“Let us not talk politics.”

Autonomous Politicians, Clientelist Structures
and ‘Civil Society’ in Southern Sri Lanka

LEHRFORSCHUNGSBERICHT

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Michael Roll
(Rollm@web.de)

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka
Co-Supervisor: Dr. Ruth Ayaß

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AGA</td>
<td>Assistant Government Agent (prior name for the Divisional Secretary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIABOC</td>
<td>Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.P.</td>
<td>Conversation Protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPA</td>
<td>Centre for Policy Alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DB</td>
<td>Decentralised Budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCC</td>
<td>District Coordination Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDC</td>
<td>District Development Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA</td>
<td>Government Agent (prior name for the District Secretary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSK</td>
<td>Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICES</td>
<td>International Centre for Ethnic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JVP</td>
<td>Janatha Vimukti Peramuna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Local Authorities (Established in 1987: Municipal Council, Urban Council and Pradeshiya Sabhas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSSP</td>
<td>Lanka Sama Samaja Party (originally the Trotskyist party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTTE</td>
<td>Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Municipal Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of (National) Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Nongovernmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>People’s Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>Provincial Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRA</td>
<td>Participatory Rapid Appraisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Pradeshiya Sabha (Local government authority at the division-level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDA</td>
<td>Southern Development Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLFP</td>
<td>Sri Lanka Freedom Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC</td>
<td>Urban Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCAP</td>
<td>United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNP</td>
<td>United National Party</td>
</tr>
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</table>
For you to just understand this system it will take another five to ten years.”

(Interview 19)

1 INTRODUCTION: SRI LANKAN PARADOXES

Sri Lanka is exceptional. Apart from all the different attractions the country has to offer to foreign visitors, some of its particularities should be of great interest to social scientists who are interested in politics in developing counties. One paradox of the post-colonial development of the country is particularly striking. In the 1950s and 60s Sri Lanka was regarded as a model country for successful development among the newly independent countries. It had reached a level of social development according to the respective indicators relating to education and health that was nearly up to the standards of industrialised countries. Equally impressive were the high degrees of political awareness and participation as measured by newspaper circulation and electoral turnouts. But in spite of these two characteristics which today are considered to be crucial factors for successful democratic development, the country became increasingly dominated by insurrections, political violence and civil war since the 1970s. The second paradox is that, in spite of the tradition of political awareness and participation, a strong ‘civil society’ like in many parts of the neighbouring country India1 does not seem to be existing today.

I argue in this paper that these apparent paradoxes can be understood by analysing the relations of state and society in Sri Lanka. The particular meaning and the practices of politics and their historical formation will be of paramount importance for this. With this paper I hope to contribute to the understanding of political processes in countries “between democracy and dictatorship” (Bendel et al. 2002). I think that qualitative-sociological and ethnographic approaches like the one used for this paper can contribute much to a more adequate understanding of processes of ‘political development’.

In chapter 2 I will make the reader familiar with the theoretical context I am positioning myself in with this paper. Starting with a discussion of social science theory of state-society relations in developing countries and making my own approach clear, I will continue with presenting relevant literature on this issue in the Sri Lankan context. I will proceed by outlining the political history of Sri Lanka since independence as far as it is of importance for understanding my paper. The methodological approach I used as well as methods and reflections on the process of data generation and analysis will be presented in chapter 3. Chapter 4 is the empirical part of my paper. I will describe and (re-)construct state-society relations based on the fieldwork I did in a town in Southern Sri Lanka. My focus is on the interaction of citizens, public servants and politicians. Topics like corruption, the power and

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1 For the special case of Kerala see Kurien (1996). For comparisons of India and Sri Lanka see Moore (1985) and more recently Mayer (2002a: 278-297).
autonomy of politicians, the risk of ‘talking politics’ and the position of a religious minority will be analysed. Based on my empirical results I will present my understanding of state-society relations and the practices and meanings of politics in Sri Lanka on a more theoretical level in chapter 5. Theoretical as well as practical conclusions will be drawn in the last chapter.

2 PUTTING THE PAPER INTO CONTEXT: THEORY, LITERATURE AND HISTORY

2.1 Theoretical framework: politics in context

Since the implosion of the communist systems from 1989 onwards, the issue of democratisation has experienced a dramatic revival. The ‘fourth wave’ of democratisation (von Beyme 1994) sparked a lot of hope that apart from the countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union a number of developing countries would become liberal democracies soon. By now these hopes have been confronted with reality and the outcome is at best ambivalent. Political scientists are confused about these developments as they do not have appropriate models and classifications at hand to conceptualise them. Out of this confusion a number of “democracies with adjectives” (Collier/Levitsky 1997) have been born. But these concepts only demonstrate the analytical helplessness of political science being confronted with phenomena that have not been anticipated in the respective theories. The surprise about the fact that systems did not either consolidate towards a liberal democracy or regress to some sort of authoritarian rule like modernisation theory would suggest is still clearly visible in these concepts. Some ‘radical’ thinkers proposed to think of some of these “grey area regimes” (Croissant 2002: 11) that are stuck somewhere in between democracy and dictatorship as consolidated ‘hybrid regimes’ in their own right (ibid.: 16). It is recognised in Transitology that especially with regard to this new field some of the traditional political science approaches are deficient (see Krennerich 2002: 67). As already mentioned I argue that qualitative sociological and ethnographic research and analysis have to contribute a lot to this field of ‘grey area’ politics. These approaches are very well equipped to analyse ‘informal politics’ being practiced openly or in the shadow of formal political institutions. Furthermore they are sensitive to the meanings that political institutions and practices do have for people in a specific context and can therefore help to understand better what is going on and why it is going on.

2 Examples are “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 1997), “defect democracy” (Merkel 1999) or “semi-democracy” (Diamond 1999; all quoted in Rüb 2002: 93).

3 Empirical studies in the political science are usually quantitative. They are based on highly aggregated data, focus on the national level and work with fixed concepts and terms to classify data.

4 For theoretical ideas and proposals on how to “rethink Third World politics”, see Manor (1991).
What has all this to do with Sri Lanka? I argue that the country provides a good example for analysing how informal politics can work not only in the shadow of formal institutions but by using them in a certain way. Sri Lanka has over the decades regressed from democratic standards it had achieved and therefore has been in political transition towards democracy and back for over fifty years now. Understanding some of the mechanisms and processes at work here might contribute to a better understanding of current processes of political transition in developing, transformation and other countries.

For outlining my approach I will draw on some of the few social scientists who have tried to develop an adequate understanding of the continuities and discontinuities of political development and democratisation by analysing state-society relations. One of the first attempts to do this in a systematic manner was Joel S. Migdal (1988) who in a more recent publication presents his “state-in-society approach” on a more general level (2001). Migdal as well as Gupta in an ethnography of the (Indian) state (1995) argue that the state should not be conceptualised as the monolithic and unitary entity it is often perceived to be, particularly so in ‘developed countries’. Rather, the state should be “conceptualized in terms far more decentralized and disaggregated than has been the case so far” to be able to take into account all the “multiple agencies, organizations, levels, agendas, and centers that resist straightforward analytical closure.” (Gupta 1995: 392).

The failure of most social scientists to approach the state in such a way is largely due to the predominant state elite- or capital-focus of most studies on the state in developing countries (Migdal 2001: 115). However, in the last years the number of studies undertaken at the sub-national level to study the ‘local state’ and state-society dynamics is increasing. In my study I will take on this perspective as well. Doing so does not imply that the results are valid ‘only’ for the very area where I have carried out my research. It is possible to extract typical and general patterns of the ways in which politics is being exercised and perceived in a particular country or region. Even capital city politics can be understood better and more adequately when these seemingly ‘peripheral’ modes of everyday-governance are applied to them (see Migdal 1988: xvii).

The overarching concept that stands behind the idea that it is possible to trace out certain country- or regionally specific patterns of politics is the ‘political trajectory’ (Bayart 1991).

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5 The term ‘local state’ as it is used here includes both, the local authorities and decentralised offices as well as the central state as it is perceived from the local perspective.
6 See for example Gupta (1995), Bierschenk/Olivier de Sardan (1999), Pfaff-Czarnecka (1999), Hanke (1999). It is important not to forget older but still important contributions that focused on state-society relations like Max Gluckman and other members of the Manchester School of Social Anthropology, Gerd Spittler (1981), Georg Elwert (1983), Franz von Benda-Beckmann (1993) or Alberto Arce/Norman Long (1993), to name only a few.
7 Of course this has to be done in a very careful and responsible manner by cross-checking the results by doing additional studies in other parts of the country, by consulting research literature covering other parts or by talking to people from other areas.
Arguing against the concept of the ‘Third World’ and the implicit theory of the radical extraneity of the modern state to African, Latin American and Asian countries, Bayart takes the concept of the historical trajectory from Perry Anderson to “insist upon the distinct historicity of the many ways in which states develop” (ibid.: 53). Challenging universalist labels as well as the unreflected transfer of terminology based on Western historical development, his concept of the political trajectory should “establish the foundations of an interpretative analysis of contemporary forms of power” (ibid.: 55). Explicitly rejecting culturalist interpretations (ibid.: 63) and encouraging comparative research by using this concept (ibid.: 54), he proposes to “identify several political categories which give form to politics in a given historical field” (ibid.: 64).

People are (politically) socialised within a political set-up that has developed historically, where institutions and practices have specific meanings for them. These practices and meanings can differ radically from one country or region to another. By operating with ‘Western’ terminology only it is most often not possible to understand the specific logics and rationalities that stand behind these differences. For theoretically connecting the concept of the ‘political trajectory’ with the idea of differing practices and meanings, I will use Luhmann’s concept of causality (1995). For Luhmann ‘causality’ can only be understood as the social construction of causality (ibid.: 7). He distinguishes between causality as medium and as form: “As medium, causality is the pure possibility of an attribution of effects to causes. As form, causality is the accomplished attribution that depends on situations but also on the habits of selection of the observer. One can, put differently, accept causality as a pattern of a possible world-description without being in agreement with the specific attribution of a particular observer in a particular situation.” (ibid.: 13; My translation, M.R.). By using this concept, specific ‘habits of attribution’ that people learn in the respective life-world they are socialised in, come into focus. The term ‘habit of attribution’ refers to internalised routines of people to attribute specific effects to specific causes in a way which usually makes practical sense in their respective everyday-context. In this paper I will use the concept with regard to the political sphere or the ‘political life-world’ of people.

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8 We could also talk about ‘political culture’ here but I prefer to avoid this ambivalent term in my paper.
9 Of course, the practices and meanings can also differ radically within a particular country or region according to other dimensions like gender, ethnicity, religion, milieu, etc. Which dimensions are seen as more relevant than others, depends on the research interest and is an empirical question in the end.
10 This temptation is difficult to resist as political institutions in most developing countries have been established and named according to Western models.
11 I am also responsible for all translations that follow unless indicated otherwise.
12 In his article Luhmann is concerned with the type of ‘person causality’ that according to him has developed in Southern Italy and with the strategies and chances to change this specific causality: “If a society is used to localise causality in personalised social networks and to expect successes or failures from the use of this specific form of causality it will be very difficult to change something about these constitutions if there are no equally handy forms of causality that can be provided as substitute.” (1995: 7). Giddens’ discussion of trust is interesting in this context. He distinguishes between generalised trust in abstract systems that is a necessity for everyday life in industrialised
I will now frame my understanding of politics and the terminology that I will use in this paper. In political science, politics is commonly conceptualised as having three dimensions: the institutional political form (polity), political contents and programmes (policy) and political processes of decision-making and the execution of power (politics). The focus of my paper will be predominantly on the last dimension. However, I will not apply this rather restrictive and predefined understanding of ‘politics’ but will instead try to find out what ‘politics’ is and what it means for people in Southern Sri Lanka. What are the tasks that politics and politicians are seen to be responsible for? On which level(s) are central government- and other politicians expected to work and what kind of work is expected from them? I will analyse these questions by using the term ‘meanings of politics’, referring to Luhmann’s concept of causality. I will also look at the ‘practices of politics’ that can only be understood in the context of the specific meanings of politics.

2.2 Literature survey on state-society relations in Sri Lanka

I do not intend to present the scientific literature on state-society relations in Sri Lanka and the arguments of the different authors in greater detail here. All I want to do is to introduce some contributions that will reappear later in the paper as I consider them to be important and in some cases supportive to my argument. The single most important author on these issues turned out to be Mick Moore with his seminal work on The state and peasant politics in Sri Lanka (1985) and some articles in which he draws on his study (1990, 1992). Moore tries to explain why Sri Lanka, in comparison with its neighbour India did not experience political activities and the representation of the interests of farmers in national politics. His conclusion concerning the importance of politics in the country is programmatic for my paper:

“Whatever else happens, politics seems likely to play as big a role in determining villagers’ life chances in the next few years as it has done in recent decades. Understanding the political angles will continue to be the key to analysis of most dimensions of economy, society and culture in rural Sri Lanka.” (1992: 39; My emphasis, M.R.).

A second author whose work is important in this context is Robert C. Oberst. Even if I consider his main assessment in Legislators and Representation in Sri Lanka. The
Decentralization of Development Planning (1985) to be problematic\textsuperscript{15}, some of his empirical findings are of great importance for my analysis. Oberst’s task is actually quite similar to mine as he examines the usefulness and the meaning of the concept of ‘representation’ in a ‘Third World democracy’. He quotes Heinz Eulau to show why this is important:

“… our colleagues in the field of comparative politics do not deal with it [the theory of representation; M.R.] in the familiar terms because they do not find our inherited formulations of representation particularly germane to the real-world problems with which the new nation builders must deal” (1978: 32; quoted in ibid.: 1).

Contrary to my research, Oberst conducted extensive interviews with Sri Lankan Members of Parliament. Although the research for his study has been carried out in the late 1970s already, the results are very helpful to get an idea of what the picture looks like ‘from the other side’.

Jonathan Spencer’s analysis (1990) adds on the dimension of politics as a source of trouble in Sri Lanka that will feature prominently in my analysis as well. Changing power structures and the increasing importance of party politics in the 1970s and 80s are the focus of Jayantha Perera’s (1985) as well as of Tamara Gunasekera’s study (1992). A very recent contribution to state-society relations at the local level, also taking into account minority-issues is Christine Bigdon (2003).

But still, in my assessment of scientific literature on state-society relations and politics in Sri Lanka I do agree with Moore’s statement from 1985 that “[t]his material is in certain respects disappointing and deficient” (203). The biases that Moore identifies are: (a) “a tendency to concentrate on ‘the politics of legislative institutions’\textsuperscript{16} and at the same time avoiding to discuss more comprehensive questions concerning the state in Sri Lanka explicitly (Moore 1990: 161) and (b) “a tendency to eschew theory in favour of description” (1985: 204). I would like to add that, as far as I am aware most studies apart from the ones listed above suffer from (c) a lack of analysis based on empirical fieldwork. Furthermore (d) much recent literature focuses strongly on the civil war and the conflict in the North-East, thereby neglecting general patterns of politics and state-society relations in Sri Lanka. I hope that I can contribute to re-balance some of these four biases and limitations with my paper.

