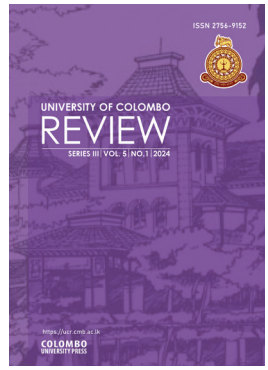

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Power implicit in language: A case of the Sri Lankan Government's securitization of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This is an attempt to uncover the ways in which the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) securitized its response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and how that process of securitization functioned in furthering its overall approach to its legitimacy and governance. Regarding this, the article focuses on the language which characterizes the discourse and the references made to the Sri Lankan armed conflict. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), written and audio-visual texts from government media outlets, private media outlets, and English news articles are assessed in this article as primary data. The discourse on the studied corpus reveals how the State securitized its response to COVID-19 as one befitting a military threat rather than a public health risk. In militarizing the securitizing process, the police and tri-forces were deployed as first respondents. References made to their experience in defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), as well as to former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's role as Defence Secretary in the armed conflict against the LTTE, were used in legitimizing the process of securitization. References made to the "sacrifices" made by the State, and the military, by extension, were used in instilling a sense of responsibility among the public to show their support for the government in its attempt to grapple with the pandemic. The public were also asked to act in unison which included an implied demand for discarding their diverse identities. This article further reveals a novel form of religious securitization emerging from the studied corpus in relation to GoSL's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS:
COVID-19, Critical Discourse Analysis, Securitization, Militarization, Power, Identity

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Background

SARS-CoV-2 (novel coronavirus) dismantled life around the world as people knew it, for many measures were put in place to prevent the spread of the virus, both globally and locally by state actors. Sri Lanka too, from 2020 onwards, relied on preventive measures for the COVID-19 pandemic, such as curfews and the closing down of public places and restrictions to access to private spaces such as homes. Measures in place also addressed issues such as quarantining infected persons, their contacts, and those who came from abroad during travel restrictions, as well as bringing expatriates and migrant workers back into the country. There were also procedures to control even the processes of disposing the bodies of those who had died (or were suspected to have died) due to the virus (Ellis-Petersen, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2021).

An investigation into any kind of securitization has the potential to reveal the reasons as to why a certain threat or risk was securitized. It demonstrates the discursive nature of the act of securitization, and reveals the power accorded to the creator of the discourse (i.e., the securitizing actor) and parties affected by the said process (Buzan et al., 1998; Buzan, 2004; Ciuta, 2009). The discursive construction of the securitization process which takes place through language materializes itself through the preventive measures, laws, and regulations put in place to curb the spread of the virus. Studying how the securitization of the response to the pandemic is framed and shaped through language would reveal the ways in which the policies enacted in relation to the preventive measures affect the public. Securitizing health risks is not new: it has happened in the past including during the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s (in the US and sub-Saharan African countries), the SARS epidemic of 2003 (mainly in East and Southeast Asia), and the Ebola epidemic of 2014 (in some West African countries) (Ciuta, 2009; Schröder, 2015). However, this is the first time in recent history, especially post-independence, that Sri Lanka securitized its response to a health risk in such an extensive manner.[1]

Although there is research on Sri Lanka's militarization, populism, and COVID-19 (Amaratunga et al., 2020; Dissanayake, 2020; Jayasena and Chinthaka, 2020; Jayasinghe et al., 2021; Seligmann et al., 2020), these studies do not go into detail in examining the intersectionality of such research areas. With the intention of bridging this gap in research, this article attempts to study how the existing power relations between the State and the public were reified and naturalized through the discursive securitization of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in its first and second waves.

[1] The involvement of the police and strict legal measures in attempting to address the dengue epidemic (Louis et al., 2016; Tissera et al., 2016), with which Sri Lanka continues to struggle, also resembles the militarized securitization of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the process of this securitization, how the response to the pandemic involved the presence of the tri-forces (the army, the air force, and the navy) and the police in almost all of the preventive measures taken was clearly noticeable. Some of the tasks which were led by the tri-forces included operating community vaccine centers, enforcing mobility restrictions, quarantining infected persons, and the sterilization of public places (Kuruwita, 2023; Sri Lanka Navy, 2022; National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak, 2022). In general, whilst this was not seen as a practice that was out of the ordinary and was used by many other countries globally, including New Zealand which was deemed quite successful in curbing the spread of the pandemic, many others questioned the effect it could have on minority and minoritized communities (Kuruwita, 2023). This was especially relevant for a country like Sri Lanka, which has a recent past of militarizing civil life and civic spaces which continues todate (Fuglerud, 2021). It is then pertinent to question the process of securitization used by the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL), the study of the implicit relations of power within the discourses surrounding it, and the ways in which the State obtained legitimacy for the act of securitization and maintained it.

