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## Ranil Wickremesinghe: The accidental Buddhist diplomat

Tabita Rosendal

On 11 May 2022, Ranil Wickremesinghe (born 1949) was appointed prime minister (PM) of Sri Lanka for the sixth time by the then president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa (born 1949). Wickremesinghe followed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Gotabaya's older brother, who had stepped down as PM after months of protests by the *Aragalaya* (lit. struggle) movement that had begun in March 2022. Shortly thereafter, Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled Sri Lanka for the Maldives and Singapore, while Wickremesinghe was first appointed interim president and then sworn in as president on 21 July 2022.<sup>1</sup> While most members of parliament supported Wickremesinghe's presidency since he was viewed as the only candidate with the necessary experience and skills to address the country's situation, his appointment created intense debates and condemnation among protesters, politicians and – perhaps most crucially – by the religious clergy in Sri Lanka.

Starting with his return as PM, the Sri Lankan public and the Buddhist and Christian clergy criticized Wickremesinghe's appointment since he was not a leader who had 'won the love and respect of the people', and it was speculated that the move had been instigated to serve the 'personal aspirations of the Rajapaksa family.'<sup>2</sup> At the time, Wickremesinghe had lost his seat in the Sri Lankan parliament, and the United National Party (UNP) – of which he was leader – had won no seats during the last election. For years, Wickremesinghe had been criticized for his role in cases such as the 2019 Easter Bombing attacks and the failed Millennium Challenge Corporation accord between Sri Lanka and the United States, but also for his pragmatic approach to the country's religious and ethnic situation. Many argued that his unpopularity would harm the country's internal political situation and external image. Worse still, the Buddhist clergy

feared that appointing Wickremesinghe could harm the privileged position of Buddhism.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Wickremesinghe has worked tirelessly to win over the influential *Maha Sangha*, that is, the most powerful monks in the country, such as the *Mahanayakas Theras* (Chief Prelates) of the Asgiriya and Malwatte chapters, since coming to power. Simultaneously, he has attempted a difficult balancing act by soliciting other religious leaders and ethnic groups other than the Sinhalese. But why are these acts of Buddhist diplomacy within and without Sri Lanka so crucial to Wickremesinghe's political legitimacy? To understand this, it is necessary to examine his Buddhist legacy in the context of Sri Lanka's religious and political situation.

Ranil Wickremesinghe was born on 24 March 1949 to an affluent and influential family. His father, Esmond Wickremesinghe, was a Christian lawyer and politician heavily involved in journalism as the editorial managing director of Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., and Wickremesinghe's paternal uncle, Lakshman Wickremesinghe, was bishop of Kurunegala under the Church of Sri Lanka. Wickremesinghe's mother, Nalini Wickremesinghe, was an ardent Buddhist who ensured that Wickremesinghe visited major temples, including the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya and the Gangaramaya at Hunupitiya, and received a disciplined Buddhist education besides his studies at the Royal College, Colombo. Wickremesinghe's maternal uncle, J. R. Jayewardene, was Sri Lanka's second President (1978–89). After completing his studies at the Faculty of Law and Politics at the University of Colombo, Wickremesinghe became active in politics in 1973 when J. R. Jayewardene began restructuring the UNP. Wickremesinghe was sworn into Parliament for the first time in 1977 after winning the Biyagama electorate and was appointed deputy minister of foreign affairs. Since then, he has held several ministerial positions for the UNP, including his six rounds as PM (1993–94; 2001–04; 2015–15; 2015–18; 2018–19; 12 May 2022–21 July 2022).

In his political career, Wickremesinghe has been sensitive to the importance of Buddhism. For instance, among his achievements as minister of education and youth affairs was establishing the Sri Lanka Buddhist and Pali University in Colombo in 1982. In 2005, he published his first book, *Politics and the Dhamma*, which presents his understanding of the Buddha's doctrine and the links between Buddhism and politics.<sup>3</sup> He is a *Dhayakaya* (lay patron) of the Gangaramaya, Walukaramaya and Weragodalla (Sedawatte) temples. He also served as the Chair of the *Dhayakasabha* of the Kelaniya Viharaya until 2019, when he was removed from the post by the *Dhayakasabha* led by Chief Incumbent

Venerable Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkitha Thera because he had not been 'doing enough' for the temple.<sup>4</sup> While the latter may seem like a minor and inconsequential mishap in the line of successful Buddhist achievements, it illustrates a more significant trend in Wickremesinghe's career, marked by careful balancing between Sinhalese Buddhism and considerations for other ethnicities and faiths. To understand why it has been imperative for Wickremesinghe to portray himself as a devout Buddhist, his strategic positioning should be viewed in light of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhist ethnonationalist project.

