

THE POLITICS OF SYMBOLS IN POST-COLONIAL STATE FORMATION IN SRI LANKA: THE CASE OF THE NATIONAL FLAG

C.S HEWAWASAM

Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

Introduction

Presentation and representation of collective identities often take place in the form of symbols. It is visible throughout human history from the tribal insignia to the national flag of the modern state. When the state becomes the supreme political manifestation of the community on which it is based, the general tendency is to transform the symbols of the community into the symbol of the state. In a situation where different collective identities which reside within a single state compete for power, the symbols of the state become sources of conflict and also a manifestation of competition for power and recognition. Therefore the reading of the politics of symbols is a key to understanding the politics of collective identities.

Research methodology

The research is conducted by adopting the documentary research methodology. It will also employ some theoretical categories presented by Antonio Gramsci in relation to state, ideology, politics and political domination, in order to analyze the processes relating to post colonial State formation.

Research problem

1. What are the ethno-political formations in motion behind the debate over the National flag subsequent to colonial rule in Sri Lanka?
2. How to read the problems of post-colonial state formation and national integration that Sri Lanka

had to confront as reflected in the discourse over the national flag.

Discussion

Antonio Gramsci's definition of state and his theoretical construct of hegemony and the historic bloc will provide the conceptual point of departure to my study. According to Gramsci, the state is construed not only as a socio-political entity existing in a physical space but also as a theoretical entity rooted in an ideological plain. Hegemony is a form of behavior in which the ruling class intends to forge a wider social alliance, namely 'historic bloc'. In order to form a wider social alliance for the state (i.e., historic bloc), the rulers employ a variety of theoretical and practical activities to win the consent (hegemony) of the ruled. As group interest and collective identities are often presented and crystallized in the form of symbols, the accommodation or rejection of these interests in 'theoretical and practical activities' of the ruling class takes place in the sphere of the politics of symbols. In this context the debate over the national flag is important to us as it highlights the process of inclusion/exclusion and compromise/rejection of diverse interests in the formation of post colonial Sri Lankan State after a long period of colonial rule.

The process of transition from the colonial state to the post colonial state began with the transfer of power in Sri Lanka. One of the formidable challenges confronted by the new rulers was to transform the colonial state into a post-colonial state to suit the changed historical situation. The state

formation process had to take place in three spheres: the ideological, institutional and human (citizenship) spheres. The postcolonial state is not only a constitutional-legal entity existing in a political space but also an ideological entity to be established in the mind-set of the human base of the state. The relationship between the nation and state became very crucial in this context. The post-colonial state formation process in 1948 had to address the issue of the nature of the relationship between the state and the different ethnic identities in the country. This relationship had to manifest itself not only in the institutional arrangements of the state but also in the symbols of the state. The national flag is one of these key state symbols. Hence the evolution of the discourse on the national flag and its historical significance could properly be understood in the context of the processes of post-colonial state formation and national integration.

The state-nation link, the basis of modern state systems, is the most controversial aspect of contemporary politics. It is a result of two convergent and different historical processes: the formation of 'modern' state and the building of 'modern' nations. In Sri Lanka these two processes took their present forms during British rule. The historical background of the discourse on the national flag should be traced in relation to the self realization of national identities and political mobilizations of different ethnic identities in the new historical context that was created under British rule.

With independence, one of the tasks of the new rulers was to design a flag for the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. In the light of the ethno-political forces in motion at the time of the transfer of power, deciding on a national flag that was acceptable to all was

no easy task. Hence, a committee representing the three main ethnic groups was appointed to decide on the national flag. The proceeding of the National Flag Committee and its report, presented on 3rd March 1951, and the dissenting views presented by S. Nadesan, help us to understand the nature and dynamics of identity politics on the eve of Independence. The proposed national flag attempted to accommodate other identities while giving prominence to the majority identity. However it did not alleviate the fears of other identities. It reflected the early manifestation of the problems of national integration and the failure of hegemonic accommodation of 'other' collective identities in forging a strong post colonial state.

Conclusion

In this presentation it is argued that the examination of the discourse on the national flag would provide a key to understanding the ethno-political roots of the present crisis in the Sri Lankan state. It is an illustration of the failure of the political leadership of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state to evolve a hegemonic state or a wider historic bloc encompassing all the collective identities which ultimately paved the way for the crisis of the state in Sri Lanka.

References

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