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Militarized Development in Post-war Sri Lanka: Consolidating Control

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ABSTRACT

Development is an important, yet contentious word, in the history of post-colonial Sri Lanka. Typically, it is linked with economic progress and societal change, intricately woven into political processes and frequently utilized as a platform to promote Sinhala-Buddhist ethnonationalist agendas. This article looks at post-colonial Sri Lanka's 'core development project' — the Mahaweli Development Programme — and its post-war revival with the military as a key actor. Through a detailed ethnographic study, it traces the way in which the military assumed extraordinary powers and became vital to the post-colonial project of development and the militarized practices that enabled this. The author argues that this project of militarized development unfolds in a fourfold manner: by normalizing the presence of the military; by ensuring the military is seen as charitable; by blurring the boundaries between the military and civilians; and lastly by portraying the work carried out by the military as transformative. The article concludes by demonstrating that this militarized project of development is the latest iteration of the long-standing post-colonial project of Sinhala-Buddhist state expansion, enabled through development.

INTRODUCTION: THE 'MILITARY-MAHAWELI PARTNERSHIP'

At first glance, much about Weli Oya appears ordinary. The road to Weli Oya cuts through numerous paddy fields and temples. A large number of residents in the area are paddy, or rice, farmers, and agriculture remains the focal point of conversation. Temples, paddy fields and paddy cultivation villages represent a romanticized and idealized vision of the 'real' Sri Lanka — a vision that is reminiscent of a glorified pre-colonial past of an egalitarian and spiritually rich Buddhist community, with the peasant farmer being the defining figure of the post-colonial nation (Moore, 1985; Spencer, 1992). Weli Oya appears to be a picture-perfect vision of this ideal romanticized Sinhala village.

However, in 2014, to enter this 'ideal' Sinhala village of temples and paddy fields, I had to pass a large military camp. Two soldiers who manned

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the checkpoint stopped and checked my identification; an act that continues to date. Routine stops and checks by the military are normal as Weli Oya is home to three large military camps. The strategic location of Weli Oya is cited as the reason for this extensive military presence. Located between the northern and eastern provinces in the Dry Zone in the Mullaitivu District, Weli Oya — or Manal Aru as it was originally called until given a new Sinhalese name in 1988 — was a key site of contention due to its position on the front line during the protracted civil war (1983–2009) between the Sinhala government forces and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE). Although the war ended in 2009, the military presence remains. It is not unusual to see large numbers of soldiers in the village daily. In addition to operating checkpoints, soldiers in Weli Oya participate in construction work and run farms, restaurants and hair salons. 'We do not even realize they are army', explained Weerakoon, my tuk-tuk driver.[1]

But this is not all the military do in Weli Oya. Since 2013, military personnel have clandestinely transported and brought in landless Sinhalese from the south of the country, mainly Hambantota, which is the stronghold of the former ruling Rajapaksa family. 'We give these people transport, material to build a house, and make sure they do not leave', explained Sarath Fernando, a senior military official.[2] Fernando claimed that he was given direct permission to carry out all these activities by the former Prime Minister and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa (who was president from 2005 to 2015) and his brother, former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (who was president from 2019 to 2022). He confirmed this was all part of a long-term plan 'to make the Sinhala man the most present in all parts of the country'.[3] To achieve this, the military revived its partnership with the oldest and largest development project in post-colonial Sri Lanka — the Mahaweli Development Programme (MDP). Fernando explained the importance of the partnership and the intended plan with a simple statement: 'See, if I bring in 10 Sinhalese settlers to live here today, this means in five years, the number of Sinhalese will increase'. 'The *military-Mahaweli partnership*,' he insisted, 'is necessary for this. And we [the military] have the people and power to make it happen' (emphasis added).[4]

While this 'military-Mahaweli partnership' has long been in existence, albeit covertly, in post-colonial Sri Lanka (Gunaratne, 2009; Muggah, 2008), it intensified when the war ended. It was also an easy partnership to (re)establish, as the Sri Lankan military is ubiquitous. It is the 14th largest military organization in the world and remains one of the best funded globally, with 6.5 per cent of GDP allocated to the defence budget in 2024. 'For every 100 citizens, we have 1.5 soldiers', stated former State Minister

1. Interview, Weerakoon, tuk-tuk driver, Weli Oya, 15 March 2014.
2. Interview, Sarath Fernando, senior military official, Weli Oya, 3 April 2017.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

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of Finance, Eran Wickramaratne (*Tamil Guardian*, 2023). This partnership played a pivotal role in places like Weli Oya, where land was, and is, being given to Sinhalese under the MDP (Kelegama and Korf, 2023).

Officially launched in 1960, the MDP is the largest engineering project to be implemented in the country. Like the Gal Oya scheme in eastern Sri Lanka, the ambitious MDP is a large-scale irrigation project that diverts water from the Mahaweli Ganga (the longest river in the country) to the northeast dry zone to provide water for paddy cultivation for the thousands of Sinhalese settlers who were brought in from other areas of the country (Thangarajah, 2003: 17). In the last of the schemes established under the project in Manal Aru (Weli Oya), Sinhalese farmers were clandestinely resettled with the help of the military (Hoole, 2015; Muggah, 2008: 121; UTHR, 1993, 2001). It was this once-covert operation that the military resumed in 2013, under Fernando's watch and guidance. 'We are kick-starting this *development* project back to life', he asserted with pride (emphasis added), signalling this significant coming together of the military and the project of development.[5]

Development is a contentious term in post-colonial Sri Lanka, intertwined with economic progress, societal change and political processes (Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007; Thomas, 2021). It became the post-colonial state's singular focus with conscious efforts such as free healthcare and large-scale irrigation and resettlement schemes aimed at improvement. However, this vision became 'part of the problem' (Korf, 2006: 50), as development was infused with deep nationalist significance and not only assured the dissemination of a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist agenda but guaranteed its hegemonic hold (Tennekoon, 1988; Venugopal, 2018). It remains an obsession in post-war Sri Lanka, where the current accelerated but uneven development drive — which is specifically associated with economic stimulus and linked to the building of major highways, infrastructure and mega-development projects, at the expense of political solutions, truth or reconciliation — made the military a central actor (Amarasuriya and Spencer, 2015; Jazeel and Ruwanpura, 2009; Lingham, 2019; Ruwanpura et al., 2020; Venugopal, 2018; Wickramasinghe, 2009).

This article focuses on that central actor in the post-war project of development. Addressing the seminal argument put forward by Serena Tennekoon (1988: 297), who contends that development is a 'nationalist enterprise' that is sustained by a combination of modernization and tradition, built on the Sinhala-Buddhist triumvirate of 'the Tank, the Temple, and the Paddy Field', it demonstrates how the military became the newest actor, or the fourth pillar, in this project. To understand this militarized project of development, the article first looks at the military and the nature of militarization. With its inordinate assumption of power and brutality

5. Ibid.

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(Amarasuriya and Spencer, 2015; Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2014), its role in extrajudicial deaths and disappearances (Satkunanthan, 2023), its efforts to restrict the rights of minorities through surveillance and extra-legal means (Lingham and Johnston, 2024), and its responsibility regarding evictions (Abeyasekera et al., 2019; Nagaraj, 2016; Perera and Spencer, 2023), the military has been written about extensively in an attempt to understand the nature, and processes, of militarization in Sri Lanka (de Mel, 2007).