In studying the GoSL's discourse on the securitization of its response to the pandemic and the process of militarization within securitization, this article attempts to answer the following research questions. What does the language of the discourse on the pandemic reveal about its securitization? What purpose does the government hope to achieve by re-invoking the civil war or armed conflict narrative in securitizing its response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theoretical framing

Securitization and militarization

The conceptualization of securitization stems from the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. This specific conceptualization attempts to examine the ways in which state actors resort to securitization in order to justify their responses to perceived threats (Buzan, 2004; Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). The speech act of securitization refers to an actor/entity securitizing a referent object against an existential threat. The referent object here is the entity in need of security, and the existential threat refers to a perceived threat which could potentially harm the status quo within the state (Buzan, 2004; Buzan et al., 1998). The widening of sectors within the conceptualization of securitization (involving economics, health, and even the environment) and levels of analysis allows one to study issues traditionally outside the military sector (Buzan, 2004; Buzan et al., 1998; Hough, 2008). Although this conceptualization of securitization allows one to study issues outside the military sector, one criticism aimed at this said conceptualization is its exclusive focus on security as a state-centric phenomenon (Booth, 1991; Hough, 2008; Wyn-Jones,

1999). According to Booth (1991) and Wyn-Jones (1999), the Copenhagen School primarily views security as a matter of the state and they mainly take the state as their referent object in securitizing existential threats. In response to this, constructivist, pluralist, and critical theory scholars have called for a deepening of the understanding of the concept of security (in addition to its widening) wherein the primary referent object of security is the human individual, so that security is viewed as a human issue (Hough, 2008). In this broader approach to securitization, in order to study the act of securitization initiated by a securitizing actor, one needs to look at the discourse within which securitization is placed and its related political constellations (Buzan, et al.,1998; Buzan 2004).

This article focuses on the State as the primary securitizing actor, as the securitization process in relation to the pandemic was initiated and continued by the State. In response, some endorsed the securitization process whilst others resorted to anti-vaccine practices, and even attempted evading law enforcement authorities. However, such practices mainly took place within the State's securitization of measures against the pandemic or as a response to it. For that reason, this article mainly focuses on the State as the main securitizing actor. Whilst there may be attempts at mimicking the State's response to the pandemic by other non-state actors, they are not explored within this article.

Militarization can be identified as a phenomenon different from securitization, yet still present within that conceptualization as a tool which serves securitization's continuation and maintenance. Militarization is identified as the presence or encroaching of the military in various facets of civil life where there was no previous presence of the military (de Mel, 2007; Lutz, 2007; Simckes et al., 2019). According to de Mel (2007), when the military is deployed in saving the nation and civil bodies and in solving political problems, this process inevitably militarizes society. This creates an environment in which civic spaces which are meant to be governed by social democratic processes then being governed by both military personnel and military values. Ideology or belief systems can be a driver in the continuation of militarization within society and its acceptance by the citizenry. Militarism, the ideological manifestation of militarization, is presented to the public as the material reality of society, as a way of making them accept militarization as a given in everyday life (de Mel, 2007; Enloe, 2015; Henry and Natanel 2016). Militarization also has the potential to contest and alter the ideals of militarism altogether, so de Mel argues that militarization is "a site of negotiation and contest, and popular culture and memory are crucial to both its entrenchment and subversion" (2007, p. 14). Cultural sites within society act as pedagogical sites[2] wherein militarization is

[2] Cultural sites often function as sites in which ideologies and beliefs are both mainstreamed and normalized. This allows for such beliefs and ideologies to be sustained in society overtime, leading to their establishment within society and exposure to members of said society.

naturalized, especially through popular culture. Memorialization of militarism also proves vital in its continuation, especially when invoked through collective memory in response to a scenario that requires militarized assistance (de Mel, 2007).

Although there has been much theoretical debate surrounding what the study of securitization entails, most of it has taken place within a Global North context whereas shrinking democratic spaces are often thought of as a symptom of the Global South. Therefore, the notion and act of militarization and militarism are pertinent for the study of securitization, especially in a country such as Sri Lanka which is still in a postwar state (Thiranagama, 2022).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The importance of stepping beyond a textual analysis of a particular corpus was shown by Fairclough (2003) who advocates for a textual analysis embedded within Critical Social Studies. According to Fairclough (2003), in order to conduct a methodologically robust textual analysis, one must conduct an interdiscursive analysis, wherein the study of the discourses, genres, and styles from which texts draw are also included within the analysis. He also claims that the criticality of textual analysis arises out of it being framed within social theory: by creating a transdisciplinary dialogue between social theory and textual analysis, one can study the consequences of, and effects produced by, texts. This would ultimately allow the author to study the power relations created and maintained in society in different discourses through different texts (Fairclough, 2003). The use of CDA to study the ways in which power relations are reified and naturalized within society through texts and discourses is referred to within the literature (Locke, 2004; McGregor, 2004; Meyer, 2001; Van Dijk, 2015). Both McGregor (2004) and Meyer (2001) claim that making hidden power relationships and meanings explicit is one of CDA's main tasks. In order to do this, the researcher must study the socio-political contexts within which discourses are situated. This is due to the fact that language is not used in the abstract and it cannot be studied in the abstract (McGregor, 2004), and the use of language is always a political choice (Locke, 2004). The importance of studying discourse and analyzing it critically is further foregrounded by Locke (2004), who claims that, through language and the resultant meaning-making processes, discourses determine the portrayal of reality within society. According to Van Dijk (2015), CDA is a social movement in its own right, for CDA as a methodology allows the author to study social power, inequality, and even the discursive abuse of power within discourses. In terms of the local literature and scholarship, CDA has mainly been used in Sri Lanka to study portrayals of the ethnic conflict in the media (Gnanaseelan, 2012) and the discursive framings within political speeches made in relation to the said conflict or the larger discourse of nationalism (Surenthiraraj, 2013; Surenthiraraj, 2016).