\subsection{2.3 Historical background: politics in Sri Lanka since independence}

I will restrict myself in this paragraph to some very basic points about the historical development of Sri Lankan politics and state-society relations since independence (1948) and

\footnote{He argues that the specific way in which legislators perform their job in Sri Lanka, that is by ‘constituency service’ (personalised services to constituents) and ‘development work’ (use of government funds for development projects; Oberst takes these concepts from Eulau & Karps 1977; see Oberst 1985: 3) rather than by performing legislative and representative (‘law-making’) duties is the main reason why the country remained so stable over the years despite many internal problems. “The adaptability and resiliency of the Sri Lankan Parliament should be a source of pride for the Sri Lankan people.” (1985: 142).

\footnote{Moore takes this phrase from Roberts (1979: 11; quoted in Moore 1985: 204).}
will already focus on the South of Sri Lanka as this was the area where I carried out my research\(^7\).

Sri Lanka is “the pioneer in South Asian Democracy” (Panandiker 2000: 47), having been granted universal suffrage already in 1931, sixteen years before gaining independence. Since the 1940s the country “was widely conceived as a political and administrative model for its less developed neighbours” (Moore 1990: 160). This was due to the following factors. The political system proved to be stable with the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) together exhibiting a relatively clear left-right coherence and replacing each other at each of the five elections after 1956\(^8\). The electoral turnouts as an indicator for political participation, are among the highest in the world and are commonly interpreted as showing “the very high degree of political awareness of the Sri Lankan electorate”\(^9\) (Moore 1992: 30) An impressively strong and manifold landscape of newspapers also contributes to this impression (see Rösel 1997: 230). It is often argued that Sri Lanka possessed something like “a developed civil society” (Moore 1990: 161; Uyangoda 2001: 201-205) in the Western sense\(^{10}\) at that time. In continuity with the situation under colonial rule the public administration could work relatively insulated from political interferences (Ranugge 2000: 51) and was perceived to be honest and efficient.

Following various motivations, from voter-maximisation to Marxist ideologies, an extensive system of social welfare has been put into place, maintained and expanded over the years, irrespective of the party in power. This ‘welfarism’ (Spencer 1990: 217) raised the quality of life according to UNDP-measurements to a level never reached before by a developing country. The Human Development Index (HDI) rank of Sri Lanka in the Human Development Report 1997 was 91 out of 175 countries. As a result of the massive extension of the education system, Sri Lanka had reached a record literacy rate of 85 per cent already in the 1970s (Rösel 1997: 230). The data for 1994 indicate an adult literacy rate of 90,1 per cent (UNDP 1998: 5). Life expectancy has been raised up to 68 years already in 1982 (Rösel 1997: 230) and to the age of 72,2 years in 1994 (UNDP 1998: 5). As Moore puts it: “the level of administration and of social, educational and institutional development in Sri Lanka is so high

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\(^{18}\) UNP and SLFP are the only two parties in the Sri Lankan political landscape that were and are able to secure a majority for themselves, although most of the governments have been coalition-governments. But these have been dominated by either one of these two parties.

\(^{19}\) The electoral turnout reached a peak of 87 per cent in the national elections in 1977, the average in the 70s being 80 per cent (de Silva 1993: 27).

\(^{20}\) Moore applies the definition of Roberts (1987: 3) who sees civil society as a dense network of “self-sustaining voluntary associations articulating group interests which remain distinct from the general interest which is the business of the state to uphold” (quoted according to Moore 1990: 161).
that it is frequently described as a developed country which happens to be very poor” (1992: 30).

With the 1956 victory of the SLFP under S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and his “Sinhala only”-programme, Sri Lankan politics took a turn towards a Sinhala-Nationalist paradigm of governance. Especially Sri Lankan Tamils who had been strongly represented in the public sector have been increasingly excluded and denied access to these jobs. At the same time the state directly intervened into the economy by nationalising existing private enterprises and establishing new public sector enterprises. The public sector was expanded up to a scale hitherto unprecedented (Ranugge 2000: 52). In the administrative sector the long established Ceylon Civil Service was replaced by the Ceylon Administrative Service in 1963. According to Somasundram this was the point when the politicisation of the public administration in Sri Lanka really started (1997: 3-8; Ranugge 2000: 52-53). The victory of the newly formed coalition ‘United Front’ (UF) in 1970 was accompanied by a massive campaign of physical violence and intimidation directed at supporters of the defeated UNP (de Silva 1993: 43). In the following elections systematic attacks of violence occurred regularly. Under the SLFP-led UF coalition, political control over and the politicisation of the bureaucracy have been extended and even formalised to some degree (de Silva 1993: 94). This happened through the 1972 Republican Constitution which vested “all powers with regard to appointments, promotions and transfers of public servants (...) in the Cabinet of Ministers” (Ranugge 2000: 53). Although this authority was legally vested in the Cabinet of Ministers in 1972 it had been practiced informally already since the Ceylon Civil Service was abolished in 1963 (Ranugge 2000: 52-53). Starting in the late 1980s many reform commissions and units, domestic and international ones, have been established to work out plans for administrative reforms. Unfortunately many of these reforms have put emphasis on “the behavioural changes in the public service, to the virtual exclusion of structural changes” (ibid.: 54). Successfully established model institutions like the Sri Lankan Institute for Development Administration (SLIDA) have been systematically crushed by politicians (Somasundram 1997: 2-19). The UNP government that was elected to power in 2001 has promised to set up an independent commission for the public service – just as the PA did in 1994.

A second important change that took place with the 1972 Republican Constitution was the replacement of the ‘first-past-the-post’ election system with a list-based proportional representation system which should account for the adequate parliamentary representation of the various ethnic minorities living in the country. In the following years, the quality of the

21 “Sinhala only” included making Sinhala the only official language of the country that should be spoken anywhere and giving Buddhist religion and culture greater prominence in all fields of society as the foundation for a national identity.

22 This coalition was formed for the 1970 national elections by the SLFP, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP), Moscow Wing.
public service that used to be one of the pillars of the democratic system of Sri Lanka deteriorated with the increasing politicisation along the lines of party-membership. The political and administrative system became dominated by patronage politics. Even the measures undertaken under the label of ‘decentralisation’ led to a stronger central party control (Slater 1989: 78). The routines, mechanism and meanings of politics that have been created or transformed through these measures are the topic of this paper.

But before coming to my own analysis a last element of Sri Lankan politics has to be addressed. Apart from the civil war in the North-East between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the respective governments in Colombo from 1983 to 2002, two other major violent conflicts took place in the country in 1971 and from 1987 to 1989. Both have been staged by the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) and started in the south of the country. What was characteristic about the 1971 coup, which aimed at taking over the government in Colombo, and the JVP in general is that the cadres have been almost exclusively youths or young adults from poor, rural areas in the Southern region. Most of them have been ‘under-‘ or unemployed, yet educated up to the secondary or at least the primary level (Rösel 1997: 244-249). The JVP constitutes the only Sinhalese political movement of importance that was not formed by members of the anglicised Colombo-elite (Moore 1990: 176). The general features of the JVP members have still been the same in 1987 when the second violent insurrection took place (see Rösel 1997: 249-290). This insurrection which was extremely brutal was only crushed down by the government by employing equally brutal violence including torture and using the ‘services’ of paramilitary troops. “Conservative estimates suggest that at least 40,000 people were killed during the period of terror in the south and thousands of others have simply disappeared” (Perera 1998: 44) without their remaining having been examined or laid open to their families until the present day. Even if a Presidential Commission on Youth (1990) analysed the conditions which were likely to have prepared the ground for the youth insurrection quite comprehensively (see Mayer 2002a: 51-58) the structural changes that were advised have not been put into practice. The ‘anti-systemic’ or

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25 The unemployment rates of youth are highest in the southern region of Sri Lanka. The districts of Hambantota and Matara, which happen to be the two most important strongholds of the JVP have average youth unemployment rates of 72 and 65 per cent respectively (Lakshman 2002: 66).
26 For more details on this largely neglected and suppressed period between 1987 and 1989 in the South and their consequences until today see Perera (1998: 45-55). In her book, she compares the violence in the North-East and in the South and examines their effects on democratisation in Sri Lanka.
27 Among many others, some major causes identified were the incongruity between the level of education and employment for youth as well as the perceived everyday discrimination and politicisation with respect to access to public services or jobs along party lines (Mayer 2002a: 51-52). The recommendations included the de-politicisation of the society, the strengthening of democratic parliamentary structures as well as effective institutions at the local level and a general ‘devolution of power’ (ibid.: 53).
‘anti state’ attitude behind the insurrection of the JVP (ibid.: 57) has not been addressed by the government either. Instead, new social welfare programmes focussing on the rural population have been created (ibid.: 54) and development projects set up or channelled to the South28. The impact of the new hopes and visions created through these projects and plans without any serious attempt to address the conditions that led to the insurrection is at best ambivalent, at worst fuelling the frustration and anger of the population in the South (ibid.: 111). The way in which the government reacted to the violent conflict is a good example for what Uyangoda has suggested to call the “unreformability of the Sri Lankan post-colonial polity” (2000).

2.4 Excursus: The current political and administrative set-up of Sri Lanka

Some basic knowledge about the political and administrative set-up in Sri Lanka is necessary to understand my analysis. I will concentrate on the institutions and factors that are most relevant with regard to my study. An organisation chart of the set-up in Sri Lanka is attached as annex 329.

The political and administrative set-up of Sri Lanka has four levels: the national, provincial, district and divisional level30. Being a presidential system, the president has a particularly powerful position (see Perera 2000) at the national level. The ministers and deputy ministers are the second most important group of actors at the national level. The power they have depends very much on the respective ministry they are heading.

At the provincial level we find a Governor who is appointed by the president. The Governor appoints a Chief Minister and not more than four other (provincial) ministers. A Chief Secretary, also appointed by the president, heads the provincial administration. Apart from these actors in the province, (central) ministries for the development of the five ‘regions’ of Sri Lanka have been established recently (cf. Gierhake 2002). The Provincial Councils (PC) that are elected by the people at the provincial level are heavily dependant on the centre. They are controlled by the many key officials at the provincial level that are appointed by the centre. Furthermore they seriously lack funds and infrastructure for being able to do proper and independent work (see Waidyasekera 2000). Rather than constituting the decentralised body it was presented to be in 1987 it is more adequate to see it as “an accidental by-product of an

28 The case of the Southern Development Authority (SDA) is a particularly extreme example for illustrating the nature of the attempts of the central government to ‘develop’ the South (see Mayer 2002a: 103-111). The SDA was one of the first projects of the 1995 newly elected president Chandrika Bandaranaike-Kumaratunga. A friend of hers was assigned the post of the manager of the SDA that until 1997 had already consumed around 1 Million Euro (ibid.: 109) with everything having been produced at that time being technical studies and plans for a 1 Million-inhabitants-city to be called Ruhunapura that should be constructed from scratch, including an international harbour, an international airport, a six-lane motorway and the redirection of four large rivers to make the other projects possible.

29 For more detailed information, especially on the responsibilities and sources of revenue of the respective bodies, see UNESCAP (undated, a) and Leitan/Selvakumaran (2000).

30 For the provincial and district boarders, see the map attached as annex 4.
attempt to cope with the ethnic conflict” (Institute of Policy Studies 2001: 77) under the heavy pressure of India.

The district level that was supposed to lose significance due to the creation of a tri-level structure (national, provincial, community) is still important today as some committees are working at this level. The District Secretary\(^{31}\) is an officer appointed by the centre to head the District Secretariat\(^{32}\). Two of the most important committees working at the district level are the District Co-ordinating Committee (DCC) and the District Development Committee (DDC) (see Leitan/Selvakumaran 2000: 8). The DCC is held every month and is chaired by the Chief Minister of the Provincial Council responsible for the district and a senior Member of Parliament (MP) of the district. The chairmen of the respective local authorities, the district-PC representatives, the district MPs, the District Secretary as well as staff of line ministries or Provincial Council authorities based in the area are usually present. The function of the DCC is to review the government activities in the district as well as co-ordinating and planning them. Empirical evidence suggests that the latter point does usually not get the necessary attention. The DDC consists of the district MPs and the District Secretary. Its function is to allocate the Decentralised Budget by preparing the Decentralised Budget Plan\(^{33}\). The Decentralised Budget is an amount of money that each MP is provided with every year for spending on development purposes in his\(^{34}\) district, currently 3,5 Million Sri Lankan Rupees. Officially, the District Secretary is supposed to co-ordinate the allocation of the money to all areas within the district. But most MPs are not prepared to hand over this authority to them and decide themselves who gets money and who does not. There is no elected body at the district level.

The lowest level is the divisional level. The most important administrative institution at this level is the Divisional Secretariat under the Divisional Secretary\(^{35}\). Established in 1993, the “‘supermarket’ for the delivery of government services” (Jayasundara 1997: 265) is responsible for delivering most public services to the people and performs other tasks assigned to it by the central government and the Provincial Council. The Divisional Secretariat is also dependent on financial transfers from the central line ministries, allocated through the district, and is directly answerable to the Ministry of Home Affairs in Colombo. The administration-contact person for

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31 The prior name of the District Secretary, that most people are still using today is Government Agent or simply ‘GA’.
32 The District Secretariat comprises the few administrative bodies at the district level as well as some district branches of the central line ministries. The District Secretariat is known among the people under its former name which was Kachcheri.
33 The Decentralised Budget Plan is one of two development plans at the district level. The other one comprises the annual central government and Provincial Council funds to the district level.
34 The male form is used here purposefully, as by far the most MPs in Sri Lanka are male.
35 The prior name of the Divisional Secretary, that people are still using today is Assistant Government Agent or ‘AGA’.
the people below the divisional level, especially in rural areas is the Grama Niladhari\textsuperscript{36}. He works under the Divisional Secretary but has a separate office in the village or the town. The people can come to visit him there and he communicates with the respective offices for standard procedures. If the Divisional Secretariat is in need of any kind of specific information on land use, for example, the Grama Niladhari is also responsible for doing the ‘field visits.’ The division is a purely administrative unit. The areas that the local government institutions or local authorities (LAs) are responsible for do not strictly coincide with them but are quite similar in most cases. According to a somewhat arbitrary classification, three different kinds of local governance bodies can be found in Sri Lanka since 1987. These are the Pradeshiya Sabhas (258) for the ‘rural’ areas, the Urban Councils (37) and the Municipal Councils (14). The members of these councils as well as the chairman or mayor are elected by the people in the local government elections every four years. An important feature of these elections is the regulation that 40 per cent of the candidates on the nomination list should be between 18 and 35 years old to increase the chances of youth to become elected into the local governance bodies. However, there is no prescription or quota system in place to secure the adequate representation of women\textsuperscript{37}. The tasks assigned to the LAs are largely restricted to local service delivery. To fulfil the few responsibilities they have as far as development planning is concerned, they often lack the necessary resources. Apart from local sources of revenue the local authorities are also dependent on transfers from the centre. There is no co-ordinated distribution of labour at the division-level as it was originally planned, with the LAs being responsible for planning and the Divisional Secretariat for supporting them as well as for implementing these plans. Instead the LAs remain largely isolated from most other government processes and institutions.

