

Media coverage on reconciliation issues in Sri Lankan newspapers

A discourse analysis
by Sri Lankan
journalists

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ri Lanka was mired in a civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the armed forces of the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) for more than two decades. The many attempts for dialogue between the two ethnic communities during the war and after its end in 2009 failed to bring reconciliation. With the new government in place since January 2015, hopes are high that reconciliation will finally blossom. The quality of media coverage will play a vital role in this process.

The report at hand is a summary of the main findings of a discourse analysis that investigated the scope and nature of media coverage of reconciliation issues in Sri Lankan newspapers. Under the supervision of MiCT experts, a mixed group of 16 Tamil and Sinhalese journalists examined all articles related to reconciliation in 9 Sri Lankan newspapers during the month of February 2016. Coverage in that time slot included the visit of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Raad bin Hussein in Sri Lanka, the singing of the national anthem in Tamil and Sinhalese language, as well as a number of smaller events related to the topic. Unsurprisingly, the results of the analysis confirm that newspapers differ significantly in their assessment of events. However, a huge overlap in the selection of topics demonstrates that there are shared interests between the Tamil and Sinhalese media which might provide common grounds for dialogue. In addition, the findings strongly suggest that differences between nationalist and government-supporting Sinhalese media are more far-reaching than differences between Tamil and Sinhalese media. Generally speaking, the analysts found a high number of articles related to reconciliation in the newspapers monitored and thus concluded that reconciliation, after many years of silence and neglect, has finally arrived to the centre of public attention on both sides.

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With a new government in place since January 2015, reconciliation between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities in Sri Lanka is entering a new stage of government attention. President Maithripala Sirisena has made clear that reconciliation will be a centrepiece of domestic politics in the upcoming legislature. First steps have been undertaken already with the return of land as well as the establishment of several institutions tasked with planning and implementing the government reconciliation policy.

Likewise, after a short period of reluctance local media has intensified the coverage of related issues. The release of a UN report on human rights violations in the last phase of the civil war (the OISL-report) was a milestone in this process, tangibly boosting the public debate over reconciliation.

Assuming that media coverage is indeed having an impact on the process of reconciliation, MiCT initiated a discourse analysis that would investigate the extent and nature of the debate in Sri Lankan newspapers. On an operational level the analysis aimed to identify patterns of presentation and to compare Tamil and Sinhalese newspapers with regard to the selection of topics, speakers and political messaging. The results of this analysis provide a starting point to draw conclusions about the impact of media coverage on the process of reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Following the model of “action research,” the analysis was conducted by a group of Tamil and Sinhalese journalists who took part in methodological training beforehand. The rationale behind this exercise was to strengthen journalists’ awareness of how meaning and messages are produced and conveyed differently by local media. It also aimed to refine the journalists’ analytical skills and enable them to better reflect upon the (often unintended) messages and framing in their own work on reconciliation.

Sri Lanka was mired in a civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the armed forces of the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) for more than two decades. During the conflict around 100,000 people died and over a million fled to other countries (Destradi 2009). Armed conflict started in the early 1980s when young Tamils began to engage in guerilla activities in response to systematic discrimination against the Tamil minority by the dominantly Sinhalese government (ICG 2012:3). Several attempts to solve the disputes by means of power devolution failed and the LTTE ultimately decided to fight for a separate Tamil state. For over a decade the Tamil Tigers managed to control the northern part of the Island until the Sri Lankan army finally defeated them in a sweeping military offensive, regaining control over the north on May 19 2009. LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was shot to death by soldiers of the Sri Lankan army just one day prior as he tried to flee the country (Destradi 2009).

The final phase of the war was a bloodbath that claimed the lives of around 20.000, mainly Tamil, civilians within just a few days (Destradi 2009). President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had assumed office in 2005, was internationally condemned for the ruthless crackdown on the LTTE.¹ However, allegations of war crimes such as attacks on civilians, prisoner executions and enforced disappearances have been made against both sides.² The LTTE was listed as a terrorist group by the European Union, the USA and a number of other countries for recruiting child soldiers, conducting suicide attacks and assassinations of high-ranking politicians, ethnic cleansing and illegal executions of dissidents.³

An in depth investigation of the alleged atrocities in the final phase of the war was conducted only recently by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein. In his final report⁴, Al Hussein suggested the establishment of a hybrid special court for further inquiry overseen by both local and international judges.⁵

With the LTTE's defeat in 2009 the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) dropped all demands for a separate state.

1 International Crisis Group 17 May 2010: „War Crimes in Sri Lanka”

2 For instance by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the United Nations High commissioner for Human Rights

3 Official Journal of the European Union, COUNCIL COMMON POSITION 2006/380/CFSP of 29 May 2006

4 See Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL)*, 16 September 2015

5 ???

8

A federal solution has been under negotiation ever since (ICG 2012).

During and after the course of the civil war, there have been several attempts to foster reconciliation between the two ethnic groups, some of them with the help of external parties such as India and Norway, which tried to help Sri Lanka in resolving ethnic disputes. Annex A contains a summary of some of the most important historical attempts at reconciliation since the 1980s.

Change of government in 2015

From 2005 to early 2015 Sri Lanka was ruled by President Mahinda Rajapaksa a member of the social democratic Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and part of a family that is extensively engaged in the country's political scene. His time in office was characterized by authoritarian control of public affairs and relentless repression of any dissident voices. Serious violations of human rights like illegal detentions and torture continued long after the end of the civil war due to a prevailing culture of fear and impunity under his leadership (Wagner 2015; Natarajan 2012).

In December 2010 President Rajapaksa established the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) to resolve ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka after the defeat of the LTTE in 2009. However, to date, only approximately 20 per cent of the 189 recommendations released by the LLRC are complete, while 57 per cent have been partially implemented and another 22 per cent remained untouched.⁶ The sluggish implementation caused disappointment among the Tamil community and demonstrated the lack of political will and commitment to the process of reconciliation under the Rajapaksa government.

On 8 January 2015 President Rajapaksa was surprisingly defeated in presidential elections by his former Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena, who was fielded by the activist alliance The United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG). This change in government was widely regarded by local and international political observers as the beginning of a democratic transition in the country (Wagner 2015). In their election campaign, the UNFGG focused mainly on taking action against

corruption and nepotism, in addition to abolishing the executive presidency. After its surprising victory, the UNFGG came up with a 100-day program to implement its election promises. Among the most crucial measures were ensuring the right to information, the appointment of independent commissions such as the National Police Commission and the Elections Commission, and the reduction of the executive presidential powers.⁷ The enactment of the 19th amendment under newly elected President Sirisena was a historic event in this regard. It reduced and decentralised the executive presidential powers the 18th amendment had given the government under the Rajapaksa government.

President Sirisena also established several bodies to look into reconciliation. Among these are the Ministry of National Dialogue under Minister Mano Ganesan, the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation under former President Chandrika Bandaranaike and the Committee on Reconciliation under President Sirisena himself. In fact, Sirisena declared reconciliation as key component of government politics in the coming legislature.⁸

The most pressing issues in reconciliation include: The reform of security forces in the north, the fate of missing persons and their families, a domestic or hybrid truth commission (and its related composition, procedures, in addition to the role of international observers), property restitution, reparations, the possible release of political prisoners, the protection of minorities, and how to maintain peaceful coexistence between the northern and southern regions.

