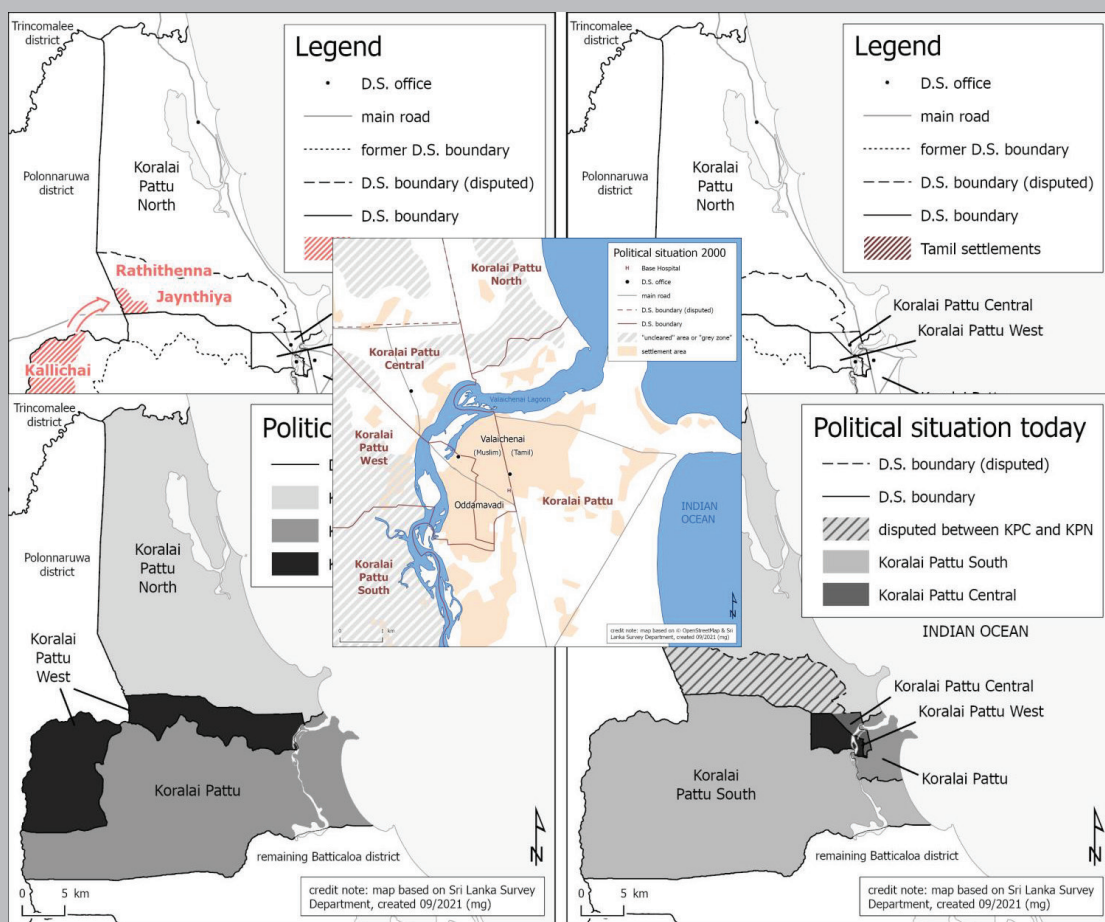


A TALE OF TWO MAPS

Territorial Anxieties, Political Cartography, and the Impossibility of Boundary Demarcation in Sri Lanka



Shahul Hasbullah
Jesmil Abdul Raheem
Benedikt Korf

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impossibility of boundary demarcation in Sri Lanka**

Shahul Hasbullah, Jesmil Abdul Raheem and Benedikt Korf*

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A Tale of Two Maps : Territorial anxieties, political cartography, and the impossibility of boundary demarcation in Sri Lanka

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This work is dedicated to the memory of

SHAHUL H. HASBULLAH

(3 September 1950 – 25 August 2018)



Photo: Jesmil Abdul Raheem

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Foreword

“*A Tale of Two Maps: Territorial Anxieties, Political Cartography, and the Impossibility of Boundary Demarcation in Sri Lanka*” by Shahul Hasbullah, Jesmil Abdul Raheem and Benedikt Korf is a welcome addition to the social science literature on Sri Lanka. It provides a detailed case study of the newly carved out Koralai Pattu Central D.S. division (KPC) in Batticaloa District, as an example of trials and tribulations and risks connected with the ongoing process of ethnicization of administrative demarcations in eastern Sri Lanka. It points to the territorial anxieties and social tensions generated by this questionable effort at ethnic purification of administrative divisions in a region characterized by ethno-religious diversity, historically evolved patterns of human settlement and state-mediated and war-affected population movements over the past several decades. Using a combination of cartography, ethnographic research and policy analysis, this study questions the viability of carving out ethnically demarcated administrative divisions and explores its possible long-term impacts on ethnic relations, peace and stability and post-war recovery in Sri Lanka. Epitomizing the life-long commitment of late Prof. Shahul Hasbullah, the lead author of this publication, for deploying social science research for building social harmony among communities increasingly divided along ethno-religious lines and advancing social justice, this work builds on the work of scholars such as Dennis McGilvray, Benedikt Korf, M.A. Nuhuman, Ameer Ali, Bart Klem and many others on the social history, impact of war and contested terrains in eastern Sri Lanka. The authors and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies must be congratulated for bringing out this timely and highly relevant publication at a critical juncture in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Kalinga Tudor Silva

Department of Sociology

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Foreword

This essay *Territorial Anxieties, Political Cartography, and the Impossibility of Boundary Demarcation in Sri Lanka*, is jointly authored by Shahul Hasbullah, Jesmil Abdul Raheem and Benedikt Korf. Shahul Hasbullah, a Sri Lankan political geographer, passed away on August 25, 2018 and the publication is dedicated to his memory. The essay is an outcome of a team work of research undertaken jointly by the three authors and it is also a product of several years of intellectual collaboration among them. Hasbullah and Korf have worked together for several years on issues that animated their academic interests as political geographers. Amidst the horrors and dangers of the war and violence in Sri Lanka, Hasbullah remained until his sudden and untimely demise a quiet activist too in a unique way.

As an academic, Hasbullah in his own unassuming way pioneered in Sri Lanka the study of displacement of civilian populations during the ethnic war. Hailing from Mannar, he himself, along with his family and neighbors, suffered displacement in multiple times. What was path-breaking in Hasbullah's work as a political geographer was the initiative he took to document, through meticulous research and with immense courage and commitment, the displacement of primarily Muslim communities in the North and East. That was also the time when systematic recording of the human suffering of the ethnic war had not yet begun by the humanitarian community in Sri Lanka. Documentation of human rights violations committed by all parties to the war, state and non-state, had just begun in Sri Lanka as a civil society activity. Two voluntary activist groups, the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) in Jaffna and INFORM in Colombo, were the pioneers in documenting human rights violations as a general field of reportage and commentary. Shahul Hasbullah's special area of work was documenting the displacement of Muslim civilians in the Mannar and Jaffna Districts since 1990.

As Korf acknowledges with gratitude, his work has benefitted much from the partnership with Hasbullah who had accumulated over several years an intimate knowledge of the social and human consequences of the ethnic war on the ground. Jonathan Spencer is another beneficiary from the collaboration

with Hasbullah. One outcome of that collaboration is the volume *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque: A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace*, published in 2015.

When Professor Hasbullah's sudden death occurred in August 2018, he had published several volumes of reports on aspects of the displacement suffered by the Muslim population in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Two of the early documentations were (a) a six volume *Report on the Loss of Movable and Immovable Assets of Muslims Evicted from the Northern Province in October 1990*, and (b) *Family Information of the Muslim Refugees, Ousted from Northern Province in October 1990*. The second documentation consists of 24 volumes of information of 9025 refugee families. He had also collected a large number of testimonies of personal experience of the Muslim refugees. Professor Hasbullah also had plans to bring out seven volumes on the general topic of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and the Forcibly Evicted Muslims of Northern Province (Nuhman, 2019).

