

Post-War Reconciliation Process in Sri Lanka: A Unique Path to Peace Building



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ABSTRACT: This study examines the unique aspects of Sri Lanka's peacebuilding and ethnic reconciliation process following the end of its civil war in 2009. Unlike many post-conflict societies that rely on formal peace agreements, Sri Lanka's reconciliation efforts were driven by a military victory without a negotiated settlement between conflicting parties. This study discusses key milestones in Sri Lanka's reconciliation journey, including institutional reforms such as the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) and the Office of Missing Persons (OMP). It examines the unique challenges, including political dominance in the process, limited engagement of minority communities, and inconsistencies in policy frameworks. The study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that have shaped Sri Lanka's reconciliation approach by drawing on qualitative data from key informant interviews (KII) and through a comparative analysis with global post-conflict practices. Ultimately, this study offers valuable insights for policymakers and scholars on the complexities of peacebuilding in unique post-conflict settings, highlighting the need for more inclusive and sustainable efforts to achieve lasting peace.

KEYWORDS-Peace Building; Ethnic Reconciliation; Sri Lanka; Uniqueness, Distinctive Features

1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka (SL), a South Asian Island nation, has been a site of significant ethnic conflict over the past several decades. The prolonged civil war, which spanned nearly three decades, was primarily between the Sinhalese-majority government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers (Kumarasingham, 2016; Devotta, 2004), which emerged out of the largest minority group of the country. This conflict resulted in extensive human suffering, including substantial loss of life and large-scale displacement of civilians (United States Department of State, 2012). The origin of the conflict was complex and multifaceted. Historical injustices, including the marginalization of the Tamil ethnic group and the centralization of power in the hands of the Sinhalese majority, contributed to the rise of the LTTE (Kearney, 1986). The Sri Lankan civil war's roots lay in deep-seated historical grievances, ethnic tensions, and political struggles brewing for many years before the outbreak of full-scale hostilities (Kumarasingham, 2016). The LTTE's demand for an independent Tamil Eelam was met with resistance from the government, leading to a brutal and protracted conflict (Kumarasingham, 2016). The war officially ended in 2009, following a decisive military victory by the Sri Lankan government. However, the cessation of hostilities marked the beginning of a new, equally challenging phase for the nation: peace-building and ethnic reconciliation.

Past studies have claimed that no single tool kit exists for reconciliation, and the context is everything. Hence, the Sri Lankan government has tried various strategies for peace and reconciliation after the civil war (Kumari, 2023). These reconciliation efforts primarily focused on justice, reintegration, and peacebuilding across various levels of society. National and grassroots approaches were implemented to foster social cohesion, human rights, and transitional justice, but these efforts faced significant obstacles, including political instability and economic inequalities (Wakkumbura & Wijegoonawardana, 2015)

For instance, the establishment of the Lessons Learned & Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in 2010, the establishment of the Office of Missing Persons (OMP) in 2018, the establishment of the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) in 2015, the establishment of the Bureau of the Commissioner-General of Rehabilitation, the establishment of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanism are some institutional arrangements made in Sri Lanka. Subsequent programs like resettlement initiatives and rehabilitation for former LTTE combatants were implemented. Land reforms, land releasement projects, and disarming efforts occurred occasionally, indirectly supporting ethnic reconciliation among antagonistic parties.

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However, economic deprivation and limited opportunities in the Northern and Eastern provinces hindered full recovery (Banerjee & Manoharan, 2003).

Despite these numerous efforts, the effectiveness of reconciliation efforts remains questioned and criticized in the Sri Lankan context. Many studies have discussed the imbalanced nature of reconciliation efforts in Sri Lanka. Critics show many reconciliation attempts as mere political promises rather than deliberate peacebuilding attempts in Sri Lanka (Goodhand, 2010). The 'national' reconciliation in Sri Lanka has focused mainly on limited institutional reforms and political reforms (Wakkumbura & Wijegoonawardana, 2015). The actual psychological well-being of individuals who have been traumatized during the war has not been tackled (Jayawickreme et al., 2017). The grievances of minorities have not been adequately dealt with in the Sri Lankan reconciliation process (Hoglund & Orjuela, 2013). The leading causes behind the failure of much of the cause for the failure of the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka are politically motivated ethnic disagreements and vast social and economic inequalities (Perera, 2012). Further, Uyangoda (2013) has mentioned that Sri Lanka's reconciliation process seems to have been detached from the mainstream political process and remained unregulated. Sri Lanka must introduce more operational activities in the reconciliation process to reach the upper levels of ethnic integration, such as compromising and adapting levels (Kumari, 2021).