Around 71 per cent of the Sri Lankan population are Buddhists, mostly belonging to the ethnic Sinhalese majority. The country's remaining religious groups comprise 12 per cent Hindus, 9 per cent Christians and 8 per cent Muslim believers. However, despite the country's multiethnic and multireligious makeup, the Sri Lankan constitution privileges Buddhism and ensures that the state protects it, and tensions surrounding the reigning Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology persist.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the *Maha Sangha* and Buddhist clergy have played crucial roles in Sri Lankan politics. Historically, the sangha conferred legitimacy to the monarchy by participating in royally sponsored rites.<sup>6</sup> Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Sri Lanka has only been ruled by Buddhist presidents and PMs. The civil war between the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan government from 1983 to 2009, which was predominantly caused by ethnocentric policies rooted in linguistic nationalism, was underpinned by Buddhist hyper-nationalism.<sup>7</sup> The importance of Buddhism in Sri Lankan politics increased after the civil war, and hyper-nationalist sentiments were fed into 'discriminatory and targeted violence' against the country's minority social groups.<sup>8</sup> When President Maithripala Sirisena was elected in 2014, it was on the premise that Muslims presented a threat to Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, and the radically extremist *Bodu Bala Sena* Theravāda Buddhist monastic group continues to advocate for the importance of purging the Sri Lankan society of Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

This privileging of the Sinhalese Buddhists vis-à-vis other ethnic and religious groups is unlikely to change anytime soon: in a 2023 Pew Research Center report, 95 per cent of Sri Lankan Buddhists argue that being Buddhist is essential to being 'truly Sri Lankan' – 87 per cent say Buddhism is *very* important to being a true Sri Lankan.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, 'any Sinhalese politician supporting policies considered to weaken Buddhism might as well be committing political suicide',<sup>11</sup> and Buddhist monks wield significant influence in politics and society. Consequently, for Wickremesinghe to adhere to Buddhist precepts and be

viewed by the clergy and lay Buddhists as a 'true Buddhist' is crucial for his continued legitimacy. But what kind of 'Buddhist diplomat' is he?

Shortly after his presidential appointment, Wickremesinghe began cultivating ties with the Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka and pledged the 'fullest state support' to 'safeguard Theravāda Buddhism to pass it on to future generations and spread it globally'.<sup>12</sup> The reason for this manoeuvring is apparent: Wickremesinghe has fallen in and out of favour with the clergy throughout the decades, and now more than ever, he needs their support. During these years, in response to criticism and to ward off protests, Wickremesinghe has sworn to protect the privileged position of Buddhism in the Sri Lankan constitution. However, political rivals such as Mahinda Rajapaksa have taken a step further and sided with hardline Buddhist groups to garner support from Buddhist communities feeling threatened by the loss of Buddhist privilege. In November 2005, Wickremesinghe ran against Rajapaksa as the UNP's presidential candidate. Due to the United People's Freedom Alliance's characterization of Wickremesinghe as a 'leader who threatened the territorial integrity of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation', Rajapaksa won the election despite overwhelming support for Wickremesinghe from Tamils and Muslims.<sup>13</sup> In 2011, after a prolonged crisis in the UNP that saw support for the party dwindle, the *Mahanayaka Theras* signed a statement calling for Wickremesinghe to step down and make way for former co-deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya. Before the statement reached Wickremesinghe, Jayasuriya had visited the *Mahanayaka Theras* and asked for their blessings in contesting for leadership.<sup>14</sup> Wickremesinghe, conversely, has consistently underlined that Buddhism is of paramount importance while other religions and ethnicities must be protected as well, and that all Sri Lankans must 'build a Nation where we accept and respect the different religions and cultures'.<sup>15</sup>

While the Buddhist clergy has interfered in politics to Wickremesinghe's benefit, this is not necessarily due to his Buddhist diplomatic efforts. In 2018, the *Maha Sangha* came to his aid when President Sirisena ousted him as PM and attempted to install Mahinda Rajapaksa instead. Hundreds of monks gathered to bless Wickremesinghe before demanding that Parliament be reconvened and democracy be restored.<sup>16</sup> Wickremesinghe was reinstated in December, a few months before the deadly 2019 Easter Sunday Bombings that claimed 269 lives. Wickremesinghe has since contended that he knew nothing of the security risks to the country because he was deliberately 'kept out of the loop' due to his strained relationship with Sirisena.<sup>17</sup> Still, the bombings contributed significantly to the UNP's downfall and the party's presidential candidate, Sajith Premadasa, losing the 2019 elections, which were dominated by Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka

Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party. Afterward, Wickremesinghe called upon the UNP to examine ‘how it lost its Sinhala Buddhist voter base’ and how it could ‘forge ahead with Buddhist principles’. He expressed that as Buddhists, rather than pointing fingers, it was important to understand the ‘correct Buddhist principle’ so that the party could move forward – with the blessings of the *Maha Sangha*. Both the SLPP and UNP had campaigned on ‘staunchly Sinhala Buddhist platforms’, had vowed not to prosecute Sri Lankan troops accused of war crimes and had extensively paid deference to senior Buddhist clergy.<sup>18</sup>

