

# “With That, Discipline Will Also Come to Them”

## The Politics of the Urban Poor in Postwar Colombo

by Harini Amarasuriya and Jonathan Spencer

After the end of the country’s 30-year civil war in 2009, the Sri Lankan armed forces continued to grow despite the complete absence of obvious military threats to the government. Under the guidance of the president’s brother, the Ministry of Defence has played a leading role in town planning through the Urban Development Authority (which formally became part of the ministry in 2010). Colombo has seen an aggressive program of improvement, which started with a “war” on alleged underworld figures, took in the eviction of hawkers from pedestrian spaces, and involved the clearance of “substandard” housing, especially in places such as Slave Island, a historically dense area near the city center. In this paper we try to capture the temporal properties of a particular moment in the history of the city when speculative capital and military force combined in an attempt to bypass the well-worn channels of urban politics. At the end of the paper we consider events of early 2015, when the incumbent president was defeated and urban development was immediately removed from the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence.

### Postwar 2009–2014: A Work in Progress

Imagine you wake up one morning and discover that now that the long war is over, the Ministry of Defence has taken over the city. Soldiers are clearing public areas of unsightly hawkers, constructing parks, and cleaning up weed-choked canals. For the first time in living memory, three-wheeler drivers are sullenly forced to charge the fare recorded on their journey meters. Pedestrians step into crossings on the busiest roads without the fear of sudden death. And poor people live in fear of the orange stickers that might indicate that their housing is scheduled for demolition.

While the Tamil-speaking areas of northern and eastern Sri Lanka stagnated economically during the 30 years of war, Colombo and its large suburban penumbra boomed. High-rise apartments, luxury hotels, and supermarkets spread out from the center of the city, amid the uneasy ebb and flow of checkpoints and road closures set up to contain the threat of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suicide bombers. It is whispered that Colombo’s top-end shopping center (Odel, opposite the Town Hall) is housed in a building that had been

used as a torture center by government forces during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP; People’s Liberation Front) insurgency of the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the truth of the story, it is hard to think of a more apt metaphor for Colombo’s relationship to the history of the war, an inconvenient history of torture effaced in a blitz of shopping.

Postwar Colombo is a work in progress, as is Postwar more generally. Aided by an ineffectual and directionless opposition, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has consolidated political control through a series of victories in national and local elections. “Reconstruction” is the word on everyone’s lips, and it is mostly taken very literally—building a new airport, a new harbor, new hotels and resorts. The most conspicuous signs of Postwar are the new roads being built across the island, introducing a change in the rhythm of travel as smooth, fast stretches alternate with slow, bumpy progress past the latest unfinished roadworks. But for all the signs of a government in total control, there is also a sense of constant improvisation in Postwar statecraft, a feeling that someone at the top is, for want of a better description, making it up as he goes along. Initiatives are announced (and sometimes forgotten) in a spirit of apparent whimsy. This is compounded by the fact that government is rarely singular and rarely coordinated. Ministries, of which there are many, operate as the personal fief of the ministers, although the choicest berths are

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1. The newest, and possibly glitziest, shopping complex in the city, the Arcade at Independence Square is said to occupy the site where the writer and activist Richard de Zoysa was murdered in 1990.

almost entirely reserved for members of the president's extended family. One of these is the Ministry of Defence, controlled by the president's brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa is formally a civil servant, the secretary to the ministry for which his brother the president is minister, but he has used his ministry as the base from which to launch a remarkable public career. As a former soldier engaged in high-profile public work, he is always keen to emphasize the fact that he is not a politician.<sup>2</sup> With no war to fight, his Ministry of Postwar has expanded its ambitions to include a broad range of activities, from helping the Ministry of Higher Education to provide "leadership" training for university students to urban planning and something called the "Colombo Green Growth Programme."

Alongside the improvisation is a pervasive sense of apprehension: hard-core Buddhist nationalists, having won the war, solemnly announce they are threatened as never before. Rumors fly from person to person: Muslims are stocking their mosques with weapons in order to prepare for jihad; toxins have been discovered in New Zealand milk powder; furtive men covered in oil—"grease devils"—are attacking unprotected women. The uncertainties of Postwar are the subject of this paper. We started on the trail of the urban poor, apparent victims of proposed resettlement, but found ourselves in the midst of a bigger, more inchoate phenomenon, an attempted reimagining of urban space, apparently inspired by Singapore and Los Angeles, and an experiment in new forms of governance that cut across the more established channels of urban politics.

In what follows, we first provide a little context on Colombo as a city and its place in the politics and political economy of Sri Lanka in the years of civil war. We then look more closely at one high-profile case of threatened redevelopment, the central area of the city known as Slave Island, where long-term residents face eviction and uncertainty. The Slave Island scheme is part of a larger project, the so-called beautification of the city, led by the Defence Secretary. Alongside the leisure facilities for the expanding middle class and the cleaned-up pavements, the city has also seen somewhat less beautiful new political phenomena in the form of attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned businesses. In our paper we seek to treat all these phenomena as potential components of a single process, a politics of postwar uncertainty, embodied for some in the person of the Defence Secretary himself. We contrast this emerging form of postwar politics with more established modes of

urban politics, frequently identified with the figure of Rana-singhe Premadasa, Colombo politician and former president, whose name is still evoked by civil servants and poor residents alike 20 years after his assassination.