However, this study claims that measuring the success or failure of reconciliation efforts can be challenging, especially in qualitative research where outcomes are highly subjective and difficult to quantify. As explained above, The Sri Lankan peace-building process has been subjected to several criticisms. These criticisms were mainly because Sri Lanka's process has added a unique flavour to global peacebuilding scholarship. Many milestones of the SL's conflict and peacebuilding cycle differ significantly from other contexts, showing diverse distinctive features. However, the effectiveness of these aspects is yet to be discussed separately. Hence, the author argues that the Sri Lankan peace process is usually criticized for its strangeness rather than effectiveness. Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyze the distinctive elements of Sri Lanka's peace-building and ethnic reconciliation approach. By examining the critical milestones of the peace-building process, this study provides a comprehensive discussion on what makes Sri Lanka's experience unique. This involves explaining the origin of the peace process, its key stakeholders, their power relations, and the institutional framework.

Significance of Study

This study focused on the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka, thoroughly examining its distinctive features. Understanding the uniqueness of Sri Lanka's ethnic reconciliation process holds substantial significance for academic research and practical policymaking. For scholars, this study offers a deep analysis of reconciliation within a complex post-conflict context, contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The insights gained from this study are also highly relevant for policymakers and practitioners engaged in reconciliation. Understanding the unique aspects of Sri Lanka's reconciliation process can inform the design and implementation of more effective strategies for addressing the needs and concerns of diverse ethnic communities. Overall, the significance of this study lies in its ability to provide a detailed understanding of Sri Lanka's ethnic reconciliation process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation is widespread, including conventional and contemporary academic dialogues. The term 'ethnic reconciliation' has close ties to 'peacebuilding.' This section discusses the literature related to the study's key themes: peacebuilding and ethnic reconciliation.

Peace & Peace Building

The concept 'peace' is coined by Galtung (1976) in his work 'Three approaches to peace: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. Galtung pointed out that peace could exist in a positive or negative state. Negative peace is interpreted as the absence of bloodshed and war, whereas positive peace is identified as a situation built on friendship, solidarity, and harmony (Galtung, 1969). However, Jarstad et al. (2019) Describe that positive and negative categories of peace can no longer explain the different realities of peacebuilding in post-war societies. Hence, structural peace is essential, and it describes a situation where sociopolitical order properly exists, ensuring equality and justice.

There is no common consensus among scholars about the meaning of peace. Hence, a wide-ranging interpretation can be found. The meaning of peace, or its constituent components, is rarely analytically clear (Jarstad et al., 2019). Ceadel (2003) characterizes peace as an armed truce maintained by the presence of military power, where opposing sides refrain from violence due to the threat of force rather than a genuine resolution. Lederach (1997) identifies peace as a dynamic social construct, and he discusses peace as an ongoing process of change from negative to positive relations, behavior, attitudes, and structures. According to Jarstad et al. (2019), peace is a complex, dynamic process rather than becoming an end state. Hence, peace is a fluid concept associated with many goals and visions of a good society. However, the most popular Western view of peace is the absence of violence, while many Eastern works of literature recognize peace as the highest value of humanity (Rummel, 1981). The modern concept of 'building' peace is a norm or state that could be constructed (Galtung, 1969). Lederach, (1997) asserts that peacebuilding is more than post-

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accord reconstruction. It is a comprehensive concept that covers, produces, and endures many processes, approaches, and stages. According to the United Nations (2000), it is more than just the absence of war; it is a complex and multi-dimensional process that relies on broad social participation. Previous authors and organizations have used different terms to mean 'peacebuilding.' According to Barnett et al. (2007), some terms, such as 'crisis management,' 'conflict management,' 'rehabilitation and reconstruction,' 'post-conflict recovery,' and 'stabilization,' are closely related to peacebuilding. Post-conflict peacebuilding is known as a peacebuilding situation after the end of a military conflict (Jirasinghe, 2018). The most recent developments in peacebuilding thoughts are also related to the notion of 'human security.'