'But what is militarisation?' questions Kadirgamar (2013: 42), who asks if it is 'the consolidation of the power of the military as an entity?', or 'a process of increasing securitisation of state institutions and society'. This article understands militarization as the critical juncture when the military 'stop[s] wielding a rifle or donning a helmet' — or when the military stops providing security and protecting citizens — and takes over control of institutions, and society, and justifies this 'as not only valuable but also normal' (Enloe, 2000: 2–3). As Rossdale (2019: 67) writes, militarization is not simply about the military, but about the whole 'social system of values and practices which promote and underpin the use of military approaches to a vast range of situations'. More importantly, militarization is not perceived as a uniform and absolute exertion of authority; instead, it is conceptualized as an ongoing and dynamic process that undergoes constant negotiation and reaffirmation (Bernazzoli and Flint, 2009; Lutz, 2002). This evolving process of the military taking over institutions and society includes the provision of development. Security and development are often placed together, frequently referred to as 'two sides of a coin' (Beall et al., 2006: 52). Militarization is generally understood as the outcome of security threats and security measures, whereby 'regulated, legible, militarised territory' is produced (Woods, 2011: 747; see also Chettri and Eilenberg, 2021; Nyíri, 2012; Salamanca et al., 2012; Sidaway, 2007; Woods, 2019). This in turn generates instability that guarantees ongoing and further military interventions (Reid-Henry, 2011). This emphasizes the need for such a militarized project of development to be studied 'in the local forms that it assumes' (Jenson, 2010: 94).

The aim of this article is to discuss and demonstrate these 'local forms' — or the practices through which the military plays a key role in the project of development in Sri Lanka. The role of the military in development has been widely acknowledged and written about in relation to the construction of roads by the military, which has resulted in the displacement and resettlement of communities (e.g. Ruwanpura et al., 2020; Thiranagama, 2012); in the words of Venugopal (2018: 14), 'development was, alongside an expansive regime of militarised governance, used to demographically transform the north and east, and to monitor, control'. Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of empirical data or analysis as to *how* this partnership between the military and development works. Using empirical data gleaned from interviews with settlers, government and military officials, I show what happens when the civil war ends, and the takeover of tasks, institutions and society begins. I identify four stages through which this militarized

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development unfolds. The first step begins with the process of normalizing the military, and is labelled here 'Normal'. The second step ensures that the military is seen as charitable and extending a helping hand — I have labelled this step 'Helpful' — and is followed by the third step which is the attempt to blur the boundaries between the military and civilians — 'One of Us'. This process comes to an end with the fourth step, which is the military justifying all of the above by portraying the work they carry out as transformative, or 'Sacred'. These four stages converge to ensure that the military assumes extraordinary powers that allow it to function as the de-facto ruler, thereby demonstrating how militarized development is a critical and integral part of the latest endeavour to consolidate the post-colonial Sinhala-Buddhist nation-building project.

In so doing, this article departs from existing scholarship which addresses how the military, and processes of militarization, are felt and experienced by minorities, or the 'other'. It addresses the significant lack of analyses or empirical data on how all this is seen and understood by, and projects itself in relation to, the majority — the Sinhalese. Through a detailed ethnographic study of settlers of the 'military-Mahaweli partnership', this article demonstrates, for the first time, how the military emerged as the most important factor in the uneven and contested post-war development drive as *the* crucial actor in the latest attempt to 'consolidate a triumphalist Sinhala nationalist project' (Venugopal, 2018: 14), casting light on the technocratic expertise the military wields in order to monitor, control, dominate and assert power, and, finally, how all this is experienced and internalized. Through this analysis, the article contributes to the importance of recognizing the essential contribution of the military in advancing neoliberal agendas in the aftermath of war in Sri Lanka (Kadirgamar, 2013). More importantly, it makes significant contributions beyond Sri Lanka by revealing how militarized landscapes emerge from authoritarian regimes, and how securitized development goes beyond mere imposition and territorial control.

Methodology

This article builds on 13 months of archival and ethnographic fieldwork carried out mainly in Weli Oya and Colombo. These visits were spread across several field trips between 2013 and 2016, followed by selected interviews with key informants between 2018 and 2021 in Colombo. During this fieldwork, I conducted 15 interviews with settlers of the first generation, 22 interviews of the second generation, 30 interviews with government officials and military officers, and eight interviews with other key informants. I have used pseudonyms and stripped any personal identifiers of my informants and places, and used the generic name Weli Oya instead of specific village names. I have removed job titles but retained organizational affiliations. Most importantly, since this article relies largely

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on confidential interviews and unplanned conversations with the military, I take particular care not to refer to any army officer by name or regiment, other than a cursory indication of rank and authority. This ethnographic fieldwork was complemented by archival research in the Mahaweli Authority Library between 2014 and 2016.

WELI OYA: WHERE DEVELOPMENT MEETS MILITARIZATION

The Dry Zone — where Weli Oya is located — has long been conceptualized as a 'frontier', or a region just beyond the pale of the settled area, to explain the process of territorial expansion of state authority into these remote margins (Cons and Eilenberg, 2019; Klem and Kelegama, 2020; Korf and Raeymaekers, 2013; Thangarajah, 2003). It is based on the understanding of the frontier as a place that resembles the state of nature (Hobbes, 1651/1994), or a place which is wild, lawless and uncivilized, where civilization can only be brought in with state projects (Jessop, 2015). The initiative to expand the state into frontier regions predates the formal launch of the MDP in 1960. It can be traced back to the efforts of D.S. Senanayake, who, as the Minister of Lands and Agriculture in the State Council during British colonial rule (1931–46), initiated plans for this expansion. These plans were further developed and set into motion by his son, Dudley Senanayake, who successfully presented the master plan of the MDP to parliament during his tenure as Prime Minister (1960, 1965–70).

The 'state project' of bringing civilization into the frontier aimed to divert water resources, construct large hydro-power dams and cultivate the Dry Zone for rice production, covering almost 40 per cent of the country as shown in Figure 1 (below). These efforts culminated in the implementation of the MDP in 1969 as the 'core development project' of the post-colonial nation (Tennekoon, 1988). This high-modernist development project was the first, and most sustained, effort at development to be infused with a deep Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist significance, which was centred on the three distinct landmarks of the tank, temple and paddy field (ibid.). This symbolic triumvirate, combined with development, facilitated the mobilizing of the 'glorious' Sinhala nation returning to its resplendent past by re-capturing the ancient territory of the Sinhala civilization to create a more developed future (Brow, 1996; Farmer, 1957; Klem and Kelegama, 2020; Peebles, 1990; Tennekoon, 1988, Thangarajah, 2003; Uphoff, 1992; Woost, 1993, 1994). This image was further reinforced when the programme that had been described as 'the biggest [development] project in Asia' was relaunched when the United National Party (UNP) won a landslide victory in 1977 (*Daily Mirror*, 1970). Gamini Dissanayake, who was the first Minister and engineer of the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme (AMDP), invoked this idealized vision of the past and portrayed it as an aspirational model, by declaring: 'The soul of the new Mahaweli