When he became president, Wickremesinghe’s Buddhist diplomatic efforts became even more precarious. On 3 August 2022, in his first presidential speech addressing the Sri Lankan Parliament, Wickremesinghe again vowed to uphold Buddhism’s place and reaffirmed his support for the Buddhist nationalist structure. He also noted that despite suffering ‘political defeats’ due to his emphasis on creating a nation with equal rights for all citizens, he would ‘not deviate from that policy’.<sup>19</sup> Then, in November 2022, he angered the *Maha Sangha* when he told monks to ‘stick to their job’ rather than dabble in politics. Simultaneously, he began advocating the implementation of the much-discussed Thirteenth Amendment, which would devolve powers to the provincial governments, including those of the Tamils.<sup>20</sup>

However, despite these ‘balancing’ attempts between Sinhalese and Tamils, Wickremesinghe has not convinced the minorities of his commitment to ensure their rights. Many Tamils – and other members of the public – argued that his call to implement the Thirteenth Amendment was intended to secure Tamil support for his presidency. Likewise, while he recently engaged in discussions with Buddhists and Global Tamil Forum (GTF) members to debate Sri Lanka’s adaption of the Joint Himalayan Declaration advocating for a more pluralistic country, Tamil rights groups remained unimpressed. Many criticized Wickremesinghe’s move, arguing that the GTF represents only a minor part of the Tamil diaspora and that the declaration fails to consider steps to ensure Tamil rights or accountability for violence against the Tamil people.<sup>21</sup>

In this way, Wickremesinghe’s diplomatic efforts have enjoyed limited success. This is illustrated by editorials concerning his political career, with critics such as Mahinda Rajapaksa’s supporters noting that Wickremesinghe is a ‘hypocrite to pretend he is a Buddhist for political vote baiting’, questioning whether Sri Lanka ‘need[s] a Christian to organize a Buddhist Council’ and arguing that Wickremesinghe may be ‘paving the way to make Sri Lanka a pawn in the hands of America and India’. However, others contribute positive impressions to Wickremesinghe’s pragmatic approach, noting that unlike Mahinda Rajapaksa

and Maithripala Sirisena, Wickremesinghe ‘does not usually make a show of unfelt religious piety for hoodwinking the masses’, that he ‘uses religion in a more street-smart way’, is ‘no religious hypocrite’, and knows that ‘Buddhist voters, true to their faith, do not worry too much about whether he is a Buddhist or a non-Buddhist.’<sup>22</sup>

Notably, while this chapter has focused on the importance for Wickremesinghe to utilize Buddhism in strengthening his claim to power – including cultivating his relationships with the Buddhist clergy in his quest for legitimacy in the Sri Lankan political context – it is essential to emphasize that he is also relying on Buddhism in his external diplomatic efforts. Since coming to power, he has continued the country’s official foreign policy, focusing on non-alignment and enhancing Buddhist ties with the outside world. This approach, centring on the importance of being ‘friends with all, enemy of none’, has been likened to following the Buddha’s ‘Middle Path.’<sup>23</sup> To achieve this, Wickremesinghe has promoted Buddhist exchanges to bolster bilateral relations and solicit loans from China, India, Japan and other Buddhist-majority countries.<sup>24</sup>

For example, on 3 November 2023, India allocated a grant of US\$15 million to Sri Lanka to ‘bolster the long-standing Buddhist connections between the two nations’, marked by a signing ceremony at President Wickremesinghe’s house in Colombo. During the event, Wickremesinghe engaged in ‘lengthy bilateral discussions’ on ‘strengthening Buddhist linkages between India and Sri Lanka’ with Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.<sup>25</sup> Shortly thereafter, on 20 November, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Special Envoy and State Councillor, Shen Yiqin, visited Wickremesinghe and PM Dinesh Gunawardena to discuss ways to enhance Sino-Sri Lankan economic, trade, investment and cultural ties. On this occasion, Wickremesinghe expressed his gratitude for China’s support to Sri Lanka, highlighted the government’s desire to ‘augment cooperation between the two countries’ in different fields and emphasized that both Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City were ‘prepared for investment opportunities’. In return, China proposed to build the largest Buddha statue in Sri Lanka as a ‘lasting symbol of religious ties’ between the two countries.<sup>26</sup>

On the one hand, these instances underline the increasing rivalry between India and China in utilizing Buddhist diplomacy in countries with sizable Buddhist communities. Similarly, Shen Yiqin’s visit to Wickremesinghe marks the continuation of China’s Buddhist diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative, including the construction of Buddhist-themed infrastructure, of which the Colombo Lotus Tower fashioned after the *Lotus Sutra* is a prime example. On the other hand, while countries like India and China have distinct motivations for

engaging in Sri Lanka under the auspices of Buddhism, Sri Lankan politicians, including Wickremesinghe, remain active in soliciting these engagements.<sup>27</sup>