Analysis of texts

This article brings together two approaches of analyzing discourse: securitization and Critical Discourse Analysis. In this qualitative article, the linguistic nature of possible discursive constructions and deconstructions of the securitization process were studied through a detailed textual and lexical analysis.

The primary data examined in this article included speeches, interviews, press briefings, and press releases published in English by government media websites and broadcast by local news channels which are available in the public domain. The speeches, interviews, and press briefings are from key figures who are a part of the government and the task force appointed to respond to the pandemic. Some of the transcripts of speeches made by (former) President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa[3], ministers, the Lieutenant General of the Sri Lankan Army, the Police Spokesperson, doctors affiliated with the task force on COVID-19 and Government Medical Officers' Association were available online on government media and news websites (for example, media.gov.lk). Other interviews and press briefings by representatives of the government also used as data were available on online news channels on their own websites or on YouTube. All interviews were transcribed manually by the author. In terms of the study of 'securitization', the data was limited to texts produced by key figures who were involved in the construction of the studied discourse pertaining to COVID-19 and the resultant securitization of it, who can be identified as part of and an extension of the securitizing actor. The collected data spans across eleven months, from February 2020 to December 2020. Sixty-four (64) such texts (both written and audio-visual) were studied when preparing this article, although not all of them are referred to within this article. The data for this article was gathered by carrying out keyword searches related to the pandemic on the Internet.

The selected texts were analyzed through the first and third steps of Fairclough's three-step model of CDA (1992). The three steps in Fairclough's model include a textual analysis of the texts selected or available (written, visual, auditory, etc.); a processing or interpretation analysis of the means through which texts are produced and then consumed by readers, listeners, etc.; and finally, an (social) analysis of the social conditions in which the texts and the processes of text production and consumption exist (Fairclough, 1992). The data was sorted manually into a single document. The findings from the discourse were yielded via the first step of Fairclough's (1992) model which is a textual analysis coupled with a lexical analysis, and this was done manually without the aid of software programs. This analysis was used in examining the linguistic structure of the discourse and studying the ways in which a particular narrative was presented by the State, and the points

[3] Elder brother of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister during the 2019-2022 Sri Lanka People's Front government.

that particular narrative has emphasized. Instances of securitization such as words and phrases which indicated the securitized referent objects were identified through lexical analysis. The textual analysis was used in identifying explicit remarks made by the State regarding the process of securitization, and even to identify what is implied by the texts produced by it.

The findings were then analyzed through the remaining two steps in Fairclough's model: the study of discursive practice and social practice. The sections following contain an analysis of the genres and narratives presented within the discourse and the particular ways in which they are used. The analysis of the consumption of the texts which is part of the second step in Fairclough's model is absent in this analysis, for the author does not intend to look at the consumption of the discourse. The focus of this article is then limited to the first and third steps of Fairclough's approach.

The sections of the article in which the findings are discussed consist of the third step which is an analysis of the wider social practice to which the communicative event (the discursive securitization of the response to the pandemic) belongs and an investigation into whether the communicative event challenges or reifies and naturalizes existing power relations between the main securitizing actor, the opposers of the act of securitization, and the consumers of the texts, i.e. the people.

One limitation of the approach utilized is the author's tendency to be selective during analysis as one can only ask a limited number of questions about the discourse and texts. Another limitation is the space for subjective research given that interpretation of the discourse depended on the author's perspective (Fairclough, 2003). This limitation, coupled with the process of choosing the research problem, may create a bias within the research, but the research methods used within the CDA approach may provide the author with the space to mitigate the effects of such bias (Meyer, 2001). In this article, through the use of concepts such as securitization and militarization, the author has attempted to limit the space into which personal biases may seep, and to prioritize the reading of findings against said concepts and the ways in which the State has relied on them to shape its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another limitation of the used methodology may be how the findings were derived specifically with a focus on a securitized response. The absence of a grounded research approach, where findings emerge from the corpus with no specific aim, could limit the scope of the analysis. The manual keyword search may have also limited the research in some ways as it would only have yielded select/specific texts for analysis. Lastly, the absence of texts produced in Sinhala and Tamil, and texts translated from these two languages to English can also be a limitation, as this leads to an absence of parts of the larger discourse as well as a loss in nuance of the discourse during translation.