3 SYSTEMATIC (RE-)CONSTRUCTIONS: METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH PROCESS AND REFLECTIONS

To be able to conceptualise the meanings and practices of politics in Sri Lanka I needed an elaborated methodological approach. Apart from that, to put the reader in a position to be able to decide if he or she wants to follow my argumentation, I have to make the processes of fieldwork, data generation and data analysis as transparent as it is (pragmatically) possible. Therefore I am outlining my methodological approach and will reflect on the research process in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{36} The colonial ‘village headman’ has been replaced by the Grama Sevaka (servant of the village) in 1963 and became a government officer at the same time. In 1990 the designation was changed to Grama Niladari (village official) (de Silva 1993: 89).

\textsuperscript{37} The representation of women in the local governance bodies is very low in Sri Lanka. With regard to Municipal and Urban Councils their proportion was only 2.3 and 1.4 per cent, respectively in 2000 (UNESCAP, undated, b: 16; see also Kiribamune 1999).
3.1 Why qualitative research?

A researchers decision to work quantitatively or qualitatively or to integrate both strategies should be based on considerations of which approach promises to be more adequate for answering the research questions. As I was interested in the everyday-perspectives and understandings of people regarding politics and ‘political development’ in Sri Lanka, a qualitative approach seemed to be more adequate. Approaches which try to measure political development quantitatively are interesting for comparing the ratings of different countries. But they usually cannot grasp the qualitatively different configurations of state and society, the mechanisms that have developed to reproduce or change these configurations and the understandings of the ‘configurating actors’ themselves. With qualitative social research it is possible to achieve that. In comparison to quantitative research which is aiming at drawing representative samples and base their numerical generalisations on them, qualitative research usually focuses on understanding social action and social structures hermeneutically from a phenomenological standpoint, therefore taking the meaning of people as the point from where to start. Although many practical questions may emerge, this way of doing research is from an epistemological standpoint not restricted to the social and cultural contexts one grew up in but can also be practiced in other contexts (see Cappai 2000) as ethnography has proven – albeit for a long time not reflected on – for more than a century now.

3.2 Methodologies of ‘empirical de-constructivism’

In my research I tried to combine three different research strategies. Of course I cannot discuss each research strategy here. Therefore I refer to the relevant literature and restrict myself to

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38 Lentz (1992) argues that the less familiar a researcher is with the field, the less sense does it make to use a quantitative approach. According to Eberle the methodological distinction between ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ is basically wrong. Instead he proposes to distinguish between ‘hermeneutic social science’ and ‘scientism’ (1999: 77-79).

39 See for example the ‘political rights index’ and the ‘civil rights index’ of Freedom House, a non profit organisation in the United States (e.g. http://www.worldaudit.org). On approaches to measure democracy and political development in general, see Schmidt (2000: 389-423).

40 This expression refers to Giddens’ concept of ‘structuration’ (1988).

41 By using the very distinction that Eberle (1999) has rightly uncovered to be wrong (see fn. 38), I refer to the social practices that are dominating in both traditions.

42 Instead of the principle of ‘representativity’ in quantitative research, qualitative methods aim for including the maximum of existing variations on a specific topic in a given field.

43 For a good overview on the characteristics of qualitative research see Flick (2002: 50). Two modes of research can be distinguished within qualitative sociology. The assumption of one of these is that order and sense are produced through the methods of interaction. Research in this tradition therefore analyses texts sequentially (e.g. Conversational Analysis or Objective Hermeneutic; see ibid.: 287-307). Researchers working in the other tradition focus more on the content of interaction. Coding and categorisation are their principal techniques of analysing texts (e.g. Grounded Theory; see ibid.: 257-286). My paper is based on the latter mode of research.

44 Amann/Hirschauer state that “ethnographic empirical research works as a restless force, in a way as the empirical variant of de-constructivism.” (1997: 37). In my understanding this is a common characteristic of qualitative research in general although the idea is be more explicit in Amann/Hirschauer’s conceptualisation of ethnography.
some points that are of particular relevance for understanding my analysis. The three strategies are Strauss’ version of the *Grounded Theory*\(^{45}\) (1998), the *Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge* (HSK)\(^{46}\) and *ethnography*\(^{47}\). All of these strategies have in common that they belong to the tradition of hermeneutic, ‘understanding sociology’. Social scientific understanding is seen by them as being not structurally different from everyday understanding but in continuity with it. These approaches try to “expound the problems of quasi-natural everyday understanding methodologically, questioning it theoretically and reflect it epistemologically” (Hitzler/Honer 1997: 25). The research process as such is seen as being circular (Hildenbrand; quoted in Lachenmann 1995: 11) which means that data generation and data analysis are not clearly distinguishable steps that follow each other but are being practiced in a parallel mode from the very beginning of the research. Which data should be generated next and where they are likely to be found are decisions made according to analytical considerations and results ('theoretical sampling’ according to Strauss 1998: 70-71). For the purpose of analysis the data are being ‘coded’\(^{48}\) after they have been generated.

All the three research strategies mentioned strongly emphasise their capacity to put existing (social scientific) terminology and conceptualisation into question by doing empirical research. A more adequate conceptualisation and understanding of social phenomena is what they are aiming for. Unfortunately this “theoretical task of the empirical social sciences” (Elwert 1989) is often not addressed explicitly. Two general procedures for achieving this ‘theoretical task’ are noticeable from the different strategies presented above. One puts emphasis on using data as a ‘whetstone’ for the researcher’s concepts and models (Grounded Theory, HSK) while the other one does not use data in such a falsificationist manner. This second procedure aims more at developing theoretical hypotheses for explaining what is going on in the field by linking contextual data with each other or explicitly with ‘directly’ generated data, e.g. by doing

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\(^{45}\) The original version was published by Glaser/Strauss in 1967. Strauss’ reformulations of the original programme (1998; with Corbin 1990) have been criticised by his former co-author Barney Glaser (1992).

\(^{46}\) The HSK is a quite recent development in German qualitative sociology which is based on the work of Alfred Schütz and Berger/Luckmann (1969). For a summary of the programme see Schröer (1997).

\(^{47}\) Apart from the vast literature on ethnography I am referring especially to the contributions of Amann/Hirschauer (1997) and Hirschauer (2001) who focus very strongly on epistemological questions.

\(^{48}\) ‘Coding’ is the procedure when the researcher tries to develop terms (‘codes’) that are expressing appropriately what (theoretical) phenomena specific parts of the text/data are indicating. In this process, codes are constantly ‘tested’ if they are analytically adequate for new and old data. They are reformulated and sub-coded again and again. The aim of the process is to develop a theory that is based on and ‘controlled’ by empirical data, therefore a grounded theory. The computer programme *Atlas.ti* that was developed according to the concept of ‘coding’ of the Grounded Theory was used for this paper as well. (A list of codes that I have generated in this process is attached in annex 2.) To use the term ‘code’ with regard to qualitative data is often criticised by qualitative sociologists as it is a concept taken from quantitative methodology that expresses the *encoding* of data. It is argued that what ‘codes’ according to Strauss do is exactly the opposite: the *decoding* of data. According to my understanding this is epistemologically problematic.Attributing a ‘code’ to data is exactly a step of *encoding* them with an abstract and analytical term. We could only speak of decoding if we had direct access to the ‘structures of meaning’ that ‘lie behind’ the data. Therefore I have no problem continuing to use the terms ‘code’ and ‘coding’. 
interviews\textsuperscript{49}. This serves the purpose of contextualisation (see Lachenmann 1995: 12-15) that narrow and data-focussed procedures cannot fulfill\textsuperscript{50}. Both procedures should initiate a process of (systematic) pondering on the side of the researcher over the adequacy of existing theoretical terms and understandings\textsuperscript{51}.

By combining the strengths of both procedures I try to take the theoretical task of empirical social sciences serious. I will ‘recast’ my data into analytic-theoretical terms and concepts and will suggest specific connections and interrelations between them, based on their particular relevance in the field\textsuperscript{52}. In this process of theoretical (re-)construction\textsuperscript{53} of typical meanings and actions the systematic irritation of existing terms, assumptions and interrelations is crucial and will hopefully contribute to a more adequate theoretical understanding of the phenomena concerned.

3.3 Doing research

3.3.1 The idea and its transformation

Originally my plan was to do research on the interaction of state and society at the level of public servants and citizens in a small town in Sri Lanka. Due to some problems, I decided not to do observations but to conduct interviews. I wanted to talk to people about their experiences of interactions with public servants but I noticed soon that another topic was coming up in nearly each of the interviews. This topic was politics and politicians. Therefore, after around two weeks in the field I decided to shift my focus according to the relevances encountered in the field.

3.3.2 Time, field and access

I was in Sri Lanka for around ten weeks from July to October 2002. For a period of seven weeks I was living in a small town which is a district-capital in Southern Sri Lanka\textsuperscript{54}. I will call it ‘Southern Town’ from now on. As I did several day-travels in the region for doing interviews and observations as well, my ‘field’ was not restricted to Southern Town alone\textsuperscript{55}. In the town I

\textsuperscript{49}For a convincing rehabilitation of ethnographic observation in this context see Hirschauer (2001).

\textsuperscript{50}In Grounded Theory the importance of contextual knowledge is emphasised and systematically included through writing ‘memos’ throughout the whole research process.

\textsuperscript{51}The logical principle that both strategies have in common and according to which theory is shaped by data is called ‘abduction’ in the understanding of Peirce (see Reichertz 2000: 276-286).

\textsuperscript{52}For the requirements that a theory based on empirical data should meet, see Elwert (1989: 153) and strikingly similar Strauss/Corbin (1990; quoted in Flick 2002: 346).

\textsuperscript{53}According to the methodology and its epistemological foundation as outlined above it should have become clear that I cannot claim to present ‘the truth’ or give some form of ‘hegemonic interpretation’ that has a higher degree of ‘objectivity’ than other interpretations. The term ‘(re-)construction’ refers to the epistemological status of this kind of methodology and analysis. Rather, this sort of analysis should be seen as a contribution to the (scientific) discourse on theoretical questions that it is concerned with. As usual in a discourse, this paper should serve the purpose of inviting or probably provoking reactions to take the argument and the understanding further.

\textsuperscript{54}Due to reasons of anonymisation I do not specify the localities.

\textsuperscript{55}Some interviews I also did in Colombo.
lived in a room of a house that the family living there rented out to me. I became quite familiar with them pretty soon. I also came to know some other people living in town quickly. It was possible to have at least a chat in English with many of these people.

My two major ‘gate-keepers’ for research turned out to be the son-in-law of the family I was living with and my interpreter who was about my age and whom I met in a small shop just by accident. After I had become more familiar with both of them and they had learned what I was planning to do, I asked them if they knew other people whom I could talk to about the topics I was interested in. Very soon, through this ‘snowballing’ the group of people I could have contacted was so big that I could choose whom to contact according to the principles of theoretical sampling. Besides of talking to a number of friends and acquaintances of my two gate-keepers and friends of their friends, I continued to make contacts on my own and met people who, according to my theoretical sampling promised to provide differing and complementary perspectives on my research topics.

3.3.3 Data generation

In the first days I was simply ‘living’ in the town, making myself familiar with everything. Even in this period, the combination of various methods, the circular research process and theoretical sampling characterised my research. In total I conducted 29 recorded interviews and 18 interviews without recording but with making notes (see annex 1). Eight of the interviews have been conducted in Sinhala or Tamil with the help of an interpreter. All other interviews have been conducted in English. Most interviews were quite formal in the first minutes but became much more relaxed later and sometimes even ended in conversations and discussions with a lot of other people joining the interviewee(s) and me. According to the ‘ethnographic interview’ (Spradley 1979) or the ‘explorative interview’ (Honer 1994) I conducted interviews with open questions to generate narratives although I had a flexible catalogue of topics in mind which I wanted to talk about (Lachenmann 1995: 10). These topics as well as the actual form of the interview were different, depending on the people I was talking to. I introduced myself as a student from Germany, doing a research project for his studies. Generally my impression was that people talked to me very openly even about issues like bribery or problems between Muslims and Buddhists that I had assumed to be too delicate to raise. I think that it was very helpful for me to be clearly identifiable for the people as an outsider to their social context (see

56 Data generation and data analysis are distinguished from each other only for the purpose of presenting them here. As I have mentioned already both processes are part of the research work from the very beginning in a circular mode of doing research.

57 Usually ‘after’ or while interviewing I talked about Germany or asked people if they had any questions they wanted to ask me. In several interviews – apart from those with experts or officials – this part took as long as the interview itself which added up to approximately two to three hours in total per interview.

58 ‘Ethnographic’ as well as ‘explorative interviews’ are especially appropriate for discovering and systematically (re-)constructing emic relevances and meanings when ‘natural’ data are not accessible or not adequate for the research topic.
ibid.: 7). It might have also been advantageous that I was obviously not perceived as a ‘full adult’ but rather as somewhere in between a youth and an adult. I think that these factors together with the attitude of ‘(methodical) stupidity’ (Hitzler 1991) caused most people not to be very suspicious but rather to try to explain the situation and their perspective to me. I was surprised about the interest and willingness of people to talk to me about what had become my research topic. Apart from some officials I did also not have the impression that people generally tried to take on a certain role specifically because of my presence while talking to me. Even if some of them complained about politicians, public servants and about the increasing costs of living, I never got the feeling that people were only presenting themselves as victims to me for one or the other reason. Instead, most of the interviews were very differentiated and balanced.

Apart from the interviews, a second source of data were informal conversations, on which I made jottings and wrote memory protocols later. The same is true for many small and the few larger observations that I did in the field\(^{59}\). A fourth source of data that proved to be very rich were newspapers. Like many people even in the more rural areas of Sri Lanka I did read at least one daily and some of the popular Sunday newspapers.

Reflecting on how I generated my data, I can identify three general biases in my research. One bias that was intended is that a majority of the people I talked to and had contact with were Muslims\(^ {60}\). The reason for this was my assumption that focussing on the perspective of people who constitute a minority in the country might reveal some of the structural features of the interaction of state and society more clearly than by (re-)constructing predominantly ‘majority perspectives’. I see the situation of Muslims in the country as an extreme variation of a general pattern in Sri Lanka. Although some specific features do exist, I found my working-assumption largely confirmed in the field. Systematic comparisons with data gathered from Sinhalese people indicated that such general patterns are existing.