Ethnic Reconciliation

The term 'reconciliation' derives from the Latin word 'conciliate,' which means to 'come together as a whole.' It is used across many disciplines, yet in the social sciences, it often refers to 'reconciliation among people.' This process is primarily determined by ethnic and religious sentiments among the individuals, as illustrated by the adjective 'ethnic.'

There is no common consensus among scholars about the meaning of the term reconciliation. The study of reconciliation is in its embryonic stage, so a degree of conceptual chaos is justifiable. Thus, a wide range of interpretations can be found. As noted by Marina and Katalin (2022), reconciliation is a lifelong journey oriented in two directions: inward (towards self-discovery) and outward (towards forgiving others). However, Ramiah and Fonseka (2006) assert that the reconciliation dimensions of conflict transformation are still underdeveloped and under-emphasized. They are often viewed as a post-conflict priority and through transitional justice mechanisms such as truth commissions or war crimes tribunals. Healing through reconciliation can sometimes take generations to complete. For Malik (2021), reconciliation is rehumanizing opponents and repairing their damaged relationships. Literature recognizes Reconciliation as a process (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004; Simon, 2019) and an outcome (Lederach, 1997). According to Simon (2019), it is a socio-psychological transformation of racial and ethnic relationships to repair them morally. Lederach (1997) says truth, mercy, justice, and peace are essential outcomes of reconciliation. Similar to him, Kriesberg (2007) discussed four main dimensions of reconciliation, namely: (i) truth, where past pain or loss sustained in a group is recognized by their enemy; (ii) justice, where those who suffered demand compensation for their suffering; (iii) respect, where after all, both parties demand mutual respect (iv) security, because a sense of security and safety is necessary. Ideally, all the above four dimensions should be included in every reconciliation process (Malik, 2021). Peacebuilding and Reconciliation actions are discussed widely in the literature. Merwe (1999), cited in Malik (2021), stated that four main actions were at the core of the reconciliation movement: i) 'restoring humanity' to all groups, including both perpetrators and victims; ii) reorganizing a new 'moral order' which implicitly reflects consensus on a new value system; iii) changing attitudes and beliefs to overcome fear, anger, and revenge, and iv) establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with enemy groups. Kraybill (1995) explains seven stages of action associated with the life cycle of reconciliation. When discussing the operational aspect of reconciliation, Bennink (2004), cited by Malik (2021), identified at least 12 activities or actions for reconciliation within four broader frameworks of (i) truth disclosure and justice actions, (ii) peace education, (iii) development for peace; and (iv) cultural and artistic actions for peace. Reconciliation is highly contextualized (Salter, 2016), as every conflict is unique (PeaceWomen.org, 2024). Thus, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to all. Similarly, no 'quick, high-impact way' would reconcile opponents. The process may sometimes extend over generations. Bloomfield et al. (2003) claim that reconciliation's fundamental problem is that no one agrees on how to define or do it. Indeed, the meaning of the terms 'peace' and 'reconciliation' varies across contexts and countries. For Simon (2019), in reconciliation, the context is everything. There is no handy roadmap for reconciliation; each society must find its route. Hence, each country has its recipe for peacebuilding and reconciliation, embedding its prolonged socio-cultural and political dimensions. However, they still have some similarities.

3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study applied informants' interviews (KII) as its research strategy. To become familiar with Sri Lanka's ethnic reconciliation process and its unique aspects, open discussions were conducted with some selected informants, including 03 officials from related government institutions (Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), Ministry of Justice, Office of Missing Persons, Sri Lanka), 01 Executive-level officer from an NGO which works towards Sri Lanka's ethnic reconciliation process and 02 global peace scholars who are interested in Sri Lanka's peacebuilding and reconciliation process. These experts contributed to the study by providing their perspectives on Sri Lanka's Peacebuilding process. In this paper, therefore, the individual perspectives of critical informants are synthesized with the researcher's arguments and presented along with cross-country experiences available in the literature. Hence, this study uses both primary and secondary data. The purposive sampling technique was used to select these respondents, considering their expertise and prolonged engagement in peace and reconciliation in conflict-affected societies, particularly in Sri Lanka. The gathered data is presented qualitatively with substantial descriptions.

4. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

As explained in the background of this paper, Sri Lanka's peace-building and ethnic reconciliation process seems to be a unique case in the scholarship of global peacebuilding. This uniqueness can be identified throughout the conflict and peace-building cycle. Though some areas are alike, significant milestones in this journey show some unique aspects compared with some commonly applied global practices. The following section discusses the highlights of this process and the Sri Lankan flavor in each breakthrough, including its origin, policy framework, institutional setup, power relations, and actors involved. This discussion section is mainly based on literature, yet those details have been discussed, analyzed, and supported by the primary data collected from KIIs.

(i) Origin: Peacebuilding and Reconciliation process

The origin of peacebuilding and reconciliation processes is often characterized by two primary documents: Ceasefire or peace agreements derived through negotiations between conflicting parties. These agreements may include the cessation of hostilities, disarmament, and plans for power-sharing, often facilitated by third-party mediators like international organizations or neighboring countries. These documents, either formal or informal, create understanding between warring parties to stop the violence and pave the way for negotiations. A Ceasefire Agreement is often the initial step, where conflicting parties agree to cease fighting temporarily, sometimes monitored by international observers to ensure compliance (Bell, 2006). This agreement usually includes provisions for withdrawing forces, disarmament, or establishing buffer zones. On the other hand, a peace agreement, or a treaty, is a broader and more formal, publicly accessible document produced after negotiation among conflict protagonists and mutually agreed upon (Darby & Mac Ginty, 2000) by some or all of them addressing conflict to the end. Usually, it includes substantive and procedural content focusing on concepts such as truth, trust, amnesty, pardon, etc. (Bell, 2006). Those key elements bring two antagonistic parties to a consensus point within the previous journey headed to two different pathways. Reconciliation should be initiated early in the pre-settlement stage (Bloomfield & Barnes, 2003; Ramiah & Fonseka, 2006) and be considered in any negotiated power-sharing, relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction efforts by both parties.

The global practices in terms of peace agreements show a mix of results. In 2016, the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with 'Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia' (FARC) in 2016, ending the conflict that lasted for over 50 years. Though it was partially successful, this agreement enabled the disarming of the FARC. Northern Ireland signed a successful peace agreement in 1998, ending the disputes between Unionists and Nationalists, known as the 'Good Friday Agreement' (Darby & MacGinty, 2000). Mozambique signed a peace agreement in 1992, ending the civil war between government forces and RENAMO rebels from 1977 to 1992. This accord, known as the 'Rome General Peace Accord,' resulted in disarmament and elections (Manning, 2002) in Mozambique. Sudan signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, ending the Second Sudanese Civil War between the Sudanese government and SPLM/A, lasting from 1983 (Johnson, 2011). Though it did not work perfectly, South Sudan gained independence after this agreement. El Salvador's peace accord, signed in 1992, considerably ended the war and established democratic governance (Holiday, 1995). The civil war between the government and the 'Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front' (FMLN), a coalition of leftist groups, from 1979 to 1992 was stopped with this agreement. Moreover, Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a peace accord in 1995 called the 'Dayton Accord' (Bose, 2002), which led to the war's end and established a complex power-sharing system. In all these cases, countries have started their complex peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, signing a peace agreement with parties involved in prolonged conflicts.

However, no peace agreement among antagonistic parties has been signed in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan peace-building process accelerated after the government's victory in the war without any peace agreement between the parties.

'The government has not signed an agreement with minority groups to stop the civil war. However, after the war, they have done their best to reestablish civilian lives in war-affected areas, ranging from economic recovery to psychological healing (A Respondent).'

The government has mainly initiated Sri Lankan reconciliation efforts without the involvement of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Ramiah & Fonseka, 2006), and some experts see this as a compelling reason behind its unique pathways to establishing peace.