Still, following Buddha's Middle Path is not an easy feat. Similar to the domestic realm, Wickremesinghe must strike a delicate balance in Sri Lanka's external relations, particularly regarding the government's goal of establishing 'Kalyāṇamittata'<sup>28</sup> ties with other countries. That is, while the 'cover of Buddhism' serves as a way for Wickremesinghe to secure elite and public support internally and to portray Sri Lanka through a benevolent Buddhist lens externally, this strategy is complicated by interrelated issues related to democratic ideals and values, such as human rights and freedom of speech. One example of this conundrum is the importance of the exiled Tibetan monk, Tenzin Gyatso, that is, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, to the Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy. Several diplomatic crises have unfolded throughout the years due to the sensitivity of the Sri Lankan government in potentially allowing the Dalai Lama to visit the country.<sup>29</sup> Most recently, in December 2022, during a visit to India, a group of high-ranking Sri Lankan Buddhist monks implored the Dalai Lama to visit Sri Lanka to receive his wisdom and blessings to aid the recovery of the country's economic crisis.<sup>30</sup> However, the Chinese 'knee-jerk response' was swift and deliberate. The *chargé d'affaires* of the Chinese Embassy in Colombo, Hu Wei, hurried to Kandy to meet with the Mahanayake Thero of the Malwathu Chapter of the Siam Nikaya, one of the most powerful Buddhist sects in Sri Lanka, to warn him of the Dalai Lama's separatist nature. Hu Wei also made it clear that any 'sneaky visits' by the Dalai Lama to Sri Lanka should be prevented, lest Sino-Sri Lankan relations be 'damaged'.<sup>31</sup>

Consequently, one question deserves attention: what does Wickremesinghe's being a Buddhist politician entail for human rights? Like other Sri Lankan politicians, Wickremesinghe has often strayed from what could be termed 'Buddhist values' in pursuit of power. For one, Wickremesinghe has been tied to the Batalanda Detention Centre, which was used as an illicit torture facility under President Ranasinghe Premadasa during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna insurrection between 1987 and 1989, though the later Batalanda Commission instigated by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga in 1997 freed him from responsibility.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, he has been criticized for his heavy-handed crackdowns on protestors during and after the *Aragalaya* movement.<sup>33</sup> In January 2024, the *Mahanayaka Theras* called on Wickremesinghe to implement laws against groups 'spreading false ideologies about Buddhism'. Under the perceived 'threat to Buddhist philosophy and cultural values' in the country, the *Mahanayaka Theras* asked Wickremesinghe to formulate legal provisions combatting 'social disturbances within the Buddhist community', such as

through social media. This follows the 2023 arrest of female comedian Jayani Natasha Edirisooriya for ‘defaming Buddhism’. The arrest was promulgated under the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act, a government-mandated bid to quell political unrest and stifle freedom of speech under the auspices of ‘protecting religious harmony’.<sup>34</sup>

As this chapter has shown, the importance of Wickremesinghe following Buddhist principles to legitimize his rule and harness foreign support cannot be understated. His strategic engagement with Buddhism has been central to both his domestic and international positioning. As such, it seems fitting to end with an excerpt from his 2023 Vesak message:

At this juncture of the country’s unprecedented economic crisis, the timeless philosophy of the Buddha becomes a source of solace. Therefore, during these troubled times, it is imperative to rise above all differences and join together in unity and service as espoused by the Buddha, to overcome the dangers in pursuing a life of normality. [...] On this hallowed day, let us seize this instance of religious sanctity, and pay tribute to the Buddha’s sagacity, by uniting in solidarity to rebuild an affluent Sri Lanka. May the full moon today remove the darkness of ignorance from our lives, and guide us on the path of Sri Lanka’s renaissance.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, as the title suggests, ‘accidental’, when used as an adjective, can mean something happening by chance, unexpectedly or unintentionally. However, when used as a noun, it can refer to an incidental, nonessential or supplementary attribute. Wickremesinghe can thus be termed an ‘accidental Buddhist’ – not because he has stumbled into Buddhism, but because Buddhism, to him, is incidental. What matters to Wickremesinghe is ensuring his political legitimacy – and Buddhist diplomacy is the means to this end. Wickremesinghe – like other self-professed Sinhalese Buddhist politicians – retains a pragmatic approach to Buddhism out of necessity. Only he knows whether he is a ‘true believer’ or not. Time will tell whether his legacy will be one of Sinhalese-*cum*-Buddhist legitimacy, united solidarity – or the darkness of ignorance.

## Notes

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