Securitizing of the response to a pandemic

The securitization of the response to the pandemic is made evident through the references made to the referent objects, i.e., the securitized entity, which in this instance is mainly the people of the country. The discursive securitizing of the pandemic is both implied in speech and performed through explicit speech acts, and this is seen in texts (speeches and written reports) produced by all representatives of the securitizing actor in the selected corpus, i.e., the State. For instance, in the statement "The quarantine process commenced with the objective of protecting citizens of this country" (Ministry of Mass Media, 2020a), former President Rajapaksa explicitly securitized the pandemic by stressing the importance of preventive measures. Although in this example the referent object is the citizenry and the securitizing actor is the government, as shown in this article, the referent object changed throughout the discourse (i.e., the entire collection of texts) variously, pointing to the State's inconsistency in prioritizing an objective. As the pandemic progressed, President Rajapaksa emphasized the importance of imposing curfew in curbing the spread of the virus and presented the citizenry and their health as the referent objects of securitization. However, another representative of the State, the Minister of Health, during the second wave of the pandemic, claimed this very measure would "…wreck the livelihood and the economy of the people" (Kumarasinghe, 2020a). This inconsistency in changes in the referent objects also functions as a means of justification of the State's measures within securitization. At times, it was implied that the securitization of the citizenry functions only as a means for the end goal of having a healthy and safe workforce: in relation to the measures taken in maintaining national security in the midst of the pandemic, the Defence Secretary claimed, "without national security any thought of economic revival, growth even in education and also for investor confidence would be futile" (Ministry of Defence, 2020a). However, at times, no reasoning is provided when explicitly specifying the securitized entity and/or objective, and this leads to contradictory narratives presented by the State: "we will rise together not as a developed nation but as a healthy nation" (Ministry of Mass Media, 2020b). Here, the need for a functional workforce is no longer the priority of the State.

The referent object also changed from safeguarding the public to seemingly "securing" democratic processes as the state made its decisions on reconvening the parliament (which would have benefitted the then opposition): "The existing methodology is now put in place adding that at the moment the health authorities, the Triforces and the Police are fulfilling their tasks with dedication. Therefore, I don't think we should create unnecessary issues by reconvening [the] Parliament" (Kumarasinghe, 2020b). The (un)democratic processes were supposedly securitized by holding the general election and amending the Constitution as President Rajapaksa claimed, "it is hoped that General Elections too could be held before June,

allowing people to exercise their franchise to select the Government that they see fit" (President's Media Division, 2020a).[4] Instead of resorting to a gradual discursive de-securitization (Bourbeau and Vuori, 2015; Wæver, 1995) of the pandemic, the securitizing actor continued to seemingly shift referent objects without clear rationale. The last example, especially, demonstrates how the State attempted to maintain power within their grasp: the changes made to the referent objects allowed the State to justify the measures it took as they were depicted as befitting the securitized entity. This move allowed the State to pass the 20th Amendment to the Constitution which accorded the President unchecked executive powers (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2020; International Commission for Jurists, 2020). What was implicit in this move was the State's intention to hold onto and maintain its power in governance, and securitizing the response to the pandemic through different referent objects facilitated the realization of this intention. The democratic space was undermined in the guise of safeguarding the health of the public: even though in this instance it was the public that were framed as the securitized entity, it was the need to maintain the government's power in undemocratic ways that was in fact securitized.

Militarizing security: The Sri Lankan know-how

This move towards a securitization of undemocratic processes is made possible as 'securitization' creates an atmosphere in which the securitizing actor can justify whatever action they take (Wæver, 1995), for such actions are framed as necessary in safeguarding the nation. Accordingly, the pandemic was securitized as a military threat instead of as a public health risk. The militarization of the health risk is evident in the deployment of the tri-forces and the police, and references made to their expertise. It is also evident in the discourse's metaphorical structure, the language used in describing the pandemic, and the responses of the State to the pandemic. In other words, militarization on the ground was sustained and perpetuated through the use of language and the militarized recent past was used to justify such measures as can be seen below.

The representatives of the State constantly mentioned the importance and necessity of mobilizing the military as first respondents to the pandemic. In fact, one of the representatives of the State, the Defence Secretary Kamal Gunaratne, at one point claimed that "if only the health authorities had [been] given the task to control the spread of coronavirus, it would have reached to an uncontrollable point" (Ministry of Defence, 2020a). The importance given to the military is furthered through references made to the expertise of the military. Some of the most frequent references to the military are those about the tri-forces' experience in already having defeated one enemy and having won battles: "These people have forgotten that the

[4] As a result, the Parliamentary elections were not conducted within the constitutionally mandated time period, leading to the nonexistence of a parliament in Sri Lanka for close to six months.

Tri-Forces personnel had saved them from terrorism" (Ministry of Defence, 2020b). This kind of framing of the type of response needed for the pandemic benefits the State in mobilizing the military as first respondents to the virus, for using the military befits the discursive framing of the pandemic as a military threat. There is mutual reinforcement between the two phenomena, which creates an enabling context for the provided measures. As the health risk is conceptualized and framed as a military threat, it would then require the assistance of the military (along with the healthcare workers) in mitigating the effects of that threat. Furthermore, the Defence Secretary claimed,

> "… the military is saddled with a huge responsibility to *ensure national security* [emphasis added] whether it is a threat or an attack from terrorists, a pandemic, or natural disasters. Similarly, even in a pandemic the military is tasked to ensure national security" (Ministry of Defence, 2020c).