A milestone in recent efforts for reconciliation is a comprehensive investigation by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) into alleged violations of human rights and related crimes during the armed conflict in Sri Lanka.⁹ The investigation and the publication of the findings were contested and denied by politicians that feared one-sided allegations against the Sri Lankan military and hence damage to the reputation of Sri Lankan war heroes. After several postponements, a report on the investigations findings

⁷ Francesco Mancin and Gianluca Rubagott (May 2015) *Balancing Act: Sri Lanka enters a complex new era*, Global Observatory; <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/05/sri-lanka-sirisena-tamil-tigers/>

⁸ Asoka Bandarage (June 09 2015). *Regime Change in Sri Lanka*, Huffingtonpost; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/asoka-bandarage/regime-change-in-sri-lanka_b_7022268.html

⁹ see the full report on <http://www.slguardian.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/UNHRC-report-on-Sri-Lanka-2015.pdf>

was finally released by the High Commissioner of Human Rights on 18. September 2015. The report on OHCHR investigation in Sri Lanka (OISL) states that there are reasonable grounds to believe that gross violations of international human rights law were committed by *all* parties during the period under investigation.¹⁰ If presented before a court of law, many of these allegations could be classified as war crimes and/or crimes against humanity. However, since the OISL report explicitly refrained from one-sided allegations the anxiously expected public outrage did not materialize.

The OISL Report recommends the establishment of a hybrid court for further inquiry that would consist of local and international judges. It argues that a purely domestic mechanism would lack credibility to overcome decades of malpractice in investigating human rights violations. This suggestion however was rejected by nationalists forces that see international involvement as a threat to sovereignty of the country.

2

Recent developments in the media sector

10

During former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's time in office from 2005 to early 2015, the Sri Lankan state media were directly controlled by the government, leaving little space for deliberation or critical debate on politics. The state media were seen as an instrument of propaganda to steer public opinion. Though a large share of existing media outlets were private enterprises,¹¹ they were factually subject to having their licenses granted (and perhaps evoked) by the Ministry of Information without legal justification. Consequently, private media sources depended on the goodwill of the ministry and therefore avoided conflict with the government (Secretariat for Media Reform 2016: 60). In all international Press Freedom Indices Sri Lanka for decades figured among the most unfree countries of the world; most of the journalists and editors rarely dared to report on the informally declared taboo topics such as corruption and human rights violations (Natarajan 2012; Destradi 2009: 6).

The January 2015 change in government is regarded as a major breakthrough for press freedom and the freedom of expression in Sri Lanka. Today, journalists are free to investigate corruption, criticise the government for its failures and abuses of power, and openly debate contested issues in public. In addition, the previous government is now being broadly attacked for its alleged involvement in cases of murder and corruption. The media is also engaged in addressing a broad range of delicate topics related to reconciliation such as the return of land, the findings of the OISL-report, and the fate of the political prisoners and missing persons. While the climate regarding these reconciliation questions was tense before the release of the OISL-report, their discussion in the media intensified tangibly hereafter.

During the past 10 years websites featuring dissenting views have been regularly and arbitrarily blocked without any legal basis, including sources like *Lanka E News*, *TamilNet*, the *Sri Lanka Mirror* and the *Colombo Telegraph*. Although the political background of these interventions was obvious, the government claimed no involvement in these cases (Secretariat for Media Reform 2016: 44-45). However, since January 2015 no such incidents have occurred and all websites are accessible, indicating a clear change in the media policy of the new government.

¹¹ 14 out of 16 radio stations and 12 out of 14 TV stations were private as of 2015 (Secretariat for Media Reform 2016: 60).

The liberation of Sri Lanka's media has however been accompanied by public skepticism over whether reporters can responsibly handle their newfound freedom. Some media have been criticised by journalists and politicians alike for sensationalist coverage, unprofessional use of sources, unreliable research and lack of accuracy (Secretariat for Media Reform 2016: 30).

In response to that criticism, the president reactivated the state Press Council, which effectively has punitive powers and serves as an instrument of monitoring and control. Because the repeal of that council was one of the election promises made by the UPFA, the decision was not well received by the press and civil society. Media institutions such as the Sri Lankan Press Institute (SLPI) are now under pressure to strengthen mechanisms of self-regulation such as the Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission, which has handled over 1,000 complaints in the past 10 years.¹²

Another UPFA campaign policy was to enact the Right to Information Bill (RTI), which has been pending in parliament for a decade. The RTI bill was presented again to parliament in March 2016 and was adopted in August 2016. While the move was celebrated among journalists, its implementation will not be an easy task to fulfill since it requires resources, knowledge, training and political willingness. Most of the journalists are not familiar with the scope and nature of the bill. Meanwhile, the administration also needs to be trained in understanding and properly implementing the new law.

Another problem is that the regulation of media development in Sri Lanka is rather opaque. The media ministry issues licenses based on undeclared criteria. Since 1991, 41 entities have received a license for broadcasting for unsubstantiated reasons (Secretariat for Media Reform 2016: 32). The ministry is also responsible for media policy and the operation of the state broadcaster SLBC/SLRC. But with no regulatory protocol in place there is no concept of media development while the public sphere remains largely dominated by state channels.

The media landscape is further divided by the language barrier between Tamil media outlets and those operating in the southern part of the country. Most of the Sinhalese newspapers, for various reasons, do not have

correspondents in the north. Thus the information exchange between the two communities is poor.

Generally speaking, the country's media landscape is divided into two separate subsystems: Tamil and Sinhalese. The decades-long civil war deeply divided the communities and polarized the media. Both the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil Tigers used the media for propaganda purposes and employed violent tactics to silence and suppress the free flow of information. And though the war has ended, both sides continue to represent the differing political claims and historical accounts belonging to each of their communities. One aim of this analysis was to investigate the nature and extent of these differences in the public discourse on reconciliation.

In the first half of 2015, Sri Lankan media were reluctant to report on reconciliation issues such as the return of land, the fate of political prisoners, the pressing question of federalism, the reform of security forces in the north, the return of refugees and compensation for families. The expected release of the United Nations Human Rights Council's Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL) had a chilling effect on coverage, as journalists and politicians feared that human rights violations uncovered in the last year of the war could escalate tensions. But thanks to a fairly balanced handling of the matter, those fears proved unfounded when the report was released in September 2015 and the topic of reconciliation finally entered the public debate.

¹² See Website of the Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission for details: <http://www.pccsl.lk/>

3

Methodology and aim of the exercise: discourse analysis for capacity building among journalists

12

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gainst the backdrop of the recent change in government politics MiCT chose reconciliation as the subject for a journalistic training program in Sri Lanka called “The Catamaran”. The capacity building project comprises trainings and editorial coaching as well as the publication of articles by Sri Lankan journalists across the country on the website TheCatamaran.org. The Sri Lankan Press Institute (SLPI) and the Media Research and Training Centre (MRTC) in Jaffna are both partners in the project.

The first phase of the project was dedicated to examine how the Sri Lankan press currently covers reconciliation issues. Therefore a mixed group of 16 Sinhalese and Tamil journalists from northern and southern Sri Lanka was gathered to examine the scope and nature of newspaper coverage on that topic in February 2016. The outcome of this analysis is the main subject of the report at hand (see chapter 4). The aim of this exercise was to strengthen journalists’ awareness of how meaning and messages are produced and conveyed differently by local media. The exercise also aimed to refine the journalists’ analytical skills and enable them to better reflect upon the (often unintended) messaging and framing in their own work on reconciliation.