'If there is no such mutually agreed mandate on reconciliation and peacebuilding in the Sri Lankan context, there is a possibility of not socializing the core concepts of reconciliation like 'truth, trust, forgiving, forgetting, healing' among the people in the post-conflict contexts (A Respondent).'

However, it is acknowledged that GoSL signed a ceasefire agreement with LTTE in 2003, but it did not last long; the government withdrew its involvement in 2008 and applied a military approach to end the war. After the victory of GoSL in 2009, it is apparent that the different political regimes have practiced a nationally led, one-way approach to the peacebuilding and reconciliation process

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by mixing their ideological flavors. Hence, the evolving peacebuilding and reconciliation process in Sri Lanka, without having an agreement between antagonistic parties, can be identified as one of its main yet unique characteristics.

(ii) Guiding forces of peace and reconciliation process

Many forces, including national government policy frameworks, guidelines of international organizations, transitional justice bodies, and third-party mediators, usually guide the peace-building processes of conflict-affected countries. Further, the conditions of ceasefire or peace agreements, constitutional and legal frameworks, UN resolutions, and international treaties play equally notable roles. International organizations like the UN, European Union, and the World Bank often monitor the peace processes of conflict-affected countries. For example, the UN played a significant role in the peace process in East Timor (Doyle & Sambanis, 2005). International documents like the UN's Agenda for Peace (1992); The Brahimi Report (UN, 2000); African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) (Bah et al., 2014); OECD-DAC Guidelines on Peacebuilding (OECD-DAC, 2001) have played a significant role in guiding the peace and reconciliation in many other conflicts affected countries.

The UN resolutions also guide the peace processes of countries. For example, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 highlights the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution (United Nations Security Council, 2000). Documents on transitional justice guide societies in addressing war crimes. International organizations, such as the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), provide technical frameworks for post-conflict peacebuilding (United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, 2009). Further, constitutional reforms or new constitutions emerge in post-conflict societies and serve the peace-building process (Kumari, 2023). In Iraq, the 2005 Constitution was a product of the peace process following the U.S.-led invasion (Dawisha, 2009). In addition, global treaties such as the Geneva Co provide rules on the treatment of civilians during conflicts, influencing post-conflict peacebuilding efforts (Roberts, 2003).

Civil society movements also play a significant role; in Liberia, women's peace movements were instrumental in pushing for the peace agreement, which led to the end of the civil war in 2003 (Gbowee, 2011). The peace or ceasefire agreements can be identified as the most important. For example, the Dayton Agreement (1995) included a ceasefire that ended the Bosnian War (Bose, 2002). Peace agreements provide a comprehensive guide to peace by introducing political reforms, disarmament, and power-sharing (Darby & MacGinty, 2000).

The peace processes of conflict-affected countries are usually guided by one, few, or more of the above-stated mechanisms or factors. However, the level of influence that each factor can have on peace-building processes differs. However, they all have such guiding principles to navigate their peace-building processes properly. In the Sri Lankan context, the peace process is primarily guided by the promises of the ruling parties' political manifestos.

'Usually, our government follows the guidelines of their national political agenda when working in all the sectors; no exception for peacebuilding too. They set the post-war recovery and healing projects based on their policy priorities' (A Respondent)'

Though UN resolutions (19/2, 22/1, A/HRC/25/1, and A/HRC/25/23) suggest some internal socio-political reforms, Sri Lanka seems to have never taken them seriously (United States Department of State Country Reports, 2013). Acknowledging its independence as a sovereign state, Sri Lanka has loosely adhered to the guidelines of international treaties or resolutions (Welikala, 2019). Though it has hardly been implemented, GoSL has developed policy recommendations from two independent commissions after the civil war: the LLRC and the Paranagama Commission.

'The government has already published the final reports of the LLRC and Paranagama commission, which state policy priorities in the peace establishing process; those recommendations guide the government what to do and what not to do (A respondent)'

Despite these documents, the government has not publicly stated any specific guidelines for establishing peace and reconciliation in the country. Hence, *'the building process in Sri Lanka seems rather a politically sensitive case (A Respondent)'*.