The inclusion of natural disasters and health risks is reminiscent of the Copenhagen School's widening of the conceptualization of security (Buzan et al., 1998), although in this instance, the widening of security only happened in relation to, and by, the military.[5]

This is because the military was framed and romanticized as the sole protector of national security and no references were made to a higher-level decision-maker, including the Commander-in-Chief of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. The discourse also referred to their dedication, sacrifices, and willingness to fight in the war against the pandemic: "The dedicated and committed Tri-Forces, police and healthcare workers have put people's lives before themselves in controlling the spread of coronavirus" (Ministry of Defence, 2020d). However, this amounts to a romanticizing of the soldier which can often be seen during war times (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002) as the Police Media Spokesman said, the tri-forces were immediately ordered to report to work (The Morning, 2020). Related references to such expertise which are mentioned often within the discourse are not limited to the tri-forces, for they are also made in relation to President Rajapaksa's leadership and his expertise in dealing with military threats. The President was credited by other representatives for having provided cohesive measures. For instance, the Defence Secretary claimed that "the able action-oriented leadership and vision provided by the President was instrumental for the achievement that Sri Lanka gained in the fight against the virus" (Ministry of Defence, 2020d). This not only appreciates the President fulfilling his duties, it also discursively legitimizes the State's measures, for the credit for

[5] The primacy of the military in widening the concept of security is further reinforced as the Defence Secretary claimed, "Sri Lankan military's contribution to combat the new coronavirus would set a good example to other nations on how effectively the country's military could be utilized with health workers to mitigate disease related calamities" (Ministry of Defence, 2020c). Here, the securitizing actor seems to take pride in militarizing the response to the pandemic and views it as effective use of the military.

having *successfully* controlled the spread of the virus is attributed to the President's leadership. The references made to his past as a Defence Secretary also functioned as a measure of the severity of the pandemic: at the beginning of the spread of the virus, President Rajapaksa justified his decision in not imposing any curfew as a preventive measure by claiming that, "when I was the Defence Secretary, we had bombs going off everywhere, many were dying, thousands were rendered disabled. But that did not force us to put the country on lockdown and there is no reason why we should do so now" (Ministry of Mass Media, 2020c). This shows the implications of securitizing a health risk in terms of a military threat: the absence of corporeality and its inability to affect the public physically (as a disabling force) and emotionally (inciting fear within) as seemingly understood by the State, analogically places the pandemic within a state of liminality between being a war and not quite a war yet, while not requiring the same amount of effort put into a real war. However, the discursive militarization eventually advanced out of its liminality and became something larger than the war itself, as the Prime Minister said, "at this time as I address the nation, the whole country is under curfew. Even during the height of terrorism, the whole country was not under curfew" (Ministry of Mass Media, 2020d). Furthermore, in talking about Rajapaksa's victory at the presidential election, the Defence Secretary said that the "people of Sri Lanka elected President Rajapaksa with a hope to restore national security to have a peaceful country after the unfortunate Easter Sunday bomb attacks" (Ministry of Defence, 2020e).[6] Such claims presented to the listener helped the State in substantiating their measures, for a discursive lack of security was created within the discourse in legitimizing Rajapaksa's presidency as he was presented as the entity capable of filling that lack. This further demonstrates that the state itself is built on the premise of restoring and maintaining national security, and it allowed President Rajapaksa to securitize the pandemic and militarize it at the same time, for both securitization and militarization were expected of him as the defender of national security and former Defence Secretary who defeated the LTTE. These references made to the tri-forces and President Rajapaksa are crucial elements within the discourse, for according to Balzacq (2005) and Ciuta (2009), the context and material events (in this case, a pandemic serious enough for it to be militarized) play a vital role in a successful securitization move. Having defeated the LTTE, the tri-forces and President Rajapaksa created a favorable context for the deployed securitization process.

[6] The 'Easter Sunday Attacks' were a series of bombings on three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday of April 21st, 2019. Later, members of a militant, radical, Islamist group known as National Thowheeth Jama'th were found responsible for the attacks.

Memorialization: Perpetuation of militarization

The discourse on the militarized securitization of the response to the pandemic was also constructed by invoking memories of other threats and disasters the country has faced. This provided reassurance to the public. The militarized response to the pandemic resembled how the tri-forces were able to overcome the armed conflict: "This is similar to how the entire country got together to defeat terrorism in 2009" (Ministry of Defence, 2020f). Related to this reassurance was the way in which the then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa recalled the state's response to the 2004 tsunami with the tri-forces' aid. Here the tsunami of 2004 was referred to as a "much greater adversity" (Ministry of Mass Media, 2020c) than the pandemic. The reference made to the tsunami further legitimized the militarized response to the pandemic, for it too emphasized the military's role in a return to normalcy after the natural disaster. This was also linked to narrative inconsistencies within this militarized securitization. War times are characterized as existing beyond normal states of being (Agamben, 2005), but the State kept mentioning a return to normalcy while the securitization process was in place: "We have already begun our return journey to normalcy… to allow public and private sectors to return to work without undue impediments" (President's Media Division, 2020a).[7] This was an attempt by the State to portray the government as a stable entity with the necessary solution in hand to face the pandemic.