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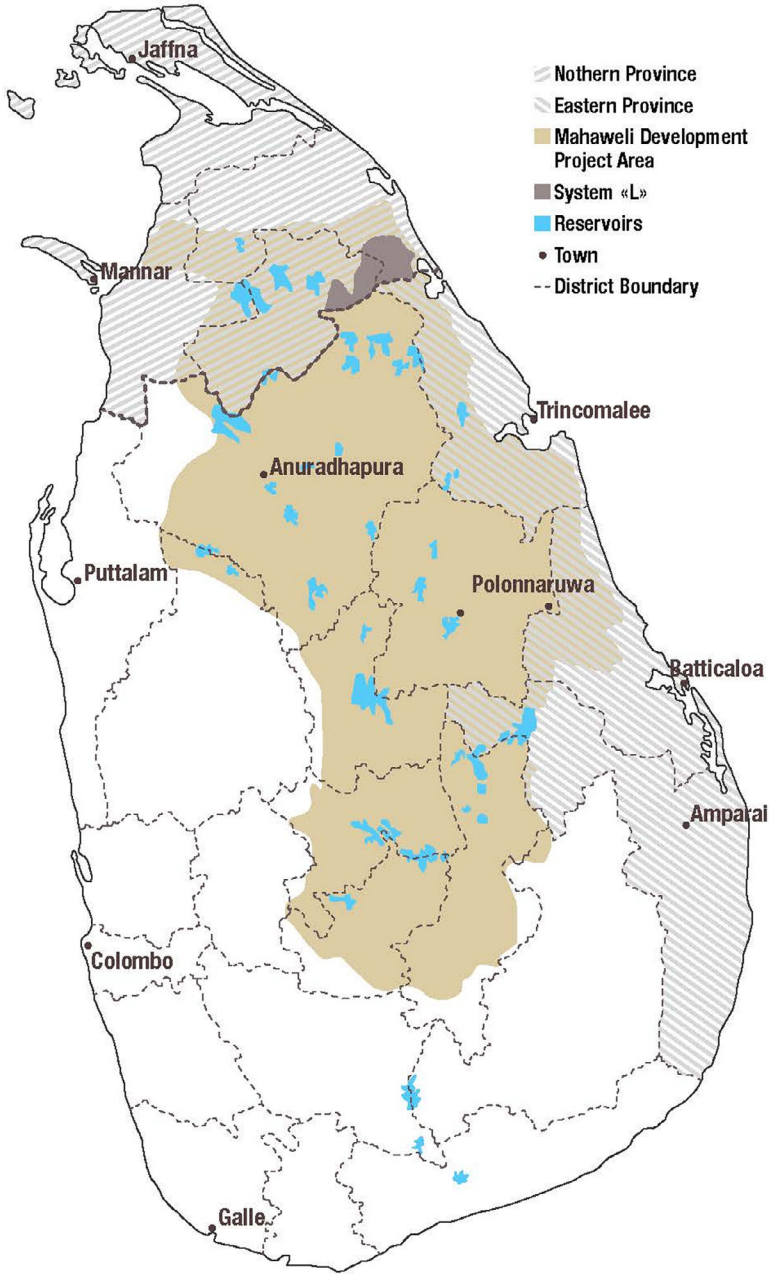
Figure 1. Map of Sri Lank



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society… will be the cherished values of the ancient society which was inspired and nourished by the Tank, the Temple and the Paddy field' (Tennekoon, 1988: 297). The idyllic village, with the peasant farmer, was placed at the core of the development project.

But the MDP, which was central to the Sinhala-Buddhist state, was also guided by other motives. The project acted as an instrument to displace, exclude and attack the 'other': ethnic and religious minorities. Tamils and Muslims, who feared they were being made minorities in their own territories, strongly opposed these schemes (Hasbullah and Geiser, 2019; Hasbullah et al., 2005; Manogaran, 1994; Muggah, 2008; Tambiah, 1986). As early as 1949, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, the founder of the Federal Party, expressed concerns that such plans posed a threat to Tamils, but his criticism was largely ignored. Many Sinhalese settlers were moved to the Dry Zone and to regions that were previously inhabited by minorities (Klem and Kelegama, 2020; Korf, 2006; Moore, 1985; Peebles, 1990; Tambiah, 1986). This aspect of the programme was acknowledged as a significant contributor to the escalating civil unrest in the country, with the LTTE declaring that one of its primary aims was to protect territory against state-sponsored colonization facilitated by the MDP (McGilvray, 2008; Thiranagama, 2011; UTHR, 1993). Of particular concern was the expansion of the programme into the northeast, or Weli Oya, the so-called 'System L' (Manogaran, 1994; Peebles, 1990; Thangarajah, 2003). Former senior bureaucrat of the Mahaweli Authority, Malinga H. Gunaratne, confirms this in his memoir, *For a Sovereign State: A True Story on Sri Lanka's Separatist War* (2009), when he writes that the settling of Sinhalese in System L was done in order to effectively eradicate and 'destroy the bases of Eelam' (ibid.: 35). System L facilitated the establishment of a loyal Sinhala population through a development programme in a thinly populated zone between Tamil-inhabited areas in the north and Tamil and Muslim-inhabited areas in the east, thereby creating a geographical barrier within the claimed Tamil homeland ('Tamil Eelam') as shown in Figure 2 (McGilvray, 2008). It is no surprise that this settlement sparked significant controversy. The initial settlement of Sinhalese had been carried out clandestinely; it had been organized by a Buddhist monk named Dimbulagala following attempts to settle 40,000 Sinhalese at Maduru Oya in the Batticaloa district failed, due to public pressure (Hoole, 2015; Kelegama and Korf, 2023; Muggah, 2008: 121; UTHR, 1993, 2001). By the time System L was officially launched as 'Weli Oya', it faced opposition from the LTTE, and became increasingly militarized. Settlers were armed to defend the territory, and strategically positioned around army camps as part of a counter-insurgency strategy (Kelegama and Korf, 2023; Muggah 2008: 126). This only came to an end when the project was abruptly paused as the civil war intensified.

