

Religion, Secularism and Federalism: Sri Lanka in an Asian Comparative Perspective

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Sri Lanka is among the many countries in Asia that have grappled with federal ideas and approaches to accommodate their diversity of ethnicities, cultures and religions. The links between ethnicity and federalism are well researched, but the link between federalism and religion has been little explored. While in the West there is an apparent association between secularism and federalism, the same is not the case in Asia, where federal and quasi-federal approaches occur in countries that privilege particular religions. Secularism itself is a highly contentious concept and Asian approaches by no means follow the Western trend of strict separation between religion and the state. Nonetheless, given the established ability of federal approaches to accommodate diversity and a multiplicity of identities, and because the success of Asia's non-secular federal systems is questionable, it could be argued that secularism is a necessary condition for federalism. However, non-secularism does not seem to impede the ability of a federal state to operate or to accommodate religion, but it can be shown to have inhibited the adoption of federalism in countries such as Sri Lanka. Federal and quasi-federal countries in Asia accommodate religion in one or more of four types. There are those that accommodate majority religions at the centre (through some privileged status); at the units via special religious rights and authorities; at a group level through the recognition of rights to apply personal laws (e.g. Sharia law); and, at the individual level via basic protections of religious freedom and the prevention of discrimination. In addition, it is noted that while Islamic and Hindu countries in Asia have adopted federal approaches, resistance among Buddhist countries persists. Three explanations are explored and although not definitive, it is hypothesised that the perceived relative threatened position of Buddhism may combine with traditional practices and interest-based emphases to work against the adoption of federal approaches to the accommodation of diversity.