The bulk of this paper was written in 2013 and early 2014, as we conducted and updated the fieldwork on which it is based. In what follows we employ a very particular voice, employing the present tense to convey the peculiar temporality of that moment in the history of Sri Lanka, but also allowing our skepticism about the government's authoritarian performative style to come across at points in the argument when we thought such skepticism appropriate. We return to the issue of voice, and the time of our writing, in the closing section, which brings the story forward to the early months of 2015.

## Colombo and the Political Economy of War

Colombo is by far the biggest city in Sri Lanka, and not surprisingly serves as both a hub for economic activity and a complex cultural signifier—of colonialism, of development and modernity, of class and privilege. Colombo is first and foremost a port city, a relation of Penang and Singapore, Mumbai and Cochin, in the family of Indian Ocean trade. It very conspicuously lacks overt ties with Buddhist nationalist historiography; it is not found in the list of sites visited by the Buddha on his legendary trips to the island, nor was it ever the seat of Buddhist kings. It was the center of Buddhist activism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but those activists often had to look beyond the city's boundaries—to Kelaniya and farther afield to Anuradhapura—to find a geographical focus for their new forms of public Buddhism (Nissan 1985; Walters 1996).

Colombo has grown in the years since independence, but it remains well short of anything like a stereotypical Asian megacity. The latest census figures give a population of 2.3 million for the larger Colombo District, which includes the surrounding suburbs, but only 318,000 for Colombo municipality itself.<sup>3</sup> Demographically, the heart of Colombo is multiethnic and multireligious, but it is surrounded by growing suburbs

2. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa served as an officer in the Sri Lankan army until his retirement in 1992, after which he moved to the United States and lived for a time in Los Angeles. He returned to Sri Lanka in 2005 when his brother Mahinda was elected President, and he was appointed Secretary to the Ministry of Defence immediately after the election. His appointment was followed by an immediate hardening of attitudes toward the LTTE (still officially observing a ceasefire with the government), and he was widely credited (not least by himself) with overseeing their eventual defeat in May 2009. As a public figure he has had an especially turbulent relationship with the media, publicly threatening his critics in the press on many occasions.

3. The overall population distribution by ethnicity is Sinhala 75%, Sri Lanka Tamil 11%, Muslim 9%. Most Sinhala are Buddhists, but with a minority of Christians; most Tamils are Hindu, but again with a minority of Christians; Muslims have been classified as an ethnic group (or "race" in colonial nomenclature) since the nineteenth century. While the larger Colombo District is 77% Sinhala, in line with the national average, Colombo municipality is only 25% Sinhala, with Muslims (40%) and Sri Lankan Tamils (31%) the biggest ethnic component of the population. In contrast, some of the suburbs which have grown since the 1970s are much more ethnically homogeneous; Maharagama is 96% Sinhala, Homagama is 98% Sinhala, Kesbewa is 97% Sinhala. The same is true for religious affiliation: Buddhists are less than 20% of the population in Colombo municipality but over 90% in many of the suburban districts.

that are strikingly monoethnic and monoreligious. The heart of the city is Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist; some suburbs are overwhelmingly Buddhist. The expansion of the Colombo suburbs is a product of the social transformations that have followed economic liberalization in the late 1970s. These suburbs are the home of the new Sinhala middle class. They are also the areas of strongest support for the new forms of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that took shape in the final decade of the war. Despite considerable continuities with the style of Buddhist nationalism that came to prominence in the 1950s, the “new” nationalism of the later war years has rather different targets and concerns. Its main enemies are not the secessionist fighters of the LTTE but evangelical Christian groups, international NGOs, and more recently, Muslims. Rooted in the new middle class that has grown as a result of economic liberalization, the new nationalism displays an ambivalent relation to that same liberalization, which is often presented as a source of cultural and moral degeneration.<sup>4</sup>

Four other long-term political trends have shaped Colombo as we find it today. Its relatively small size is a result of a post-independence population movement in which the rural poor sought a better future in migration, but rather than migrate to the cities, they moved to less densely populated rural areas in the dry zone of the north and east (Kearney and Miller 1985; Moore 1985, 1990; Spencer 1990, 2003). Official planning for the first 40 years of the country’s history focused on a vision of rural rather than urban modernity and on the socioeconomic potential of these apparently “empty” areas of the island’s dry zone (cf. Gunaratna 2006). The areas where the migrants settled now have very high concentrations of rural poverty and not coincidentally became the main sources of security force recruitment as the police and army expanded in the last years of the war (Venugopal 2009; World Bank 2007). They are also the heartland of Mahinda Rajapaksa’s electoral support. Insofar as security force employment has come to provide a vital economic safety net in these areas, the government needs to find ever more uses for the young men and women who have been signed up. This is one obvious rationale for the army’s role in urban development. Colombo, in contrast, has been one of only two sites of significant electoral defeat for the government since Rajapaksa’s presidential victory in 2005, and this must make it especially attractive for a certain kind of social engineering.<sup>5</sup>

4. The ultranationalist party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya, which fielded Buddhist monks in its election campaign in 2004, won eight of its nine parliamentary seats in the area around Colombo. For more on the changing shape of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism after the 1990s, see Amarasuriya and Spencer (2012), Berkwitz (2008), Deegalle (2004), and DeVotta and Stone (2008).

5. The other zone of dissidence is the Tamil-dominated Northern Province, where provincial council elections were won by the Tamil National Alliance in late 2013, and this, too, is an area of major military involvement in social and economic transformation.