One underlying theme in Hasbullah's work is the ways in which Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict had acquired a distinct capacity for its own reproduction due to consequences of the conflict, which have acquired some independence from the root causes of its emergence. The expulsion of the Muslim civilians from Jaffna and Mannar in 1990 marked the beginning and subsequent escalation of a new politics of ethnic enmity between the Tamil and Muslim communities. That politics of ethnic antagonism had in turn redefined the nature and dynamics of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict that was for years fought within a binary framework of Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic politics, turning it into a tripartite ethnic conflict.

This essay foregrounds the dangers of ethnicization of local politics that eventually has led to what its authors call the politics of purification among Tamil and Muslim communities in the Batticaloa district. The politics of purification, triggered by the issues of displacement, denial of land rights, scarcity of material resources, the access to state resources and exclusivist ethnic politics during the war, has continued into the post-war period as well. In this particular case, the dispute is over the re-demarcation of internal boundaries of two newly created divisional secretariats exclusively for the Tamil and Muslim communities in Koralai Pattu Central (KPC) in Valachchanei. The dispute, as the essay shows,

is indicative of “how the complicated relations between Muslims and Tamils in eastern Sri Lanka have translated into a spatial politics of demanding ethnically pure territorial containers in the local administrative set-up.” Thus, the case of “KPC” is presented as emblematic of the “spatial politics of purification” in Eastern Sri Lanka.

Don't the authors overstate their point in this assertion shared by some of their European and North American colleagues as well, who have been studying ethnic politics in Sri Lanka's Eastern province? Raising a question of this nature is particularly relevant while paying tribute to the intellectual and activist legacy of Professor Hasbullah, one of its co-authors. The dissenting point can be formulated as follows: Reification of exclusivist ethnic imaginations within a strictly binary framework of ‘friend vs. enemy’ among ethno-nationalist movements and their activists is only one aspect of a complex story of ethnic politics in a society that has been coping with the legacy of a protracted internal war. There is another side, as exemplified by the example of the activist-academic life of Shahul Hasbullah and the biographies many others from all of Sri Lanka's ethnic communities. It suggests the possibility of a politics of inter-communitarian solidarity for acting in unison for shared emancipatory ends. This is also a powerful motivation for its recognition as a normative goal of intellectual commitment which indeed requires shedding of the unconscious, and of course dreadful, Carl Schmittian legacy of framing of what politics is/ought to be, and reframing politics as taking a Hannah Arendtian imaginary of politics as emancipatory practice.

This is perhaps what Professor Korf himself suggests in the Preface when he invokes the memory of Hannah Arendt to comment on Professor Hasbullah's normative ideal of politics.

Jayadeva Uyangoda

Reference

Nuhman, M. A. 2019, “Remembering Professor S. H. Hasbullah,” *Colombo Telegraph*, September 11, 2019.

Preface

This work is dedicated to our beloved friend and colleague, Professor Shahul Hasbullah, who taught political geography at the University of Peradeniya and was tirelessly engaged in fieldwork to study the plights of war-affected communities in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Being a Muslim whose extended family had been displaced from Mannar in 1990 when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) forcibly evicted all Muslims from northern Sri Lanka, “Has,” as his friends used to call him, was deeply committed to inter-ethnic reconciliation. He stands out as an exemplar to all of us with his exceptional ability and willingness to attend to the plights of all three ethnic communities and to consider the grievances of each of them fairly. For his public engagement and his research work, he travelled extensively across Sri Lanka. “He was always out of home,” remembered his close friend, Professor M.A. Nuhman.¹

This study documents ongoing research that Hasbullah was undertaking with the two coauthors at the time of his untimely death on 25 August 2018. We continued to conduct fieldwork to complete the study, which investigates the “politics of purification” that guides boundary making in eastern Sri Lanka. It builds on Hasbullah’s previous work, most notably a study on relocation policies and post-tsunami aid in Kalmunai (Hasbullah and Korf 2009), a study on the antinomies of community in Kattankudy (Hasbullah and Korf 2013), his contributions to a multiauthored ethnography of religion and space in eastern Sri Lanka (Spencer et al. 2015), and a comprehensive study, together with Urs Geiser, on administrative redistricting in the Ampara district (Hasbullah and Geiser 2019). In all these studies, Hasbullah was at pains to expose the dangers of ethnicization, both of politics and of administrative everyday practice, in eastern Sri Lanka. Both, politics and administrative practice undermine the possibility for ethnic communities to live convivially in this multicultural and multi-religious space, a vision that was at the heart of Hasbullah’s research and activism.

Jonathan Spencer, a long-term collaborator and friend of Hasbullah, has written comprehensively about politics in Sri Lanka. Spencer used Carl Schmitt’s famous definition of the political as the distinction between friend and enemy

1 colombotelegraph.com/index.php/remembering-professor-s-h-hasbullah/

to make sense of a deeply rooted antagonism in Sri Lankan politics. Spencer found Schmitt's concept appealing not in a moral sense but as a descriptor of the "moral disturbance – the capacity to shock and unhinge" (Spencer 2012, 729) that characterizes Sri Lankan politics and that has so fundamentally undermined inter-ethnic relations in the last decades.

Hasbullah's normative ideal of politics was radically different. It could have been inspired by Hannah Arendt, who has offered a very different conception of the political: the political not as a dissociating but an associating force, as the space of encounter, of community, of togetherness. Arendt calls this the "space of appearance" of the political: "Wherever people gather together, it [the space of appearance] is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever" (Arendt, *Human Condition*, New York 1959, p. 178). What Arendt alerts us to is that such a politics as togetherness, as conviviality has to be actively created and struggled for.

Indeed, politics can work in a variety of registers: not only enmity but also hospitality, solidarity and fairness. It is this normative conception of the political that Arendt has sketched for us that we might uphold in the midst of the turf battles that continue to trouble Sri Lanka's politics. This is, we believe, the legacy of our beloved friend Hasbullah. In the coming years, we hope to preserve his work and his legacy and continue his passionate commitment to scholarly life that always combined research with a search for justice. This study is just a small step in that direction.

Benedikt Korf and Jesmil Raheem Abdul

Acknowledgements

A first version of this work was presented at the conference *Imaginations of the ‘Rural’ in Sri Lanka*, held at the Open University, Colombo, 14-15 July 2017. We thank Harshana Rambukwella and Jonathan Spencer for the kind invitation to speak, and the audience for their engaging comments. The paper was also presented at the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, on 4 December 2017, where it received again useful comments. A revised and extended version was presented as a memorial lecture for Professor Shahul Hasbullah at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, first in Colombo on 28 January 2020, and second, in Kandy on 30 January 2020. We thank Mario Gomez and Tudor Silva for organizing, and Jayadeva Uyangoda as well as Tudor Silva for chairing these events, as well as the audiences at both events to share their views and comments with us. Neloufer de Mel as well as colleagues at the Political Geography Research Group at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich, in particular Thiruni Kelegama, Alice Kern, Thamali Kithsiri, and Timothy Raeymaekers, commented on previous written versions of the text.