In early 2016 the journalists met for a training session in Colombo to familiarise themselves with the methodology of the discourse analysis. Leading questions and categories of the research process were explained and tested in working groups. To stir debate about the research questions and exploit the merits of deliberation the journalists worked in pairs throughout the analytical process. In the actual implementation of the analysis, each pair examined every issue of one newspaper for the month of February 2016, compiling a content sample of all articles¹³ related to reconciliation¹⁴ in the following newspapers:

13 More precisely, each pair of journalists was asked to select the 30 most relevant articles about reconciliation from all articles published by a newspaper that month. Relevance was defined by the centrality, prominence and length of an article.

14 The research process included brainstorming on current reconciliation issues which resulted in the following list of topics: rule of law, the fate of missing persons and their families, the truth commission, the Hybrid Court (composition, procedure, role of international observers), devolution of power, the UN report, property restitution/resettlement, reparations/compensations, political prisoners, north vs. south (federation, peaceful coexistence), protection of minorities, the national anthem, NGOs and constitutional reform.

Sinhalese:

- *Mawbima* (published by The Standard Newspapers/private)
- *Dinamina* (published by the state run Associated Newspapers of Ceylon)
- *Silumina* (published by the state run Associated Newspapers of Ceylon)
- *Divaina* (published by Upali Newspaper/private)
- *Lankadeepa* (published by Wijeya newspaper/private)

Tamil:

- *Thinakurral* (Thinakurral Publications/private)
- *Thinakaran* (published by the state run Associated Newspapers of Ceylon)
- *Uthayan* (Uthayan group of newspapers/private)
- *Virakesari* (Express newspapers/private)

The newspaper sample was designed to gather the most popular newspapers in both languages while simultaneously representing the main political camps that exist within these communities. In the discourse analysis the journalists were asked to examine the following categories:¹⁵

- The general relevance and placement of topics related to reconciliation in the newspaper under investigation (What topics are covered by the newspaper? Are there prominent topics that are frequently mentioned? What topics are missing?)
- Speakers (Who are the major speakers? Who is not at all or rarely mentioned?)
- Rhetoric/style (picture choice and placement, style of headlines and language, references)
- Messages/interpretations (main patterns of explanation conveyed by each newspaper)

The analysis aimed to identify patterns of presentation and to compare differences in newspapers from both

communities with regard to the selection of topics and speakers and with regard to political messages spread by these media. This approach is based on the concept of discourse-theory and its emphasis on the constructive nature of human perception and thinking. According to the founder of discourse analysis Michel Foucault (1991) the individual as well as collective understanding of reality is shaped by the discourse on that reality, more precisely by the patterns of description and language that this discourse consists of. Reality does not actually exist beyond that discourse (Ibid.). Accordingly, influencing or determining patterns of public debate is seen as an act of power in discourse theory. An analysis of patterns underlying public discourse can thus provide insight on power relations in the field of investigation.

In the chapter below you will find a summary of the most important findings of the analysis.

¹⁵ The methodological approach and discourse analysis training for journalists was headed by Prof. Michael Meyen (department of communications studies and media research of the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich) and supported by Anke Fiedler and Anja Wollenberg (MiCT). Deepanjalie Abeywardana from the Verité Research Institute in Colombo supported the journalists in the course of the analysis and in drafting the final report at hand. Lydia Gitanjalie Thiagarajah supported the analysis of the Tamil newspapers and the drafting of the report on that part,

The following reconciliation relevant events were covered in the newspapers monitored during February 2016:

- The singing of the national anthem in Sinhalese and Tamil language during the Independence Day ceremony on 4 February 2016
- A visit by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in Sri Lanka
- Visit of Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj
- The appointment of Reginald Cooray as governor of the Northern provinces
- Constitutional amendments

The quantitative extent of coverage on reconciliation issues were generally high in both Tamil and Sinhalese newspapers. In the Sinhalese sample more than 400 articles related to reconciliation issues were identified and even more articles were found within the sample of Tamil newspapers. This indicates a strong acknowledgement of the topic's importance on both sides. And while reconciliation has always been a central topic in the Tamil public sphere, the Sinhalese media's broad attention to reconciliation issues can be seen as a new development.

Though they belong to separate language communities, Tamil and Sinhalese newspapers showed surprisingly similar patterns in their selection of topics. Publications on both sides gave heavy coverage to the singing of the anthem in both languages on Independence Day, along with the visit of High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein. The relevance of these events was reflected in broad coverage in all of the newspapers in the sample regardless of their political affiliations or language differences. This overlap might indicate shared interests between the Tamil and Sinhalese media that could provide common ground for dialogue.

Less overlap was found in other topics such as the visit of the Indian minister of External Affairs and the appointment of Reginald Cooray, which were covered by all newspapers to varying degrees. Still, none of the newspapers ignored these events. The discussion of constitutional amendments stood out however, because it was not tackled in the state-run newspapers *Silumina* and *Dinumina*, while Tamil newspapers discussed the matter broadly as a centrepiece of reconciliation. To put it differently: The question of power sharing and federalism was not included in the debate on reconciliation by the state-run media, while Tamil newspapers saw these

issues as essential components of the reconciliation process.

Opposing political messages were identified between the nationalist newspaper *Divaina* and the state-run newspapers *Dinamina* and *Silumina*. The latter presented reconciliation events as progressive steps on the way to unity and peace, while the nationalist newspaper *Divaina* emphasised embedded risks to the unity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the dual-language national anthem on Independence Day was presented by *Divaina* as a possible step towards separation, while the state press acknowledged the move as a gesture of reconciliation that would strengthen unity and peace in Sri Lanka. Likewise, *Divaina* framed the visit of the High Commissioner of Human Rights as well as the OISL report as unjust interventions by the West that undermine sovereignty of Sri Lanka and tip the balance of power in favour of the Tamil interests. The state press meanwhile saw the visit of the Commissioner as an opportunity for Sri Lanka to renew the relations with the international community.

Despite minor differences among the Tamil newspapers, no major rifts were identified in the interpretation of events. In their political messaging the Tamil press was basically in line with the state-run Sinhalese papers positive assessment of current efforts, though the Tamil papers nevertheless pointed out that these efforts are insufficient. *Thinakkural* and *Uthayan* viewed the singing of the national anthem in Tamil as a noble gesture that needs to be translated into more tangible and expansive action. Following a similar pattern of a double message in the Tamil papers, the visit of the Human Rights Commissioner was charged with high expectations that were followed by disappointment that the Commissioner did not clearly side with the Tamil demands.

The findings suggest that differences in political messages between nationalist and state-run Sinhalese media are actually deeper than those between Tamil and Sinhalese media. This phenomenon was however not mirrored in the speakers selected by the newspapers. Sinhalese state-run media refrained from quoting representatives of the TNA, whereas they often appeared as key sources in the Tamil newspapers.

