict and reconciliation.

The authors classified civil society into two categories depending on their size: international civil society and local civil society. These two frequently collaborate and take on the roles of issues, resulting in a positive outcome. However, there comes a point when local civil society players are treated as instruments to be exploited for the larger international civil society's benefit. Furthermore, portraying civil society as a good, democratic, and place for impoverished people's upliftment has helped to reduce competing interests and policies in this area, as well as the reality that many civil society groups are run by elite representatives. A deconstruction of civil society along class conflict lines may reveal that, rather than being a watchdog against the state, civil society frequently reflects a state-linked elite. Furthermore, a gender perspective highlights the difficulties of using the public domain as an unproblematic space for population representation, because the public domain is traditionally a male domain, making civil society a male-dominated space, with the female domain remaining in the private sphere.

This book took a look at the international debate and the context in which civil society actors have been portrayed as peacemakers. It elucidates the various contributions made by civil society to mitigate and end armed conflict, where the availability of open space to support nonviolent conflict resolution has also enabled capable new entrants to enter the field, namely inter-governmental organisations (INGOs) and donor agencies, who work with and support local civil societies and NGOs in peacekeeping and humanitarian action. Most significantly, it demonstrates two

difficulties that cloud people's perceptions of what civil society can do to promote peace. To begin with, the frequently ambiguous and evolving concept of "civil society" risks obscuring the complexity and conflicting battles that exist within the civil society realm and defining it as "positive." Second, due to the challenges in measuring the impact of peace initiatives, many people ignore critical discussion of outcomes, which is important if we want to comprehend civil society's contributions to peace.

Much of what has been published on civil society peacebuilding so far has centred on how international actors may best understand, support, and exploit the potentials of local civil society to achieve peace in this book. It has no instrumental aim, therefore it relies heavily on interview material, implying a constructivist, process-oriented interpretation of identity that sets power front and centre (international attention).

The author emphasises the importance of a liberal peace approach to peacebuilding that is based on an international viewpoint. Western-style democracy and free-market development are central to this strategy. This type of discourse promotes stability and peace, but it risks jeopardising the social justice element of peacebuilding. This international approach is portrayed as a neoliberal concept of an alternative and efficient sector that can provide a substitute for services previously undertaken by the state, as well as a donor-funded 'solution' to democracy and economic growth.

According to the literature on peacebuilding, the author pinpoints three interrelated functions of peace-minded civil society actors: they can put pressure on key actors to forbid war and initiate dialogue between adversaries, they can build a peace constituency, and finally, they can act as an intermediary between ordinary people and actors.

The book brought about a constructivist approach aligned to the work of the author, in doing this, simplistic assumptions about 'multiculturalism' and 'cross ethnic' understanding are challenged and the obstacles of peacebuilding in asymmetric conflicts are highlighted. The conclusion can be made that any attempt to encourage the formation of inclusive identities or to hush up differences may, indeed serve to obscure and reinforce important conflicts and inequalities.

The author reveals that conflict or war in the region was a significant result of faulty historical interpretations that the factions infringed on their significance, aggravating the dominance-suppression notions and insider-outsider attitude among the groups. The majority of Sinhala national consciousness is influenced by one of the island's most outstanding



features: a lengthy, continuous, and triumphant record of resistance to foreigners. Tamil politicians and historians, on the other hand, have attempted to bring their past to light in response to what the other group perceives as the concealing of "Tamil history" in Sri Lankan history writing. Apart from this, Ethnic polarization has fully developed in the wake of political conflict and war experiences. Education wherein the school, little is taught that explains the roots and contemporary developments of the ethnic conflicts. Instead, a history of heroic Sinhalese kings, defeating infiltrators and invading Tamils, is often taught in government-controlled areas, while the righteousness of Tamil struggle against state suppression is taught in the LTTE-controlled areas, no alternative interpretations and perspectives have been recognized. The church, which is mainly composed of both Tamils and Sinhalese, is likewise split along ethnic lines, and as a result, it hasn't completely realised its potential to serve as a bridge-builder. Furthermore, the violence was exacerbated by the Sinhalese Buddhists' insistence on maintaining hierarchical subordination. The unfortunate scene in this dispute is the role of the media in promoting polarisation, which has been heavily utilised to promote the viewpoints of both parties in the conflict. In the Sinhala media, it is claimed that government troops have "sacrificed their life" while "terrorists have been destroyed." As a result, it served to legitimise violence by associating harshness, as well as prior violent acts, with the potential of retaliation. The influence over identities in this case readily led to the dominance of one interpretation of identity and the concealment and suppression of other identities and conflicts. Political conflict, ethnic rivalry, and violence have fueled coexistence and the invention of racial purity on the island, as a process of rejecting or erasing histories of cultural hybridity.

There is a rise of two nationalism in one country, Sinhalese nationalism, a commitment based on protecting the unity and sovereignty of what they consider a sacred Buddhist state, protect minorities from concessions and negotiations on that basis with Tamil warriors which considered a threat to the country's sovereignty. Moreover, they often assert their difference from Tamil nationalists by emphasizing that they advocate a multi-ethnic Sri Lankan society. Whereas, the suffering and struggle of the Tamil is a central theme of Tamil nationalist discourse, discrimination in the labour market, the twisted Sinhalese teachings in the history and other social studies disciplines were added, as well as the lack of recognition of the Tamil identity and the right to self-determination.