Summary

In this study, we argue that at the heart of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict that has ravaged the country for several decades is a "territorial anxiety". This anxiety continues to haunt Sri Lanka's politics even since the civil war ended. To illustrate the multiple ills this anxiety produces, we provide an ethnographic case study of the politics of boundary demarcations of local administrative units in eastern Sri Lanka, more specifically the controversy around Koralai Pattu Central Divisional Secretariat (D.S.) division (known as KPC) in Batticaloa District. Our study will trace the history of the evolution of KPC, neighboring divisional secretariats (D.S.) and the Pradeshiya Sabha (P.S.) system from the late 1980s to illustrate how administrative boundary demarcation and ethnic segregation became increasingly entangled. If administrative boundary demarcations are used as an attempt to purify administrative (and political) entities into ethnically homogenous territorial containers, this will likely result in unsolvable contradictions. Indeed, our ethnographic material rather points to the impossibility of a politics of purification, understood as the attempt to confine administrative and political entities into ethnically homogenous territorial containers. The case of KPC reveals lessons not only for Batticaloa's politics but for boundary demarcation politics for administrative or electoral purposes in Sri Lanka and South Asia more broadly.

Introduction

The road is dusty. Left and right, the traveler is passing a landscape of jungle, paddy fields and coconut trees. Occasional houses or small hamlets appear along the roadside. This is the road from Polonaruwa to Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka. In the Batticaloa district, before passing Valaichenai Lagoon via Oddamavadi Bridge, a collection of newly built, shiny government buildings suddenly comes to view. Big sign boards announce: Divisional Secretariat Office of Koralai Pattu Central (KPC), Valaichenai. (We will use the abbreviation KPC hereafter to refer to this office in particular.) The block of buildings in the midst of a loosely populated stretch of land could summon the image of a white elephant – a metaphor in development jargon for projects that are misaligned with the realities on the ground, used to express a sign of the failure of top-down development.

In the case of KPC, however, such an image would be ill-conceived. The office building, staffed by administrators, is in operation. The office is located in this particular place for a political reason: to make a claim for the existence of KPC as a divisional secretariat (D.S.) division. The building itself is part of a territorial claim: KPC was formed after the repeated request of local Muslim Members of Parliament (MPs) to provide an administrative unit to deliver security and welfare services to Muslims living in the area; security and services that these Muslims felt were not provided in the previous administrative set-up. Previously, the village had belonged to a majority Tamil D.S. division whose administration of Tamil government officials, they claimed, was insensitive, or even hostile, to Muslims' concerns. KPC was thus designed as an administrative and territorial container, which was spatially demarcated in a way to separate, protect and serve "the Muslim community." In other words: KPC was designed to be a Muslim D.S. division.

The case of KPC is indicative of how the complicated relations between Muslims and Tamils in eastern Sri Lanka have translated into a spatial politics of demanding ethnically pure territorial containers in the local administrative set-up of D.S. divisions, and how this, again, is shaped by territorial anxieties (e.g. Hasbullah and Geiser 2020, Hasbullah and Korf 2009; Yusoff and Sarjoon 2016). KPC is an exemplary case of the spatial politics of purification in eastern

Sri Lanka. Purification, writes Jonathan Spencer (alluding to James Joyce) (2003, 3) is the attempt to maintain fictive separations based on the illusion that “a nation is the same people living in the same place.” These imaginations of purity are at play on different scales of politics, however, from the idea of a pure Sinhala-Buddhist nation or a Tamil Eelam to the more pragmatic politics of Muslim politicians to carve out homogenous administrative entities for their flock. In Sri Lanka, the nation is implicated in imaginations of ethnic purity – of an ethnos purified from alien, polluting elements. The idea of the nation thus translates into a variety of scalar politics; the (ethno-)“nation” is re-inscribed in local turf battles in much finer-grained spatial scales than the nation-state and mapped into the boundary politics of local administrative units.

In this paper, we argue that the work of purification is bound to fail – and this failure is grounded in territorial anxieties that produce the desire for spatial purification which, if implemented, not only reinforces these anxieties but also instigates aggression and hatred. Writing on India, Arjun Appadurai (2006) has identified a core affective mechanism that drives these territorial anxieties: the “fear of small numbers.” The difficulty to achieve a coherent community – a pure collective – is what seems to instigate fear, antagonisms and political violence. Small minorities create anxieties as they “remind these majorities of the small gap which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied national whole, a pure and untainted national ethnos” (Appadurai 2006, 8). What Appadurai describes for the national ethnos in India also translates forcefully into the smaller grains of the spatial politics in eastern Sri Lanka: the attempt to produce ethnically pure spatial administrative containers produces new minorities, thereby not dissolving but reinforcing the “fear of small numbers.”

Using KPC as a case, we will scrutinize the impossible work of purification that undergirds the boundary politics of re-demarcating administrative units: it is impossible, as it will never achieve its intended “purity”; instead, it produces smaller numbers again and again, thereby never solving the ethnic “problem” but rather *aggravating* it. The history of KPC’s establishment and the subsequent struggles this created for local residents to access government services illustrates this impossibility. The case of KPC shows in particular how the attempt to solve inter-ethnic tensions by sub-dividing ethnic communities spatially into separate

administrative entities resembles a metaphorical fight against windmills: with every new spatial entity comes a new minority created in that container space. This has serious effects for local residents who feel their access to government welfare is made more difficult. The “fear of small numbers” is thus not eradicated, but multiplied.

Indeed, the case of KPC is a product of Sri Lanka’s competing ethno-nationalisms, and thus not simply a local problem but indicative of the contradictions of ethno-nationalism(s) more broadly. As Jeganathan and Ismail (1995/2009, 16) have pointed out, “there is a fundamental contradiction, a continuous oscillation between possible heterogeneity and implied homogeneity in the project of nationalism.” Writing on postcolonial South Asia more widely, Sankara Krishna has called this imagination a “fiction of homogeneity” (Krishna 1999, 2004), which is not only produced through historical narratives and myths, but has become translated in the spatial grammar of the postcolonial state and its administrative apparatus: The spatial grammar of ethnicization and purification diffuses through the local administrative state and transforms its everyday practice as much as it does the anticipation and expectations that citizens develop of state practice.

Methodology

The study builds on more than a decade of the first author’s ethnographic fieldwork, complemented by additional fieldwork by the second and third authors. The first author traveled regularly to the area during and after the war, interviewed key informants, local politicians, senior civil servants, and held group discussions on numerous occasions. Through his long-term engagement, he was able to establish relations of trust that enabled him to gain politically sensitive insights, especially into Muslim politics. He was supported by the second author, who, coming from and living in Kattankudy, provided important contacts in the field, collected additional information and verified existing information towards the end of the study. The third author joined the field sites repeatedly and participated in a number of interviews and group discussions. All authors also assembled policy documents and other archival material, and analyzed media reports to consolidate our understanding.

The KPC controversy is highly politicized, and the conflict over its boundaries is ongoing. Due to the political sensitivity of the topic and its continuing topicality in Sri Lankan politics, this study had to apply an ethnographic approach that was sensitive to context and politics that only a long-term engagement with the field sites made possible. Due to the positionality of the two Sri Lankan researchers, who are both Muslims, our account more strongly reflects Muslim grievances and political positions than those of Tamils. We have, however, also assembled narratives from Tamil informants. These insights are based on occasional interviews, often held on other occasions, with Tamil government officials, politicians or intellectuals over the last two decades, mostly by the third author. Due to the continuing political sensitivity of the issues at stake, we did not record any interviews, nor do we quote *ad verbatim* from any conversations to protect both respondents and researchers.

Ethnicized territorial politics in eastern Sri Lanka

Muslims and Tamils have long lived in a convivial relation in eastern Sri Lanka (McGilvray 2007). Since the war started in 1983, the relations between Tamils and Muslims in eastern Sri Lanka turned increasingly toxic and violent, however, and nurtured an ethno-nationalist identity politics that emphasized purity and otherness. In 1990, the LTTE demanded the complete and forceful evacuation of Muslims from the northern province, who had to leave behind all their assets (Hasbullah 2001; Thiranagama 2011). At the same time, in eastern Sri Lanka, the LTTE committed several brutal attacks on Muslims, among them the attack on the Kattankudy mosque in 1990, which killed more than 100 Muslims during prayer. All this took place in a time of massacres and terror committed by the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE and several militia groups (Goodhand et al. 2000, Lawrence 2000, Mc Gilvray 1997, Spencer et al. 2015). We cannot do justice here to the complicated history of Tamil–Muslim relations in Batticaloa and eastern Sri Lanka more broadly. Suffice it to say that LTTE atrocities against Muslims in the early 1990s and inter-communal violence between Tamils and Muslims pitted both “communities,” as they were often called (assuming a certain homogeneity), against each other. Muslims felt increasingly vulnerable and sought their own political representation in the form of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC).