A second bias in my data is that most of the people I came in contact with were men. I tried to talk to women explicitly and succeeded in some cases but generally it was much easier for me to get access to male interview partners. I found politics to be largely seen as a ‘male’ issue. The few interviews and conversations that I succeeded to have with women did not reveal a strikingly different perspective from those conducted with men. Thus I do think that this bias is

\(^{59}\) Usually I was waiting somewhere for an interview or something else when I could observe interactions of citizens and public servants, for example. I carried out one larger observation while participating at the monthly meeting of a District Coordination Committee (DCC).

\(^{60}\) The term ‘Muslim’ is problematic in the Sri Lankan context as it is often used as if it was an ethnic category. Ethnic groups in Sri Lanka that are categorised as Muslims are Moors, Malays, Borahs and several others (Hussain 2001: 245). I refer to people as Muslims throughout the paper if they are adherents of Islam. I noted that although the ethnic distinctions are important, people were often referring to themselves as Muslims in distinction to Sinhalese-Buddhists and Tamils.
not fundamentally distorting my analysis although it clearly remains an analysis from a male perspective.

The third bias refers to the different experiences of people with ‘the state’ in rural and more urban areas. Even if Southern Town is a small district capital in a rural area I found that the conditions under which people were living in town were quite different from the conditions under which people outside of the town were living, especially as far as contact with public servants and politicians was concerned\(^61\).

I do not include the use English language in most of my interviews as another bias as I could not find a systematic relationship between the ability of people to speak English and a certain socio-economic or other sorts of status in Southern Town. The results of the interviews conducted in languages other than English did not systematically differ from the English interviews. All these biases are important to be kept in mind when assessing the results of my analysis.

3.3.4 Data analysis

As I have already laid out in paragraph 3.2, I coded my data (see annex 2) and used Strauss’ strategy of analysis. For this purpose I transcribed all the data\(^62\) I had recorded or written down as notes. The strategy of ‘constant comparison’ of data and codes with each other is particularly important to generate meaningful analytical codes and categories. During the process of coding, connections between different codes turned out to be important. The data I have coded include my observations, many notes I took on interesting things that I came across and some of the newspaper articles that I have collected. By including these data I tried to contextualise and balance my interview data. Apart from constructing codes and connections it was important to write memos on analytical and theoretical findings or on ideas that came up in the process of analysis. My analysis is based on these memos, codes and connections and will be presented along the different phenomena and dimensions of these phenomena which I found to be relevant.

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\(^61\) An indicator of how important the differences between rural and urban areas are as far as state-society interaction is concerned, is the result of Transparency International Sri Lanka that bribery and corruption are experienced almost twice as much in urban areas, compared to rural areas (2001/02: 5). Southern Town is officially defined as being an ‘urban’ as well.

\(^62\) For the rules of transcription I used, see Flick (2002: 254) and Kowal/O’Donnell (2000). I transcribed word-by-word but did not pay too much attention to non-verbal expressions as I did not consider them to be particularly relevant for my research topic.
4 (RE-)CONSTRUCTING STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS IN SOUTHERN TOWN

For the purpose of presenting the analysis I will separate three topics in this chapter that are in fact very closely interlinked with each other in everyday life in Southern Town as well as in other places in Sri Lanka. These are interaction of citizens with the public administration at the local level, interaction with politicians as well as politics in general and finally the risk of political discourse. By contextualising the central part on ‘politics’ with the other two, I hope to be able to show the far-reaching impact that politics has on the everyday life of people in Sri Lanka.

But first of all, let me introduce Southern Town. The small town of around 10,000 people is a district capital located in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. The climate in this area is usually dry and very hot. Despite being a district capital, Southern Town is rather small. Two or three busy streets frame the heart of the town. The main occupations are fishing and trading of all kinds of goods in small shops or on the street. Most of the public servants working in the administrative institutions do not live in town but travel in and out every day by bus. Nearly all of them are Sinhala-Buddhists. The language used in everyday business in the administrative offices is Sinhala. With around 60 per cent the unemployment rate in the area is one of the highest in the country.

As Southern Town is located along a main travelling route, the relatively narrow streets are usually packed with busses, lorries and three-wheelers, especially in the early morning and evening hours. You can find Buddhist temples as well as mosques and Christian churches in Southern Town. Even if the population of the southern area is predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist (around 98 per cent), little less than half of the population in Southern Town are Muslims. In the Urban Council (UC) of Southern Town the UNP is the dominating party as it has been most of the time since independence. Among the members of the UC, Sinhalese as well as Muslims can be found in approximately equal numbers.

The region in which Southern Town is located in one of Sri Lanka’s poorest and most rural ones. Some government development projects have been implemented here after crushing down the JVP insurrection in 1989 which started in the South. These projects focus on the rural population in the area and should serve to prevent another outbreak of violence. Some NGOs from overseas as well as a few national ones also have their small offices in town.

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63 In deep gratitude to all those people especially in the Southern area of Sri Lanka to whom I spoke and who helped me to understand their everyday life and problems a little bit better, I do my very best to keep their identity as well as names of places anonymous.

64 Most Muslims in Sri Lanka have Tamil as their first language. Nevertheless in Southern Town people and especially Muslims are predominantly multilingual.
One topic that came up frequently in the interviews was the image that the southern part of the country has for other Sri Lankans but also in the eyes of many people living in the South. This part of the country is seen as being backward and rural and the people as being uneducated compared to the rest of the population. Local problems that were mentioned are the very high rate of unemployment, the high and increasing costs of living and the expensive transport facilities to Colombo. Southern Town does not have access to Colombo by train but only by bus.

4.1 Public service and society

This paragraph is concerned with the interaction of citizens and public servants with the special case of the police being discussed separately. I will focus on the question of how and under which conditions access to the services of public servants is possible for citizens.

4.1.1 Access to and performance of the public service

There is a popular expression in Sinhala for what public servants are doing in office according to many people: “ice gahanewa”65. It is used to express that “they are lazy, no? Always eating, smoking inside, they don’t care about the people.” (I. 4). After some time in the field I found that this assessment was not hold by all people. Instead “[w]hat type of people comes asking for help, they’re treating in that way.” (I. 7). It turned out that people who were characterised as ‘respectable’ or ‘decent’ and were well educated and in most cases also quite well-off (ibid.) had no problems in ‘getting their things done’ quickly. On the other hand

“... if a poor person goes like that, will he do that for that poor person? No! He will do it one day but not at that time itself. He will keep it in a side, neglect it. Then he has to go three, four times again and again to remind him to do it.” (ibid.)

Access to public services is thus socially structured. People who have ‘something to offer’ to public servants are much more likely to get what they want without problems and delay. The question remains what this ‘something’ could be.

4.1.1.1 Access and public servants’ point of view

Surprisingly for those people who had access, bribery as such was not an issue. They did not have to pay for getting a service that they were legally eligible to.66 Instead, what was necessary for them to have was a special kind of social capital (Bourdieu 1983). By delivering the services to these customers quickly, public servants were trying to acquire a claim for reciprocity towards them. In return for delivering public services to them they could expect to get help from these customers if they needed it. We could also say that public servants saw the customers with the required social capital as ‘relational resources’ which they could activate at

65 Translated literally this means something like ‘playing ice’ or ‘playing cool’.
66 Of course, it was also possible to ‘buy’ certain services but that was the exception rather than the rule.
a certain point in life: “Because he is helping him in this way, one day, if he needs a help or anything, one day he can go near him, no? Asking for that help, no?” (ibid.)

If they are activated as a ‘relational resource’, the customers most often fulfil a ‘relay function’. By channelling a public servant’s demand to the appropriate person that he or she knows, the customer is able to mediate certain services or resources to this public servant.

“That means if they need help or anything if they can’t straight away search a way go and ask that help from that certain person, they knows that this person is very close to this second person. So they are having that intention that if they do this work for him through this person he get his work done from this certain person.” (I. 7)

I will call these informal connections between a person who is demanding a service, another one who is able to deliver the service and a mediator in between ‘chains of mediation’. There is nothing particularly new about this phenomenon but I argue that the ‘chains of mediation’ in Sri Lanka differ from broker- or mediator-mechanisms in other countries. The question of what specific kind of social capital is necessary to get access to public servants will be left open now and will be answered later in paragraph 4.2.

4.1.1.2 “They are cheating the government and the people.” (I. 2)

People who lack this kind of social capital and who do not have the money to pay bribes are usually those who experience the “ice gahanewa”-mode of administration. That means that, although money can be a functional substitute it is not only (economically) poor people who are facing these kinds of problems. “Undeducated peoples and Muslims community people are facing similar problems.” (I. 2). Either their requests are totally neglected or it takes a long time and a lot of effort for them to get their things done. By using different strategies, people who are facing these problems try to avoid or minimise them. As far as the Divisional Secretariat is concerned, many people go there only for the weekly ‘Public Day’. On that day they can speak to the Divisional Secretary directly and can thus avoid contact with the workers for getting their services. Other people told me that families might choose to send women to the office because they would not get angry and start to shout at the workers when the job was not done until then, as men would be doing often. The experience was that shouting at the workers only causes more trouble and an even longer delay. A last strategy could be called the ‘good mouth’ strategy: “...if you are talkative and if you (...) can win people, convince them that this work

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67 This help could be for example giving support for securing a place for a child in one of the privileged schools in Colombo or giving support to find a good job.

68 Although most of the quotations I use here are from one interview, the number of interviews on which these codes and analytical conclusions are based is large. But there were only few other people who put it as focussed and eloquently as this person did.

69 I will come back to this problem of delay later and will analyse it as a strategy that I have called ‘delaying services’.
must be done, you can talk to them straight away.” However, I found that this strategy can be used by self-confident middle-class people only who at least do have a ‘respectable’ job. For many other people who do not have the necessary social capital, who lack the financial means to pay bribes and have not developed a specific strategy, the impression remains that “no one is working the right way!” (I. 12).

4.1.2 “Corruption is everywhere!” (I. 3)

‘Corruption’ in the Sri Lankan context as anywhere else includes many different practices and phenomena (see Olivier de Sardan 1999). Apart from the classical ‘bribery-corruption’, by ‘corruption’ people in Sri Lanka also refer to the different dimensions of politicisation, especially with regard to the public service. I will confine myself in this paragraph to some of the ‘non-political’ forms of corruption that came up frequently in my research.

The first form is the one that is least spectacular: bribery and speed money. As I have mentioned before, especially these people who have no relevant social capital that public servants could be interested in, are usually facing the “ice gahanewa”-mode of administration. According to my findings that is not due to the ‘laziness’ of public servants but at least a part of it is a strategy which I have called ‘delaying services’. It means that public servants, after assessing under how much time pressure customers are, delay the service or the fulfilment of their demands purposefully. Sometimes they ask people openly for some ‘speed money’ which could speed up the process of service delivery. But most often the customers do already know that they have to give something. This ‘something’ can be some cigarettes or a tea in the canteen of the Kachcheri or a large sum of money, depending on the service that is required.

70 This ‘good mouth’ strategy seems to be prominent in the Sri Lankan context as a Sinhala saying that this person pointed out to me, seems to indicate: “If it is a daughter she must have modesty, if it is a son he must have a good mouth, otherwise the family will be nowhere, right?” (I. 25).

71 People usually referred to teachers as an example.

72 On corruption in Sri Lanka see also the interesting Corruption Report of Transparency International Sri Lanka (2001/02) and some chapters in de Silva et al. (2002).

73 Hereby I refer to the exchange of a particular service for money that should either be for free or not be available for money.

74 Only few people knew about the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption (CIABOC) in Colombo and all of them did not have much trust in them. The fact that the commission is located far away for the people was seen as one of the major problems. Some people even suspected that the commissioners and inspectors working there were corrupt themselves which indicates how weak the confidence in and how deep the suspicion towards public sector agencies is.

75 Although many people could understand public servants who take bribes for improving their low salaries, they made a clear distinction between this kind of bribes and systematic bribery for enrichment which is seen as an outcome of the ‘moral degeneration’ in some sectors such as the police (see also the results in Transparency International Sri Lanka 2001/02: 11).

76 Typical ‘small services’ are birth certificates, identity cards or passports. A ‘bigger thing’ would be a land deed that one usually would have to wait for for around ten years. With large enough an amount of money a Grama Niladhari can speed up the process to three days. It is important here to keep in mind that there are many people who just do not have enough money to ‘buy’ these services and these are the people who suffer most under this system as they are effectively excluded.
Many people think that public servants do earn a lot of money by collecting bribes in addition to their (rather low) salary.

A second form of corruption that people were very much aware of is what one person called “Commission Business” (I. 3). It includes all kinds of arrangements between technical officers who have to estimate the costs for constructions, and the respective contractors. People noted that usually technical officers overestimate the costs for a specific project and get their share of the commission that was left over later.

A third form of corruption that came up very frequently in the interviews is what I call the ‘enforced gift’. The term refers to the practice of some public officers (income tax officers, price control inspectors) and especially police officers of all grades who are going to shops and sometimes even to the private houses of shop owners and take goods without paying for them. Many businessmen and –women I talked to complained that several officers are coming quite frequently which leaves them with a considerable loss of profit for their business. If the business owners refuse to accept this practice and ask officers to pay, they face some sort of problem in the following days. A strategy commonly used by police officers is to inspect the business owner’s transport vehicle very thoroughly during the next traffic control. The fines that are following and the required repairs are usually high enough for discouraging the respective person from complaining again. The practice of the ‘enforced gift’ is thus “a sort of demanding, so if you don’t give, they will harass.” (I. 23). To check whether there was a difference between Muslim and Buddhist shop owners I went to another town and visited all the hardware shops there. The hardware shop sector had turned out to be very strongly affected by this practice. As in all other examinations I did regarding this question, the result was clear: all the three Muslim shop owners had suffered the loss of huge amounts of profit due to this practice while none of the Sinhalese owners had ever faced it. An explanation for this finding will be given later.

4.1.3 “Police can do anything.” (I. 27)

Together with the judiciary, the police is perceived as being the most corrupt institution in most South Asian countries (Transparency International 2002a; Transparency International 2002b). In Sri Lanka as well as in India and Pakistan, all the respondents to the survey who had contact with the police in the year before, reported that they had encountered corruption (for Sri Lanka see Transparency International Sri Lanka 2001/02: 2, 17). This was reflected in my interviews. The police was clearly the most visible actor representing the state at the local level according to my interviews and observations. Access to the police is possible in Southern Town according

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77 This practice is usually referred to as ‘kick-back’ in the literature.