For the Sinhala-Buddhist nation, the first stage of the Mahaweli project was a success, as it significantly altered the ethnic composition of the northern and eastern districts. Through the Mahaweli Authority, thousands of

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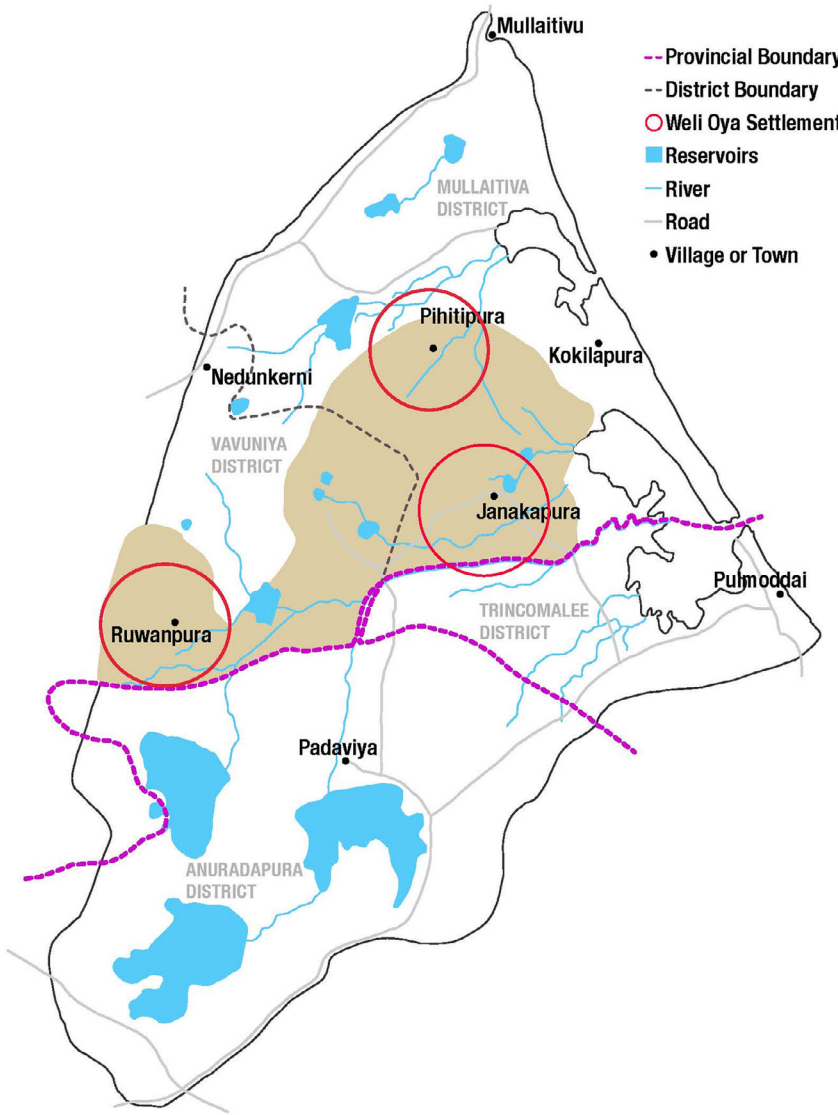
Figure 2. Map of System L



Source: author's design

Sinhalese settlers were relocated to sparsely populated areas in the northern and eastern dry zones, expanding the settlement frontier for agriculture (Gunaratne, 2009; Muggah, 2008). The state project's ambition to claim the frontier had been achieved. But legal authority was blurry and indecipherable. Most of the schemes created under the AMDP were situated

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deep within provinces inhabited by Tamils and Muslims, rendering them as minorities in their own territories. Reports by the organization University Teachers for Human Rights (Hoole, 2015; UTHR, 1993) documented that these development projects and settlement schemes only exacerbated the ethnic segmentation of districts and divisions. As a result, the ethnic composition and ratios of the north and east saw significant changes. The resettled farmers not only became 'frontiersmen' in the northern and eastern dry zone, but they also contributed to the increase of the Sinhalese population and Sinhala-Buddhist dominance in the region.

In 2012, the MDP got a new lease of life in Weli Oya under former Prime Minister (and then President) Mahinda Rajapaksa and his government. Three years after the brutal civil war ended, the challenge of rebuilding trust and reconciliation or addressing any minority grievance and past injustices was disregarded, with great efforts by successive governments to transform the country into a 'world-class' global hub. This vision included a series of Chinese-funded mega-development projects such as the Colombo Port City project, site of ongoing controversy; the Hambantota port which was leased to the Chinese state-owned China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited in 2017, as Sri Lanka struggled to repay its foreign creditors; the Hambantota airport, or 'the world's emptiest airport' (Shephard, 2016); as well as highways, cricket stadiums, and luxury resorts. Alongside these grand new projects, the oldest development project that was designed to transform the north and east — the resettlement scheme — was surreptitiously restarted. These projects, old and new, were connected to Mahinda Rajapaksa's vision of a single Sri Lanka with 'no minorities' (Jazeel and Ruwanpura, 2009), which ultimately served the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist project. This was a vision shared by the Yahapalanaya or 'good governance' Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition government that overthrew Mahinda in 2016, a vision that was more forcefully endorsed and enacted by the former technocratic President Gotabaya, and which continues to date under the present unelected President Ranil Wickremesinghe. The military became the most obvious ally to help realize this vision.

Post-war Sri Lanka provides a significant example of how the influence of the military persists long after the war's end by reaching beyond the confines of traditional warfare and defence against internal or external threats, and infiltrating into various aspects of social and political life (Enloe, 2000; Satkunanthan, 2022, 2023; Sjoberg and Via, 2010). Under the leadership of President Gotabaya (2019–22), the military's mandate expanded to include urban development, water management, land reclamation and construction. This shift also involved appointing retired military officers to key government positions at various levels. Like Fernando, quoted earlier, many military leaders assumed governance roles in the northern and eastern provinces; simultaneously, the military strengthened its presence there, ensuring that both provinces were de-facto territories occupied and controlled by the military (Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research and PEARL,

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2017; PEARL, 2022). The military mandate was further expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic with the military establishing quarantine centres, running 233 vaccination centres, and military services being used to detect, trace and isolate positive cases and infected people (Abeysekera et al., 2022).

The rational for expanding the military's role and remit into development activities was based on the argument that rapid demobilization posed risks, and strategically applying the military's skills and discipline to civilian activities was therefore justifiable (Harris, 2012). This involvement was portrayed as essential for maintaining order necessary for economic prosperity, leading to the military's control over development, reconstruction, land and resettlement decisions in the north and beyond (Kadirgamar, 2013). It was later claimed that *only* the 'disciplined, efficient, and uncorrupted military' can shoulder such responsibility, and facilitate reconstruction and development (Seoighe, 2017: 449; see also Satkunanthan, 2013). The same logic of efficiency, capability and unparalleled resourcefulness was used when justifying military involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic (Senevirathna, 2020). And indeed, it was the same logic that was used to re-initiate the 'military-Mahaweli partnership' which was further cemented with the appointment in 2020 of a retired military officer, Major General Sumedha Perera, as Secretary to the Ministry of Mahaweli, Agriculture, Irrigation, and Rural Development. In Fernando's words, 'the President [Mahinda] felt that we [the military] could make this programme successful again; we have the power and ability to do this. Walk around Weli Oya and you will see for yourself and understand how we *successfully* do this'.[6]

MILITARY PARTNERSHIPS: 'NORMAL'

In her examination of the process of militarization, Cynthia Enloe (2000: 3) claims it is important to consider that 'militarization does not just happen; it requires decisions, many decisions made by both civilians and people in uniform'. In post-war Sri Lanka, such decisions have ensured that 'militarisation is pervasive across the country in all kinds of seemingly non-military arena' (Thiranagama, 2022: 192). While successive post-war governments ensured that the military is at the centre of its economy as the most powerful and well-financed institution in the country, with unrivalled resources, manpower and authority to act as de-facto rulers, it also ensured that the military is slowly and surely embedded in institutional and ideological structures. This guaranteed, as Lutz (2002) highlights, that militarism will shape subjectivities in fundamental ways. Along with admiration for the military, this also instilled fear regarding real or feigned adversaries

6. Interview, Sarath Fernando, senior military official, Weli Oya, 3 April 2017.

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that exaggerate or diminish over time. Gradually, militarization became 'viscerally embedded in the average Sri Lankan's experience of daily life, where the ideology of militarism became part of the everyday and thereby has resulted in its naturalization' (de Mel, 2007: 242). In the militarized-development nexus, this naturalization took place at multiple levels and in complex ways. What was most crucial was for the military to be seen, and their presence to be felt, as 'normal', to be viewed as benevolent protectors who are in charge of making life better for civilians. In the northeast of the country, joining hands with the Mahaweli Authority was the first step.