Two dynamics have since then turned the relationships between Tamils and Muslims increasingly hostile. First, the LTTE and some Tamils considered the Muslims as “traitors” because, instead of joining the Tamils’ armed struggle, they sided with the Sri Lankan government (Korf 2006, Thiranagama 2010). Since the mid-1990s, the Sri Lankan government has coopted Muslim politicians, honoring many with ministerial portfolios and resources. The flow of resources is visible in a number of prominent public buildings in Muslim areas. McGilvray (1997, 241) reflected on this development in the 1990s, noting the “visible economic prosperity of the Muslim commercial centres,” which “was especially striking in contrast to the depressed or nonexistent mercantile economy of the Tamils.” This impression led many Tamil nationalists to brand Muslims as “war winners.”

Second, Tamil politicians developed a demographic anxiety: while many Tamils had fled eastern Sri Lanka during the war and only few returned, Muslims had largely stayed. The high Muslim birth rate has led to the Muslim population increasingly “outnumbering” Tamils in the eastern province. The relative decline of the Tamil population ratio undermined the LTTE’s demand for a Tamil Eelam (a Tamil homeland) that included the northern and eastern province. While the Tamil population was in a large majority in the North, Tamils had lost this status in the East after independence: first, due to the large numbers of Sinhalese settlers in irrigation schemes (Bastian 1995, Hasbullah and Geiser 2020, Peebles 1990, Tambiah 1986), and second, due to the increased Muslim population. The latter also forced Muslims to buy land in “Tamil areas” (land that was previously owned by Tamils and located in Tamil settlements) to build houses for their increasing population (Hasbullah and Korf 2013). Tamil nationalists voiced resentment against this practice and claimed that this threatened the territorial integrity of their “own” areas, even after the end of the war.

Meanwhile, Muslims in eastern Sri Lanka came to resent the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups operating in eastern Sri Lanka and their politics of intimidation, violence and terror. The LTTE had taxed Muslim entrepreneurs and shop owners when it controlled large parts of eastern Sri Lanka. Muslim farmers had also been unable to access their paddy fields, which were located in territories held under LTTE control on the other side of the Batticaloa lagoon (Korf and Fünfgeld 2006, Gaasbeek 2010). The LTTE would not allow Muslims

to enter “uncleared areas,” as these territories were called by the government, and gave those lands to Tamils living in their territory to cultivate. Even in the ceasefire period between 2002 and 2006, these lands were not returned to Muslims because the LTTE opposed this move. Many Muslims who had lived in smaller hamlets felt insecure and moved into major Muslim settlements (Hasbullah and Korf 2013).

The war thereby resulted in hardening the ethnic boundaries between “Muslims” and “Tamils.” Both ethnic communities voiced their well-founded grievances about the ethnic other and painted themselves primarily as victims of the other’s malpractices. These grievances did not end with the termination of the war. Rather, they have intensified since 2007, when military combat ceased in eastern Sri Lanka with the retreat of the LTTE to the Vanni. These grievances map onto a spatial politics of establishing “pure” ethnic administrative territories meant to protect each group from the ethnic other and to gain control over government resources. Muslim politicians demanded security for their community, and one instrument to achieve this was to create new administrative divisions purely for Muslims. Tamil politicians, in turn, considered these demands as hostile, as new administrative entities usually entailed in carving out of some territories from existing D.S. divisions that were dominated by a Tamil population and Tamil administrative cadre.

These demands started to be articulated since the 1990s, but the war prohibited their implementation. With the cessation of military combat in eastern Sri Lanka in 2007 and the final end of the war in 2009, the controversies over these demands have been heating up into a “territorial politics” that ethnicizes state services, and subsequently, access to the state. The state apparatus is thereby seen through the lens of ethnicity: Administrative units are assigned to a particular ethnic group, and subsequently, to be staffed by civil servants from that group. This has not always been the case. Until the 1980s, most state officials in Batticaloa district were Jaffna Tamils, and thus outsiders. Since then, a new generation of state officials is filling the ranks of local, provincial and central government posts in Batticaloa. This generation is recruited from Tamils and Muslims from eastern Sri Lanka, who compete for these government jobs. The creation of new ethnically marked administrative units is becoming a possibility to secure

government jobs for specific cohorts of these recruits (thus generating a market for local politicians to secure electoral loyalties by promising government jobs).

The politics of access to land further play into these struggles over state control. Muslim politicians hoped that control over new administrative units and related territory for Muslims could help solve some of the challenges Muslim communities faced due to the demand for land as a result of population growth: Muslim settlements in eastern Sri Lanka have always been densely populated (Kattankudy, for example, has one of the highest population densities in Sri Lanka), and the pressure on families to acquire land for things like building houses demanded by dowries or for rubbish disposal increased significantly due to rising population numbers. Many Muslim families thus sought to buy land from Tamils in neighboring jurisdictions, as it was too expensive or impossible to buy land within the Kattankudy D.S. division (Hasbullah and Korf 2013).

Many local and national Tamil politicians voiced concern that these Muslim land purchases equaled selling off “Tamil land,” thus undermining the Tamil Eelam project. Because the political stakes were high, Muslim politicians struggled to find a deal with Tamil politicians to acquire control over land located in “Tamil” jurisdictions. As many Tamils had been displaced or forced to flee or move away, population numbers in those D.S. divisions tended to stagnate or even decrease, while Muslim populations tended to grow significantly – with growing land demands in very congested Muslim settlements. With the war ending in eastern Sri Lanka in 2007, the question of Tamils’ return to their previous settlements added an additional layer of struggles: returning refugees required the recognition of their land and the support of basic welfare infrastructure from the state to restart their livelihoods from the ruins of their former homes.

In this way, control over land, security and access to state welfare became one of the central concerns of local politicians, both among Tamils and Muslims, during and after the war. Territorial re-districting of administrative units became the prime political mechanism through which local politicians hoped to secure these concerns. Muslim politicians in particular propagated redrawing administrative boundaries and carving out “pure” Muslim jurisdictions to ensure that their voters’ interests would be recognized. Tamil politicians instead defended the status quo and vehemently opposed these proposals, as they saw

redistricting as a potential weakening of their control over the eastern province. But at the heart of these struggles over administrative units and their territorial boundaries was each group's political imagination of an ethnically purified political container space. These spatial politics of purification work with the (often implicit) assumptions that administrators on D.S. level should belong to the same ethnicity as the majority of the population they represent, and that this ethnicized territorial ordering would ensure access to state services for previously less-served populations.

KPC's formation as an administrative unit

The skirmishes around the new D.S. division of Koralai Pattu Central are one prominent example, where these political imaginations of purification play out *territorially*. This explains the location of the new D.S. office along the Polonaruwa-Batticaloa road. The office is located in a site that, during the times of the civil war, especially prior to the ceasefire in 2002, had been the theater of military contestation. The road had been heavily fortified, with a sequence of military camps and checkpoints along it. The road remained closed for travel at night, and the territories north and south of it were more or less under the control of the LTTE. Close-by Valaichenai, with one part populated by Tamils and the other by Muslims, was a highly disputed place with intense militant movement, skirmishes between the fighting parties, LTTE surveillance, massacres and intimidation. The new D.S. office was not located inside Valaichenai town, but at its vicinity, thus staking claims to land in that area.

