

Adaptable Sinhala Buddhist Hegemony: Understanding JHU's Changing Electoral Strategy

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Talk of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lanka has always tacitly assumed the Sinhala Buddhist bloc to be a single, unified force whose dominance has pushed to the background all other competing nationalisms. But is this hegemony quite what it is popularly believed to be? Is it a mere dominant class exerting control and influence over others? It should then naturally follow that such a hegemonic class is unified in its goals, ambitions, and preferences. This paper seeks to evaluate the concept of hegemony in relation to the post-2015 general election Sri Lanka, particularly the electoral strategy of Patali Champika Ranawaka, with the use of the concept of hegemony as understood by Antonio Gramsci. In this light, it maps the multiple shifting allegiances of the Sinhala Buddhist electorate, analyzes the fractured nature of such allegiances, explores the realignment of 'historical blocs' (to borrow Gramsci's terminology) in the political landscape of post-January eighth Sri Lanka, and situates Patali Champika Ranawaka and his electoral strategy within this larger framework of analysis. Towards this end, this research has made use of participatory observations, interviews, and online following of Patali Champika Ranawaka and his activities. It concludes that the Sinhala Buddhist bloc and the 'hegemony' it exerts hardly constitute a single, unified force, but rather is a fragile aggregate of numerous alliances that requires constant negotiation in order to be maintained. Such hegemony is not as overarching and dominant as is popularly believed, precisely due to its fractured nature and the resultant fragility. The said fragility also exposes the vulnerability of this 'dominant' bloc, and puts into serious question the perception of its 'hegemony' as understood in the popular sense.

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