4.1

Selection of topics in Sinhala newspapers

The five selected Sinhala newspapers, the *Dinamina* and the *Silumina* (the state press), the *Mawbima* (a tabloid newspaper), the *Divaina* (a nationalist newspaper) and the *Lankadeepa*, (the most-read newspaper in Sri Lanka) focused on several topics related to reconciliation in February. These included the singing of the national anthem in both Sinhala and Tamil for the Independence Day ceremony, the arrival of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the report on the OHCHR resolution on Sri Lanka (OISL report) and the visit of the Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushmita Swaraj. Swaraj's visit was seen as important in connection with reconciliation mainly because of the significance and sensitivity attached to India regarding the ethnic conflict and devolution of power. India has always been seen as a major influence on these matters mainly because of the pressure coming from Tamil Nadu on resolving the ethnic issue and the role it played in the past in terms of the Indo-Lanka Accord (see section 1). Finally, the appointment of the Northern Province Governor Reginald Cooray received less coverage compared to the aforementioned subjects.

The Independence Day ceremony and national anthem

The national anthem was sung in both Tamil and Sinhala during the Independence Day ceremony on 4 February 2016. This was a significant event since the singing of the anthem in Tamil was unofficially banned under the Rajapaksa government. However, president Maithripala Sirisena removed the effective ban with a circular issued in March 2015. Against this backdrop, singing the anthem in both Sinhala and Tamil on Independence Day dominated the press during the first week of February.

A majority of the Sinhalese newspapers monitored in this study welcomed the move. The state press papers the *Dinamina* and the *Mawbima* framed it as a strong symbolic gesture for reconciliation. The *Mawbima* noted that, "singing the anthem in Tamil is an example of reconciliation. Nationalists who do not understand this

try to reverse this process. We should contribute to develop the country regardless of ethnic divisions” (Feb.5: *Mawbima*, p.6). The *Mawbima* praised the move as a major step towards unity and peace.

However, the *Mawbima* also somewhat sensationalised the event, covering Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran’s visit to a Buddhist temple after the singing of the national anthem. The article carried pictures of Wigneswaran worshipping at the temple with the headline, “We are happy that the Sinhala brothers extended a hand of friendship which we are ready to accept”. While this coverage can be considered supportive of reconciliation, the pictures and the manner in which he was captured worshipping in a Buddhist temple, along with the headline’s rhetoric and the content of the article actually sensationalised the event. The *Mawbima* also gave coverage to the religious festival in the Madu Church on Katchchativu Island claiming that services currently held in Tamil would be held in Sinhala next year as well.

The only exception to an overall positive assessment of the event was the nationalist *Divaina*, which criticised the singing of the anthem in Tamil, saying it encouraged federalism. Federalism is often equated to separatism in the nationalist press. In its criticism, the *Divaina* compared the situation to that of the Indian national anthem, which they said was sung in one language despite the existence of multiple languages in India. The *Mawbima* challenged this comparison on the grounds that the Indian national anthem is sung in Bengali, a minority language.

“The main argument nationalists and extremists use against singing the national anthem in Tamil is that the Indian national anthem is sung in one language despite there being many languages in India. But they ignore the fact that it was written in Bengali, which is a minority language. There is nothing the Sinhalese will be deprived of by singing it in Tamil. It will not divide the country either. Objecting to it being sung in Tamil only damages reconciliation” (*Mawbima*, Feb.6, p.6).

The *Lankadeepa* took a moderate position on the national anthem being sung in Tamil. It focused on Wigneswaran’s statement saying that the move helps achieve reconciliation as a symbol of the willingness to extend a hand of friendship towards the Tamil community. The decision was an important step towards reconciliation, the paper said.

Overall, a majority of the Sinhalese newspapers were in favour of the decision to sing the anthem in Tamil. The main aberrations on this take were the *Mawbima*, which seemingly gave more coverage with the story on Wigneswaran’s visit to the temple, and the *Divaina*, which stood out by emphasising the dividing effects of the event.

Visit by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein

The Sinhalese press showed mixed reactions to the arrival of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein. While the state press widely welcomed the visit, the nationalist press was mostly critical of the event. In comparison to commentary on former High Commissioner Navanethem Pillai, the overall press reaction was more pragmatic, calling the visit of the current commissioner important for the country’s national interests.

The state press papers the *Dinamina* and the *Silumina* were both optimistic about the visit, framing it as a crucial step for foreign affairs and the improvement of human rights in the country, both of which would help Sri Lanka to revive international relations. Sri Lanka was internationally isolated for decades due to the authoritarian rule of the Rajapaksa government. Against this backdrop, the state press considered the commissioner’s visit an opportunity to further overcome that isolation.

A *Silumina* editorial asserted the following: “If certain groups are skeptical about the arrival of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, then that skepticism should be awarded to the previous government’s activities which led to Sri Lanka being mostly isolated from the international community. Although now is the time to correct these past misfortunes, these so-called groups and individuals try to mislead the public by saying that the current government is only interested in imprisoning war heroes and in betraying the country by aligning with Western powers” (Feb.14: *Silumina*, p.6).

The state press stressed the need to rectify past mistakes, thereby emphasising the importance of reintegrating into the international community for future political and economic progress in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the *Dinamina* editorial spoke of the UN High Commissioner as a person who supports the government in its effort to renew the status of foreign affairs. In that same vein, *Dinamina* overtly rejected the suggestion

that the commissioner is working against the interests of the nation.

The nationalist press on the other hand focused on protests against the visit, claiming that international involvement in reconciliation and transitional justice posed a threat to Sri Lanka's sovereignty. For example, the *Dinamina* carried images of a National Freedom Front (NFF) protest of the visit. It also published prominently placed headlines such as "UN High Commissioner meets Northern Province Chief Minister and Governor" (*Divaina*, Feb 8, p.11) and "The Dual Role of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights" (*Divaina*, Feb.9, p.9), emphasising his alleged inclination to support the Tamil cause and hence influence the current balance of power in Sri Lanka in their favour.

The OISL report was often mentioned along with the visit, with the nationalist press referring to the report as a "partisan" document in favour of Tamil interests (*Divaina*, Feb 5, p.11; *Divaina*, p.18). Representatives of nationalist parties such as the NFF, which are in the coalition of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), were quoted portraying the OISL report as partisan and in interference with the country's internal affairs (Feb 8: *Divaina*, p.1). The OISL report was also portrayed as an outcome of the "influence" from "the West" that mobilised support in favour of the Tamil minority population. Writer Keerthi Warnakulasuriya for instance regularly commented on political issues in the *Divaina* criticising the US, Norway, Eric Solheim and the "Tamil diaspora" for "intervening" in the drafting of the report. In his weekly column, Warnakulasuriya pointed out that the OISL report would disclose the names of 40 military personnel, evoking fears with regard to national security and sovereignty (*Divaina*, May 24, p.12; *Divaina*, May 3, p.1).

While the tabloid *Mawbima* comprehensively covered a protest held by families of the "disappeared" during the UN High Commissioners visit to the north, its editorial on the same day (Feb 8, p.6) was critical of the Sinhala and Tamil "extremists" who suggested that the UN High Commissioner would "divide the country". Thus, *Mawbima* took a stance similar to that of the state press, which was supportive and pragmatic on the UN High Commissioner's visit while at the same time highlighting the need to recognise protests against foreign intervention.