78 That this pattern is structural rather than a single case was confirmed to me by many people, both Muslims and Sinhalese alike.
to the same criteria as for the public service in general. An important difference between the police and other public servants is that they represent the monopoly of violence of the state. Thus they do have some legal authority and possibilities at their disposal that they can actively use in informal ways (e.g. checking cars of people, file cases against people, put people into prison, etc.). A second point is strongly connected with this. The police and the law enforcement authorities in general are supposed to be the institutions to which the people should turn to for help against unlawful treatment. They are the ones who should represent the force of law and the monopoly of violence as the two most important features of a ‘Rechtsstaat’ or constitutional state. If the feeling of the people is that these authorities cannot or do not fulfil this responsibility, the rule of law is very likely to degenerate and become overruled by other mechanisms of authority. I will come back to this point again later.

4.1.4 “The main thing is, nobody is there to look after this.” (I. 3) –

The (restricted) autonomy of public servants

Public servants and police officers can be seen as being autonomous with regard to these people who lack the social capital that is necessary to get access to them. If they are denied the services that they are legally entitled to, they do not know of any authority they could turn to for complaining about this exclusion. As ‘autonomy’ is one of the key-concepts used in this paper, I will now give a working definition of my understanding. Autonomy is the possibility of acting continually according to one’s own will without having to fear noticeable restrictions of action in the future. Thus autonomy is always autonomy from something. For this paper the three most important dimensions that somebody can be autonomous from are (other) state institutions, citizens and law. Looking at how ‘autonomy’ was established and how it is being defended and upheld is one way of discovering informal strategies, mechanisms and structures of politics.

To ensure their autonomy with regard to people who lack the necessary social capital, public servants and police officers have developed specific strategies. Most important is their potential – and the selective demonstration of it – to ‘create trouble’ for those who are complaining and who are trying to challenge this autonomy. People are very much aware of this potential. Another, somewhat milder strategy to defend the own autonomy against charges by citizens is to simply pass on the responsibility for a certain problem or project to other authorities. This is very easy in the Sri Lankan context as the responsibilities that different

79 Therefore the group of people experiencing and thinking that “the police can do anything” are more or less the same that also have to face “ice gahanewa” in the public administration.
80 This ‘trouble’ can be many things: from a thorough check of the vehicle by traffic officers to a day in prison or even the use of physical violence.
81 I came across that phenomenon several times in my interviews. If people asked officials why certain things were not happening as they should (e.g. infrastructure constructions) they were referred to another institution which should be responsible for this task. From there, they were usually either referred to another institution or back to the first one.
institutions at the local level have are not very transparent to the people and sometimes not even to the officials themselves. The local branches of the line ministries of the central government did not hand out information to the press about specific projects they were planning or implementing. Furthermore, these authorities did not only make themselves autonomous from citizens but also from other official authorities at the local level. This was usually achieved by ‘isolating’ themselves from other authorities and not cooperating with them. This was the case especially with regard to the local authorities. According to my research they were completely excluded from the planning and implementation process of the central government authorities at the local level. People usually knew about this weakness of the local authorities. The central government officers were seen as following their own agenda that both, the elected members of the local authorities and the local people cannot control or influence.

The police as well as other public officers can therefore use the power and authority they have and collect bribes and ‘enforced gifts’ without putting themselves at great risk. Some interviews indicate that the everyday experience of this autonomy has led to an attitude of resignation and lethargy among the excluded part of the population. This is most often the case for Muslims as many of them do own shops or businesses and are thus particularly susceptible to these practices. With regard to all the practices outlined in this chapter, a Muslim hardware shop owner from Southern Town complained: “They are giving trouble, we can’t do in freedom our things. (...) After my period it [his shop; M.R.] is closed. I don’t want like this! Very difficult! I don’t like it to give to my son even.” (I. 23).

The autonomy of the police can be regarded as having particularly negative impacts. The police has established not only autonomy from the people but also from the rule of law. At the same time it is the authority that is equipped with the monopoly of violence of the state exactly for defending the rule of law in society. That means that the autonomy of the police has effects that are much more serious than ‘only’ the material loss through bribes and ‘enforced gifts’. It contributes to the erosion and delegitimisation of the rule of law as the dominant mechanism of regulation in society. But we have already seen that the autonomy of public servants as well as of police officers is not absolute. Rather, they are only autonomous with regard to a certain group of people. In the next part I will turn to the factor that is restricting the autonomy of public servants to this group of people and that at the same time equips other people with the social capital which is necessary for getting access to public servants and their services: “The name is ‘public service’. But those who do it are politicians.” (Conversation Protocol 8).

4.2 Politics and society

In this subchapter I will analyse the role of ‘politics’ in Sri Lankan society, the importance and the meaning of politics and the ways in which politics works. The interaction of citizens and politicians as well as public servants and politicians will be examined.
4.2.1 “In Sri Lanka the whole state apparatus has gradually been politicised.” (I. 18)

Although criteria of caste and pre-colonial social stratification may remain important especially in rural areas, the increasing penetration of society by state institutions\(^\text{82}\) has led to “new dimensions of social stratification” (Perera 1985) in Sri Lanka\(^\text{83}\). Together with the growing penetration of society by the state, the institutions that have been established or integrated into the new political and administrational set-up were increasingly politicised from the centre (cf. Perera 1985: 136-177). The process started slowly with the granting of universal franchise in 1931 and progressed especially after the victory of the SLFP in 1956 (Gunasekera 1992: 238). By 1970 “the process of politicisation of the bureaucracy was almost complete” (Wijeweera 1988: 30). My interview partner’s experiences strongly correspond to these historical analyses that politicisation had reached its first peak in the early 1970s\(^\text{84}\). By then, what is sometimes referred to as the ‘MP Raj’\(^\text{85}\) and politics in general had come to be of crucial importance for the everyday life of Sri Lankans at each level of society. This is still the case today. Politics turned out to be of paramount relevance to the people in nearly all of my interviews and conversations. Based on my data I developed the analytical term ‘autonomous politician’ that seemed to be most appropriate for understanding and explaining the importance of politicians in Sri Lanka. Later I will come back to the question of what this ‘autonomy’ of politicians means for the political system and politics in Sri Lanka in general.

4.2.2 Autonomous politicians in Sri Lanka

Two dimensions of autonomy are most important according to the definition I have given below. The first one is the dimension of *having the possibility to act* according to one’s own will. I will analyse this dimension as ‘power’\(^\text{86}\) of politicians. The second dimension will be analysed and presented under the term ‘autonomy’ of politicians and refers to acting continually *without having to fear noticeable restrictions of action in the future from somebody or something else*. It is here where the autonomy of politicians from law, citizens and state institutions will be analysed. Of course, power and autonomy require and presuppose each other to a large extend. ‘Autonomy’ implies that there are other institutions from which the

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\(^\text{82}\) ‘Traditional’ or colonial local leadership positions have been transformed into administrative posts (Gunasekera 1992: 235-238), a number of rural organisations or committees established at the local level (cf. Perera 1985: 136-177), the public service has been expanded massively and state-owned companies set up.

\(^\text{83}\) For details about this transformation process that I cannot go into here, see Gunasekera (1992), Perera (1985), Wijeweera (1988).

\(^\text{84}\) By ‘politicisation’ in the Sri Lankan context, authors usually refer to the substitution or subordination of a ‘traditional’ local leadership elite by local political ‘brokers’, to the increasing importance of party affiliation at all levels of society and the increasing dominance of politicians from the centre over other sectors and (administrative) levels of society.

\(^\text{85}\) This term refers to the powerful position that Members of National Parliaments (MPs) had come to occupy over their respective electorate and especially the administrative sector in their areas (de Silva 1993: 96).

\(^\text{86}\) I do not use the term ‘power’ in a meta-theoretical meaning but strictly restricted to some concrete areas of action that I have analysed. Within these areas of action, I refer to ‘power’ as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance (…)” (Weber 1968).
‘autonomous’ actors have succeeded to become independent from to a considerable degree. In my analysis these are state organisations, citizens and law.

4.2.2.1 “There is no big person than politician.” (I. 27) – The power of politicians

To give access to jobs is the single most important authority that politicians have\textsuperscript{87}. These are by no means only high-level jobs in the administration but the range goes from temporary positions and jobs in state-owned enterprises up to high positions in the public service (cf. Mayer 2002a: 152). Obtaining land deeds or contracts are other services where politicians can be most helpful (‘constituency service’ in the classification of Oberst 1985). They can also channel public resources like government funds or the Decentralised Budget to a certain area and specific purposes by dominating the relevant local decision-making councils like the DCC (‘development work’; ibid.). According to the experiences of a local development consultant “[t]hey meet but the politicians dictate terms. None of the officials could take independent decisions, they have to follow the dictate of the politician.” (I. 18).

The authority of politicians to appoint, transfer and promote public servants gives them the possibility to sanction officers who do not work according to the politician’s orders and to appoint less resistant public servants to particular positions.

“If it is a government servant he also belongs to the politician, he also doing according to the politician. In Sri Lanka I’m sadly say, government servants are very afraid of the politicians. So if they do against politician, surely two weeks or three weeks later he are transferred to the remote area. That’s why government servants, they are doing not a- they are doing- they are doing against their mind.” (I. 27)

This potential to influence almost every decision made in the public service by these means equips politicians with the power to deliver ‘constituency services’ and do ‘development work’. Due to the very high penetration of Sri Lankan society by state institutions, the structures and mechanisms that I have just outlined are of dominating relevance to even the lowest (administrative) level in the most remote corner of the country. A Grama Niladhari, the public officer at the lowest administrative level told me: “I can’t do independent work. (...) We have to work under politicians. If I work independently that thing, the Minister can challenge: ey, you why not do for my friend? Then he can transfer us also.” (I. 29)

The structures of the political as well as the administrative system in Sri Lanka can be described as being highly centralised and controlled by the central government. One of the curiosities of this particular system is that after every change in government a massive

\textsuperscript{87} Unless stated otherwise, when I speak of ‘politicians’ I only refer to MPs and ministers, politicians from the centre. It is obvious that generally ministers do have more power than MPs of one of the parties in government. Oberst’ finding that their power is particularly strong with regard to ‘constituency services’ (see fn. 15; Oberst 1985: 10, 55-72) was reflected in my interviews as well as the fact that this is not the case with regard to ‘development work’ (ibid.; 97). However, regarding the issue of ‘autonomy’, I found that the differences between ministers and MPs did not seem to be considerable.
exchange of administrative personnel takes place at nearly all levels throughout the whole country. The decisive factor here as elsewhere is party affiliation.

Concerning the power of politicians, it is important to note that there is a big difference between those MPs who belong to one of the parties in government and those who are in the opposition. If the MP’s party looses the parliamentary elections, he or she almost immediately looses most of the necessary authority over the administrative sector and also the power that goes with it. So, unlike in the early times of legislation after independence when ‘traditional’ positions were still important, it is nowadays predominantly formal positions or connections to people in these positions that structure politics. The formal position is important as it provides the respective person with a number of constitutionally guaranteed rights as well as authority and power. But apart from the work that an MP or a minister is expected to do, this authority and power and the formal position as such can be used to exercise informal and even extralegal practices as I will show later. They have developed historically and became institutionalised to some extent in this process.

In the next paragraph I will focus on why these practices and the power that is necessary to exercise them are so all-encompassing and apparently unchallenged. For the power over the sector of public administration I have done this already. I will now turn to other dimensions of autonomy of politicians in Sri Lanka.

4.2.2.2 “Nothing but their own power!” (I. 17) – The autonomy of politicians

According to my fieldwork the most relevant dimensions of autonomy of politicians apart from the administrative sector are the following: autonomy from political authorities at the lower level, autonomy from citizens, autonomy from law which very often goes hand in hand with the use of or the threat with violence, and finally autonomy from local NGOs. The everyday-dimension of autonomy as well as the consequences with regard to transparency and accountability will be analysed.

The issue of decentralisation has been discussed extensively in Sri Lanka, even if the political and administrative system has remained highly centralised. The assessment of Slater that the decentralisation measures of the late 1980s in Sri Lanka which included the establishment of the local authorities (LA) and the Provincial Councils have instead led to a

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88 See Oberst for his interesting data on how fast and consistent constituents adapt to a change in government and approach the MPs of the new government with their demands (1985: 55-72).
89 This is true for ‘constituency service’ but not so much for ‘development work’.
90 ‘Institution’ and ‘institutionalisation’ are highly ambiguous terms in the social sciences. My understanding is based on the conceptualisation of sociological Neo-Institutionalism (see Hasse/Krücken 1999). For an example of its usefulness for explaining processes of social transformation and development see Mense-Petermann (2002).
91 Talking about decentralisation in Sri Lanka, usually the term ‘devolution’ is used which emphasises the political dimension of decentralisation. The discussions about decentralisation in Sri Lanka have always been connected with the attempt to find an adequate political model for the peaceful coexistence of the different groups in Sri Lanka, especially Sinhalese and Tamils. On the devolution discussions, see de Silva (1996) and Siriwardena (1998).
stronger dominance and control of the local level by the central government was shared by nearly all of my interview partners. They stated that decentralisation happened “only in the books” (I. 10). I was also told by members of LAs that public servants working for the local branches of line ministries, usually see themselves as superior to the elected LA members. The LAs were not informed or consulted when development measures and projects were planned or being implemented by central government agencies in their area. Thus they can be considered as suffering from the autonomy of the public service, too. A factor that is of crucial importance here as well is party affiliation as a high district officer made clear:

“After the elections, local government elections, the party in power they won almost all except one local government body here. So now the government they are having very cordial relations with the local government. The Provincial Council they don’t like it very much. (...) They leave them out, they try to leave them out because they are in the opposite side.” (I. 21)

The power and the resources that have been given to the elected councils at both sub-national levels are very restricted. The central government still has the capacity to determine how high their actual influence is allowed to be in every single case. These decisions can be made according to informal criteria like party composition. People are very much aware of the fundamental weaknesses of the LAs. On the responsiveness of LA representatives to the people a businessman remarked: “Oh, they promise that they will listen. But they will not because they are all controlled by the main government. Even the money is granted by the government.” (I. 17). This perception indicates that LAs and their members may serve some purposes but local decision-making on development questions is certainly not among them\textsuperscript{92}.

The second relevant dimension is the autonomy towards citizens. I will focus here on the importance of elections, as this issue came up frequently in my interviews and as it is usually considered to be the most important instrument for controlling and restricting the autonomy of politicians. Three sub-dimensions are relevant here: the election system, the voting procedure and the perceived usefulness of elections. I will start with the election system in Sri Lanka. The change from a ‘first-past-the post-system’ where each electoral district had an MP to the list-based proportional representation system was felt very strongly according to my interview-partners\textsuperscript{93}.

“The earlier system of the government: every electorate they nominated one MP, so we can go to him and tell something, no? The current system, the preferential system, we don’t have a particular MP for us. They stay in Colombo now. Once in a blue moon only they come to this area and do some good thing with the television that they show their face and [claps in his hands]. No, not a single one is here, staying around here. Their house and everything is in Colombo and they are passing a good life.” (I. 23)

\textsuperscript{92} In the last paragraph I have already demonstrated the power and autonomy of politicians in relevant local decision-making bodies for development like the DCC or the DDC.