## The Mews Street Incident

We start our story in 2010, when, after winning his second term in power, President Rajapaksa formally placed the Urban Development Authority (UDA) under the MOD.<sup>6</sup> The war between the military and the LTTE ended in May 2009, yet financial allocations for the MOD have grown ever higher since the end of the war (Ratnayake and de Mel 2012). A growing share of this has been used to implement Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s vision of urban development. Describing the Greater Colombo Development Project in 2011, the Defence Secretary said that Colombo’s potential needs to be unleashed. Thus, the Greater Colombo Development Project includes repairing the drainage system, rehabilitating lakes and urban wetlands, creating a new transport system and a new road network, building a new city on land reclaimed from the sea, and what is termed “rationalizing” land use and “freeing up” land for development. While the “rationalizing” of land use involves shifting key administrative units to the country’s capital complex at Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte, “freeing up” land for development also includes relocating “slum dwellers” in Colombo.<sup>7</sup> Colombo, like most other Asian cities, has its share of poor housing and low-income communities (UNDP 2012). Stereotypically, this segment of the population is usually blamed for most of the city’s crime and squalor; they also provide the brute force that helps politicians from all sides of the political spectrum subdue their opponents when required.

In a 2012 interview with *Business Today*, the Defence Secretary set out his vision for Colombo and specifically talked about the clearances in the area known as Slave Island.

We have started a programme to remove unauthorised constructions such as slums and relocate them into proper housing. We cannot allow these people to live under such low standards. . . . We must give them the opportunity to live well. With that, discipline will also come to them. It is not that they don’t like to live like that.

His interlocutor mentions potential unpopularity and receives this reply:

Yes, but we are not throwing people out of their homes. We always look after them but they must understand, this is for their benefit. We have to do such programmes for the advancement of the people and the country. . . . Unfortunately there are people who, without understanding or thinking of the country, its future and development, try to mislead. That is why they protest. It is very important for the public to understand what we are doing. We need to demolish unauthorised constructions and remove pavement hawkers if we are to move forward and develop their

6. Gazette extraordinary no. 1651/20, dated April 30, 2010. President Rajapaksa himself is the Minister of Defence.

7. *Sunday Times*, April 3, 2011.

lives and standards. We must move fast because we were lagging behind due to the war that lasted 30 years.<sup>8</sup>

A petition filed in the Supreme Court by several residents of Mews Street documents another side of the same story. Mews Street was one of the first sites of “relocation.” Mews Street is located in one of the oldest parts of Colombo, Slave Island. Slave Island’s name derives from colonial days, when, it is said, slaves from East Africa brought by the Portuguese and the Dutch were kept there (Gunaratna 2006). Interspersed between hotels and commercial spaces, on narrow lanes and alleys are residential streets. The residents in these areas are mainly Muslim, predominantly from the small Malay community, with some Tamils and Sinhalese. On May 4, 2010, Mews Street residents were visited by officers from the UDA and asked to attend a meeting the following day. About 20 residents who went to this meeting were informed that the UDA had received instructions from the MOD some months earlier to demolish the houses. The residents were asked to vacate their houses by May 8, as that was the date fixed for demolition. The UDA officers told them they would be provided with alternative housing, and the residents then requested that they be allowed to inspect these alternative houses.<sup>9</sup>

On May 6, several residents visited these alternative houses accompanied by an officer from the UDA. They found that most were temporary houses built with planks, with shared outdoor bathroom facilities, and some were already occupied. The residents said that they were not agreeable to these temporary accommodations.<sup>10</sup> Despite the residents’ refusal to vacate their homes, and with no assurance of acceptable, alternative housing, on May 8, according to newspaper reports and court documents, around 2,500 members of the police, riot police, army, air force, and UDA officers arrived at Mews Street and started demolishing the houses using backhoes and diggers. In total, 17 houses were demolished, home to 107 residents, of whom 24 were minors.<sup>11</sup> Residents tried to contact local politicians, some of whom arrived on the scene, but many of the more powerful and well connected conspicuously kept away. (Some are said to have prudently switched off their mobile phones as events unfolded [Thaheer 2014].) Protesting residents were forcibly removed by the armed forces and the police, who refused to record their complaints. On the same day, the army began constructing a wall, assimilating the land on which these houses were built to the adjacent MOD headquarters. A military school for children of the armed forces now stands on the land.

On May 11, the former residents of Mews Street, many of whom were living in makeshift tents opposite their demolished houses, were asked to attend another meeting at

the UDA. At this meeting, they were informed that they would be granted a rent of Rs8,000 per month for a period of 12 months to enable them to find alternative housing. The UDA promised to provide acceptable alternative housing within 12 months. The residents were also offered Rs5,000 per house as “transport cost” to move whatever belongings they had salvaged from their demolished homes to their new accommodations. They were also told that they would receive new apartments in the Mihindu Senpura housing scheme that was being constructed outside the city. However, in 2013 these apartments were given to supporters of a ruling-party politician and not to the residents of Mews Street as promised. A prominent opposition MP accused the government of attempting to change the demography of Colombo by shifting minority communities out of the city. He claimed that the Mews Street residents had now been told they would be given housing outside the Colombo Municipal Council limits.<sup>12</sup> The residents themselves are not unaware of the wider politics of these evictions and development plans. “We always voted for the UNP [United National Party], no? That is why they want to move us. But they are stupid. Do they think we will stop voting for the UNP because they move us from here? Wherever we are, we will vote for the UNP.”