These references made to the armed conflict and the tsunami serve a larger purpose than merely shedding a positive light on the military and the State. The main function of these references, the mutual reinforcement between them, and militarized securitization was to appeal to the emotions of the target consumer group, i.e., the public. By discursively creating a space wherein the whole country was placed within a state of war, the public was constantly reminded of the personal sacrifices made by the tri-forces and healthcare workers: "…these people have forgotten that the Tri-Forces personnel had saved them from terrorism, disasters like floods, landslides, tsunami and also man-made disasters risking their lives" (Ministry of Defence, 2020b). Such sacrifices made by the tri-forces and healthcare workers were weaponized to militarize the everyday life of the civilian by placing certain demands, duties, and responsibilities on them. In this instance, one could also see the perpetuation of militarization within society through acts of memorialization (de Mel, 2007). The public's cooperation was presented through the discourse as a crucial element in achieving a successful securitization (and thereby control) of the pandemic. Although the need for their cooperation could be justified in the sense of cooperating

[7] This kind of reasoning in justifying their need to reopen and rebuild the economy lends itself to a paradoxical reasoning, for returning to normalcy is difficult and almost impossible while the securitizing actor has waged war against an existential threat; the discursively constructed response to the pandemic would not allow a return to normalcy (Agamben, 2005).

in taking Polymerase Chain Reaction tests and helping in the process of preventing the spread of the virus, it still functioned as a means through which the civilians' lives were militarized along with the securitization of the response to the pandemic. These demands are reminiscent of how states declare the change of circumstances which can be expected due to a war the state is currently waging (Foley, 2015). Such duties and responsibilities were also evident in the demands made by the State for a call for unity, "to work in unison and brotherhood" (President's Media Division, 2020b), in supporting the efforts of the government. A sense of responsibility was placed on the public in reminding them that they were secure at home owing to the sacrifices made by those at the *frontlines* of the battle against the pandemic. This turned into a measure of one's patriotism and it was especially evident in what the public was asked to perform in showing their gratitude and patriotism towards those who fight for their sake. According to Hartmann-Mahmud (2002), any citizen who does not perform what is asked of them by the State would be considered unpatriotic. This demand for unity was also shown by the State as something which was already present amongst the public: "All Sri Lankans despite their differences – ethnicity, religion, cast or creed – are fighting with unity to save the country from COVID-19" (Ministry of Defence, 2020g).

Related to the demands made of the public to act in unison, were the affirmations made by the State to respect every individual's rights during this difficult time, as the Prime Minister claimed, "we have taken all decisions without considering politics, religion or race" (Ministry of Mass Media, 2020d), implying that diversity was either divisive or did not matter at that juncture. Such a statement was presented at a time when the State made the decision to ban the burial of remains of COVID-19 related deaths. This mainly affected the Islamic and Catholic communities of the country. In response to the opposition made to this ban, the Prime Minister asked of oppositional political parties and the public not to put their interests before a national cause as it was a time characterized by the need for unity and brotherhood (Kumarasinghe, 2020b). The response of the Prime Minister comes as no surprise, for according to Hartmann-Mahmud, when a health risk is framed as a military threat, it often curbs "critical discourse on the issues", for to be critical is thought of as being anti-war, and being anti-war is "perceived to be unpatriotic, even treasonous" (2002, p. 427). Interestingly, however, against this dominant narrative presented by the State, a counter-hegemonic narrative was presented by another representative of the State, the Minister of Justice and Prison Reforms, Ali Sabry:

> "…the scientific evidence in terms of infectiousness at the time of death [and the] fact that the virus cannot survive after death and then if you wrap the body in some impermeable wrapping… In light of that, how do we in this country come to terms with the fact we are forcefully cremating bodies?" (*Daily Mirror*, 2020).

In this way, he countered the justification provided by the government in the forced cremations of Muslim individuals who had died or were suspected of having died from COVID-19.[8] However, in this instance, those deemed unpatriotic and the treasonous could not impact the securitization process, for they made up a minority within the public. Although these opposing views challenged the legitimacy of the securitization of the response to the pandemic and the State's authority, the securitizing actor had the power to label such views as treasonous and unpatriotic within the hegemonic narrative.

This process of labelling also functioned as a process of identifying outliers within the public. This also had the potential to affect the securing of a successful securitization move as it depicted the State as divided and indecisive in its own process of securitizing the pandemic.[9] The counter-hegemonic narrative presented by the representative of the State questioned the legitimacy of the State, though it could not challenge the State's authority as the claim was made by an individual who represented the unpatriotic and treasonous minority. It did, however, reveal who had access to the discourse and the power to shape it (McGregor, 2004): in this case, it was the majority which stood against the funeral rites of ethnic and religious minorities. Ethnic tensions which largely became an issue post-independence, which ultimately resulted in civil unrest and a 30-year long armed conflict, can be seen once again invoked through this discursive securitization process and exacerbated to maintain the measures used and to appease the Sinhala Buddhist majority upon which the then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power – the very same community whom he said elected him into power to save their race from the face of destruction:

> "…more than 6.9 million voters in this country elected me as your new President. It is no secret that the majority who voted for me then were Sinhalese. They rallied because they had legitimate fears that the Sinhala race, our religion, national resources and the heritage would be threatened with destruction" (News.lk, 2020).