The author points out various peace organizations which strive hard for peace in the country exercise through the movements. Most peace organizations emerged as a response to two urgent situations namely, the repression by the government and the ethnic conflict. The notable organizations where the author mention was the Citizens Committee for National harmony, Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE), Family Rehabilitation Centre, National Peace Council (NPC), Impact and Foundation for Coexistence, Centre for Performing Arts(CPA), Victimized soldiers and their Families Peace etc. and many religion-based organizations were part of the peace movement too. However, peace organizations and activists often use a vague definition of peace allowing for the inclusion of a wide range of persons and opinions that bring more complexities in Sri Lanka.

The author recorded various activities and measures as a part of the peace movement, they are demonstrations and public manifestations; awareness-raising; peace education and information; informal diplomacy and cross-ethnic contacts; advocacy work; addressing the consequences of war; development and democracy work for peace, mobilizing a social movement for peace. Furthermore, in the latter part, the influx of resources from foreign to NGOs made the creation, professionalization and growth of peace work from being primarily idealistic, peace work tend to a career opportunity and market or economy based requisite to get work done. Peace and finance become the goal and mission of the scenario.

The author also highlighted the various grassroots level of peace work which is carried out through changing attitudes (peace education, courses, seminars, media campaigns, rallies, posters and pamphlets have served to attract people's attention to peace issues), cross-ethnic dialogue (where the ambition to join together and let go of identity label was fundamental in this work), culture as peace work such as a poem, songs dance or play can thus be a way to articulate problems and put experiences and feelings into words and movements, mobilizing people for peace were mobilising people to take part in the demonstration, rallies or other highly visible events serves several different purposes according to organizers and participants, peace work amid violence (local civil society contributes to indirectly to increasing security for civilians in the war zone).

This book highlights all of the positive initiatives and measures taken by civil society organisations, as well as their dark or negative sides and effects, such as encouraging rent-seeking, which leads to reliance on foreign forces, creating a market-oriented mentality among community-based



organisations backed by international NGOs, a decline in volunteerism, and cultivating an "anti-peace" mentality. It also identifies the difficulties that exist among groups that profess to be conflict mediators and peacemakers. The peace movement is split, hampered by disputes, and without a unified goal, as seen by the fact that they compete and work for their name. We discovered an arena where combat and mobilisation frequently took place along party political or ethnic lines, and where the LTTE and the state sought control over civil society groups, demonstrating what civil society in Sri Lanka is. On the more neutral side, however, many foreign and Sri Lankan civil society groups have frequently hosted events aimed at engaging individuals close to top decision-makers in innovative conversations and trust-building concerning conflict resolution. This book demonstrates the importance of structural transformation, even if it cannot fully accomplish peace sustainability. After all, this author's significant works give the judgement needed to terminate the conflict reasonably and sustainably while also fostering inter-ethnic harmony.

The argument here might refer to this book particular to civil society since it implies that it describes Eurocentric and western culture, more predisposed to ideas based on liberal peace discourse, democracy, and free-market development features. Despite the state's supremacy, which allows them to operate on their terms and for the welfare of the state, the actors decide whether or not to accept external aids. Civil society's concepts are based on external actors or forces that serve as negotiators for issue resolution. The rise of foreign-funded NGOs has been followed by deterioration and weakening of the welfare state, resulting in a widening of the gap between the government and its citizens. At the time, the nation needs power politics based on a realism approach, in which citizens could select their fate in terms of security, unity, and integrity. The country's sovereignty is crucial in determining whether the country's position is prominent or undervalued in the globe. Instead of relying on external forces or agents with moralising skills to help them stand strong on their own, they need the space of their potentiality to grow. Apart from the Tamils, other minorities were mostly ignored in this book, and their contributions and significance were undervalued. The text fails to represent the fundamental tasks of small-scale local activities, which are the foundation for all positive virtues as well as the ignition of community chaos.

This book is an untiring work of the author to make awareness about the identity conflict and war of peace to the world based on the Sri Lankan island. The book shows how important civil society is for safeguarding the human rights, messenger, conciliator

and promoter of peace and directing the need for a negotiated political settlement where international circles have been a way for them to encourage international attention to and involvement in the island. The book also reveals the drawbacks and demerits of diverse goals, motivations and strategies of various launched and set up organizations that diverted away from the specific goal, hence it hinders in accomplishing it. The peace organizations and NGOs on the island represent a plurality of different identities. Simultaneously they highlighted the shared identities and aim to strengthen ethnic identities and cultures. It shows that they not only endeavor the critical Sinhala-Tamil divide but also caste, party political and other divides. It has shown that although the polarization between ethnic groups and nationalism is central to violent conflict, the divides between moderates and hardliners and moderators or between nationalists and cosmopolitans are just as important, but far less recognized by peace workers. Overall, this book is informative and recommendable. It is a very critical overview of the conflict situations and peacebuilding processes in the last several decades in Sri Lanka. It will be a great help to all the NGOs, civil societies, disaster response or rescuing teams in the harsh situation to perform their jobs. It will equip the peace researchers and practitioners in further proceedings of their activities. The book is a commendable attempt and opens up various possibilities of research in future. It must essentially be in every decent library and a much read for scholars, activists, pacifists and other nationalists. And most of all every Sri Lankan must read the book. It is a must for an eye-opening book to all members of civil societies, NGOs for better performance. This book opens up insights and awareness to us in understanding the identity politics, peacebuilding processes and role of civil society in war-torn Sri Lanka. The author in this book not only identified the problems but necessary suggestions and remedies have also been given. This book is found to be of much importance not only to the politicians, policymakers and general masses for awareness and decision making in social and political development. But this book is perceived to be of much help and importance in the field of academics, researches and students alike.



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