Indeed, there are no fixed documents for guiding Sri Lanka's peace and reconciliation process other than statements included in the political manifestos of different parties. Furthermore, the orientation and commitment towards the peace and reconciliation process in Sri Lanka fluctuates when the ruling party changes occasionally. However, as an independent peace mediator, Norway played a crucial role in mediating the Sri Lankan peace process in the early 2000s (Goodhand & Klem, 2005) to initiate a ceasefire agreement.

(iii) Nature of power relations

In any negotiation, connected parties' social and political relations can be symmetric or asymmetric. Symmetric relationships are characterized by a balanced mutual relationship based on similar allocations of power resources, whereas in asymmetric

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relationships, actor 'A' wins at the expense of actor 'B' (Pfetsch, 2011). The nature of power relations among parties involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes is typically asymmetric (Rouhana, 2004). The different actors hold varying degrees of influence, resources, and legitimacy. However, symmetric relationships are more stable than asymmetric ones in negotiations (Deutsch, 1963; Brown, 1975), as cited by Pfetsch (2011). Though they are practically unrealistic, they are more fair and valid in peace negotiations.

In peace negotiations, the typical actors involved are the governments, former combatants, international organizations, civil society, victims, and local communities (John & Kev, 2008; Brett, 2017). The state sector, or the government, usually holds much formal power by controlling institutions, resources, and the mechanisms for implementing peace agreements. At the same time, the role of civil society and victims is more limited and state-regulated (Clark, 2010). For example, the Rwandan government under the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) played a dominant role in shaping the country's reconciliation process (Clark, 2010). The Colombian government held a stronger position in the peace negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), primarily due to its political authority (Rettberg, 2020).

However, international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and NGOs significantly influence national peacebuilding efforts in conflict-affected countries (Aliff, 2014).

For example, international organizations have led peace-building processes in East Timor and Gambia (CAVR Report, 2005; Saine, 2019). They often provide technical expertise and funding that governments and local civil society need but may impose conditions or influence the direction of policies based on external priorities. Also, in many post-conflict settings, former combatants significantly influence negotiations. The African National Congress (ANC), the former rebel group and now the ruling party, had substantial power in shaping the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process (Laplante, 2017). In Sierra Leone, former combatants were critical in designing its peacebuilding and reconciliation process (Kelsall, 2005). In contrast, the peace processes of countries like Northern Ireland (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006) and Nepal (Subedi, 2017) were said to be central government dominated.

In the Sri Lankan context, there was no significant role or voice for the former combatants, war victims, civil society, or international organizations within its peace-building process, which started after the war victory of the government (Ramiah & Fonseka, 2006). After the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, the government led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa and later administrations took control of the post-war reconciliation framework, determining the pace and nature of reconciliation efforts. This was most visible when establishing the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in 2010, whose recommendations were selectively implemented. Some other literature also supports this idea. Local communities, mainly Tamil and Muslim civilians, are central to the reconciliation process, as their sufferings are heavy (Fernando, 2020). The participation of minority people is crucial for truth-telling and healing, but their influence on shaping national policies is relatively limited (Hoglund & Orjuela, 2013).

'Of course, we saw that the war victims have been called by the LLRC and also for justice for disappearances, but their voices have often been outshined by the government's nationalistic narrative (A Respondent).'

As Uyangoda (2011) noted, Tamil communities expressed concerns over the government's reluctance to address war crime allegations, leading to feelings of further marginalization. Also, The UN's Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has passed multiple resolutions on Sri Lanka, urging the government to investigate war crimes and address the grievances of the Tamil population. Sri Lanka had tremendous diplomatic pressure then (Fernando, 2020). However, the Sri Lankan government, which was in power by that time (2009), ignored or refused publicly some recommendations given by international organizations like the UN, listing them down in their priority lists. Tamil political parties like TNA also could not play a significant role in expressing their interests in the country's reconciliation process. Though they have conducted few discussions with these stakeholders, apparently, they have nominal and less influential power in this process.

Against this backdrop, the power relations of the peacebuilding and reconciliation designing process in Sri Lanka seem to be somewhat asymmetric, with the dominant nature of central government and military leaders' consultations. One respondent also noted that; *the peace-building process in Sri Lanka was largely national-led*.

The influence of the dominant nature of government can be seen mainly in the policy-level discussions and the grassroots-level peace-building efforts.