Religious securitization: United in hegemony and bound by geopolitics

The presence of religious and cultural symbolism, references made to relevant activities, and allegory within the discourse which were indicative of the Sinhala Buddhist hegemony were invoked in many parts throughout the discursive securitization process. Such references were made by the State in participation at

[8] Although the government initially did not heed the advice given by the expert committee which said they could not find any traces of the buried cadavers affecting ground water levels of the country, the government eventually allowed the burial of COVID-related deaths in March of 2021, almost one year after the first reported case of COVID-related death (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2021; Ganguly, 2021).

[9] The securitizing actor needs the approval of the public for a successful securitization move (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998).

religious events at temples (by engaging in *pirith* and *pooja*[10]) in invoking blessings on citizens, the tri-forces and healthcare workers, and the President during the pandemic. The Prime Minister specifically requested the "Maha Sangha to chant Rathana Sutra at every temple to invoke blessings on the public and the country during this pandemic situation" (Ministry of Mass Media, 2020e). In addition to this, the public was also asked to participate in lighting "'Adishtana Pahan'[11] dedicated to Tri-Forces members contracted with COVID-19 in their effort to contain spread of the virus" (Ministry of Defence, 2020h). Such demands made of the public remind one of the ceremonial nature of a militarized society where the public's participation is a crucial part of the performative aspect of militarization (de Mel, 2007). In the midst of this religiosity and cultural ideology, Pavithra Wanniarachchi, the then Minister of Health claimed:

> "According to legend, this country has the blessings of the Gods... I have received many invitations to participate in religious activities to bless the country at this difficult time. I am ready to sacrifice myself to the sea to protect the country from COVID-19." (Backbencher, 2020)

Through the use of this allegory, the Minister portrayed herself as prepared to play the role of Queen Viharamahadevi,[12] and stated her willingness to bring the pandemic under control by any means available to her. These elements of the discourse reveal to the reader the emergence of a new form of securitization: a majoritarian religious securitization of the response to the pandemic. Similar to a militarized securitization, the religious securitization too relies on weaponizing *pirith* and *pooja*s against the perceived existential threat. Even within this securitization, the civilians were militarized as they too were advised to partake in utilizing the tool of pooja in securing the tri-forces and healthcare workers. The scope of this majoritarian religious securitization, unlike its other militarized variety, did not limit itself to Sri Lanka: "*Pirith* was chanted throughout the Island invoking blessings to those infected with the virus in China" (President's Media Division, 2020c). This shows the reader the ways in which the State utilized securitization in attempting to attend to geopolitical and diplomatic affairs as well. Minister Wanniarachchi's statement is another example of the State's further departure from securitizing the pandemic as a health risk, for she resorted to religion and folklore to present herself as concerned about the safety of the public. The religious securitization of the pandemic and the response to it was rendered exclusively Sinhala Buddhist, as the

[10] *Pirith* (Sinhala translation of the Pali word *Paritta*) refers to the act of seeking protection through the chanting of the Buddha's words and teachings. *Pooja* is an act of offering and/or worship.

[11] Refers to oil lamps lit with a specific purpose or wish in mind.

[12] Queen Viharamahadevi was said to have sacrificed herself when the country faced a tsunami during King Kelanitissa's reign (Gunawardana et al., 2020). Interestingly, the Women's Corps of the Sri Lankan Army also has Queen Viharamahadevi on their logo (Sri Lanka Army, n.d.).

religious activities at both individual and state level were limited to Sinhala Buddhist rituals. Metaphorically too, the pandemic was seemingly framed within religious and cultural symbols: for example, a panel of expert doctors suggested calling the preventive measures taken by the public a *Panchayuda*[13] (President's Media Division, 2020d). Although this could be seen as an important symbol within Sinhala and Tamil cultures, it also fits within a war metaphor, as it can be read as arming the citizenry with the necessary weapons to fight against the virus, furthering the metaphorical construction of the soldier on to the citizenry. Alternatively, it can also be read as a metaphor which adds to the construction of the patriarchal war-maker: a *Panchayuda* would render the citizenry infantilized, as the preventive measures implemented by the State can be read as the *Panchayuda* worn by the public, i.e., the entity in need of securitization.