Residents of Java Place, Malay Street, Justice Akbar Mawatha, and Masjidul Jamiah Mawatha, all located in Slave Island, have since been told to vacate their homes to make way for redevelopment under the Slave Island Area Project. Residents said that they had attended several meetings organized by the UDA and had attempted to argue against these developments. One woman claimed that at a particular meeting, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa had threatened to throw them out by their necks if they made too much noise. The Indian-owned TATA Development Company has been given the contract to build apartments and “develop” the area. Some residents petitioned the Supreme Court in an attempt to get a stay order on the project. However, the court ruled that the evictions would go ahead, with residents being given a lump sum to cover alternative housing for 2 years. Residents have been told by the UDA that by that time an apartment complex would be built in the same area, to which they could eventually return. The controversial Chief Justice Mohan Pieris reportedly endorsed the ongoing development of the Colombo area and stated that improving housing and lifestyles of low-income communities would ensure that they refrain from crime and vice.<sup>13</sup> Since this latest court decision, some residents have started moving out. Others complained that they have yet to receive money, that those who filed cases are being deliberately targeted, and that their money is being

8. Interview with *Business Week*, reproduced on the Ministry of Defence website, [http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=business\\_todays\\_cover\\_story\\_tam\\_20120509\\_05](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=business_todays_cover_story_tam_20120509_05), October 5, 2012, accessed February 9, 2015.

9. Supreme Court Fundamental Rights Application no. 349/2010.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/on-the-plaint-of-evicted-muslims-at-slave-island/>, December 9, 2013, accessed February 9, 2015.

13. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/no-mercy-for-shanty-dwellers-challenging-uda-from-de-facto-cj/>, October 1, 2013, accessed February 9, 2015.

delayed. As one evicted man told us, “This is a vicious government—protesting against them is like stepping on a snake; they turn around and attack you—that is how this government behaves.”

“Officially,” these communities are gripped by poverty, crime, and deviance, but this is far from obvious to visitors to the area. Slave Island is a bewildering maze of narrow alleys lined with houses of varying sizes and designs. Most of the homes extend up two or three stories. Many are brightly painted with impressive facades. Some are surprisingly spacious when you enter, usually accommodating several families. Most houses also are sites of some kind of income-generation activity. One elderly couple, who share their home with the families of their son and daughter, cook thousands of “string hoppers” daily to supply nearby shops.<sup>14</sup> The grandchildren go to one of the ubiquitous English-medium “international schools” nearby. The son-in-law is a chef in a local restaurant, while the son is away working in the Middle East.

By late 2013, some residents had already started moving. They had received money and found homes to rent in other parts of Colombo. However, their children still attend schools in Slave Island, and many of the adults have jobs in the area as well. One man, watching a neighbor prepare to move, claimed that he had decided to stay on in his home till he died. He moved his family, he said, but he refused to leave the area. “I don’t need the money they [the government] are giving me. I have an income of 200–300 thousand a month. One of my daughters is in France. I have a good job in a bank. This is my home. I am not leaving.” He pointed to the funeral announcement of an old lady pasted on a nearby wall. “She died of heartbreak. Not even two weeks after she moved. She couldn’t stand the sorrow of having to move from her home.”

Promises made to residents offering alternative temporary accommodation, rent money, and the possibility of returning to new apartments often fail to take account of the complex household arrangements that exist in these communities. One woman who had leased her house for over 15 years claimed that she had received nothing while her tenants were given money to rent another house for 2 years and promised a new apartment in the future. “Because we are Muslims, these officials think we are uneducated and stupid. That we don’t understand anything.” One of the biggest complaints is that the new apartments are built for small nuclear families, whereas current living arrangements are far more complex. As families expand, they build on existing property, usually adding floors to existing houses. One family living in Java Lane, shifted to the woman’s *maha gedera* (natal home) close by in Church Street. They simply added another floor using the money they received from the government for rent. The *maha gedera* now holds the parents, two grown-up sons, a daughter, and their respective families. “If we are asked to move from this house, will we each be given an

apartment or rent allowance?” asked one of the women, “How can we all fit into one little apartment?”

## Plans and Politicians

Master plans for the development of the Colombo region have come and gone for decades, but none have ever been comprehensively implemented. At the same time, successive governments have created ever more ministries in order to ensure every ruling-party MP has a seat at the table, a berth, however small, on the gravy train of state resources. As a result, there is a bewildering range of departments, units, and divisions—each claiming some part of urban development and planning in Sri Lanka—not to mention a plethora of plans and documents. In addition to the UDA, which is currently under the MOD, there is also a National Housing Development Authority, the Urban Settlement Development Authority, and the National Physical Planning Department, all of which currently fall under the purview of the Ministry of Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities. The Colombo Municipal Council has its own planning, construction, engineering, and development divisions. The UDA looms large over all these institutions and seemingly has the authority to override any of their decisions, not least because of its vastly bigger command of capital and labor power.