Secondary topics

There were also secondary issues and events related to reconciliation that were covered in February. Constitutional reforms were mentioned mainly in the *Divaina*, which framed them as an attempt to offer federalism to the Tamil minorities. But a discussion on constitutional reforms as a platform where the minorities' grievances can be addressed was explicitly absent in the Sinhalese press in general. At the same time, there were hardly any references to solutions to the ethnic question, the land issue and reduction of armed forces in the north, or the release of Tamil detainees in any of the newspapers that were monitored in the study at hand. This shows the limitations of reporting on reconciliation in the press.

The appointment of Reginald Cooray as the new governor of the Northern Province received press coverage, though it was minimal compared to that of the other major events that took place in February, not to mention in comparison to the extent of coverage it saw in the Tamil press. In the state press, the appointment was framed as a gesture of reconciliation, since Cooray is seen as someone who has long worked toward the goal of resolving the ethnic conflict with his "non-partisan stance".¹⁶ One interview with Cooray in *Dinamina* carried the headline, "I who was never racist can bring reconciliation". Cooray was appointed as the governor following the retirement of his predecessor H.M.G.S. Palihakkara.¹⁷ And while the state press and the *Mawbima* welcomed the appointment as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation mainly because Cooray has been supportive of the devolution of power, the *Divaina* declared it as an attempt to "pave the way towards separatism".¹⁸

4.2

Selection of Speakers in Sinhalese newspapers

Speakers related to each topic overlapped across the press, but were portrayed in a different light depending on the political affiliations of the newspaper. For example, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was

¹⁶ Verité Research, The Media Analysis, Vol.6, No.7

¹⁷ Verité Research, The Media Analysis, Vol.6, No.7

¹⁸ Ibid

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presented as a supportive figure in the state press, while he was quoted and highlighted in the nationalist press as a partisan player representing the interests of the international community as well as those of the Tamil minority. The nationalist papers also quoted nationalist ideologues such as Gunadasa Amarasekera and Wimal Weerawansa on these events and issues, whereas the space given to them in other Sinhalese newspapers was minimal.

Overall, state and non-state newspapers strongly prioritised government voices. The state press gave particular prominence to government voices such as the speaker and the newly appointed governor of the Northern Province. Notwithstanding, *Mawbima* published interviews with the Northern Province Chief Minister and ex-LTTE figures as well. The unnamed ex-LTTE sources commented on the war and its last phase, while the Chief Minister spoke of the national anthem during his visit to the Buddhist temple.

Within the sample the opposition, that is the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), received minimal or no coverage at all. While the Tamil press regularly referred to TNA's statements, they went unnoticed in the Sinhalese press, including in the state press.

4.3

Messages in Sinhalese newspapers

Key messages by nationalist paper *Divaina* mostly emphasised how reconciliation activities endanger national security and how interference by "the West" poses a threat to Sri Lankan sovereignty. The visit of the High Commissioner of Human Rights as well as the OISL report were framed as unjust interventions by the West that undermine sovereignty and tip the balance of power in favour of the Tamil minority. The paper also attempted to unmask the alleged impartiality of the UN Commissioner and the OISL report as subtle strategies to support the Tamil cause in the process of reconciliation.

Outstanding in this regard were the weekly Sunday columns by Keerthi Warnakulasuriya, who linked the "interference" from countries such as Norway, the US, Switzerland and Canada especially in the investigation of alleged war crimes to the likelihood of a possible

revival of terrorism. The rhetoric he used reinforced this messaging. For example, phrases like "separatist Tamil political parties", "separatist federalism", "NGO mob" and "Tamil diaspora" help establish national security concerns that allegedly stem from these parties.

In contrast with the prevailing view of unjust intervention in internal matters by Western forces, the state press, as well as the tabloid *Mawbima*, framed the visit of UN Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein as an opportunity to renew relations with the international community. The concept of Western forces as "bogeyman" was replaced by the idea of support and reintegration into the international community. This shift is a matter of national interest, the argument goes, since economic and social development in Sri Lanka will benefit from any improvement in foreign relations. And yet the contrasting view of the visit and the OISL-report by the *Divaina* and state press once again highlights how differently these camps conceptualise the process of reconciliation as well as the relations between Sri Lanka and "the Western world".

This deep rift was also reflected in the coverage of the celebrations of Independence Day. While the *Divaina* used the occasion to highlight the threat of separation through empowerment of the Tamil minority, the state press acknowledged the equality of all Sri Lankan minorities and their right to recognition. The main message conveyed by the state press was that the Sinhalese government, by singing the anthem in both languages, had extended a hand to the Tamil community in a move that would strengthen unity and peace in Sri Lanka. This message countered fears of separation by framing a possible empowerment of the Tamil community as a development that would ultimately serve the national interest.

4.4

Selection of Topics in Tamil newspapers

The four Tamil newspapers analysed for this study included: *Virakesari*, the privately owned and most widely read paper in the language; *Thinakkural*, which is from the same publisher; the Jaffna-based *Uthayan*; and *Thinakaran*, which is published by the state.

Selection of topics in the Tamil press largely overlapped with those in the Sinhalese press in the month of February 2016. As with the Sinhalese newspapers, the national anthem being sung in both languages at the Independence Day celebrations received widespread coverage. The OISL report, along with the visit of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, investigations into alleged war crimes and human rights violations, and debate surrounding the constitution were also among the most discussed topics. The appointment of the new governor to the Northern Province was also important, but failed to elicit the same interest and response as the other reconciliation-related news. And like the Sinhalese press, the visit of Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was a secondary topic in the Tamil papers' reporting.

Regarding the selection of topics relevant to reconciliation, the Sinhalese and Tamil press seemed to share the similar criteria. Both included identical events in their coverage of reconciliation, with the exception of the debate on constitutional amendments which was only covered by the Tamil papers.

The Independence Day ceremony and national anthem

The national Independence Day was a major topic in the Tamil newspapers, which echoed the sentiment of the Sinhalese press when they welcomed the move to sing the national anthem in both Tamil and Sinhalese. The Tamil press emphasised that celebrating in both languages creates a Sri Lankan identity that goes beyond individual race and religion, and thus encourages patriotism and national belonging within the Tamil community (Feb 1: *Thinakaran* p. 1; *Uthayan* p. 3; Feb 3: *Thinakaran*, p. 6; Feb 4: *Thinakaran* p. 17; Feb 5: *Thinakkural* p. 1).

However, unlike the largely positive Sinhalese coverage, the Tamil press also indicated that there was more work to be done towards reconciliation (The Media Analysis, Vol.6, No. 5 & 6). The *Thinakkural* stressed this in its editorial while praising the decision to sing the anthem in Tamil. The same paper pointed out that those singing the anthem can relate to it only if it is sung in a language they can understand, however (Feb 7: *Thinakkural*, p.18). Criticism of the approach was countered by providing examples of other countries where

the anthem was sung in more than one language. The vehement opposition to performing the national anthem in Tamil by nationalist elements and the Joint Opposition led by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was widely covered in the Tamil press as well (Feb 5: *Thinakkural* p. 1; Feb 6: *Uthayan* p. 1, p. 11; Feb 2: *Thinakkural*, p. 1). This mostly criticised the spread of extremist ideology, hate and racism while praising the current government by contrast (Feb 1: *Thinakaran* p. 1; *Uthayan* p. 3; Feb 4: *Thinakaran* p. 18, editorial p. 8; Feb 6: *Uthayan* editorial p. 12, p. 19). *Uthayan* asked skeptically whether the dual-language anthem was a ploy to find favour with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Al Hussein, who was scheduled to arrive the day after Independence Day (Feb 6: *Uthayan*, p. 19). The *Thinakkural* summarised the country's contrasting reactions to the matter by writing that nationalists in the south opposed it, while northerners were in favour despite finding the effort inadequate, and common citizens accepted it.