The third step in Fairclough's model is the analysis of the social practice(s) of the studied discourse, and it specifically focuses on the ways in which the discursive event is shaped by the organizational and institutional dynamics of the entity that initiates the speech act (the securitization process). The 'institutional circumstances' of the discursive event were that the discourse was constructed as well as led by the State. As discussed previously, this government was brought into power by the public, suggesting an absence of security, especially for the Sinhala Buddhist community of the country. Former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election into office was reinforced by the narrative of his expertise as a former Defence Secretary, defeater of the LTTE, and the only person who was capable of bringing stability to the insecure country. For these reasons, the "nature of the discursive practice, and the constitutive/constructive effects of the discourse" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 3) only took the form of a militarized securitization when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The only "anomaly" within this process of securitization was the religious and cultural securitization. Although this religious securitization process was largely initiated and steered by the clergy and Sinhala Ayurveda[14] practitioners led by Dhammika Bandara (an Ayurveda practitioner who concocted a syrup which was said to be effective against COVID-19), the State eventually endorsed it and even took the lead in promoting the narrative of seeking protection from local, cultural, and religious means, as evidenced by then Health Minister Wanniarachchi's actions and words (Backbencher, 2020). In addition to the contradictory narratives (hegemonic and counter-hegemonic) presented by representatives of the State in banning burials of COVID-related and suspected deaths, this religious and cultural securitization

[13] A *panchayuda* is a pendant worn by toddlers; the five weapons on the *panchayuda* refer to the five weapons of Lord Vishnu (Hindu deity). Giving a newborn infant a *panchayuda* to arm itself against harm is also a tradition amongst Tamil and Sinhala communities (Dissanayake, 1986).

[14] The distinction between Sinhala Ayurveda practitioners and Ayurveda practitioners of other ethnicities has been made to reflect how Dhammika Bandara was mainly endorsed by the Sinhala Buddhist community, including Buddhist temples.

was the other process which did not neatly fit in with the militarized securitization process. Even so, these "anomalies" catered to and appeased those who ensured that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected to office, who were the Sinhala Buddhist voter base.[15]

Conclusion

The above analysis of the discourse shows how the militarized securitization of the response to the pandemic justified the measures taken in preventing the risk. It validates former President Rajapaksa's leadership, and the power accorded to him by his voters. He kept the politico-ideological hegemony intact, for the process of securitization appeased the Sinhala Buddhist voter base through both its religious securitization and the curbing of the supposedly divisive diversity. With the purging of space for dialogue and critical discourse, anyone who opposed the discursive securitization was labelled as unpatriotic and treasonous. The processes of securitization and militarization mutually reinforced each other and contributed to the justification of the measures taken to protect the public. The continued justification then also raised the question as to why the State resorted to a process of securitizing the pandemic as a military threat.

Compared to state actors in other states, Sri Lanka shows an interesting case of securitization of the response to the pandemic. Whilst many other state actors, such as the US and Brazil, resorted to a militarization within the securitization process, Sri Lanka too had a tendency to militarize existential and perceived threats due to its history of a series of civil unrest from 1956 to 1983 and its 30-year history of an armed conflict. During this war against the LTTE, the Sri Lankan society was heavily militarized through political discourse, popular culture, and the constant presence of the tri-forces and the police in all domains of civil life (de Mel, 2007). Even after the armed conflict had ended, there were no signs of demilitarizing the large society, for it allowed the then government – led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa – to centralize power around presidency and eliminate democratic spaces within governance (Mampilly, 2011; Höglund and Orjuela, 2011). Even in 2019, Sri Lanka ranked 41 in the Global Militarization Index (Mutschler and Bales, 2019). Therefore, one could even say that the absence of a gradual demilitarization of civil society would explain the public's acceptance of the militarized securitization of the response to the pandemic. Although such a claim would provide context for the militarization of the securitization process, as shown above, this impacted the wider society in many ways while providing the State with reasons to remain in power.

This would then also bring into question the validity of "securitization" within Sri Lanka as conceptualized by the Copenhagen School. Firstly, as the Copenhagen

[15] At the 2019 presidential election, Gotabaya Rajapaksa received 6,924,255 votes which was 52.25% of the entire voter population (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, n.d.).

School suggests, the act of securitization during the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka did not view the State as the sole referent object. Secondly, whilst constructivist, pluralist, and critical theory scholars advocated for a widening and deepening of securitization, as mentioned earlier, perhaps the militarized recent history of Sri Lanka does not lend itself to expanding the act of securitization beyond that of a militarized one. Even the religious and cultural securitization which could be seen in the discourse relied on weaponization for its continuation.

Furthermore, as discussed at length in this article, the act of securitization of the response to the pandemic as a military threat instead of as a health risk needed the approval of the public for the continuation of that process. The security measures which narrativized diversity as divisiveness and enforced discriminatory laws on ethnic and religious minorities, especially regarding their burial rites, also needed approval from the public. This was achieved by discursively securitizing the pandemic as a military threat to both supplement and match the process of securitization, which was taking place on the ground, and which was achieved by deploying the tri-forces as frontline respondents. This discursive securitization of the response to the pandemic was not only used to obtain approval for the securitization process, but also to sustain that approval and the measures used on the ground. The securitizing actor, which was the State, in this instance, did not have much trouble in legitimizing the act of securitization and the means used, for the discursive securitization had already framed the citizenry and their wellbeing as one of the referent objects. Countering this discursively militarized securitization was discouraged as the act of countering was narrativized or framed as unpatriotic.

Conflict of interest

The author of this article hereby declares that there is no conflict of interest in publishing this article.

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