International donor agencies and private developers have also entered the picture. The World Bank is one of the main sources of funding for the Metro Colombo Urban Development Project and the associated Green Growth Programme. The Japan International Cooperation Agency is supporting a township development project that includes a new road and transport system. Much of the property development is apparently taking place through private developers from China, India, and Pakistan. This dizzying mix of agents and agencies means that it is not easy to unravel who is responsible for which part of the development. This blurring of responsibilities has meant that agencies also struggle in a micropolitics of representation. On the whole, the UDA is keen to attach the imprimatur of the World Bank to its many signboards on improvement sites even as the bank itself is just as keen to maintain a distance from more controversial projects, such as the threatened evictions.

But in the eyes of the public, all the “development” and the “beautification” is linked with one person: Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Above all, the new Colombo is seen as his vision and as a product of his style of governance. He is presented as a person who can get things done. While his methods may disturb a few, the Colombo that is being envisaged is one with which the middle class is quite comfortable. Soon after the war ended in 2009, several “underworld” leaders were killed—allegedly in intergang skirmishes. Most of the victims were Muslim, prompting protests from that community.<sup>15</sup> There were reports of

14. A type of steamed noodle made with rice flour.

15. Charles Haviland, “S Lanka Muslim Protest at Police,” September 4, 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/8238454.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8238454.stm).

beggars disappearing. Perhaps the greatest furor was over the disappearance of Colombo's stray dogs.

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's disregard for political consequences also resonates with the attitude of the middle class to politics—that politics is about manipulating and appeasing constituencies for votes. Politics is viewed as dominated by short-term expediency rather than doing what is right. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's disregard, in particular, for the concerns of Muslim constituencies long regarded as controlling Colombo city also resonates with the newly resurgent form of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that has become more strident and anti-Muslim since the end of the war.

The other person whose mark on the city is still spoken of in reverential tones is the late President Ranasinghe Premadasa, whose own career started in Colombo urban politics and who retained a keen interest in urban housing up to his 1993 assassination by the LTTE. Often viewed as authoritarian and dictatorial, his period in office was one of Sri Lanka's most violent and turbulent times, yet after his death, Premadasa is evoked more for his programs in favor of the poor than his part in these other events. During the early years of liberalization in the late 1970s and the 1980s, UNP politicians like Premadasa created grandiose personal projects to fuel their political careers (Tennekoon 1988). Premadasa's projects included the Village Awakening Programme (Gam Udawa), the One Million Housing Scheme, and the Janasaviya Poverty Alleviation Programme (Brow 1996; Waniyaratne 1997). While the special focus of these projects was the rural poor, Premadasa also targeted the urban poor and the middle class. Low-income urban areas were "upgraded" with better access to basic amenities and regularization of title in many cases, and the middle class were provided with the opportunity to invest in state-led "housing schemes" that sprang up in the suburbs. The central area, which was Premadasa's own constituency, received special attention. Many of the *wattes* (shanty settlements) earmarked for development under the current regime contain beneficiaries of Premadasa's housing projects. Over the years, residents have built on and added to these homes, resulting in a complex legal situation where establishing ownership is rarely straightforward. However, people in these areas continue to refer to their homes as "Premadasa *mahattayage geval*" (Premadasa's houses).

Premadasa's legacy is still visible in Slave Island as well. On one of the streets in Slave Island is a little *kovil* (Tamil Hindu shrine). Curious about the presence of a *kovil* in a mainly Muslim area, we wandered up to it. A few people were seated on steel chairs placed in a circle outside. One man, bare chested and long haired, wearing earrings and a multitude of holy threads around his neck, stood up as we approached and asked what we wanted. He turned out to be the priest in charge. He also has another job as the manager and main musician of a *papara* band.<sup>16</sup> He reeled off the

names of all the elite Colombo boys schools who call on him to perform at cricket matches and "old boys" dances and events. The outside wall of his house is festooned with pictures and paper cuttings. On closer inspection, it appeared that one of the pictures was a framed collage made up of images of President Premadasa as a child with his parents. A framed certificate, signed by President Rajapaksa for performing at a National Youth Council event, hangs next to this. The priest said that he had collected newspaper articles and pictures of Premadasa all his life. He then went into his house and emerged with the deeds, which he had obtained during Premadasa's time, and showed them to us. "I have all the right papers to show that I own this property. I keep them with me so that they can't just throw me out."

Premadasa's program of upgrading low-amenity housing in urban areas has continued up to the present, albeit punctuated by rather different approaches to the urban poor (Wakely 2007). In a project that anticipated many of the new UDA schemes, a high-rise apartment building known as Sahasrapura was built on the outskirts of Colombo in the late 1990s, and shanty dwellers were cleared from prime central land and moved into the new building complex. The idea was that private investors would pay for the new housing by buying up the site of the old housing, but the promised new investment never arrived, and the scheme was not replicated at the time. But this project, although seen as a partial failure at the time, now serves as the model for the new proposed developments in Slave Island and elsewhere.