When I first met with Fernando, I asked him why the military had started carrying out work that falls under the purview of the Mahaweli Authority. He replied that it was 'normal' for the military to get involved: 'After all, we [the army] have made sure that peace has come to this country and now that the war is over, it is our duty to help develop this country further'.[7] He went on to recount how he had negotiated the 'simple' tasks that the military wanted to take over. Very proudly, he claimed this was because the military are 'far more competent than the inefficient Mahaweli Authority'.[8] For Fernando, these actions, while being indeed simple, were crucial: they would enable the settlers to see the military as helpful. 'We do a hundred little things every single day and everyone in Weli Oya sees this. They see that we are important, that we are in charge. And most importantly I must say they realize very quickly that without us things would be very difficult', he said.[9]

Ruwan Herath, a junior military officer, explained how this partnership worked and what the 'simple tasks' were. The first step was to look after the newly arrived settlers from different parts of the country. This meant that the military took charge of the settlers upon arrival, showed them the plots of land that had been assigned to them by the Mahaweli Authority, and provided them with assistance to build temporary houses by giving them sheets of metal and tools, a lantern and a mosquito net. 'The Mahaweli were responsible for distributing food rations to the settlers for the first few months, but we decided that it was not enough so we distributed food parcels and water and this help meant a lot to them', Herath added.[10] While this was the official division of duties, it became routine for the military to be more actively involved in setting up the newly arrived settlers, while the more formal and administrative matters concerning land were left to the Mahaweli Authority.

These 'simple' acts of giving materials and tools to build houses and providing cooked food were later intensified. The military got involved in the transporting of the settlers from different parts of the country to Weli

7. Interview, Sarath Fernando, senior military official, Weli Oya, 25 October 2014.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview, Ruwan Herath, junior military official, Weli Oya, 10 February 2015.

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Oya. Wijedasa recalled his journey from Hambantota in April 2014, and described the moment he noticed that it was the military who was in charge of transport: 'Once the Mahaweli Authority had approved everything, we were told that the land was waiting for us in the north. All we had to do was arrive at the meeting point and when we came there, an army bus was waiting for us. The army brought us here, gave us food and helped us build this life'.[11] His wife, Rani, was full of praise for the military: 'They were the people who really *helped* us. Not only did they give us the bus to come here and brought us here, they even made sure we had enough food to eat and water when we came'.[12] These accounts were not unique. What kept being repeated by many settlers was how 'helpful' the military were. In reality, the military were not just helping the settlers on arrival but had become fundamental in the very act of arrival itself by providing the transport, thereby further entrenching the perception of helpfulness and benevolence in the minds of the settlers.

After transporting the settlers, and physically helping them by providing them with food and tools, the next — and fundamental — step was to encourage and convince the settlers to stay, rather than giving up and returning to their place of origin, as many wanted to when faced with the hard reality of life in Weli Oya. Prema felt that he would have returned to Matara, where he came from in 2015, if not for the constant encouragement he received from the military. 'The encouragement was not just with food and the tools, this was part of their job I am sure, but they helped build our spirits and our willpower and this helped us mentally to become stronger and stay on', he explained.[13] Vijay was of the same opinion. He spoke of the persistent support that had been extended to him by various military officers since he arrived in Weli Oya from his hometown of Hambantota:

> When I came here, I was desperate. I had no money or anything and I was almost about to tell the Mahaweli sir that I did not want to stay here anymore. But then when I told this to the army sir who comes to check on us, he was very supportive. He understood life was hard but told me that I need to not let hardship scare me. I should face it and make something out of myself.[14]

While Vijay's decision to stay had largely been influenced by the fact that he had no family to support, the credit given to the military was steadfast. Like Prema, he acknowledged that without the continued support and words of encouragement from the military in order to stay, he would have left as previously planned.[15]

The military, therefore, created and executed this image of being 'helpful' and 'benevolent', not only by carrying out the actual tasks that were

11. Interview, Wijedasa, settler, Weli Oya, 5 September 2015.
12. Interview, Rani, settler, Weli Oya, 5 September 2015.
13. Interview, Prema, settler, Weli Oya, 20 March 2015.
14. Interview, Vijay, settler, Weli Oya, 28 April 2015.
15. Ibid.

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allocated to them by the Mahaweli Authority but by coupling this with actively encouraging and motivating settlers to stay on in Weli Oya to make a life for themselves in the face of hardship. In turn, this motivation, support and encouragement that were extended by the military became part of the everyday life of the newly arrived settlers. For many, it was a 'natural progression': to move from actively helping with the physical aspect of settling in, to the emotional support and motivation that came afterwards. As Vijay succinctly explained: 'Without this, we all might have actually left'.[16]

MILITARY MANDATE: 'HELPFUL'

While it is established that militarization has a profound impact on the landscape, directing attention to it exposes the extensive spatial and temporal integration of military interests and objectives. This can shed light on a variety of activities, discourses and aspirations (Dowler, 2012; Enloe, 2000; Henry et al., 2009; Kuus, 2009; Lutz, 2002). While the post-war military occupation of the northeast went hand in hand with the military being seen as the obvious partners for the project of development, as well as being perceived as protectors of civil society, the mechanisms of control expanded and transformed the Dry Zone in complex ways. The rhetoric of being 'helpful' was used to enable and justify the work the military was doing in Weli Oya in relation to the MDP, thereby ensuring that its reach into everyday civilian life and encroachment into civilian space became much more widespread. To further intensify its control, the military resorted to surveillance and actively started to monitor the settlers on an everyday basis.

The importance of this act of surveillance was explained by junior military officer Herath. He claimed this was the only way in which the military could keep a record of who arrived in Weli Oya and where the settlers lived: 'The Mahaweli office of course maintains these records officially, but we were told that we should keep our own records as well'.[17] To maintain these records, junior officers were assigned to watch over certain sections. As a result, the military maintained a record of all settlers who came to Weli Oya, where they were allocated land, and all those who left. In a very deliberate and calculating manner, the military slowly took over those duties that typically would fall under the purview of the local Mahaweli Authority office.