The Tamil papers themselves also pointed out differences between the Sinhalese and Tamil press coverage. The *Virakesari*, for example, said that singing the anthem in Tamil would make Sri Lanka look good to the international community, a benefit that it said had gone unnoticed in the Sinhalese press (Feb 7: *Virakesari*, p.1). The latter, with its largely positive coverage of the national anthem languages, did not discuss whether the effort may still have been inadequate to the larger situation, as the Tamil press had emphasised (Feb 13: *Thinakkural*, p.8).

Missing persons and the pardon of political prisoners were sub-topics of news related to Independence Day. Coverage included protests and memorandums to pressure the government to find solutions to these problems (Feb 5: *Thinakkural* p. 1; Feb 1: *Thinakaran* p. 6; Feb 2: *Thinakkural*, p. 12; *Thinakaran*, p. 1). The reports, while welcoming the singing of the national anthem in Tamil, also emphasised that the Tamil people face challenges and need answers for issues such as resettlement, political prisoners, release of land, constitutional reforms, and growing Sinhalese extremism (Feb 3: *Thinakaran*, p. 5; Feb 4: *Thinakaran* p. 17; Feb 4: *Thinakaran*, p. 6; Feb 6: *Uthayan* p.19). These issues were not raised by the Sinhalese press. While Tamil coverage unanimously agreed that singing of the national anthem in Tamil was a positive initiative, it reiterated that other more serious issues have to be addressed to achieve reconciliation.

The state-owned *Thinakaran* summed up Tamil anxieties, writing that, “Even though Sri Lanka has gained independence ... we (the Tamils) are a people who are yet awaiting independence” (Feb 3: *Thinakaran*, p. 5).

And though it had been sensationalised in the Sinhalese press, the visit of the Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister C.V. Vigneswaran to a Buddhist temple was not addressed by the Tamil press.

Overall, the Tamil newspapers in the sample approached Independence Day more positively than in past years, and this appeared to be due to their language’s inclusion in the performance of the national anthem.

The OISL report and the visit of the UN Human Rights High Commissioner and other delegates

While the Sinhalese press showed mixed reaction to the arrivals of foreign delegates, the visit of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Al Hussein was a much anticipated event in the Tamil press. It was covered with equal enthusiasm, highlighting the meetings with the TNA, Vigneswaran, and the families of missing persons (Feb 6: *Uthayan*, p. 1; Feb 7: *Uthayan*, p. 1; Feb 9: *Thinakkural*, p. 1; Feb 8: *Thinakkural*, p. 1). The Tamil press was more hopeful about the visit however, because the grievances of the Tamil people would specifically be addressed (Feb 6: *Thinakkural*, Editorial, p.10; Feb 7: *Thinakkural*, Editorial, p.4). Opposition to the visit led by Rajapaksa’s camp, which alleged that it compromised Sri Lankan sovereignty, was also highlighted in the Tamil press (Feb 6: *Uthayan*, p. 10).

But positive anticipation turned to disappointment upon deeper analysis of the visit. One of the key reasons for this change in tone were mixed comments by political leaders on the role of international judges in investigations of alleged war crimes and human rights violations (Feb 1: *Uthayan* p. 1; *Thinakkural* p. 1). *Uthayan*, for example, focused on the reluctance of Al Hussein regarding the involvement of international experts and judges in any mechanism related to accountability measures. Tamil reporters were also disappointed when he said that the GoSL would need to decide the nature of investigations on the alleged war crimes by itself (Feb 13: *Thinakkural*, Puthiya Panpaadu, p.8; *Virakesari*, Arasiyal Theeppori, p.17, 19; Feb 14: *Virakesari*, Samakaa-la Arasiyal, p.17). The *Virakesari* responded by saying that Tamils were treated as second class citizens. It

also stressed the politicisation of the judiciary, the protection of armed forces and the futility of past commissions that had been established to look into Tamil grievances.¹⁹ The Tamil press also criticised another perceived slight – a statement by Al Hussein about not releasing political prisoners without first subjecting them to legal proceedings.²⁰

In the weeks prior to Al Hussein’s visit, the opinion was put forward that a purely local mechanism of questionable legitimacy was unacceptable to the Tamil community. After Al Hussein’s visit, the issue was reiterated with added skepticism about the possibility of achieving true justice for Tamils. The press noted that he’d agreed to local mechanisms and switched from using the term “war crimes” to “human rights violations” (Feb 13; *Uthayan* p.12). *Uthayan* summarised the common Tamil press stance on the matter, calling the visit a “triumph for the government, disappointment for the Tamils, and a threat to Mahinda Rajapaksa’s faction” (Feb 13: *Uthayan* p.12).

The coverage in the Tamil press about accountability and investigations into alleged war crimes and human rights violations included mixed reactions, bringing out the many political voices that the coverage initially sought to highlight. The prime minister and president were two of the key speakers featured in the Tamil press on the issue. The president’s interview with Al Jazeera in January 2016, during which he had denied war crimes and stated that there were only human rights violations was received with shock by the Tamil press.

In that vein the TNA’s disappointment over the president’s statement about not allowing international judges was also covered prominently (Feb 1: *Thinakkural* p. 11; *Uthayan* p. 1; *Uthayan* Editorial p. 12; Feb 3: *Thinakaran* p. 1). The president’s stance on accountability issues was also presented as incompatible with Tamil interests. The prime minister’s position, however, was seen as less contentious. His statement that “reconciliation without accountability, and accountability without reconciliation is inappropriate”, and that the final decision concerning international judges was a judicial one, in addition to a reassurance that international involvement was not prohibited, were viewed more favourably (Feb 14: *Uthay-*

an, p. 1; Feb 2: *Thinakaran*, p. 1; *Uthayan* p. 1; *Thinakkural*, p. 1).

However, the foreign minister's statement in the United States on the certainty of international involvement in investigations elicited scepticism (Feb 27: *Thinakaran*, p. 1; *Uthayan*, p. 1). An editorial by the *Uthayan*, for example, stated that "the politicians of the good-governance government are well-versed in saying one thing on Sri Lankan soil and turning it upside down on foreign soil" (Feb 28: *Uthayan*, p. 18), reflecting the disappointment and the lack of confidence in the incumbent government on war crimes investigations.

In addition to this mistrust of local politicians, the Tamil coverage also expressed uncertainty in placing faith in the UN and other international entities, by questioning whether the "Tamils will be deceived yet again" (Feb 13: *Uthayan*, Editorial p.12). On the other hand, the Tamil coverage interpreted the international community's silence over local dealings as a sign of trust in the current government that underscored its capability and commitment to ensuring accountability and reconciliation (Feb 28: *Uthayan* p. 19).

A lack of initiative for investigating the fate of missing persons was another topic discussed in the Tamil press (Feb 9: *Thinakkural*, Editorial p. 4). The reporting on this matter was very much in contrast to the criticisms of the Sinhalese nationalist media, which claimed that the UN's actions were biased towards and influenced by the Tamil population. While the Tamil press did express hope in positive results from Al Hussein's visit, his perceived reluctance to support the Tamil positions engendered a disappointed and critical tone.