\textsuperscript{93} Although the new constitution with this change was promulgated in 1978 already, the first parliamentary election where it was actually practiced were only in 1989.
Before 1989, MPs could easily be contacted in their house or office in the electoral district at least over the weekend (Oberst 1985: 60). They were also personally responsible for ‘their’ area and according to Oberst’s research, each MP did meet with nearly all of his constituents during his term in office (ibid.: 55). “Before we voted for person, now for party. Now we lose contact. If we want to contact him, he doubts that I voted for him or his party.” (C.P. 17). With this loss of possibilities for personal contact for a large part of the population a small but important potential of citizens for holding their politicians accountable for what they do (or do not do) was lost and thereby the autonomy of MPs increased.

With regard to the voting procedure many people turned out to be disillusioned. Several cases of electoral malpractice were reported. Personal intimidation, the use of the Samurdhi programme to ‘force’ or ‘motivate’ people to vote for a specific party and the counting of votes that had not been cast were only some of them. Resignation and lethargy were among the attitudes that people expressed with regard to the usefulness of elections.

“So if we want to see a change, so we have to wait another six years till another government will come. So even if another government comes there is no difference. According to the past experience, we have seen both parties governing the country but both do the same. If both are not good, what can we do?” (I. 17)

Although the JVP has achieved some remarkable results in the last elections, people did not (yet) think of them as an alternative to the two dominating parties because they still remember the past of the JVP and are too scared to vote for them. The criteria according to which people do ‘qualify’ for contesting for a seat in parliament also contributes to the impression of the people that there is no alternative available (see also Perera 1998):

“...in our country the system, voting, I mean the election system it depends on the strength and the money. (...) Strength means the people who are backing and who can face anything and who can fight and who can do these things. And the money. So without these things you can’t contest in an election. So educated graduates are not up to that standard.” (I. 10)

If elections are seen as an instrument for pushing competing parties into creating better policies, the choices in Sri Lanka seem to be quite restricted from the voter’s point of view. This experience of voters indicates that specific mechanisms according to which politics is being exercised have been institutionalised to such an extent that they are not changing even when a new government comes to power. These mechanisms as well as alternative functions that elections and the support given to a politician might have, will be dealt with later. With

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94 As the explicit aim of the introduction of the proportional representation system was to accommodate the different minorities of the country, it is interesting to note that the above quotations as well as many other comments in this direction were made by Muslims.

95 The fact that these practices are widespread and are exercised in some areas in an institutionalised manner is confirmed by a recent study on electoral malpractice in Sri Lanka (Peiris 2002; see also the website of the Centre for Policy Analysis for information on elections and violence: http://www.cpalanka.org).
regard to the ability of citizens to supervise their politicians the opinion prevails that “we have no power to control them since they control us.” (I. 17).

I will now turn to the next dimension of autonomy. This is autonomy from law which is often connected with the exercise of or the threat with physical violence. I will start by quoting a longer passage from an interview where these dimensions come out very plastically. I was talking to a person about the last national elections and the attempt of an MP and his men to intimidate people at a polling station:

“M.R.: Did they fight?

Well, they didn’t hit the people individually. But their behaviours has damaged our soul. (...) On the election day (...) at the polling station (...) the Officer in Charge, a head of a police station was [there] with around twenty people to give security to the polling rule but in spite of that this fellow [the MP; M.R.] (...) and his supporters, fully drunken came with the van with sticks and knives and all that and hit the JVP cadres around here and who was voting (...). But the JVP they had come to observe them as a reporter from the paper, newspaper. They always smash those guys and smash cameras but the police was here.

M.R.: And what did they do?

I mean we were watching it to our own eyes! (...) Weapons and they [Police Officers; M.R.] had everything but he [Officer in Charge; M.R.] was not dare enough to do anything, he remained silent and said: go, go, go. But, I mean that’s how, then we, we really suffer. To whom we are voting to join parliament! That is an authorised person that we are voting. (...) When they go to parliament they reveal their real state, (...). By showing swords and sticks and knives and guns and weapons and everything in front of the police like proving that they are not afraid of police, not afraid of civil law! Nothing but their own power! (...) That was the present government party.

So, I mean this is the real situation, so we are really disbelieve, desperated. And if we feel like going to a police station for some reason we remember that, we go to the persons like that. But how comes we expect any right from those person? If he cannot act at that time for those who came with arms and other things, they hit and blame the police to the face and they remain silent! So there is nothing more to say. It is evident. And who possess the power. So the next moment if somebody wants to be powerful and strong and go over police, what he has to do is to join the politician party.” (I. 17)

People were very much aware of the incapacity of the police to secure the rule of law. Everybody knows that police officers are also facing physical violence or will loose their job or be transferred away if they do not respect the autonomy of politicians. Thus the police cannot fulfil its crucial role as the institution to which people could turn to in the last instance to secure their rights according to the rule of law. Instead, other mechanisms of authority based on other principles have been established as one interviewed person stated while reflecting on the weakness of the police:

“... that’s the main thing that people have disbelieve in this everything that happens around. I mean they feel that they are very neglected, they are very, I mean, useless. So even I, I feel that. If we thinks, okay, we have to go to the police and we have to go to no other organisation for help, for any right. Then the next minute we think, oh, what the use of going there? No need, because he works - we know that police - he works for the Chairman [of the UC; M.R.], maybe for the minister, maybe for the PA, right? And if we want something we have to go to the minister, maybe the PA, maybe the Chairman.” (I. 17)

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96 Whether the police does secure the rule of law or not does of course also depend on their willingness to do so. But in my interviews people always strongly emphasised the lack of power of the police to do so.
This fundamental subordination of the rule of law under the ‘rule of politics’ even when it takes place at the highest level of the state is strongly noticed by the people.

“How even the earlier government came to power, they inquired, inquired, inquired about he [members of the former government; M.R.] got that land, this and that and then postponed. Now, these people come to power, they will also inquire, inquire. No punishment. Useless. The commission [to investigate allegations of corruption against former members of government; M.R.], that is only another waste, waste of time and waste of money.” (I. 3)

That even the rivalry between the two main parties does not motivate politicians to make use of the force of law against each other is thus another factor that gives people the impression that this subordination of the rule of law under the ‘rule of politics’ has become an institutionalised practice rather than being the fault of one of the parties.

Together with the rule of law, politicians have also taken over the monopoly of violence. Instruments of state violence like imprisonment and the execution of verdicts can be used and influenced by politicians. But also physical violence has become a characteristic of politics and a practice of single politicians in Sri Lanka, especially since the late 1970s. At all levels political violence usually goes hand in hand with impunity for the respective actors. In my interviews, in other conversations and in newspaper articles, people are reacting to these tendencies with disillusionment and a feeling of powerlessness as well as personal threat in many cases.

Organisations that could probably challenge ‘politics’ at the local level are local NGOs. The representatives of local NGOs I spoke to stated that they encounter a high level of suspicion whenever they try to contact public servants. Some told me that politicians only have contacts with and support these NGOs in the area that have a large membership and a certain popularity: “that’s interesting for politicians.” (I. 28). Another characteristic of NGOs in Southern Town as well as apparently in the rest of Sri Lanka, maybe except Colombo, is that they focus very much on delivering services and resources but not on doing political lobby work. I will come back to this point later.

Even at the local level politicians from the centre seem to be the decisive force and can act autonomously and largely unchallenged from other actors. Of course, autonomy is never absolute but I found that despite of people having different perspectives on and connections with ‘politics’, they all agreed that “the end-power is by the politician.” (I. 17). If politicians have succeeded to monopolise power in certain spheres to such an extend and if they have

97 According to Perera, violence as a means of politics was institutionalised in Sri Lanka through the UNP that came to power in 1977 (1998: 19-26) and has become endemic since. During the civil war in the North-East and the (para-)military campaign of the government against the JVP in the South, political violence reached unprecedented heights. The collaboration of the government with paramilitary troops in these wars and of politicians with ‘gangsters’ (Uyangoda 1997) and personal teams of ‘thugs’ intensified the “steady criminalization of democratic politics” (Perera 1998: 86) in Sri Lanka. For Perera this “continuity of political violence and the inability or the apparent disinterest of the state (irrespective of which political formation may represent the state)” (ibid.: 85) poses the most serious threat to democracy in the country.
achieved such a high degree of autonomy, there is only little that people can do against these practices. Therefore it is interesting to look at how people manage this situation and if they try to make use of these practices for their own purposes in certain ways. Some of these ‘mechanisms’ will be presented in the next part.

4.2.3 “Because when somebody wants to do something we always have to go through the politicians.” (I. 17) – Mechanisms of politics

By ‘mechanism’ I refer to the different possibilities of getting access to services or resources by using ‘politics’ and the work that is required for getting access98. I distinguish two sorts of mechanisms. One is the ‘party mechanism’, the other one the ‘minister mechanism’99. Both have to be seen as a continuum where the latter is at the stronger end. The distance between both ends is not a very long one as access to MPs and ministers100 in Sri Lanka is quite easy compared to other countries101. Although it became more difficult with the introduction of the proportional representation system it is still possible for a large number of people to contact ‘their’ MPs or ministers. This is not only confined to richer people or those living in urban areas. Apart from direct access, access through ‘mediation’ is also possible as I will show below. The ‘party mechanism’ is usually working for everyday activities like routine interaction with public servants or the distribution of welfare services. An example is Sri Lanka’s biggest social security programme Samurdhi102. Samurdhi is well known for having a strong ethnic bias towards Sinhalese people and for being heavily politicised and leaving out around 40 per cent of the poorest households while on the other hand including around 60 per cent of households which are not formally eligible (Jansz 2000; Kumarasinghe 2002). Access is usually granted if party affiliations with the governing party do exist. People being affiliated with other parties are often excluded from welfare services. Another example for the effective exclusion from public services is the story of the UNP Urban Council vice chairman of Southern Town who told me that while the PA was governing the country he was too scared to go to the Divisional Secretariat in his town for getting official documents. Thus the ‘party mechanism’ is always ambivalent for the people103.

98 I did not avoid terms like ‘patronage politics’ or ‘clientelism’ that are usually used to describe these kinds of politics purposely. However, I found that the terms that I have developed from my data are more precise for what I want to refer to. Nevertheless, the phenomena are falling under the category of patron-client relations.
99 I use the term ‘minister mechanism’ as people referred to ministers in most cases. MPs were also mentioned as they can also exercise some of the services that people expected when using the ‘minister mechanism’.
100 The MPs or ministers that people would approach are usually those who have been elected in their electoral district.
101 It is interesting to know that Sri Lanka has the highest number of ministers among all countries in the world. After the 2001 elections the number rose to an all-time high of 61 cabinet, project and deputy ministers (www.srilankaelections.com).
102 Samurdhi (‘prosperity’) is basically a welfare allowance programme which also includes some credit and insurance components.
103 To deal with this problem, changing party membership is a strategy which is used by some MPs or even ministers despite of the clear ideological left-right differentiation of the two major parties in Sri Lanka.
is no chance for UNP or JVP. When the UNP in powers actually the situation is the same.” (I. 8). As I said already, both mechanisms can be seen as a continuum. Although in everyday interaction, to be known as a supporter of a particular party is sufficient to get access to government services, the reason behind this mechanism is that every supporter could potentially contact the minister whenever a service is denied to him/her. The ‘minister mechanism’ as such is often used for more special tasks like getting a job, promotion or transfer:

“... any person who wants to get a transfer, any teacher, anyone in the administration, anyone in the police who wants to get a transfer would not apply to his immediate boss or his head of the department direct but he would first go to the politician and try to canvass the politician to influence the transfer.” (I. 18)

The ‘minister mechanism’ is also frequently used in the constructions business as a technical officer and some contractors told me. The constructor usually approaches the minister to get a letter from him which asks the technical officer in charge to give the contract to the contractor. The contracts acquired with the help of a minister yield a much higher profit than the competitive tender-contracts. Other businessmen also try to get contracts or official documents with the help of ministers (see also Moore 1985: 198). A Chamber of Commerce official complained: “There is a dispute of some commerce (...) they must learn to go to their chamber or something than running to the politician.” (I. 26).

For being able to use the ‘minister mechanism’ it is usually not enough to only belong to the politician’s party. Contractors told me that they call the minister (or even more than one) before the election campaign starts and offer to help him preparing the party rallies, for example by providing their private or transport cars. They also insure the minister that their friends and relatives will be voting for him. Donating money for financing the election campaign was not involved in the cases that I know of. The ‘minister mechanism’ works similarly for people who want to get jobs in government-owned enterprises or in the public service. People have to help the minister or his party during election times to ‘qualify’ for getting a job later. These services are highly personalised (see Perera 1985: 164). However, I heard from several people that people who offer enough money can also ‘buy’ jobs without working for the party.

Even development projects of international donors cannot work outside the autonomous sphere of the politicians and without using the ‘minister mechanism’. From Sri Lankan staff members of a bilateral donor organisation I heard that they could only implement their project because a minister who blocked the implementation could be convinced by local staff that by presenting himself to the people as the person responsible for the project, he could benefit from it politically.

The ‘minister mechanism’ is also of great importance as far as protection against the autonomy of public servants and the police is concerned. This is also the explanation for the findings concerning the different hardware shop owners presented earlier, where the Muslim
owners turned out to be vulnerable to the practice of ‘enforced gifts’ of police officers while the Sinhalese owners did not have these problems.

“The Sinhalese also a bit more powerful than the Muslims. They are, you know, some are from powerful families. They can, they are without fear because majority is Sinhalese, no? They can go to politicians and make reports.” (I. 28)

Muslims are in a structurally weaker position as they are generally not as much in these political networks as Sinhalese are\(^\text{104}\) and thus often lack the necessary social capital.