'Grassroot projects are designed and implemented exclusively by the government. The voices of other groups involved in the ethnic conflicts are not adequately heard (A Respondent).'

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However, for Pfetsch (2011), it is incorrect to say that symmetric relationships are more advantageous and asymmetric ones are worse. The crucial question is whether the parties are satisfied with the negotiated outcome in particular circumstances. Symmetric power relations exist only in exceptional cases within peace and reconciliation negotiations, such as the Colombian peacebuilding process (Rettberg, 2020).

(iv) Policy framework and institutional setup

Though the scope, implementation, and effectiveness vary widely, many countries, particularly conflict-affected countries, have national policies or frameworks for peacebuilding and reconciliation. Unless they have integrated peace efforts into other national policies, however, the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of these policies can differ significantly depending on the political, social, and historical context.

For example, the National Unity and Reconciliation Policy (NURC) of Rwanda, Nepal's national policy on transitional justice, South Africa's national reconciliation policy, and Northern Ireland's 'Together: Building a United Community (TBUC)' policy are noteworthy. Also, some countries, like Colombia, Gambia, and Timor Leste, integrated peace-building reforms into other national policies and established institutional frameworks.

In addition to the policies, a straightforward institutional setup, usually driven through the policies or peace agreements, can be seen in many countries that work towards peacebuilding and reconciliation. Those include mainly Truth Revealing and Commissions (TRC). For example, aiming to foster national unity, Rwanda has a formal National Unity and Reconciliation Policy led by the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC), along with its policy 'Vision 2020' established in 1999 (Clark, 2010). South Africa, in 1995, established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which promotes restorative justice (Laplante, 2017). After ending its civil war, the Sierra Leone government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to create a national reconciliation framework by investigating human rights violations during the conflict, promoting accountability, and recommending reforms (Kelsall, 2005). Colombia has established a Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition, aiming to promote reconciliation through truth-telling, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition (Rettberg, 2020). Following the 1999 independence referendum from Indonesia, Timor-Leste 2001 established the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR) in 2001 as part of its national policy (CAVR Report, 2005). It is ending a decade-long civil war. Nepal's government has also established two bodies—the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission on Investigation of Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP)—to implement national peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts (Subedi, 2017).

Within this global backdrop, Sri Lanka has some similar and distinctive features. Some respondents mentioned that Sri Lanka's national policy framework and institutional arrangements towards peace still exist at the infant level. Even after the ethnic war, Sri Lanka was often criticized for its unnecessary delay in formulating a national policy for ethnic reconciliation. The national policy on ethnic reconciliation was drafted only in 2012, and it was approved in parliament in 2018, only eight years after the ethnic war. In contrast, many other countries that have experienced conflicts have taken steps towards formulating a national policy on peace and reconciliation just after a war or sometimes even before (see the table below).

Table 01: Years of establishing Truth Commissions/ Policies in different countries after the war

Country	End of Conflict	Policy/Commission on established;	Policy/Commission name
South Africa	1994	1995	Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)
Sierra Leone	2002	2002	Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)
Colombia	2016	2016	Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition
Nepal	2006	2007	National Policy on Transitional Justice
Timor-Leste	1999	2001	Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR)
Gambia	2017	2017	Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC)
Sri Lanka	2009	2018	The National Policy on Ethnic Reconciliation

Source: Author complied (2024)

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However, it is acknowledged that the GoSL established the ‘Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)’ in 2010 and the Office of Missing Persons (OMP) in 2016. However, the LLRC was dissolved after 18 months of work after producing some recommendations. Currently, the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation is working under the purview of the Ministry of Justice. However, these institutions usually change, abolish, or merge when the ruling party changes; hence, the consistency of programs is often disturbed. The respondents during the discussions often highlighted the gap of not having a solid institutional setup towards peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. As one respondent noted,

‘These institutions can be abolished or merged at any time; when reshuffling the ministerial portfolios by a newly appointed government, it is important to have a fixed institutional set up for this task, taking this peacebuilding and ethnic reconciliation task under the national priority lists’ (A Respondent)’.