The establishment of this D.S. division goes back to a longer political struggle over the boundaries of local jurisdictions in eastern Sri Lanka: In 1989, new local government structures were being implemented because the thirteenth amendment of the constitution abolished the former village council system and the previous electoral wards in the wake of introducing the proportional representation system in national elections. In Batticaloa, the former Assistant Government Agent's (A.G.A.) division Koralai Pattu was divided into three local government divisions (both D.S. and Pradeshiya Sabha, or P.S., divisions): Koralai Pattu (KP), Koralai Pattu West (KPW, created particularly for Muslims) and Koralai Pattu North (KPN). Drawing the boundaries for these three D.S. divisions and allocating the Grama Niladhari (G.N.) divisions and villages to them

immediately raised concern and controversies around the exact demarcation of these boundaries, and subsequently involved the interference of local politicians, making it a case of continuous resentment between Muslims and Tamils.

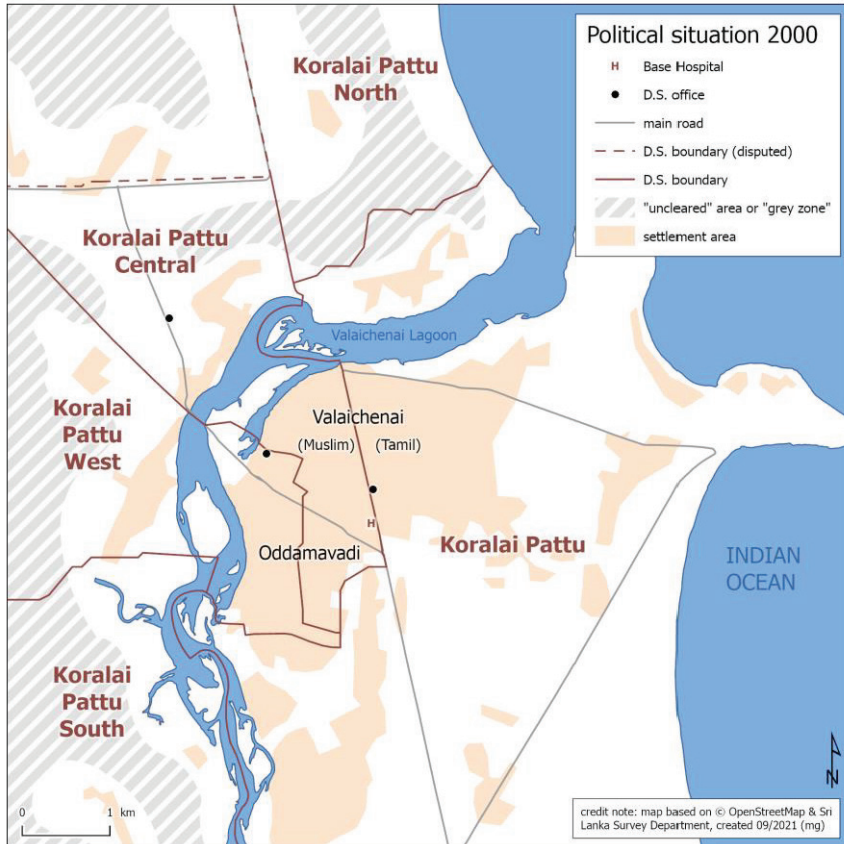


Figure 1: KPC’s location along the Polonnaruwa–Batticaloa road, a disputed territory during the war

In our study site, only the Muslim settlement of Oddamavadi was allocated to KPW. Muslims from neighboring Valaichenai remained within KP division alongside Valaichenai Tamils. The division included a vast territory west of the lagoon, which was under LTTE control at the time. According to some informants, these two neighboring Muslim communities had maintained significant differences: Valaichenai Muslims had traditionally engaged in fishing, while Oddamavadi Muslims in paddy cultivation; and the two communities also tended to support different political parties (before the SLMC was founded). Valaichenai was a stronghold of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), but

most Oddamavadi voters supported the United National Party (UNP). It was due to location-based identity politics, so we were told, that the two Muslim communities were allocated to different D.S. divisions, and Valaichenai Muslims were administered in a D.S. division with a Tamil majority. This is surprising given that, at the time of boundary demarcation in the late 1980s, the relations between Muslims and Tamils had already been tense in that area.

From the early 1990s onwards, a self-declared community of Valaichenai Muslims started to demand a separate D.S. division. This movement was initiated by a local government official, Y. Ahmed, at the time the additional district secretary in Batticaloa, who came from Valaichenai. Ahmed was killed on 22 December 1992, presumably by the LTTE because of his activism for a separate D.S. division, which the LTTE considered a threat to Tamil interests.² Ahmed's initiative was subsequently taken up by local Muslim politicians. With the formation of the SLMC as the main Muslim political party in the 1990s, the demand for a separate D.S. division became a key political demand from local SLMC politicians throughout the 1990s. Several local Muslim politicians subsequently took up this demand to gain the voting block of Valaichenai Muslims: first M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, later Mohideen Abdul Cader and Ameer Ali.

Numerous request letters and pamphlets were written to justify the claim for a separate D.S. division specifically for Valaichenai Muslims. In the following, we paraphrase the reasoning for this demand as it can be found in these documents (most of them in Tamil). The new D.S. division was to bring "assured physical security, independent socioeconomic activities, undisturbed administration and dignified self-rule" to Muslims in Valaichenai, who claimed (as Tamils did) to have long historical roots in the area. They also claimed a distinct place-based Muslim identity, setting them apart from neighboring Oddamavadi Muslims.

² The LTTE usually denied (or at least did not confirm) responsibility for such killings.

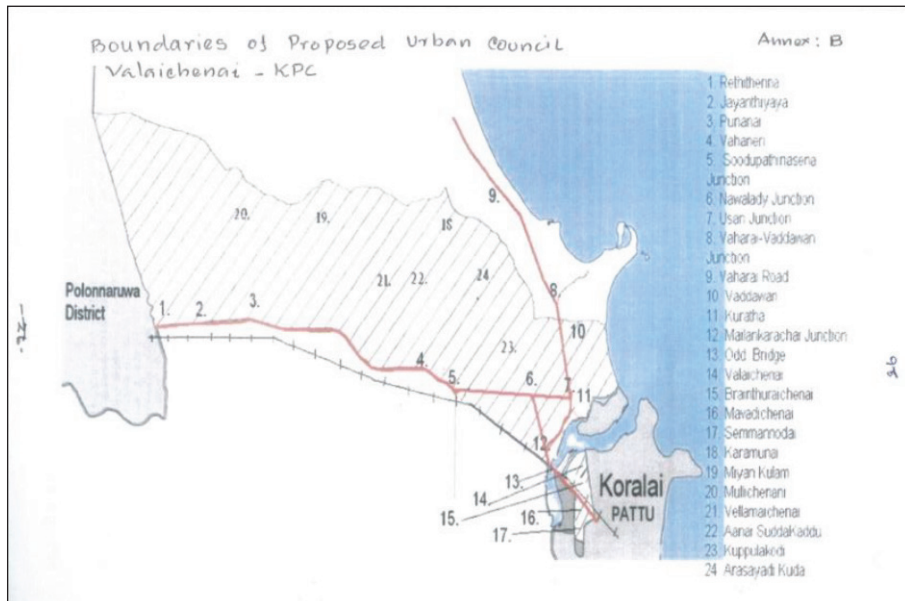


Figure 2: Sketch map of KPC submitted to government authorities

More specifically, three justifications were often formulated. *First*, that Valaichenai Muslims lived in a densely populated quasi-“enclave,” surrounded by Tamil settlements (and at the time, when the demand was first formulated, much of the surrounding territory was controlled by the LTTE). This meant that their community could not expand despite high population pressure, as land purchases in neighboring places would be obstructed by Tamil administrators. They therefore demanded their own unit for self-government with appropriate land resources. *Second*, these pamphlets and request letters maintained that Valaichenai Muslims held rightful claims to land across the Batticaloa lagoon, which they could not access during the war while it was under LTTE control. They expressed the suspicion that after the end of the war, Tamil administrators were obstructing the return of these lands. They hoped that administrative powers would allow them to reclaim their assets and properties. *Third*, these letters and pamphlets insisted that neighboring communities had been given administrative autonomy since 1989, and they were asking for the same right: Oddamavadi Muslims had KP West, Valaichenai Tamils had KP, and Vaharai Tamils had KP North, all with local P.S. government facilities. They claimed they were simply demanding the same for their community.