The visit of Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was also covered, with the newspapers outlining news about meetings with various political actors (Feb 6: *Uthayan*, p. 1; Feb 7: *Uthayan*, p. 1, 3; Feb 9, *Thinakkural*, p. 14). While the coverage was largely neutral, *Uthayan* was critical of India's detrimental role in reconciliation efforts in Sri Lanka, and expressed disappointment its role during the final phase where "India only waited for the news of the death of [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran" (Feb 14: *Uthayan*, p. 18). The article viewed India's role as a potential game changer, but maintained that the country had failed to support the cause of the Tamil minority.

Constitutional reforms

The consultations for the new constitution were covered differently in the Tamil press than they were in the Sinhalese press. While the Sinhalese nationalist paper *Divaina* negatively equated constitution-related news with federalism, the Tamil press highlighted federalism as essential to the Tamil community (Feb 9: *Thinakkural*, p. 1; Feb 16: *Thinakkural*, p. 1; Feb 15: *Thinakkural*, p. 1; Feb 7: *Uthayan*, p. 1; Feb 2: *Thinakkural* Editorial p. 4; Feb 1: *Thinakkural* p. 1). The notion of statehood derived from the Indian model was also covered by the Tamil press in this context (Feb 9: *Thinakkural*, p. 1; Feb 16: *Thinakkural*, p. 1; Feb 15: *Thinakkural*, p. 1; Feb 7: *Uthayan*, p. 1; Feb 2: *Thinakkural* Editorial p. 4; Feb 1: *Thinakkural* p. 1). The Tamil community also requested permission to observe the remembrance of the war dead through reinitiating the "Maaveerar Day", which was primarily an initiative by the LTTE (Feb 13: *Uthayan* p.1; Feb 16: *Thinakkural*, p. 1).

The necessity of a referendum to produce the new constitution was viewed with scepticism owing to the fact that the Sinhalese majority would be unlikely to support Tamil requests, especially given the rise in Sinhalese extremism (Feb 2: *Thinakaran*, p. 7; *Thinakkural*, Editorial p. 4). The tone of the Tamil coverage expressed very little trust in the current government's intention to make significant changes, and emphasised that the Tamil community should act in a diplomatic but firm manner to achieve reasonable results. It also emphasised that the international community should exert pressure on the government to that end (Feb 7: *Uthayan*, p. 27; Feb 2: *Thinakkural* Editorial p. 4).

The *Thinakkural* used the conversation about the constitution to underscore ideas that have long been part of the Tamil debate, namely that power sharing is seen as an essential change for the Tamil community. The *Thinakkural* stated that "if the current government rejects this request it becomes clear that the Sinhalese majority does not wish to share powers within Sri Lanka with the Tamils". The article went on to state that "Tamil youth did not take up arms to fight for their own interests, but did so to secure their rights" (Feb 17: *Thinakkural* p. 1; Feb 16: *Thinakkural*, p. 1).

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The appointment of Reginald Cooray as governor of the Northern Province

Another reconciliation topic was the appointment of Reginald Cooray as governor of the Northern Province, which received considerable attention in the Tamil papers, though not as much as other related topics. The coverage viewed the new appointment with hopeful anticipation, highlighting the endorsement of the Tamil political leaders and noting the governor's fluency in Tamil as a signal that he would better understand the community's issues. The importance of the governor acting as a "people's representative" to resolve issues such as the release of political prisoners, locating missing persons, and regulate the military occupation of land were all emphasised in the coverage of the event (Feb 16, *Thinakkural*, Editorial p. 4; Feb 28, *Uthayan* p. 23).

Reports also featured comments by Chief Minister Vigneswaran, who said the new governor was someone who can "fulfill the aspirations of the Tamil people" (Feb 20: *Thinakaran*, p. 3; *Uthayan*, p. 1). The state-owned *Thinakaran* featured an interview with the governor, which emphasised the importance of power sharing and trust building. "We cannot give back the lives that were lost," he said when asked about the validity of demands by the north as someone who is seen to understand that region's positions (29 Feb: *Thinakaran*, p. 5). Compared to other publications, *Uthayan* paid more attention to the governor's statements, highlighting Cooray's assurance that military camps in the north would be reduced, while land would be released and developed (Feb 20: *Uthayan*, p. 1; Feb 27: *Uthayan*, p. 1).

A controversial comment by the governor on mixed marriages between Tamils and Sinhalese produced differences of opinion between the papers, though. The *Thinakaran* attempted to neutralise the comment by calling it a misunderstanding (Feb 27: *Thinakaran*, Editorial p. 6). Other Tamil newspapers viewed the comment critically. The *Thinakkural*, for example, likened the statement to "applying balm to a severe wound", and suggested he focus on more pressing issues (Feb 24: *Thinakkural*, Editorial p. 4).

4.5.

Selection of Speakers in Tamil newspapers

Key sources in the Tamil press were TNA MPs, the Chief Minister, Vigneswaran, and other Tamil political leaders including Mano Ganesan, the Minister of National Co-existence Dialogue and Official Languages. By contrast, the Sinhalese press quoted voices from the government and the Joint Opposition, but rarely quoted representatives of Tamil parties or institutions. The Tamil papers also featured nationalist Sinhalese political figures, writing critically about their opposition to reconciliation matters (Feb 28: *Uthayan* p. 8; Feb 2: *Uthayan* p. 1; Feb 9: *Thinakkural*, p. 1). Coverage also featured the president and prime minister's statements on accountability mechanisms.

4.6.

Messages in Tamil newspapers

In general, Tamil newspapers paid more attention to reconciliation related topics than the Sinhalese press. The key message across all of the papers was that achieving reconciliation relies on resolving issues related to power sharing, missing persons, political prisoners, the release of land, resettlement, reducing military presence in the north, and conducting accountability initiatives and investigations related to alleged war crimes and human rights violations. Against this backdrop the singing of the national anthem on Independence Day was acknowledged as a friendly gesture but as such also regarded as insufficient, if not useless as long as essential demands remain untouched.

The Sinhalese nationalists claim that the international community was biased towards the Tamil community was not covered by the Tamil press. On the contrary, the newspapers urged the international community to pressure the government to implement the OISL report's recommendations and meet the expectations of the Tamil minority.

The coverage of visits by the UN Human Rights High Commissioner Al Hussein and India's External Affairs Minister Swaraj, among other foreign diplomats,

conveyed disappointment, distrust and skepticism about their aims and effectiveness in supporting the cause of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

Another key message was that the Joint Opposition poses a threat to reconciliation, unity and peace in Sri Lanka. Criticism was particularly harsh for former President and Joint Opposition leader Mahinda Rajapaksa, who Tamil papers accused of fuelling extremism and racism.

The state-owned *Thinakaran* deviated slightly from other papers by publishing positive opinions of government initiatives, but otherwise remained largely in line with the general sentiments of other Tamil papers on reconciliation themes.

More than two decades of civil war have resulted in tense and hostile relations between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities in Sri Lanka. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, many reconciliation efforts failed both before and after the war ended in 2009. But with a new government in place, hopes are high for a new beginning.