However, as explained above, many other countries have fixed and solid institutional setups for working with peace and reconciliation matters, particularly in the post-conflict context. The table below summarizes the identified deviations among the commonly practiced methods in other countries and the Sri Lankan context. However, this is developed based on the widely applied practices of other contexts, and the researcher always acknowledges possible exceptions.

Table 2: Common practices of peacebuilding and Reconciliation Journey: Sri Lanka vs other contexts

	Standard practices in other contexts	Sri Lankan context
Origin of the process	Usually by a ceasefire or peace agreement	After the war victory
Guiding documents	Ceasefire agreements/Peace agreements, Treaties, UN resolutions	Mainly the political manifestos of ruling parties *
Power Sharing among actors involved	Victims, Offenders, Government, Civil society, International Community, etc. Power sharing is context Depend: Symmetric or Asymmetric (largely Asymmetric)	Explicitly Asymmetric. Dominance of Central Government and Military
Policy Framework & Institutional Setup	Availability of National Policy on ethnic reconciliation Institutions are usually fixed for a certain period.	There is no policy until the end of conflict during the conflict. The policy was drafted in 2012 and approved in 2018. Fragile Institutional Setup. Change, abolish, or merge along with ruling party changes.

Source: Author Compiled (2024)

*The LLRC and Paranagama Commission's recommendations are acknowledged, though they were not thoughtfully implemented

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Sri Lanka's peacebuilding and ethnic reconciliation process stands out for its unique trajectory, particularly in the absence of a formal peace agreement between conflicting parties. Unlike many other post-conflict societies whose reconciliation processes have emerged through ceasefire or peace agreements, Sri Lanka's post-war efforts were primarily driven by the government's military victory in 2009. This has led to a national-led, top-down approach, where the government and military leaders maintained dominant control over the reconciliation framework. Key stakeholders, such as former combatants, civil society, and minority communities, were largely excluded from meaningful participation, resulting in an asymmetrical power dynamic throughout the process.

The institutional and policy frameworks guiding reconciliation have been inconsistent, marked by the delayed adoption of a national reconciliation policy in 2018, nearly a decade after the end of the war. The institutions created to address reconciliation, such as the LLRC and OMP, often lacked continuity and were vulnerable to political changes, further limiting their effectiveness. While Sri Lanka has undertaken various efforts, including resettlement, land reforms, and rehabilitation of former combatants, these initiatives have been criticized for failing to address the deep-rooted grievances of minority communities and the psychological trauma of war victims.

Moreover, the process has been heavily influenced by the political manifestos of ruling parties rather than guided by comprehensive international frameworks or sustained grassroots involvement. This political sensitivity and the lack of a fixed institutional setup

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can hinder reconciliation efforts' long-term success, which is yet to be analyzed. Despite these challenges, Sri Lanka's experience offers valuable lessons in the complexity of peacebuilding, highlighting the need for inclusive participation, balanced power relations, and a more stable institutional foundation to foster enduring peace and reconciliation.

Limitations and Further Research

All inherent limitations associated with qualitative studies are also present in this study. Since the study focuses on Sri Lanka's unique context, the findings may not readily generalize to other post-conflict countries with different historical, social, and political backgrounds. A limited sample size with only a few key informants may restrict the diversity of viewpoints. However, those viewpoints have been supported by literature in other contexts. The reconciliation processes in Sri Lanka span over a decade, and the study may rely on retrospective accounts from informants, which could be influenced by memory bias. The study faced difficulties accessing high-level political actors, such as military officials or top-level government representatives, who may have played crucial roles in shaping reconciliation policies. Without input from influential stakeholders, the study might present a one-sided or incomplete view of the decision-making processes and power dynamics within Sri Lanka's reconciliation efforts. These limitations highlight potential areas where future studies could improve methodological rigor, expand on diverse viewpoints, and address the evolving nature of Sri Lanka's reconciliation efforts. Further research can be conducted on related themes, keeping these limitations in mind. Studies could take various research approaches, such as conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of reconciliation policies, comprehensive cross-country studies covering a broader scope of peace and reconciliation policies, or exploratory studies to identify other dimensions, such as local perceptions of reconciliation at the grassroots level, given Sri Lanka's unique peace-building process.

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