The proposals for a new D.S. division specifically for Muslims was highly controversial. While local Muslim politicians readily took the idea up to gain legitimacy for the newly founded SLMC, local Tamil politicians, especially the LTTE, vehemently opposed it. The latter was clearly against the proposal to carve out a separate “Muslim” administrative unit from an existing “Tamil” administrative unit. The LTTE particularly objected the allocation of land from the strategic LTTE stronghold of Vaharai, in KPN, to be included in the new (“Muslim”) administrative unit. Therefore, despite the demand, a new division was deemed unimplementable throughout most of the 1990s while the war was ongoing and the LTTE was controlling significant parts of northern Batticaloa. But towards the end of the decade, initial negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government (Goodhand et al. 2011) eased the tensions in the area slightly, providing the political atmosphere for the central government to consider this proposal.

In March 2000, the so-called Panambalana Committee³ submitted a report to the Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs recommending the establishment of two new D.S. divisions in Batticaloa district: KPC, deemed a Muslim division, and KPS, deemed a Tamil division. This recommendation was approved by the cabinet on 13 July 2000 (amp/00/1155/05/65) and confirmed in a letter addressed to the district secretary of Batticaloa on 27 December 2000 with the instructions to allocate land and provide a cost estimate for the new divisional secretariat building. According to the cabinet decision, 11 G.N. divisions and a total of 240 square kilometers were to be allocated to KPC.

3 Named after the chairperson of the “Committee for Establishment of New Divisional Secretaries’ Divisions and Reconstitution of Grama Niladhari Divisions,” Mr. D.L.V.A.A. Panambalana, who was appointed on 3 June 1999 by then Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka. The committee submitted the report on 3 March 2000.



Figure 3: Koralai Pattu Central’s new divisional secretariat office

The new KPC D.S. office was officially inaugurated on 24 May 2002 in a temporary office location in Valaichenai. The new secretariat building was declared open by Ameer Ali, then member of the Eastern Provincial Council, (previously minister of disaster relief services), on 19 March 2010. The new secretariat was not located inside the main settlement area of that division (the Muslim section of Valaichenai), but at its vicinity: on the Batticaloa-Colombo Main Street at Palai Nagar in the Thiyawathuwan G.N. division. At the time of its erection, this building was located in a loosely populated area, with occasional houses and paddy fields surrounding its compound. But the location was close to a newly planned housing scheme for Muslim families, Maryam Village, which was declared open by Ameer Ali, then MP and minister of rural economic affairs, on 12 December 2016. A second housing scheme was announced but has not yet been declared open as of the time of writing.

The five D.S. divisions coexist alongside only three local P.S. government units (KP, KPN and KPW) because KPC and KPS have not yet been accepted as legal local government bodies. (The cabinet approval document of 13 July 2000 stated that KPC D.S. division falls in the territories of KP and KPW P.S. administrations) The three officially accepted administrative and local P.S. government bodies, the two newly created ones, and the five central government territorial units (D.S. divisions) are nevertheless all operational, with government office buildings and a staff with limited roles and duties. The subsequent formation of equivalent P.S. units for the newly created D.S. divisions has not taken place despite demands from the local Mosque Federation and local Muslim politicians, in particular

Ameer Ali, at some time local MP and government minister, as well as by the KPC divisional secretary.⁴

As a result, two parallel administrative cartographies co-exist, whose boundaries do not overlap: the five D.S. divisions, whose boundaries have not yet been surveyed and gazetted (i.e. officially announced) and the “old” boundaries of three P.S. administrations with political bodies and electoral wards from the previous territorial demarcation of the three D.S. divisions drawn in 1989. Administrative units that legally do not (yet) exist nevertheless already develop a life of their own – but one that is only acknowledged in certain administrative tasks. In others, the old entities still constitute the legitimate spatiality of administrative order. As a result, numerous maps with new (roughly delineated) boundaries circulate in the government sector and among NGOs and UN offices with boundaries of five D.S. divisions (see Figure 4). This cartographic ambiguity creates political problems, as the co-existence of two administrative “cartographies” causes turf battles regarding the politically sensitive questions of land allocation, infrastructure investments and welfare services.

Even more, the exact territorial boundaries of KPC and KPS D.S. divisions have still not been formally surveyed and their boundaries demarcated. The time of the inception of the two new D.S. divisions at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s was a period of insecurity, and these territories were located in an area at the border zone between government and LTTE controlled areas.⁵ Even after the ceasefire agreement of 2002, the relations between the LTTE and Muslim politicians remained tense, as the LTTE did not allow the Muslims to return to agricultural lands in the territory under LTTE control. The split-up of the LTTE in 2004, the subsequent deterioration of the security situation and the resumption of military battle in 2006 prohibited a formal gazetting of boundaries.

4 See, for example, the letters and documents compiled in: “Proposal for Pradeshiya Saba / Urban Council (Koralai Pattu Central)”, submitted by M.S.S. Ameer Ali to the Minister of Local Government and Provincial Councils, A.L.M. Athaullah (who was an MP from Amparai district) on 28 November 2012. This proposal compiles several earlier request letters by the KPC divisional secretary, as well as Ameer Ali’s earlier request letters and a letter by the Mosque Federation.

5 See, for example: The report and letter by the “Federation of Koralai Pattu Central Mosques and Institutions” on “Demarcation of Administrative Boundaries for Koralai Pattu Central Divisional Secretariat – Valaichenai (Batticaloa District), submitted to the Reforms Commission of Divisional Secretariat Boundaries and G.N. Divisions, Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs, Colombo, on 27 April 2010.

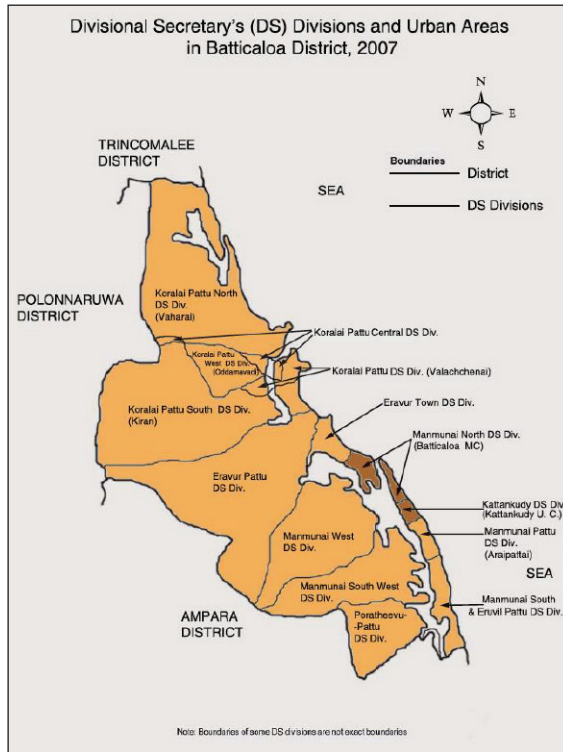
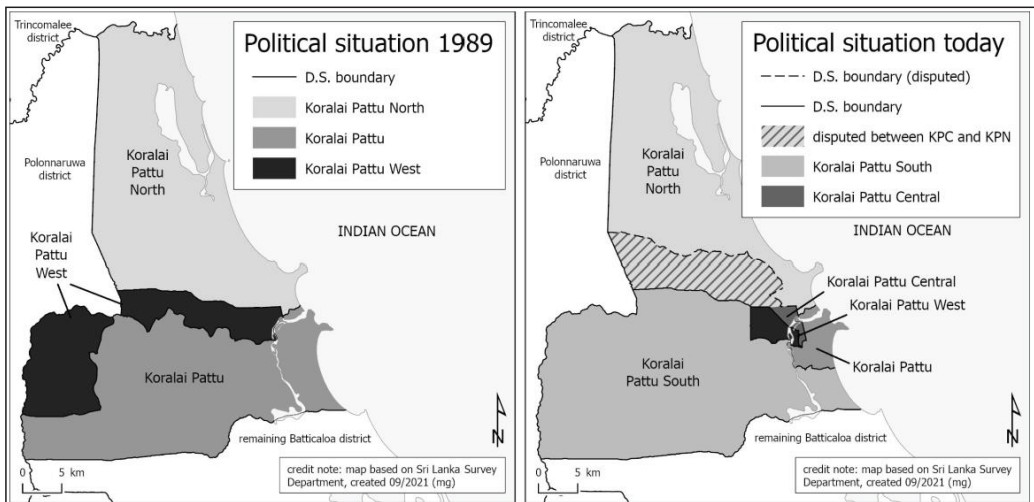