### The Antinomies of Beautification

Visitors to Colombo notice that there is a lot of construction work going on in the city. Whereas there was a certain randomness to past roadwork and disruption, this roadwork has a new uniform quality to it. Old pavements are dug up, and pale pink bricks are laid in all the newly constructed pavements. Roads have been widened, and a bewildering one-way system has been established, considerably inconveniencing users of public transport while possibly easing traffic for private vehicles. Old and not-so-old walls that surrounded government buildings have been pulled down, making spaces suddenly larger than before. Trees that had lined the streets for hundreds of years and had grown somewhat chaotically—proving hazardous for unwary walkers or causing sudden disruptions during thundershowers due to falling branches—have been chopped down or pruned. New trees are now being planted at regular intervals. Observant visitors would also note that those working on the construction and clearing and cleaning the spaces are not typical workers. Many of them are dressed alike, sport the same haircuts, and carry themselves with a certain precision; much of the reconstruction work in Colombo is being carried out by military personnel. This is

16. *Papara* bands consist of a group of musicians playing a range of brass instruments and drums. These bands are a popular sight at cricket

matches and even society weddings and dances. Their rhythmic and loud music is usually a signal for all to get on the dance floor.

also a new feature of Sri Lanka's Postwar, where the military has been gradually involving itself in assuredly nonmilitary activities ranging from farming to construction to the hospitality trade. When vegetable prices skyrocketed in Colombo, the military sold vegetables. In the Jaffna Peninsula, they have opened a luxury hotel.

Certain spaces have been completely transformed. Independence Square in Colombo 7 is marked by a rather majestic monument built to celebrate independence from the British. This area occasionally attracted attention during Independence Day, or when a visiting foreign dignitary arrived, but otherwise it was used mainly by Sri Lanka's elite athletes for training. A few of Colombo's residents also used to walk for exercise in the area. Under the UDA Metro Colombo Development Project, the area has been turned into a beautifully organized walking area. Paths have been laid out between neatly planted trees and carefully laid grass. The area is well lit, and police patrol discreetly. During early mornings, and in the evenings, the surrounding areas are filled with walkers who have driven there for their exercise. Men and women of all ages, sizes, and shapes can be seen walking briskly and purposefully along the paths. An occasional jogger may brush past the walkers. In the evening, children can be seen learning to ride bicycles along the paths.

The link to the military is never quite far in spaces like this, but nowhere is it perhaps as obvious as in the Nawala Urban Wetland. Nawala is an emerging Colombo suburb, midway between the city of Colombo and the new capital complex in Kotte. A long-neglected canal runs through Nawala, and at one end of the canal, a small expanse of empty land was used by construction workers for many years as a site to buy and sell cement and sand. In 2012, the construction workers were abruptly moved, and the area was cordoned off. The area has now been neatly landscaped with artificial ponds and waterfalls. Paths for walking have been laid, and the adjacent canal has been cleaned up. Admonitory signboards abound: food cannot be consumed in the park; dogs cannot be walked; visitors are enjoined to behave "decently." Weirdly, a military tank has been placed in one corner—children visiting the park can be seen clambering in and around the tank and posing for pictures by it.

But alongside this new vision of urban beauty, there have been darker developments. Mosques and churches have been attacked amid a rising sense of apprehension that the city may find itself engulfed in a repeat of the violence of July 1983. These fears have most recently surfaced as a result of the activities of a new group of militant monks and their supporters, called the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). The BBS emerged seemingly from nowhere as the proud occupants of a shiny new multi-story Buddhist Cultural Centre, built in 2012 on a prime site close to Colombo University and the army headquarters. In early 2013, BBS launched a campaign against the use of halal certification in food labeling in the supermarkets that have proliferated in the last decade. Within weeks, there were attacks on Muslim businesses amid wild rumors of jihadi groups

training in mosques and secret contraceptives being fed to unwitting Buddhist women who made the mistake of shopping at Muslim-owned stores. It was widely believed that BBS enjoyed the support of the Defence Secretary himself, a belief apparently vindicated when he made a speech at the opening of a new BBS training center in early 2013.

Colombo is not a traditionally Sinhala Buddhist space. The areas marked for "development" are spaces where Sinhalese are a minority and Muslims are the biggest ethnic group. This regime cemented its power by waging and winning a ruthless war against the LTTE. Its support comes from a Sinhala nationalist base. The fact that the same military forces that defeated the LTTE are now in charge of urban development invests the plan with a power that previous proposals lacked. As a shopkeeper in a shopping complex in a Colombo suburb marked for "development" who had been served with an eviction notice told Amarasuriya, "It is Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa who has told us to go." The emergence of BBS and its anti-Muslim campaign, its link to Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, and the renewed drive to relocate Colombo's mainly Muslim low-income residents suggests all too obvious connections between the current regime, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and its development project.

## The Work of Time

In a recent overview of change in Indian cities, Nandini Gooptu (2011) highlights processes that sound very close to those we have been mapping in Colombo: the clearing of the poor and repurposing of public space for bourgeois use. Gooptu's point is that similar processes have been at work in cities across the world in recent decades. What, she asks, is distinctive about the Indian experience? The answer would seem to be politics. The Indian version of liberalization has been accompanied by the so-called deepening of Indian democracy, with poor and low-caste groups engaging as never before in electoral politics. This in turn generates a range of contradictions and confrontations that give a specifically Indian cast to the politics of the urban poor.

What, then, of Colombo and the politics of the urban poor? What is specific to our story of dispossession and beautification? How does it differ from the Indian cases reviewed by Gooptu? The obvious answer would seem to be the military and the kind of "postpolitical" project represented by the UDA and the Defence Secretary. The regional comparison in this respect would seem to be Pakistan, where the army has been involved for a long time in urban real estate and, when it suited, urban planning (Siddiq 2007). The difference in the Sri Lankan case—and clearly there is scope for a much more careful and sustained comparison than can be attempted here—would not be the scale or the ambition of the military but the relative novelty of its engagement in these areas of life. One characteristic of the postwar order is its instability and unpredictability. This, we suggest, can be best understood in terms of two issues.