The act of monitoring presence (and absence) of settlers was seen as 'helpful', and more importantly as 'crucial'. Wimal and his wife Mala felt that this constant checking up on their presence meant that nothing bad could happen in Weli Oya: 'We feel safe, and we know that no one will get up to any no-good activities. We are all fearful and respect these army

16. Ibid.
17. Interview, Herath, junior military officer, Weli Oya, 10 September 2014.

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sirs'.[18] This was an opinion shared by many settlers who felt that this constant vigilance made the area safer. Samanthi, and many others like her, did not question this monitoring that the military was carrying out. The fact that they were being watched over continuously was not seen as a constant check on their freedom: 'They look after us, it is like they are making sure we are safe here. We have young children, young girls and we all feel that we are being protected'.[19]

This perception of the military carrying out these constant checks and monitoring the settlers' presence and absence as being 'crucial' was the result of the conflation of surveillance with safety. It was not only seen as 'necessary' to limit general misbehaviour in the settlements, but it was seen as crucial since this was the northeast, where the conflict had been at its most intense. Many of the settlers who arrived in Weli Oya did not know exactly where they would be getting land from the Mahaweli Authority, other than in the north of the country which is 'where the war happened and the Tigers lived', referring to the shortened name for the LTTE used by many.[20] Soma, who had arrived in Weli Oya towards the end of 2015, explained why she thought the military checks were essential: 'we are still surrounded by these Tamils, and we all worry about what can happen. But with the army constantly being here and seeing if we are ok, we feel safe'.[21]

It is important to note that this aspect of militarization has a gendered dimension to it, which aligns with the perspective of militarization as a process of diffusion with distinctly gendered implications (Hyndman, 2004; Lutz, 2002). While Soma and many of the female respondents said that the military was necessary for protection, the male respondents did not always agree. Many felt that the 'gaze' of the military was imposing and curtailed their freedom. Ranjan, a young single male of 24 who had arrived in 2016, expressed his vehement dissatisfaction: 'If I wanted my every action to be watched over like this, I would have joined the army in the first place'.[22] His mention of the questioning he had faced and the subsequent threats of taking away his allocated land were echoed by many young single males. Most males recounted examples of forceful disagreements with the military when they wanted to go to a city in search of work and money.

However, not all male settlers shared this opinion. Most males who had families living in Weli Oya echoed the need for the surveillance that the military carried out and did not question it. Rather, they actively tried to help the military by carrying out tasks which were considered menial but necessary. Gunasinghe, who had arrived in 2013 with his wife Mali and son Ruwan from Matara, insisted on seeing some sort of identification to verify

18. Interview, Wimal and Mala, settlers, Weli Oya, 10 August 2014.
19. Interview, Samanthi, settler, Weli Oya, 3 March 2015.
20. Interview, Tissa, settler, Weli Oya, 6 October 2015.
21. Interview, Soma, settler, Weli Oya, 11 November 2015.
22. Interview, Ranjan, settler, Weli Oya, 2 February 2016.

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who I was. I had stopped at his house to speak with Mali, who I had met a few days previously. Within 10 minutes, Gunasinghe drove up in his tuk-tuk demanding to know who had given me permission to be in the area. Only after an intense discussion during which I had to show my national identity card proving I was Sri Lankan did he stop questioning me. When he realized I was Sinhalese (evident from my name), he visibly relaxed. 'The neighbour saw you talking to Mali and called me immediately', he explained, 'and I rushed back home'.[23] He informed me later that a 'local army commander' who was in charge of looking after the village had given him the task of monitoring all visits from outsiders and keeping a record of all *anawasarayen athulwena minissu* [intruders].[24] By not questioning the surveillance system enforced by the military and vigorously participating in it, Gunasinghe had become a proxy agent. By successfully enlisting many civilians into this network of proxy agents who 'work' for them, the military further cemented its presence.

This surveillance also produced a new set of rules that were put in place, irrespective of the Mahaweli Authority. The military not only watched over those who were living in the settlements but enforced a rule regarding absences. With the vigilant monitoring that was taking place regarding what each person was doing, a rule was established that any absence of more than seven days had to be reported to the officer in charge of the settlement. When Samanthi first told me of this, she voiced her fears by adding, 'we were told that we must report if we go away and I have also heard that if we don't report and the army sir finds out, our land will be taken away from us'.[25] Perera, a senior military officer, explained this rule was intended to discourage people from leaving at the first sign of any difficulty: 'life here is hard and if we don't watch over these people, the first thing they do is leave'.[26] He firmly believed that if every absence had to be reported, it would deter many people from leaving, and concluded by proclaiming how successful this rule had proved to be.[27]

A few months later, I asked another senior military officer, Raymond, why settlers could not temporarily leave Weli Oya if they wished to do so, attempting to hint at how this rule violates individual rights and liberties enjoyed by most free citizens. He vehemently insisted that absences were not tolerated because the real intention behind the military helping the MDP was to build new Sinhala villages in the northeast. He firmly believed that if people moved to Weli Oya to claim land, whilst making a living elsewhere with their families, this 'dream' could never be achieved: 'We established a rule that all settlers must register as voters in this DS [divisional secretariat]

23. Interview, Gunasinghe, settler, Weli Oya, 5 May 2015.
24. Ibid.
25. Interview, Samanthi, settler, Weli Oya, 31 March 2015.
26. Interview, Perera, senior military officer, Weli Oya, 10 April 2015.
27. Ibid.

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division. This way we make sure they do not have one foot here and vote elsewhere in the country' he said. Raymond concluded that this was 'the only way we can actually make this future a reality'.[28] With this vision being the foundation, the simple tasks that the military carried out as partners of the Mahaweli Authority can be seen as multi-layered, revealing the processes of control that were exerted. While military personnel were perceived as being 'helpful' protectors who looked out for the settlers, in reality these actions facilitated a more insidious form of control and Sinhala-Buddhist state expansion that are key features of post-war militarized development.

NEW MEANS OF CONTROL: 'ONE OF US'

'Control over space is a vital element of militarization', writes González (2019: 168), explaining how militarized geographies leave deep-rooted imprints on place, space and territory. A significant goal of the successive post-war governments in Sri Lanka has been to establish the military as a permanent occupying force. But, as Enloe (2000: 289) suggests, militarization is not limited to conspicuous locations; rather, it has the capacity to alter the significance of people, objects and locations well beyond explosive devices or military uniforms. Henry and Natanel (2016: 854) refer to this as the 'hidden transcripts' of violence through which military aims and values become embedded within the ordinary, so that everyday life acts as an important domain for militarization as a 'process of inscription'. These 'hidden transcripts' facilitated the third step of militarized development in Sri Lanka, where the ubiquity of military practices results in forms of control, occupation and colonization, and most importantly, blurs the distinction between civilian and military spaces — that is, when the military is seen as 'one of us'.

While this blurring process began in the northeast as soon as the war ended under Mahinda's rule, it was most pronounced under Gotabaya, and continues to date. New military bases were set up by seizing large amounts of public and private land while continuing to displace thousands of people (ICG, 2012a; PEARL, 2022). These irregular land acquisitions, which ran into several thousand acres, were justified by claiming that it was land that had been formerly occupied and used by the LTTE (ICG, 2012a: 22). While some of the land was used to build tourist resorts, most of it was claimed as archaeological reserves by the government (Maatram, 2023). This land takeover was linked to a complex security network which underpinned the military's ability to control the population through its embedded involvement in activities such as the MDP. This network involved the setting up of major base camps linked to a system of satellite camps (ICG, 2012b), and

28. Interview, Raymond, senior military officer, Weli Oya, 20 October 2015.

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included the covert building of military cantonments, or clusters of homes to house military families.