Figure 4: Map in government census document as of 2007 showing “new” (but inaccurate) D.S. divisions and boundaries⁶



Figures 5 and 6: “Old” and “new” (tentative) boundaries of the D.S. divisions in northern Batticaloa District

6 Department of Census and Statistics (2007): Basic Population Information on Batticaloa District – 2007. Preliminary Report Based on Special Enumeration. Colombo. This map appears on page 8 but is reproduced for thematic maps throughout the document.

This situation has continued to the present and has produced administrative ambiguities and political turmoil. KPC has existed only in a reduced format: three G.N. divisions originally allocated to the D.S. division continue to be administered by the KPN D.S. divisional secretariat (Punanai east, Rethithenne, and Karamunai), confining the effective territory of KPC D.S. division to 8 (instead of 11) G.N. divisions, and 8 square kilometers instead of the allocated 240 mentioned in the cabinet-approved document, which had followed the recommendations of the report submitted by the Panambalana Committee in 2000. Those three G.N. divisions are now controversial, since they seem to have been part of a “local deal” between Muslim and Tamil politicians in the late 1990s and allocated to KPC (although some of these had a Tamil population), as they included agricultural land some of which was used by Muslims from Valaichenai for their livelihoods activities. These three G.N. divisions are: Punanai East G.N. division, and two new G.N. divisions, which housed settlements of Muslim refugees (Rethithenna and Karamunai) and which have been carved out of Punanai East G.N. divisions as new G.N. entities.

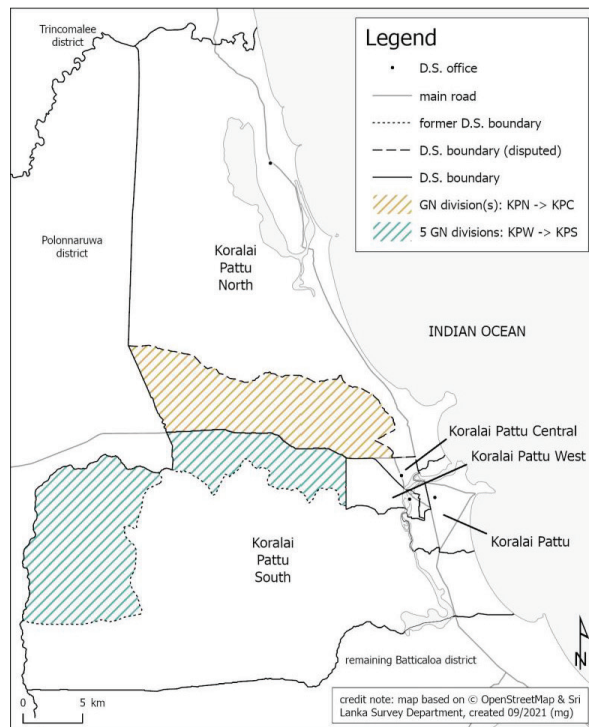


Figure 7: “The deal”: shifting G.N. divisions from one D.S. division to another

But this “deal” has produced a number of territorial conflicts and boundary disputes between different D.S. divisions since the official formation of KPC and KPS was announced. As part of that deal, five G.N. divisions were transferred from the “Muslim” D.S. division KP West to the “Tamil” D.S. division KP South (to compensate for the loss of land in the “Tamil” D.S. division of KPN). Local Muslim representatives complained that, while the five G.N. divisions were already administered by KP South, those three allocated to KPC were still under the purview of KPN. These informants blamed the Batticaloa District Secretariat (whose government officials are largely Tamil) for obstructing the implementation of the administrative reform.⁷ The Punanai East G.N. division has continued to be administered by KPN, and even today, the survey department maps list this G.N. division under KPN, not KPC.⁸

These territorial disputes take place in the heart of the administrative state, where Muslim government officials disagree with Tamil government officials over jurisdictional powers, administrative boundaries and bureaucratic responsibilities. For example, KPC’s divisional secretary complains that the KPN divisional secretary still claims administrative duties over the un-gazetted G.N. divisions. Further, the divisional secretaries of KPC and KP disagree about the exact boundaries of their administrative units, in particular around the location of Valaichenai Base Hospital, which both D.S. divisions claim is on their respective territory. Further quarrels have emerged around the location of essential government offices. For example, it was reported that the birth registration office was recently shifted from a location inside “Muslim” KPW D.S. division to “Tamil” KP D.S. division, which caused resentment among local Muslim politicians. The local Muslim MP, Naseer Ahamed, even got involved to prevent the relocation of the office from its original place.

Resentment and local turf battles over territorial control and access to administrative services are the product of an “ethnicization” of the administrative state, which produces a political cartography: The drawing of boundaries, the location of government offices and the staffing of government units are all seen through the lens of ethnicity, and the gain of one ethnic group is seen as the

7 For example, see letter by the Federation of Korlai Pattu Mosques and Institutions to Basheer Segu Dawood, Deputy Minister of Co-operatives and Internal Trade, Colombo, on 29 November 2010.

8 <https://it.survey.gov.lk/gn Updating/> (accessed on 18 May 2021).

loss of another one. In Batticaloa, Muslim politicians claim that a longstanding equilibrium of powers is now being unsettled. For a long time, the administrative state on district level has been dominated by Tamil government officials, but influential Muslim MPs were nevertheless able to make their influence felt through the political system and higher government levels, e.g. through the powers of ministerial posts they held in a number of governments.

After the last national election in 2020, this equilibrium has come out of balance, with only one Muslim MP elected from the district, and MP Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (alias Pillayan) appointed as the Batticaloa District Coordinating Committee co-chairman on 22 September 2020.⁹ In the view of many Muslim informants, this gives “the Tamil side” an advantage in the struggles over the control of the local state. Many Muslims further consider their political leverage to be compromised since the 2019 Easter attacks.¹⁰ In turn, many Tamil government officials or politicians have long lamented the former powers of Muslim MPs and government ministers, following the legacy of the charismatic founder of the SLMC, M.H.M. Ashraff, who was often accused of providing favors to Muslim areas and staffing government institutions with his supporters.¹¹ Both Muslim and Tamil politicians thereby engage in victimization discourses that resonate widely in local media and public discourse, which pose the ethnic other as taking undue advantage in the struggle over control of the local administrative state.