The first, as in India, is the distinctive form of urban politics (Das and Walton 2015). The second is time and the temporal quality of the postwar moment.

In a valuable survey of the housing of the poor based on work conducted immediately before the MOD takeover of the UDA, Wakely draws attention to two important points. The first is that whatever the complexities of tenurial circumstances, people in “under served settlements” in Colombo feel little imminent threat of eviction (Wakely 2007:2). That was 2007, and the situation now is obviously reversed. The second is the way in which areas of poor housing do not merely serve as political resources for local politicians; in many ways they are constituted through the medium of local politics. “Informal” settlements are characteristically established under the protection of powerful local figures, who might use their own people to establish a settlement and then use their connections to obtain connections to municipal services, before selling the houses on to others who need them (Wakely 2007:21). In this account, the familiar process of “quiet encroachment” (Bayat 2015) in Colombo is an inherently political process. And the higher-level politicians at its heart may include some of the most powerful (and notorious) figures in the government. In contrast, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s project to bring discipline to the poor is a project that seeks to escape the constraints of local political processes.

As in India, the poor are also voters. As one veteran Colombo politician put it to us, “This beautification only really benefits Colombo 3, 5, and 7 [the main districts of elite housing], but the people in those districts don’t have that many votes, and often they don’t even bother to vote. If you want to win an election, you need the support of Colombo 1 to 15.” Or, as a leading academic critic of the regime explained in an interview in 2011:

The majority of people who use Colombo are constituted by the floating population that comes in the morning and go out of Colombo in the evening. For these people a Colombo city administered by the Ministry of Defence, clean and attractive is something to be desired. It is not attractive to the poor people living within Colombo. For them Colombo is a place where they make a living.<sup>17</sup>

These comments followed the government’s comprehensive defeat in the local elections in Colombo. After this, there seemed to be a toning down of threats of eviction and little or no evidence of actual evictions taking place (until very recently). Despite widespread perceptions to the contrary, this suggests that the sheer weight of numbers of *watte*-dwellers—as translated into votes, could put some kind of brake on the ambitions of the MOD. But this slowing down of evictions and demolitions is not accompanied by any kind of public

recognition: this is the effect of a behind-the-scenes politics that leaves little visible trace and is clearly resistant to ethnographic observation. So, where Das and Walton (2015) delineate the way in which a certain kind of politics might emerge in the everyday life of the urban poor, the postwar moment in Colombo seems to be one in which such politics, if they are to be effective, have to become ever less visible (cf. Bear 2011:51).<sup>18</sup> The corollary of an invisible politics, of course, might be the steady growth of an equally invisible opposition.

If politics as usual might be seen as protecting the poor from the more radical visions of the postwar city, a great deal of the MOD pitch presents the Defence Secretary as a man not encumbered by humdrum political considerations. This is where time enters the picture: “We must move fast because we were lagging behind due to the war that lasted 30 years.” The implicit message in much of this public rhetoric involves an analogy with the victory over the LTTE: in the fight against the LTTE, talk of “political solutions” came and went, but it required decisive action by the military to get the job done. So, too, in the fight for a modern and beautiful Colombo.

The sense of a man in a hurry, of time accelerating, and of improvements that had long been mired in political and bureaucratic delay suddenly blossoming overnight brings to mind Ssorin-Chaikov’s exploration of the temporal dimensions of late Stalinism (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006). The obvious point of comparison is the constant sense of urgency, of the public need for things to be done immediately, to remind everyone that we really do live in revolutionary times. But there is more to the comparison than this. Ssorin-Chaikov’s central theme is what he calls “heterochrony,” the coexistence of multiple temporalities at work in a specific situation. In analyzing gifts to Stalin, he draws on Bourdieu’s (1991) remarks on the “work of time,” in which gifts require both time and the uncertainty that duration brings with it in order to do the work required of them in social relations. In the lives of the poor, the ties that bind them to the politically connected are the products of time passing relatively slowly, and what benefits they may accrue are the work of what Procupez (2015) calls “patience.” Premadasa’s program of steady upgrading of poor housing elevated the dynamic of everyday urban politics to a new level, and the endurance of his presence in the memory of the poor is testimony to the effectiveness of his political project. The decisive arrival of the bulldozers and breakers in Mews Street is the opposite, and the memory of that moment has destabilized whatever

18. Another difference from the Indian situation (cf. Randeria and Grunder 2011) is the extent to which the possibilities for legal intervention have narrowed as the regime has taken charge of the higher courts. In early 2013 the government successfully instituted an impeachment process to remove the chief justice of the Supreme Court after she failed to support crucial moves to push back earlier constitutional guarantees of devolution. The new chief justice has subsequently made his unwavering support for anything proposed by the government abundantly clear.

17. N. M. Devasiri, “CMC Defeat: Is It a Challenge to the Government,” interview with Lankadeepa, October 18, 2011, translated by Minna Thaheer, <http://www.infolanka.com/news/IL/dm124.htm> (accessed July 2, 2013).



sense of security has been built over the years by poor residents of the city.