Cantonments look deceptively unassuming. They are small, efficiently built, and display no grandeur. But at the same time, these 'very small housing schemes', as they are referred to, covertly permitted the next stage of military encroachment into civilian life, and subsequent militarization. On 20 January 2016, I walked into a new village of 50 houses in Weli Oya. These houses had not been there during my previous stay, and they were not the wattle-and-daub houses I was used to seeing. A shop selling groceries stood at the entrance and there were two water wells for the sole use of the residents of the houses in the scheme. An innocuous sign marked the entrance to this village: *Ranavisipura* or army village. Built in less than a year, the houses were allocated to soldiers who were stationed in nearby army camps.

Renuka ran the shop at the entrance to Ranavisipura. Her husband, Nuwan, is stationed at the closest military camp. When I asked Nuwan and Renuka how they had come to live in Weli Oya, and how families like theirs had been chosen for this scheme, they revealed that priority had been given to families of soldiers who have been stationed in Weli Oya for over five years. A loan of 500,000 Sri Lankan rupees (approximately US$ 1,500) was provided through the Sirilak Saviya Foundation, which was headed by Shiranthi Rajapaksa, the wife of Mahinda Rajapaksa. 'The loan is deducted monthly from my salary', explained Nuwan who considered this to be a very good opportunity, as the cost of labour for the construction of the house was provided free of charge, with soldiers being assigned to carry out tasks. 'Even the cost of cement is greatly reduced, so I am only paying for the land', he added, claiming that if not for these subsidies, he would never have been able to own a house.[29] Renuka felt that life was a lot harder in Weli Oya, but she also admitted that this was the best option they had as a family:

> Even though it is far from any town and the schools are not very good, at least now we have our own house. And I must say the most important things is that the army looks after us. The house is being built. Water is pumped to our wells daily. There is always someone guarding our houses. Even though this is the North, I do not feel scared at all.[30]

While the presence of the military provided the military families with a sense of security, what was most important to Renuka and many others in Ranavisipura was the manner in which they were welcomed to Weli Oya. Malathi, who had moved into her house in the cantonment with her two-year-old son, did not feel like an outsider for long and claims she made friends easily: 'I was very scared when I first moved here as I did not know how the people in this area would react to us as army families'.[31] Renuka

29. Interview, Nuwan, military officer, Weli Oya, 20 January 2016.
30. Interview, Renuka, settler, Weli Oya, 20 January 2016.
31. Interview, Malathi, settler, Weli Oya, 20 January 2016.

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was quick to interject that this welcome was not simply from other newly settled families, but also from families who have been living in Weli Oya since the 1980s. 'The *akkas* [sisters] in the village next to us, you know the one further down the road, have said that they feel like we have been living here forever', she added, thereby demonstrating the excellent relations between the old settlers and the new.[32]

Ranavisipura had a dual function. By building the cantonment in the heart of Weli Oya, the military were not only further strengthening their control and presence in the area, but were making headway in a much harder, and more sinister, process. They were slowly and surely becoming a part of civilian life. While the soldiers and their families clearly had more privileges, the new settlers saw these families as being similar, and equal, in most ways. One senior officer, Eranga, who had made the choice to accept the loan and move his family to Ranavisipura, claimed that the decision to build a cantonment here had to do with helping the settlers in Weli Oya see the military not as imposing figures in uniforms but as civilians: 'Of course, the army still needs to be respected, but what matters most is that we are seen just like everyone else and by moving our families here and living among people who are also new to the area, people realize we aren't very different'.[33] For their part, the settlers felt that there was no difference between them and the military families.

This second function is directly connected to Fernando's earlier remarks that it was crucial for the 'Sinhala man to be the most present in all parts of the country'.[34] By building Ranavisipura, the government not only actively merged the lives of the military and civilians, but also contributed to the growing Sinhala population of Weli Oya: a long-standing, stated goal of the MDP. 'The direct result of the families of the soldiers relocating to Weli Oya resulted in the huge increase of the Sinhala voting population', noted a local government bureaucrat.[35] Therefore, in this post-war strategy of militarized development being used to control and expand the triumphalist Sinhala-Buddhist state, the military not only played an active role in making it happen, but played an even bigger, and more insidious, role by itself becoming an essential part of that expansion.

JUSTIFICATION: 'SACRED'

Studies of militarization have long demonstrated and underlined the dangers of an expanding economic footprint of the military, especially when it is typically redefined and legitimized by patriotic and nationalist narratives

32. Interview, Renuka, settler, Weli Oya, 20 January 2016.
33. Interview, Eranga, senior military officer, Weli Oya, 3 March 2016.
34. Interview, Sarath Fernando, senior military official, Weli Oya, 3 April 2017.
35. Interview, local government official, Weli Oya, 10 December 2021.

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(Siddiqa, 2017) and when it 'operates to shape places, spaces, environments, and landscapes' (Rech et al., 2015: 47). This includes myriad and varied efforts to transform soliders into heroes deserving of veneration, valorizing their sacrifices — all objectives inherent in militarized rhetoric (Gonzàlez et al., 2019). In post-war Sri Lanka, the military was defined, fashioned and its actions legitimized as essential for the Sinhala-Buddhist state. This redefinition portrayed the military as 'protectors' who contributed 'towards the upliftment of people' (Varatharajah, 2012: x), and transformed the 'normal' soldier into a presentation of unchallenged heroism (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2019). Central to this was the image of the largely Sinhalese-Buddhist military who had come forward to protect innocent civilians from the 'terrorists', by summoning their bravery, manliness and patriotism. After making these symbolic images and ideological claims central, the final step was to frame the partnership with the Mahaweli Authority, as well as all the activities carried out by the military, as 'transformative, uniting' and most importantly as 'sacred' (de Mel, 2007: 88), further ensuring that localized processes of militarization are rationalized, and that militarized development is firmly embedded in the public imagination.

I learned how this ideological process of legitimation was carried out and how the rhetoric was disseminated in the most unexpected of ways. In March 2015, I drove from Weli Oya towards Kandy and stopped at Ruwanweli Maha Seya, the largest Buddhist stupa[36] in Sri Lanka, and the Sri Maha Bodhi (a much-venerated tree, grown from a sapling, under which the Buddha attained enlightenment). Walking towards the Sri Maha Bodhi, I saw over 200 people, dressed in white and sitting in perfect rows. This was an unexpected sight as the temple grounds are always busy with people who do not usually adhere to lines or order. As I made my way towards the stupa, I ran into the senior military officer, Sarath Fernando. He greeted me enthusiastically and pointed at the rows of seated people, informing me that they were all soldiers from the military camps in Weli Oya: 'I organized a *pirith*[37] ceremony for all the soldiers who died in the war who were stationed in Weli Oya. We arranged for buses to bring the soldiers, their families, and even a large number of people from Weli Oya to take part today',[38] he explained proudly. As the ceremony was about to start, he quickly invited me to join him and his family.