So far I have discussed only the direct form of the mechanisms of ‘politics’, either through contact with the MP/minister or through the routinised everyday form of it, the ‘party mechanism’. But there are forms of mediation also. Unfortunately I cannot say very much about them as most of the people I talked to had contact with MPs or ministers themselves. The indirect forms are more likely to appear in the villages outside the urban area (see Gunasekera 1992: 240-248). However, some remarks are possible. The following description of how the mediated forms work I got when I asked a person to whom a teacher would go if he wanted to be transferred to another school:

“The closest politician he or she has access to. And then they work up. Let’s say for instance if he or she has access only to the local government (...) only a member who is not powerful enough to influence the Director of Education, right? What he does, he or she, who wants a transfer goes to this authority member, then goes with him to the politician who gave him nomination for that elections and then he says, he is a very close political sympathiser of ours, he helped us in these elections, so can you please give a letter, so and so. So it goes up that way.” (I. 18)

Together with other statements and information I gathered and strikingly similar to the findings of Gunasekera (1992) a conclusion about the nature of these local political ‘brokers’ in Sri Lanka can be made. ‘Brokers’ in Sri Lanka do most of the time lack the autonomy which is usually the special feature of an intermediary who mediates ‘between different worlds’\(^\text{105}\). As far as my data are concerned I can only agree with Gunasekera’s assessment that ‘brokers’ in Sri Lanka “lack any independent resources of their own” and that their “power is essentially unstable and impermanent” (ibid.: 246-247) as they have usually no monopoly on anything that they could offer to politicians. In most cases they will lose their position immediately if the MP/ministers loses his seat. That is why Gunasekera argues that ‘brokers’ “cannot be considered ‘brokers’ in the conventional sense” (ibid.) and why she prefers the term ‘henchman’ for the Sri Lankan context. Everything that a henchman has to offer to the local population is his connection to the MP or minister. Thus he remains fully dependant on the MP/minister with regard to every service that he can offer. He is only a link in the short, vertical ‘chain of mediation’ and as such he is easily exchangeable.

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\(^\text{104}\) That does not mean that single Muslims are not in these networks at all. The contractor I quoted before, for example, is a Muslim. However, many Sinhalese people are in these networks from the very beginning because of their families’ connections, what is generally not the case for Muslims.

\(^\text{105}\) For comparison see the analysis of (development-)brokers in the African context of Bierschenk et al. (2001).
As a first summary it is possible to say that politicians (MPs/ministers) have succeeded to monopolise the dominant and ultimate power of decision-making in the most important spheres of life in Sri Lanka. Therefore they are largely autonomous in what they are doing. Mechanism have developed according to which people can get access to the services of politicians. The basic mechanism is what I call ‘minister mechanism’ which in its everyday form also works as ‘party mechanism’. In the next part I will look at what people think about these structures and mechanisms, what their effects are and how people think they could be changed.

4.3 “Let us not talk politics.”

The risk of political discourse and the unavoidability of politics

4.3.1 ‘Civil society’ in Sri Lanka?

Most people I talked to expressed the feeling that the government is cheating them by promising much but realising only little. Despite these widespread frustrations in Southern Town I found a striking absence of ‘civil society’ activities. People usually confirmed this perception. Some reasons for this phenomenon will be outlined now. With regard to policies or the mode of politics most people I talked to saw themselves as being powerless. Apart from this perception of a lack of political efficacy of the people, the disunity among the people was mentioned as another reason. The major causes for this disunity according to my interview partners are religion, party affiliation and the selfishness of people in ‘getting their own thing done’ without caring about the wider community. Generally, younger people were much more likely than older people to complain about certain practices or problems to local politicians or public servants. When I asked if the people who were systematically excluded from public services had organised themselves against these practices, people told me that the only ‘political organisation’ were the two parties and that the necessary leadership for setting up such an organisation could only come from an MP or a minister. A common attitude was that the changes that were necessary for the country had to come and could only come from the centre, from the MPs and ministers themselves. One person who was sceptical that this might happen argued instead that for something to be changed “there must be a complete destruction here” for people to be “reborn again” (I. 17) after the destruction. This strongly resembles the motivations behind the JVP-insurrection of 1987-89 that was clearly anti-state and anti-systemic (cf. Mayer 2000: 162).

In nearly every conversation I had, people complained heavily about ‘dirty politics’ in Sri Lanka. With this expression they referred to the strong politicisation of society, the self-interest

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106 Quoted from an advertisement board of the Sri Lankan company Siddhalepa, Hettigoda Group which I came across in front of a famous Buddhist temple in Southern Sri Lanka.

107 I use ‘civil society’ here in the ‘Western’ meaning of organisations acting in between the public and the private sphere primarily by doing lobby work for achieving certain political goals.
of politicians and party politics. Apart from outbreaks of violence during election times when the “political heat” (I. 11) comes up, the permanent potential of (party) politics to cause trouble at the village level was striking. ‘Talking politics’ which means discussing political issues or talking about parties and politicians was characterised as being dangerous and as creating trouble 108:

“If both of us belong into same party we will have a peaceful surrounding here or otherwise you and myself must be arguing, so let us not talk politics. (…) … so you must not talk politics if you want to be peaceful.” (I. 10)

These efforts to avoid ‘talking politics’ in everyday life as well as the negative attitudes towards politics are in strong contradiction to the awareness of people about their very strong dependence on politicians and (party) politics (cf. Mayer 2002a: 159-160). They are also contradictory to the image of the state as the responsible actor for reforming the political system and the state as an important source of social status 110. This ambivalence of politics and the state in the eyes of most people is created by the clear-cut exclusion/inclusion processes according to party affiliation that dominate and influence all spheres of life down to the village level. Almost everybody is vulnerable to be excluded at some point in the future if the ‘wrong’ party happens to win the elections. ‘Talking politics’ is so dangerous and risky precisely because politics is so important and touches upon every aspect of daily life of most people.

This comprehensive politicisation makes it nearly impossible for anybody to do something independently of these political networks. NGOs as well as journalists depend on services of politicians or at least on them tolerating or ignoring their work. Everybody is aware that “this is a political situation here.” (I. 4). As far as local NGOs are concerned, what I found to be “[a]n extremely apolitical discourse of development [which] is dominated by the ‘delivery mode of development’” (Röseberg 2002; see also Bastian 1998) may be a response to that situation and the dangers connected with politics. Organisations which try to do political lobby-work face a problem that one of my interview partners called the “isolation-type situation” 111:

108 I expected the experience of violence during the JVP insurrection to have some influence on the way the state and politics is perceived. However, according to several of my interview partners these experiences did not fundamentally change these perceptions. That politics is perceived as being dangerous and that people are usually not challenging central government authorities is not restricted to the south of Sri Lanka.

109 The interpretation of “Let us not talk politics” of the company that financed these advertisement boards is the following: “Generally Sri Lankans, when they get together, jabber on unnecessary topics on politics. This more often results in their neglecting their work and some times such talk leads to quarrels among themselves. It is an advice to the people to refrain from such unnecessary talk. Our motive in putting up such Boards is to make our people aware of those and to advice them not to indulge in such unwanted things. (…) We consider it as service that we are doing to educate our people.” (Hettigoda Group, by e-mail, 07.10.2002).

110 See also Spencer (1990: 208-231) on these issues.

111 A small organisation that tried to educate rural people about their rights was set up in Southern Town two years ago. However, the founders were politically well connected and had the backing of the District Secretary at that time. As soon as this secretary was transferred due to his resistance against political orders from the centre, the organisation stopped working. The NGOs of Southern Town have recently decided to form a NGO consortium that should also help to communicate with the district administration. This idea is also based on a proposal from the
“Isolation, that means, ah, if some forces, forces mean the political or any social organisation or NGO is trying to do something against those process and the social situation but there is no, ah, agreeable public participation. People are thinking: Are they going to some political target? They are any background in politically? And who are the leading these things? What is the use of this type of action? Is there any financial benefit to us? Those are things they are thinking. Therefore that movements is isolating and no public participation or operation.” (I. 8)

This sensitivity and deep suspicion towards any kind of organised activity outside of political parties is understandable if one looks back into history where all local level organisations that were established for decentralisation and more participation have only led to a stronger and more efficient political control from the centre and thus to “rural disempowerment” (Røseberg 2002: 193). This “dominance of political over social organisation” (Moore 1985: 227-230) leads to the paradox effect that activities or organisations that do not offer either political connections or immediate material gain are largely ignored by most people because they are seen as being useless\(^\text{112}\).

Using the terminology of Albert O. Hirschman (1970) it is possible to conclude that ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ are hardly possible for the people in Sri Lanka. And if the third option ‘loyalty’ in this context implies the exclusion of a large number of people from access to public services as only a restricted number of people can get access through party affiliation\(^\text{113}\) (cf. Pfaff-Czarnecka 1999: 94), what options are these excluded people left with? In (peripheral) Sri Lanka many of them react with lethargy and feelings of alienation from the state and from the current political system\(^\text{114}\).

4.3.2 ‘Communal harmony’ through ‘conflict anticipation’

In this paragraph I will present some of my findings concerning the position of a religious minority at the local level within these social and political structures. Whenever I asked directly if there were any problems between Muslim and Buddhist people in Southern Town, I was presented a picture that I have named ‘communal harmony’. Muslims emphasised strongly that

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\(^\text{112}\) For the difficulties of a youth development project see Mayer (2002c; 2002a: 255-258). The suspicion of people towards development activities and organisations is nicely illustrated by the experience of International Development Organisations like World Bank or Asian Development Bank. They have to pay ‘sit-in-allowances’ to people in rural areas of Sri Lanka to ‘make them participate’ in Participatory Rapid Appraisals (PRAs) or ‘needs-assessment’ workshops (see Mayer 2002a: 255, fn. 36). If people doubt that they will have any benefit from the project either because it ‘only’ aims at empowerment or because politicians will monopolise and distribute the project benefits anyway, they have to make sure to get their share before the project starts.

\(^\text{113}\) According to Hirschman, ‘loyalty’ is one option that people can choose to react to decline or bad performance of organisations. The original understanding of the ‘loyalty’ option is that people remain loyal to an organisation in spite of the bad performance. In the context of patronage politics however, the ‘loyalty’ that is based on personal benefits automatically excludes other people from access to organisations and services and at the same time prevents broad-based ‘voice’ or ‘exit’.

\(^\text{114}\) This feeling of alienation is largely based on the exclusion from patronage networks. The political ideals of excluded people are not automatically democratic ones. In this context it is instructive to note that the ideals of political leadership of the revolutionary JVP were not less authoritarian than these of the other parties (Mayer 2002a: 40).
in comparison with other places in the area, Southern Town had a remarkable history of peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Sinhala-Buddhists and the few Tamil people\(^{115}\). However, I was wondering why people did emphasise this point so strongly once it was mentioned. I was told that there were inter-religious marriages, and “not only one or two” of them (I. 23) and that people were like “sisters and brothers in Southern Town” (I. 7). I began to notice that this dimension was sensitive and very important precisely because people were usually reluctant to talk about this issue without being asked. After some time in the field I began to ask more concrete questions, indicating that I knew about the dominance of Sinhala-Buddhists in the public service or in the police, for example. Then, very carefully people began to unveil the ethnic\(^{116}\) dimension of some of their everyday problems. The way Muslim people were putting it already indicated that this topic was of the highest sensitivity:

“You might be thinking, … not that you are thinking but you might be thinking, possibility is there. Because always pointing his fingers at the Buddhists. Why? Not because I have anything against them [laughing]. Not that you are thinking, you might be thinking. So, there you are.” (I. 25).

Apart from that, especially the more educated Muslims I talked to displayed their patriotism for Sri Lanka and their friendship with Buddhist people explicitely. They also expressed relief and joy about the end of the civil war in the North-East of the country. But at the same time some people feared that “now the next flouting will be on the heads of the Muslims” (I. 25), that they will be ‘the successors’ of the Tamils. I learned that people followed up the peace negotiations between the LTTE and the government very closely. They also noticed the clashes that occurred between the LTTE and the Muslims living in the Eastern Province. The perception was that the fate of the Muslims was largely neglected by both parties negotiating for peace in Sri Lanka, in particular by the government\(^{117}\). This coincides with the analysis of Hussain (2001) who argues that in Sri Lanka generally “the impression is given that the Muslims constitute no particular problem (…) and that they are peripheral to the main ethnic conflict” (ibid.: 251)\(^{118}\).

Apart from that, in everyday life in Southern Town I came across several phenomena indicating that discrimination of Muslims is taking place, especially with regard to the public service and the police as I have shown already. I do not think that it is intended by the people working there to discriminate Muslims as a group but it happens for certain reasons that I will

\(^{115}\) I did not follow up whether this is consistent with the ‘official’ history of the area.

\(^{116}\) I am using the term ‘ethnic’ here instead of ‘religious’ because this is the label according to which Sri Lankan non-Muslims do usually classify all people who are adherents of Islam.

\(^{117}\) A Muslim politician was later added to the team of the Sri Lankan government. However, Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (founded in 1987) was seen as the representative of the Muslims living in the Eastern Province only (28 per cent of all Muslims in Sri Lanka; Hussain 2001: 262) by my interview partners. The party itself is also seen as a provincial party and not as a religious or ethnic party (Hussain 2001: 247; Ali 2001: 12).

\(^{118}\) Hussain uses this conclusion referring to a specific report but it sums up his argument in the article.
discuss later. Most Muslim people that I came to know a little bit better turned out to be very sensible to various symbols of Sinhala-Buddhist dominance, especially in government institutions\(^{119}\). Generally, they were very much aware of their ethnic minority position in the larger area. In Southern Town, Muslims have developed a special pattern of how to deal with their minority position in the social and political context which I call ‘conflict anticipation’. This pattern also helps to understand why people were so extremely careful in conversations not to make me think that they had any problems with Buddhist people:

“I am very careful because we are living in an atmosphere where you must live peacefully. (...) So we have fought for nearly 20 years of war. And now it has been stopped. We are very happy and we hope and we pray that it should continue. That is why we have to be very careful when you say something and you must not hurt one person of the other religion. So myself is very careful and my family members also, I have told them to be very peaceful and I don’t interfere in the other things [he was referring to the Buddhist NGO mentioned in fn. 128; M.R.]. (...) ...even in one word you must not criticise [a person of another religion; M.R.]. (...) So we have to be more careful not to do anything against that peaceful atmosphere.” (I. 10)\(^{120}\)

Everything that Muslims say or do in Southern Town outside of their community seems to be regulated by ‘conflict anticipation’. People always have in mind that they are members of a “weak minority” (I. 25) and that every action they take might lead to a conflict along ethnic or religious lines. Even if ‘communal harmony’ prevails on the surface of everyday life in Southern Town this state of affairs seems to be a very precarious one. “So once they [Muslims; M.R.] talk against the police, then there is a conflict between the Sinhalese and the Muslims.” (I. 25). Most Muslims I spoke to would not raise any demands for the community or complain about any sort of discrimination they might have faced because they are afraid of being harassed personally or of ‘putting in some trouble’ (I. 23) the whole Muslim community. Instead “we pay the money and silent. That’s what we can do.” (ibid.). The position that many Muslims see themselves in is well expressed in the following remark of one of my interview partners:

“Whenever the Muslims fight for their rights or the minorities fight for their rights, the majority community will say, this is pure racism or communalism. But when they fight, when they maltreat the minority communities they will say that is nationalism.” (I. 25)

Another reason for why Muslim people do not complain is that they have no idea to whom they should go to for complaining. Only few of the Muslims I know about had direct access to an MP or a minister. This is exactly why they are facing bribery and ‘enforced gifts’ in such an

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\(^{119}\) One of these symbols is language. The first language of Muslims was usually Tamil. In all the government institutions only Sinhala was spoken. Even if most Muslims did also speak Sinhala they did not feel comfortable with this situation. Another example is a Buddhist NGO that managed some government facilities. Although Muslims were not excluded from using these facilities and the organisation did not benefit from this financially, Muslims expressed their discomfort with this arrangement.