There is also a future orientation in the UDA project, a vision of a city of clean, open spaces and endless consumption opportunities. But coeval with this vision is the haunting presence of an alternative future, one in which everything that matters—Buddhism, the Sinhala people—is under imminent threat of destruction.<sup>19</sup> This dark alternative, widely propagated in speeches and newspaper articles, is central to the appeal of the new Sinhala Buddhist nationalism of groups like BBS. There are still other futures at stake: the older planners we spoke to, although ostensibly oriented to their own visions of the future, seemed less bothered than might be expected by the apparent disengagement of their plans from any possible implementation even as they pointed out fragments of earlier, abandoned plans that had been picked up and instituted by the current UDA regime. The new layout of Independence Square, for example, had originally been proposed in an otherwise forgotten document from the early 1960s. Rather than a straightforward orientation to the future, those plans seemed to have a curiously allochronic relation to the other social processes we analyzed.

At one level, the “new” Colombo we explored in 2013 looked to be a city made beautiful for a particular constituency, the new, predominantly Sinhala, middle class of the expanding suburbs. “Discipline” and “progress,” among other things, were a useful alibi for the removal of the unsightly poor and the political nullification of the Muslims and Tamils who dominate numerically in the city center. But progress has its prices too. The capital behind the new hotels and malls in the city center is rarely locally controlled; the heritage that is being rediscovered and restored is usually inescapably colonial and therefore also foreign. A government keen to claim the Buddhist high ground for its projects is entirely open to the building of new casinos. One characteristic of the new “securitized” city, if that is what the MOD control of the UDA really is, is a growing sense of cultural insecurity, an insecurity informed by the different visions of the immediate future that circulate with increasing velocity.

### Coda 2015: The Autumn of the Patriarch

Two years have passed since we first explored Slave Island, and it is time to return to the temporality of the ethnographers. When we started the field research for this paper, we found ourselves entering a familiar narrative, a teleology in which the poor and the marginal would be dispossessed by a combination of authoritarian politics and speculative capital. But as we moved across the city, speaking to differ-

ently positioned people, we found remarkably little evidence of evictions or demolitions having taken place even as we found overwhelming evidence that almost everyone believed they would take place. That alerted us to the performative dimension of the UDA project, the capacity to enact a certain future simply by announcing it as inevitable. The ethical corollary for critical observers would be the cultivation of a certain ethnographic scepticism in the face of claims to inexorability. To some extent the ethnographic perspective, which can either hold firm to a very close inspection of a quite specific moment or enter and reenter what is claimed to be a process—and notice that nothing much seems to have changed—has a corrective potential in the face of claims to have already decided the properties of the urban future. Thus the voice we employed, which emphasizes the specific moment in which we made our observations and constructed our story, and with which we tried to resist the sense of inevitability so carefully cultivated by the regime.

For a time it was harder to cling to this counternarrative we had constructed, with its thin shards of hope. On our last visit to Slave Island, in December 2013, we discovered that some of what was feared was actually taking place. People had been ordered to leave their houses in Java Lane, and already there were empty houses awaiting the demolition crew. But even then, there was a kind of scaling back of the spectacle of arbitrary power: papers had been served, some sort of process had been followed through. Nevertheless, just weeks after we had submitted the first version of this paper for review in February 2014, we discovered that the Java Lane houses had been comprehensively demolished.

But the story has not stopped there. In late 2014, apparently guided by an incompetent astrologer and a sense that the opposition remained in terminal disarray, Mahinda Rajapaksa called a presidential election 2 years ahead of schedule. An unexpected candidate, one of Rajapaksa’s senior ministers, Maithripala Sirisena, was announced as the “common candidate” to stand on behalf of a remarkably diverse range of opposition groups. He was swiftly joined by a number of other powerful figures from Rajapaksa’s party. In a campaign tightly focused on ending the excesses of Rajapaksa’s rule, Sirisena emerged the winner by a slim margin in early January 2015. Although Rajapaksa won majorities in his rural Buddhist heartland, he was heavily outvoted in the Tamil-speaking areas of the north and east and in the urban areas. In Colombo Central, Sirisena won 81% of the vote; Rajapaksa was reduced to 18%. Within days of the new president’s appointment, a new, much reduced, cabinet was announced, with many responsibilities reallocated. The Urban Development Authority was removed from the Ministry of Defence and handed over to the new Minister of Urban Development, Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Seen in this light, the brief reign of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s UDA conjures up a rather different regional antecedent—Sanjay Gandhi, another man in a hurry, another unelected member of a powerful family, and another man with an authoritarian project of urban transformation

19. As we made the penultimate revisions to this paper, the leading government-owned English-language newspaper, the *Daily News*, ran an editorial headlined “The Ongoing Genocide against the Sinhalese,” January 22, 2014, <http://www.dailynews.lk/editorial/ongoing-genocide-against-sinhalese>, accessed February 9, 2015.

(Tarlo 2003). And just as Gandhi's project swiftly met its democratic nemesis, so too with Gotabhaya.

Still absorbing the implications of this radical change in political circumstance, we returned in January 2015 to Slave Island to see what had happened since Spencer's last visit in May 2013. Gazing at the flattened rubble that had been Java Lane, we noticed a poster advertising our friend's *papara* band. We asked a man lounging nearby if he knew what had happened to the priest-cum-bandleader. He was okay, we were told, but had left for a pilgrimage to India. And his shrine with its images of lost President Premadasa? All gone. He looked across at the rubble. "Mosques, temples, churches: they destroyed them all. But look what happened to them!" He brightened. "They will be cursed forever."

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### Correction

After this article was first published electronically on 20 VII 15, we discovered it was not the correct final version. We have replaced it with this correct version, which was posted electronically on 8 X 15.