Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict has been characterized by the growing distance that separates Sinhalese Buddhists from Tamil Hindus. A look at the Catholic Church of the island nation shows that a similar lack of communication and indifference exists within a community unified by religious faith but separated by politics, language, and culture.

Bernardo Brown

ON JANUARY 8TH 2011, Rev. Rayappu Joseph, the Catholic Bishop of the Sri Lankan Province of Mannar, testified before the ‘Lessons learnt and recommendations Commission’ (LLRC) appointed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa after the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. The aim of this commission was to inquire into the origins and consequences of the armed conflict that had confronted the Sri Lankan army and Tamil separatists since 1983. More than seventy priests set up to address the period between the years of 2002, when the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE signed a ceasefire agreement, and 2009, when the army delivered the decisive military blow against the LTTE in the northern and eastern parts of the island.

Despite the skepticism with which the commission was received by Tamils in the north and east of the country and the widespread criticism it received from the international community for its lack of independence to investigate accusations of war crimes – Bishop Joseph and other members of the Catholic clergy offered their depositions in Mannar. Amongst the many grievances expressed by the Tamil population of Sri Lanka, which Bishop Joseph enumerated to the LLRC, he declared that 146,679 people remained uncounted for from the last stages of the war (during the first half of 2009). This statement incensed the government in Colombo and led the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) of the Sri Lankan Police to pay Bishop Joseph a visit and question him over his sources of information.

A year later, briefly after the LLRC report was published, Bishop Joseph sent a letter addressed to President Rajapaksa and the UN Human Rights Council in which he demanded the appointment of an independent investigation as it would be the only reliable approach to seek justice for Sri Lankan Tamils. This letter was signed by thirty Catholic priests from the Northern Province. Bishop Joseph wrote, “The LLRC has quite rightly identified abuses by the LTTE and also came up with some positive recommendations that have potential for reconciliation. But it has failed to address critical issues of truth-seeking and accountability, despite strong evidence and testimony presented before it. The record of various domestic bodies whose recommendations successive governments have ignored [...] have made us lose confidence that our concerns will be heard.”

On February 18th 2013, another letter was sent to the President and the UNHRC, this time signed by a staggering 133 members of the clergy, not only Catholics, but also Anglicans and Methodists, as well as 54 Catholic nuns working in different parts of the country. With this new letter, a broad interfaith movement of Christian solidarity movement started to take shape and garnered support for Bishop Joseph’s demands for justice and accountability. In this strongly worded and widely distributed public appeal, the signatories stated that, “In the last year, those charged with investigating and criticising the government in peaceful ways, including by engagement with the UN, have been assaulted, questioned, arrested, threatened, discriminated against or intimidated by government ministers, officials, military and police.”

Sinhalese Catholic response

While Bishop Joseph’s concern for the humanitarian needs and civil rights of the people of Mannar received the support of many in the country and across the international community, it also generated cautious reactions amongst some Sri Lankan Christians who were anxious to publicly assert their allegiance to the state. As Sri Lanka polarized over matters of human rights and terrorism, the ethnic conflict continued to reconfigure identities, seeing through religious communities and nurturing antagonisms amongst the Christians of the country. This phenomenon was particularly significant amongst the multi-ethnic Catholic communities, as they are the only religious denomination that cuts across Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic categorizations.

In early August of this year, some of these fears materialized when a group of monks, followed by several dozen civilians, broke into a meeting of families of the disappeared in Colombo at the Center for Social Justice (CSJ). Although military violence was kept at bay, it provided a disquieting reminder of the meager levels of tolerance that prevail in postwar Sri Lanka.

As political discrimination and the stigmatization of minorities have continued to characterize the country since the end of the armed conflict, the hope of peace and reconciliation has been received by many in Sri Lanka as a dream still far away from reality. As a consequence of this lack of visible improvement, religious minorities have not only become increasingly wary of public display of faith that can bring them unwelcome attention, but now also have strong evidence as to what responses they can expect to actions that attempt to question the government’s human rights record.

Bernardo Brown received his PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Cornell University. He is currently working on a monograph about South Asian Catholic migrant chaplains. A former RAS fellow, he now holds a postdoctoral fellowship at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore. (beb66@cornell.edu)