\(^{120}\) By referring explicitly to the post-war situation, this quotation shows how important the peace process is for other minorities in the country. However, ‘conflict anticipation’ is of course not confined to this special situation as many other interviews and conversations showed.
apparently planned and systematic manner compared to the Sinhalese population. People often emphasised that their situation would be very different if they had a Muslim representative. Therefore the case of the Muslims in Southern Town is helpful for clarifying two of the most important functions that a legislator is expected to fulfil in Sri Lanka. The first one could be called ‘delivery work’ which means channelling funds and projects to supporters and mediating jobs and services to them. ‘Delivery work’ includes both, ‘constituency service’ and ‘development work’ in Oberst’ terminology (1985). The second function that is expected from legislators is the protection from law and sanctions according to law as well as unlawful treatment like bribery. This function could be termed ‘security work’. MPs and ministers are able to a considerable extent to create ‘informal spaces of security’. I have tried to capture this and other phenomena showing which modes of authority are the dominating ones in Sri Lanka with the term ‘rule of politics’. For minority communities this second potential function of legislators is particularly important and goes far beyond the pure security issue, also having a psychological dimension:

“The Muslims are politically weak in the sense, those days we had representatives. (…) Whenever there was a problem we were able to go and tell him. Though he may not look into the problems immediately we had a confidence in ourselves.” (I. 25)

According to my analysis the reason for the discrimination of Muslims in Southern Town is not that Sinhalese-Buddhist people did not like them personally. It is rather because most Muslims are not as strongly integrated into the political networks. They are not only excluded from the ‘rule of law’ as many people in Sri Lanka are but also from the ‘rule of politics’. This is a structural rather than an ethnic or religious problem that Muslims share with many other groups in the country.121

5 PRACTICES AND MEANINGS OF POLITICS: THE ‘OCTOPUS-MODE’ OF POLITICS IN SRI LANKA

In this chapter I will summarise my findings on politics in Sri Lanka and will draw some theoretical conclusions122. I will discuss the following three major dimensions: the political system, political practices and finally the meaning of politics. For each dimension the

121 Of course, I am not arguing here that ‘ethnic identity’ or ‘religious identity’ are no relevant dimensions to many problems in Sri Lanka. But while these dimensions and processes have been widely discussed and analysed, the specific political structures that have developed in Sri Lanka have not been given the same academic attention, as far as I can see.
122 I think that I can claim to be able to carefully draw some general conclusions on politics in Sri Lanka. Apart from interviews with people from other areas in Sri Lanka, I used newspaper articles and scientific literature on Sri Lankan politics to make sure that the phenomena I present are not confined to the southern part of the country. The findings of two more recent empirical studies are generally in line with my arguments (Mayer 2002a, 2002b; Bigdon 2003).
distinction between formal and informal characteristics will be crucial even if it is not always possible to clearly separate the one from the other.

Sri Lanka is characterised by a very high level of penetration of society by the state. Formally the political as well as the administrative system is heavily controlled and dominated by the central government authorities in Colombo. The introduction of the Provincial Councils and the decentralised LAs in 1987 have not fundamentally changed this structure but rather enhanced the capacity of the centre for a more effective control of the local level. Even with regard to other kinds of local organisations it is obvious that the strategy in Sri Lanka “is one of the integration of social and political organisations in the framework of a national state and the corresponding absence of autonomous local social institutions.” (Moore 1985: 228). But if spaces for associational autonomy are lacking, a “transition from clientelism to citizenship” (Fox 1994) becomes highly unlikely as Fox has shown in his “lessons from Mexico”.

By also using their formally strong position as members of the central government in informal ways, MPs and ministers have established themselves as the most powerful individuals in their respective electoral districts. This comprehensive power over many sectors of society goes even beyond the rule of law. According to my analysis, politicians can be described as being ‘autonomous’ and the form of authority which is dominating in society as ‘rule of politics’. It is this specific structure of Sri Lankan politics with its practices and meanings that I will call the ‘octopus-mode’ of politics. While the head of the octopus symbolises the MPs and ministers – the head and ‘source’ of power – the numerous tentacles that go down from there are symbols for both, the (downward) authority that politicians can exercise in all sectors of society as well as the ‘chains of mediation’ or (upward) access to politicians. As politicians are largely autonomous the tentacles are moveable and the politicians decide what kind of connection they want to establish, to maintain and to dissolve.

What are the practices of politics in this system? In distinction to the ‘Western’ understanding of what the responsibility of a legislator is, in Sri Lanka “law-making is not found to be the most important function of the legislatures” (Oberst 1985: 3). Instead, ‘delivery work’ and ‘security work’ are most important. These practices are highly personalised (‘minister-mechanism’), either directly or indirectly with the help of a henchman (‘chain of mediation’). However for normal public services, party affiliation with the party in government serves as a substitute (‘party-mechanism’). Those who do not have contacts or do not support the ‘right’ party are left with the option of paying bribes or hoping to meet a public servant who does not exploit his restricted autonomy.

123 One of my interviewees compared the political system of Sri Lanka to an octopus because of the many linkages that exist between different sectors (I. 18). I use the metaphor in a different way. However, I owe the idea to this person and I am very grateful for it.

124 On the importance of what I have called ‘delivery work’ in Sri Lankan politics, see also Moore (1985: 224) and Spencer (1990: 228-229).
Most of these practices of politics are informal but nevertheless well institutionalised. To understand this we have to turn to the third dimension of the ‘octopus-mode’ of politics: the meaning of politics.

“People depend on everything from politicians, so the people think the politicians are the best people to do everything. That idea is created or that ideas has come because this political interference. The people, uneducated people think politicians can do anything. So they think that every person must go behind the politician.” (I. 10)

I found that the practices and mechanisms of politics in Sri Lanka were seen as legitimate by most people. The success of politicians depends on their success to deliver services and resources to a large part of the population in their respective electoral district. The long tradition of an extensive welfare system might have created these expectations and is likely to have been an important facilitator for this kind of politics. The politicisation of the public administration gave people, especially in the rural areas another reason to see politicians as the “new power elite” (Gunasekera 1992: 240) they had to turn to with problems and demands. Regardless of what they thought about the new system with its mechanisms, if they didn’t want to “go empty-handed” (I. 28) they had no other chance than using the ‘party-‘ or ‘minister mechanism’. I was struck by the openness of some businesspeople telling me exactly what the procedure is to get a contract with a minister’s help. None of them seemed to have any doubts about the legitimacy of this practice: “In Sri Lanka we must do like that.” (G.P. 11)

Using Luhmann’s concept of causality we could say that people learned to attribute the delivery of services, resources and even security to the political system and the politicians themselves, thereby developing a special pattern of causal thinking and expectations based on this pattern. The institutionalisation of this kind of politics where “the State distributes, the peasant consumes” (Spencer 1990: 228) also helps to explain the widespread “passive ‘receiving mentality’” (Mayer 2002c: 3) or ‘dependency syndrome’ among the rural Sri Lankan population. People expect the state and politicians to deliver services, jobs and welfare payments to them as they have ‘always’ done. In a poor and rural area like Southern Sri Lanka the dependency on these ‘political transfers’ is particularly high.

We can conclude that irrespective of how the system and the mechanisms developed historically, citizens as well as politicians have developed a special kind of causal thinking that is usually not questioned in everyday life as it has proved to be functional for a very long time and is so still today. As few other options were available, people have adapted to the system and have learned to use it to ‘get their things done’. Children have been socialised within this

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125 Even if all the people I talked to know that politicians can do almost anything, most of them also know that this is not the way politics is supposed to work.
126 Even if Oberst’ results are from 1985, it is interesting to see that his result was that the legislators see it as their duty to distribute particularised benefits and do even express positive attitudes about this practise (1985: 67-68).
127 Unfortunately I cannot discuss the importance of MPs assuming many of the roles and responsibilities of local traditional leaders (see Oberst 1985: 56; Rösel 1997: 233).
system and have learned that politicians are responsible for delivering services and jobs to them (cf. Mayer 2002a: 229). For many people these personal material benefits are the motivation to vote for a specific politician: “the people themselves have also developed attitudes to sustain the politicisation.” (I. 18). It is important to emphasise this point that the system is working according to a specific logic and rationality that is to a large extend shared by politicians and citizens. An institutionalisation of the ‘rule of politics’ has taken place, irrespective of which party is in power. To take this institutionalisation of (party) politics into account, helps to understand the violence that politics and ‘talking politics’ can cause at the village level: “because almost everyone is heavily dependant on the State” (Spencer 1990: 228–229). It also helps to understand why a transformation of the current political system is expected and can only be imagined to take place either if it starts from the top or through a violent insurrection that would destroy the political system. A last point that is important with regard to the institutionalisation of the ‘rule of politics’ is that the system is so comprehensive, especially in peripheral Sri Lanka, that it is almost impossible for somebody to set up an organisation or organise activities independent of the political sphere (see also Fernando, quoted in Saravanamuttu 1998: 114). Independent organisations are thus highly unlikely to emerge. As everybody is aiming at establishing vertical links because they have proven to be functional, horizontal linkages that are necessary for being able to resist domination by central leadership (Fox 1992: 7) are neglected. The comprehensiveness and force that the ‘rule of politics’ has developed in Sri Lanka is articulated in the following quotation:

“In Sri Lanka each and every place is subjected to the politicians. Right? From a single telephone call from a higher politician everything is done, to his mind not the secretariats mind. So even the police people they have to do that. They have to listen to the politicians because they think that they are survive there because of the politician. Because the power of their life, their existing, what they believe is, this politician.” (I. 17).

6 DISCUSSION: DEMOCRATISATION AND DECENTRALISATION

In this chapter some theoretical as well as practical conclusions can be drawn from the findings. As far as theory is concerned I want to look at what the results of my study can contribute to the puzzle of political development and transition. The practical part will deal with the question of decentralisation as a solution to the current problems that Sri Lanka is facing.

I think that I could show that especially with regard to regimes in the ‘grey area’ between democracy and dictatorship, informal practices can be exercised that make use of formal

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128 Both, the concept of causality according to Luhmann and the term ‘institutionalisation’ do not imply that change is not possible. Rather they emphasise that change always happens in a particular context and that the ‘old logics’ will have an impact on the transformation process towards new structures and logics (see for example the study of Mense-Petermann 2002). In economic theory the concept of ‘path dependency’ is used to describe a similar phenomenon, although this understanding is somewhat more technocratic and static.
positions or institutions but do not work according to the ‘Western’ logic as is usually assumed. These practices can give the whole system a fundamentally different meaning and importance for the people. They can even erode and delegitimise the system without this being noticed by scientists who focus on the capital and who only try to apply the ‘Western’ terminology of politics. Qualitative and ethnographic studies are sensitive to informal practices and different meanings and can help to analyse both, change and transition that is happening below or even outside of the classifications of political science and also continuities that persist despite a change of classification of the political system (cf. Krennerich: 67)\textsuperscript{129}.

Decentralisation or devolution tend to be overestimated as an instrument for ensuring accountability and (local) democracy. The problem is that authors often focus on the technical elements of decentralisation (training of staff, resource distribution, etc.) without discussing it in the broader and above all, political context. Meaningful decentralisation to be implemented in Sri Lanka is highly unlikely as long as politicians gain an important part of legitimacy from delivering services and funds to their electoral district. But even if decentralisation would be implemented, why should the fundamental logic of the ‘rule of politics’ change? People told me that they expect corruption only to be shifted to a lower level in this case. I am not arguing that decentralisation would be useless but to assess its possible impact, the broader political context of politics in Sri Lanka has to be taken into account. Unfortunately, there are many signs indicating that the problems that Sri Lanka is facing, those of the Tamils in the North-East as well as Muslims and youth in the South as well as many other groups in the country are structural (cf. also Mayer 2002b). They are caused by a political system which is characterised by specific logics, rationalities, practices and mechanisms. The ‘octopus-mode’ of politics that has developed in Sri Lanka has established the ‘rule of politics’ as the dominating mechanism of authority in the country. Unless this structure is explicitly recognised, analysed and finally addressed it is likely that reforms will only lead to some other creative adjustments of the practices of informal politics according to the established meanings.

\textsuperscript{129} My analysis of the Sri Lankan political system emphasises some points that feature prominently in the concept of the ‘neopatrimonial multi-party system’ according to Erdmann (2002). This concept was developed for analysing African political systems that are ‘stuck’ in the transition to democracy. I think that it might be useful for comparing different political systems of developing and transformation countries that are in the ‘grey area’ between democracy and dictatorship.
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Annex 2: List of codes developed (68)

"attitude in politics" (7)
"commission business" (11)
"disunity" (4)
"education" (17)
"freedom from politicians/publ. servants" (3)
"good mouth" (2)
"keeping quiet" (13)
"Let us not talk politics." (26)
"moving with the people" (3)
"political consciousness" (6)
"politics" (65)
"politisisation" (13)
"welfare state" (2)
"winning rights" (4)
(Development Project) (4)
(political) attitude of the people (12)
access: public services (19)
autonomy of MPs (73)
autonomy of public servants (28)
avoiding politicians (1)
avoiding public administration (3)
benefits through politics (9)
bribery (24)
communal harmony (22)
communities&government institutions (20)
confidence through representation (2)
conflict anticipation (13)
contract-wangling (15)
corruption (20)
data (16)
decentralisation (13)
Decentralised Budget (5)
delaying service (12)
delivery-expectation mode (8)
Development Projects (5)
differentiation-political (15)
differentiation-admin. (2)
discrimination (11)
electoral system (7)
fear of Muslims (8)
fear of Sinhalese (2)
future of the country (6)
Language (2)
Mouthlessness (1)
MP-mechanism (69)
NGOs (12)
party politics (42)
patriotism: Muslims for SL (2)
peace (4)
performance-publ. serv. ("ice gahan.") (34)
planning-implementation (19)
Police (28)
political powerlessness (14)
politicians&violence (14)
politics as family business (8)
potential insecurity (6)
proposals for change (8)
re-action (35)
representation (6)
responsibility for change (16)
responsibility for state of affairs (5)
social contacts for benefits (2)
transformative activities (36)
treating people (6)
trust in public service (8)
trust in state/politics (25)
vote (18)
weakness-Las (24)

(Codes in inverted commas are ‘in-vivo’
Codes [Strauss 1998]. They are directly overtaken from interviews or other sources of data in the field.)
Annex 3: Organisation Chart: The political and administrative set-up in Sri Lanka

(Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency 1997)
Annex 4: Map of Sri Lanka

(Source: UNDP 1998: 2)