The *pirith* ceremony, led by the chief monk of Ruwanweli Maha Seya, started with a sermon. The sermon began with effusive praise for Fernando and the military officials for arranging an event of this magnitude, which was to culminate the following day with a ceremony called the *kapruka*

36. A stupa is a Buddhist commemorative monument housing sacred relics associated with the Buddha.
37. *Pirith*, which is generally translated as 'protection', refers to chanting of the teachings or sermons, or *suttas*, of the Buddha.
38. Interview, Sarath Fernando, senior military official, Anuradhapura, 4 March 2015.

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pujawa, during which a Buddhist flag would be wrapped around the stupa. The ceremony, the monk claimed, would bring Fernando and the entire military great merit, which they would carry with them into their next life.[39] The monk continued the sermon with accolades comparing Mahinda Rajapaksa to the famous Sinhalese King Dutugemunu who built the very temple in which we were sitting. Dutugemunu, a folk-hero in the country, is renowned for defeating and overthrowing Elara, a Tamil king who had invaded his kingdom, and who built Ruwanweliseya. The comparison of Mahinda, and subsequently his brother Gotabaya, to this Sinhalese warrior king who united the country under a single rule, is very common in the country. It was first made on 19 May 2009 when Mahinda addressed parliament and claimed, 'we have liberated the whole country from LTTE terrorism' (Radhakrishnanin, 2011), and gathered momentum as it was spread by state propaganda and Buddhist clergy which continuously portrayed Mahinda as 'a hero-king' (Wickramasinghe, 2013).

Fernando, the monk proclaimed, was like one of the 10 giants who had helped the Sinhalese king to win the war. These giants are celebrated for their incredible strength, without which, folklore states, the Sinhalese king would have been defeated. Referring to what the military had done as 'defeating the LTTE', and what they were doing now as 'engaging in excellent development work by building houses for Sinhalese families and Buddhist temples in the North and the East', the monk drew parallels between the past and the present: 'Today the military, under the leadership of people like honourable Mr Fernando, is carrying out work that goes to show their great love for this country. This is what the kings of long ago did with the help of these noble giants: they defeated the invaders and restored the country to its *rightful* Buddhist heritage'.[40] Using this analogy, the monk's sermon drew to a close, concluding that the military was doing the same work as the giants who helped the kings of long ago, and declaring that it is only through such work and dedication 'that the country can be the proud Sinhala-Buddhist nation it was long ago and always should be'.[41]

This sermon, with its glorified depiction of the military as heroes, was broadcast through a loudspeaker throughout the premises of the Sri Maha Bodhi. It was not only intended for the military and the settlers who had arrived from Weli Oya for the ceremony, but for everyone present that day. The dissemination of this rhetoric was influential in depicting the military as patriotic, and necessary for the Sinhala-Buddhist nation. More importantly, it emphasized that the 'military-Mahaweli partnership', which included acts such as moving settlers to Weli Oya, ensuring they do not abandon their land, or building houses for families of the soldiers, was portrayed not only as 'sacred', but as indispensable to the post-war

39. Sermon, chief monk of Ruwanweli Maha Seya, Anuradhapura, 4 March 2015.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.

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Sinhala-Buddhist state. In the exact manner that the MDP was justified as a means of reinvigorating the glorious past of Sinhalese civilization, the military and militarized development, which included its partnership with the Mahaweli Authority, were justified as being necessary to reclaim the country as the Sinhala-Buddhist nation it was always intended to be.

'OUR WORK GOES ON'

Until Sri Lanka defaulted on its sovereign debt and declared bankruptcy in June 2022, it was in the midst of two post-war development drives. The first was an ambitious, flashy, large-scale mega development project driven by its ambitions to become a global financial hub. The second was a revival of post-colonial development objectives which made central projects such as the MDP that were implemented in the name of an exclusionary form of nationalism (Brow, 1996; Kelegama, 2023; Kelegama and Korf, 2023; Tennekoon, 1988; Woost, 1993). The first of these drives put modernization at its epicentre, while the second was premised on tradition. More importantly, both of these combined development ambitions were a 'nationalist enterprise' built and sustained by the Sinhala-Buddhist triumvirate of 'the tank, temple, and paddy field' and were deeply intertwined with the post-colonial ambition of consolidating Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony, whilst excluding the island's minority ethnic and religious communities. In this context, the military — or the fourth pillar, as this article argues — becomes the newest and latest addition in this political project of development, and a remote village like Weli Oya becomes a place of great significance.

As Appadurai (1996: 18) writes, it is critical to note that the local is never 'mere'. What goes on in Weli Oya must be understood in terms of what is happening in post-war Sri Lanka. While the incidents recorded in this article may appear unique, in many ways they are not. Rather, the dynamics coursing through post-war Sri Lanka materialized in Weli Oya in a unique way. Anti-minority sentiments and the violent rise of Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism found a way to coalesce. The notion of the unitary state, which found new significance in the post-war narrative, took on new meaning and was facilitated through the MDP with the military playing a central role. This article offers new insights into the way in which this project of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is newly enabled, and carried out, by the military. Its point of departure is the understanding that militarization is not simply about the military, but is about the processes of normalization and routinization. It considers the ways that the military encroach into civilian domains and how it is absorbed into everyday values and attachments in the process, and it demonstrates how the project of militarized development works. The article establishes that this partnership is not simply a case of the military carrying out and implementing development projects. Rather, it is a partnership in which the presence of the military is first normalized,

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then seen as helpful and benevolent; this is followed by a blurring of the boundaries between the military and civilians, and finally by the portrayal of the work carried out by the military as transformative and sacred. Taken together, it illustrates how such strategies serve to normalize, glorify and perpetuate military violence, intervention and domination, and the importance of the military in the post-war state of Sri Lanka. More broadly, it contributes to our understanding of the multifaceted nature of securitized development by demonstrating how this extends beyond the exercise and realms of authority and territorial dominance. It brings into focus the individuals who are subject to these processes and highlights the ways in which those individuals associate significance, and value, to their identities as subscribing members of *any* majoritarian state, or an ethnocracy.

While the bulk of empirical data in this article is from the period of Mahinda Rajapaksa's rule (2005–15) and Maithripala Sirisena's rule (2015–19), this vision of the unitary Sinhala-Buddhist state is a long-standing endeavour perpetuated and implemented by successive governments in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Life in Weli Oya remains the same. The dynamics of the Mahinda post-war state have merely been transferred from one government to another. While projects such as the MDP often experience interruption and disruption in their implementation, the larger project of development persists and continues to date. A senior official attached to the Mahaweli Authority explained this by claiming: 'President's come and go, but whatever happens, our work goes on'.[42] The active involvement of the military in this 'work' of 'making this country a Sinhala-Buddhist land' is the latest enactment. This new militarized project of development is based and substantiated on the notion of hegemonic nationalism, further entrenching the long-standing post-colonial goal of expanding the Sinhala-Buddhist state. However, the Sinhala-Buddhist state does not emerge naturally; rather it is engineered and built repeatedly, with the latest attempt relying heavily on the military. This article highlights one aspect of this unfinished, contentious and ongoing endeavour.

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42. Interview, government official, Colombo, 5 January 2022.

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