In the study at hand, these hopes were reflected in broad coverage of reconciliation efforts regardless of the political or language affiliations of the newspapers in the sample. Sri Lankan media seemed to unanimously acknowledge the importance of reconciliation. This acknowledgment could serve to boost the reconciliation process, especially since the Tamil community can finally see that their concerns are also being recognised within the Sinhalese community. The *Divaina* warnings for separation and foreign intervention stood out as an exception within an otherwise strongly supporting coverage in the Sinhalese press.

The strong overlap in the selection of topics can also be seen as a common bond between all Sri Lankan newspapers, and one that provides a basis for a national debate on reconciliation that includes viewpoints from both sides of the conflict.

Still, the analysis of messages and speakers highlighted differences in how reconciliation is conceptualised in both communities, a sign that there are limits to the possibility of finding common ground. Likewise, the absence of TNA representatives in the Sinhalese press, as opposed to their strong presence in the Tamil press, underscored differences in how each community perceives the legitimacy and relevance of sources. These differences are deeply rooted in the history of the country and they will not vanish any time soon. Therefore it is important to further strengthen awareness and understanding of how bias is created and reproduced among journalists and editors. Capacity building activities for journalists in Sri Lanka need to include corresponding items. At the same time media literacy should be fostered among the recipients.

Needless to say that media cannot bring forth reconciliation all alone; the government and civil society have to take a leading role in this process. Still, the media can and should further push the process by persistence and continuous attention.

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Annex A contains a summary of some of the most important historical attempts at reconciliation since the 1980s.

The Parthasarathy Formula

After the Tamil pogrom sparked an exodus of refugees from Sri Lanka to Tamil Nadu in the summer of 1983, the first major Indian diplomatic initiative took place that November. Called the Parthasarathy Formula, it recommended the establishment of regional councils with legislative powers in the Northern and Eastern Provinces where a large proportion of the population is of Tamil origin. The Chief Minister and the Council of Ministers were to constitute the executive arm backed by a Regional Public Service. However, neither the Sinhalese nor the Tamils accepted the proposals. One of the main reasons for the failure of this proposal was the lack of definition for a “region” (Ganguly 2010).

The Thimpu talks

The next diplomatic attempt at conflict resolution and reconciliation between the GoSL and the Tamil parties took place in Bhutan’s capital Thimpu from July to August of 1985. The four major militant Tamil groups participated in the talks in response to pressure from India (source).²¹ The People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), along with the Indian and Sri Lankan governments, also took part. The Tamil delegation presented a set of “four cardinal principles” (Ganguly, 1998: 211) that included the recognition of the Tamil community as a distinct nationality, a Tamil homeland with territorial integrity, self-determination and the right to full citizenship, in addition to other fundamental democratic rights for all Tamils (ICG 2012:3). The rigid positions of the participants ultimately caused the talks to collapse, however.

December 19 Proposals

The next phase of diplomatic involvement of India in conflict resolution was the December 19 Proposals, which resulted from discussions between Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene and former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The two of them met with LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran in Bangalore in December 1986. The proposals specifically addressed the crucial issue of the devolution of power by suggesting the establishment of an Eastern Province with a Provincial Council. The GoSL opposed this idea on the basis that this would pave the way for separation and the foundation of a separate Tamil state. Instead, the GoSL came up with the idea of trifurcation of the Eastern Province, which was rejected by Tamil groups since the Eastern Province was not seen as a part of a Tamil linguistic region (Loganathan, 1998: 74-77). Though the talks failed (Ganguly, 1998: 211), they were nevertheless embodied in the Indo-Lanka Accord (Loganathan, 1998: 79; Ganguly, 1998: 211).

Indo-Lanka Accord

The Indo-Lanka Accord was signed by Jayewardene and Gandhi on 29 July 1987, declaring Sri Lanka a “multi-ethnic, multi-lingual plural society”. The accord aimed to recognise the Northern and Eastern Provinces as a single administrative unit, where elections were to be held in Provincial Councils three months after signing the accord, which also named English and Tamil as official languages. The 13th amendment to the constitution, which sought to give autonomy to regions, was a result of the Indo-Lanka Accord. Among the main objectives of the 13th amendment, merging Northern and Eastern Provinces and recognising Tamil as an “official language” and English as a “link language” were crucial. However, the 13th amendment was never fully implemented due to objections mainly by the communist party in Sri Lanka, the JVP (Ganguly 2010: 88; ICG 2012: 4).

UNP-LTTE talks in 1989/1990

Two years after the Indo-Lanka Accord, discussions were held between the GoSL and the right-leaning United National Party (UNP) government headed by President Premadasa in 1989-90. But the talks collapsed in June

²¹ This were the LTTE, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS), and Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF).

1990 when the LTTE appeared to walk out of negotiations. Neither party had seemed to show a genuine commitment to the talks, though. Instead they seemed to have strategic objectives. The government wanted to neutralise the JVP which had been involved in attempts to destabilise the government, whereas the LTTE focused on removing the Indian Peace Keeping Force (Uyangoda, 2005).

PA-LTTE negotiations of 1994/1995

Further talks were held in 1994/95 between the LTTE and the Tamil government in Jaffna, resulting in a peace agreement signed on 6 January 1995. However, the LTTE terminated the agreement in April 1995 (Uyangoda, 2005).

The Norwegian initiative of 2000

The Norwegian government attempted to help the GoSL and the LTTE restart their negotiations within the framework of the “Norwegian Facilitation” in 2000. Then Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga’s government preferred the term “facilitation” over “mediation,” mainly to highlight Norway’s limited role in the talks (Uyangoda, 2005). Having gained international support, their aim was finding a solution within the existing territorial framework. But the government terminated the Norwegian initiative in May 2001 blaming Eric Solheim, Norwegian Peace Envoy to Sri Lanka, for being “ineffective” in bringing the LTTE to the table. The prolonged discussions and the disagreement over the preconditions (the LTTE wanted both a ceasefire and de-escalation of the war whilst the government wanted talks without a ceasefire) also led to the failure of the talks (Uyangoda, 2005; Ganguly 2010: 91-93).

UNF-LTTE negotiations 2002-2003

The victory of the United National Front (UNF) led by the UNP resulted in the resumption of negotiations after the parliamentary elections in 2001. Both the parties, and mainly the LTTE, had reached the upper limit of their military capacities, which paved the way for a ceasefire agreement on 21 February 2002 that was facilitated by the Norwegian government (Uyangoda, 2005). The international community backed the ceasefire. Five rounds of talks were held between the two sides,

but once again the peace process failed in April 2003 when the LTTE exited the negotiations.

The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission

The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) established on 16 December 2010 under the Rajapaksa government was another milestone that could have potentially fostered reconciliation after the defeat of the LTTE in 2009. Essentially it recommended the devolution of power as the basis for resolving the ethnic conflict. The LLRC presented 189 actionable recommendations classified under 11 broad categories including detention policy, land disputes and resolution as well as demilitarisation. However, to date, only approximately 20 per cent of the 189 recommendations are complete, while 57 per cent have been partially implemented and another 22 per cent remain untouched.²² The sluggish implementation can be attributed to the lack of political will and commitment to the process of reconciliation under the Rajapaksa government.

²² Verité Research (2016), *Sri Lanka: LLRC Implementation Monitor – Statistical and Analytical Review No.4*