Territorial turf battles and access to state services

These territorial disputes about administrative boundaries and access to state resources seriously affect access to state service for ordinary people. The coexistence of two maps of administrative boundaries – one for D.S. divisions

9 Chandrakanthan is a former LTTE cadre who broke with the LTTE in April 2004 to side with Karuna Amman. He became first the deputy leader (under Karuna) of the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), before replacing him as leader in April 2007. In May 2008, he was appointed chief minister of Eastern Province. In 2020, he was elected as MP. This political career should not obfuscate his reputation as ruthless militant leader during his time in the LTTE and thereafter with Karuna and with the TMVP.

10 On Easter Sunday of 2019, six coordinated explosions caused devastation in two Catholic churches, one Evangelical church and three luxury hotels. Overall 260 people were killed. Two radical Islamist groups were responsible for the attack. In the aftermath of these attacks, Islamophobia has increased in Sri Lanka.

11 Jeyaraj, D. B. S. (30 September 2000). “Obituary: A pioneering leader – M.H.M. Ashraff, 1948-2000”. *Frontline*. 17 (20).

for the central administration and the other for P.S. for provincial and local government administration – creates confusion about the responsibilities of different governmental bodies for essential state services. Matters of welfare distribution is already been handled by the “new” map of D.S. administrations; the question of land allocation continues to be handled according to the “old” map of D.S. divisional offices that follow the boundaries of the established P.S. units, as land allocation is a “devolved,” decentralized subject, at least as long as the land does not belong to large-scale development schemes run by the central government (Bastian 1995). In this section, we therefore look at how the two maps affect the access of residents to important government services.

Citizen access to government services is crucial, especially in Batticaloa, where these services are urgently needed due to the legacy of the war. The war displaced many people from their homes, and during the war, many residents could not access their fields on the other side of the frontlines. (For example, Muslims could not go to their fields if these were located in LTTE controlled areas.) People now want to return and reclaim their properties and land, but they depend on paperwork from the D.S. divisional secretariat to be able to do so. When this administrative office is run by a government official from another ethnic community, residents have a suspicion that their matters are not attended to fairly and promptly. This is acute in questions of land rights, as Muslims and Tamils often have competing claims to land.

These competing demands result in an increasing number of disputes, where one ethnic community accuses the “other side” of obstructing or negating their intrinsic rights or their possibility to govern their lives, making pragmatic solutions of land distribution politically impossible. For example, Muslim settlements face the problem of population growth and increasing congestion, as their administrative units tend to be confined to small but densely populated territories. These settlements urgently need new land for their expanding families but also for waste disposal. At the same time, a number of Tamil settlements have lost population due to out-migration during the war, and only a fraction of these refugees are returning. Therefore, in these settlements and jurisdictions, there is often vacant land available that Muslims could buy, but they are unable to due to Tamil politicians’ and administrators’ resistance to sell this land to the “other community.”

We illustrate these constellations in *four* sites in northern Batticaloa:

The *first* case concerns Muslim residents from Kallichai. Kallichai is a village at the Western edge of Koralai Pattu in two G.N. divisions located in the P.S. (and “old” D.S.) KPW division. These Muslims were displaced from their homes in 1990 when violence escalated in Batticaloa district, as their village was located in the inner heartland of LTTE-controlled area where the LTTE did not tolerate any Muslims. The families were first temporarily relocated into refugee camps and temporary housing schemes in a government-controlled area around Jayanthiya, Athukkalai, Divlana and Manjola. In 1994, fifty families were provided with housing and paddy land in Jayanthiya through the Mahaweli Development Authority in its Maduru Oya scheme. Today, many Muslims continue to live in the relocation site in Jayanthiya but commute to their fields in Kallichai for their livelihood activities. These fields had been inaccessible during the war, when the LTTE controlled the area.

The politics of (re-)location is significant in this case: The location of this scheme along the northern part of the Polonnaruwa–Batticaloa road, just at the border to the Polonnaruwa district, was favored as a site of relocation by local Muslim politicians, among them Ameer Ali and M.L.A.M. Hizbullah. First, the land in this location came under the purview of the Mahaweli Authority and its multi-provincial Maduru Oya scheme, i.e. this specific stretch of land was administered by a central government authority, not the provincial government, which is dominated by Tamil government officials. Second, the location was still inside Batticaloa district boundaries, and therefore, the block votes of the relocated Muslim residents could be harnessed by Batticaloa Muslim MPs to keep their electoral voting base intact. At the same time, it was located along the highly securitized Colombo–Batticaloa main road near the neighboring district of Polonnaruwa, under military control of the government.

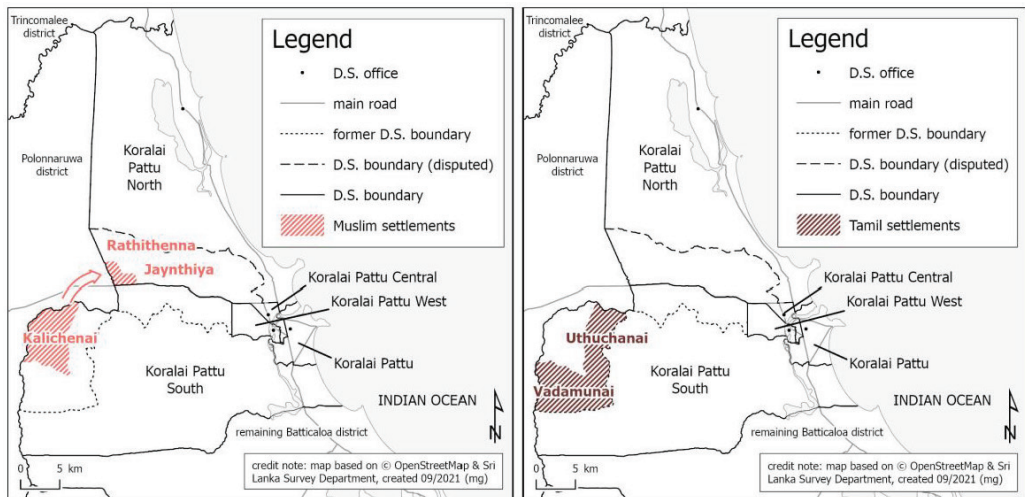
The two Muslim settlements of Jayanthiya and Rathithenna, both located along the Colombo–Batticaloa main road, became a central issue of concern in local politics, when the re-drawing of D.S. divisional boundaries was discussed during the preparation of the “Panambalana Committee” report. In the subsequent cabinet memorandum, G.N. division Punanai East (211), in which these two Muslim settlements are located, was to be subdivided into three G.N. divisions:

Punanai East (211B), Rathithenna (211H), and Karamunai (211 G/2); the latter two have a Muslim population, the former a Tamil population. These three G.N. divisions were shifted from KPN to the newly formed KPC D.S. division.¹² Punanai East (211B) is loosely populated with Tamil and Veddha populations (Kern 2021), and it houses large tracts of agricultural and forest land used by Muslim residents of Valaichenai, which is the reason why Muslims lobbied for its inclusion into KPC. But the allocation of this territory and these three G.N. divisions to KPC has been most controversial, and their boundaries have not yet been officially gazetted.

This re-demarcation of G.N. divisions had been part of a local “deal” between Muslim and Tamil politicians about an exchange of territory: Tamil politicians were reluctant to “give away” the southern part of KPN (Vaharai) to a “Muslim” D.S. division. In exchange for shifting the territory of Punanai East with its large but sparsely populated territory to the “Muslim” D.S. division of KPC, five other G.N. divisions, among them the “Muslim” G.N. divisions of Kallichai, were taken out of KPW (a “Muslim” D.S. division) and assigned to KPS (which is “Tamil”).¹³ Four of these five G.N. divisions had a Tamil (majority) population and were therefore shifted to the “Tamil” KPS division. Kallichai, due to its location, was shifted together with these four D.S. divisions to KPS. But the result is that Muslims from Kallichai, now settled in Rathithenna and Jayanthiya, complain that the D.S. divisional secretariat administration of KPS is obstructing their return to their original homes in Kallichai – and they think this is because KPS is governed by Tamil government officials (as a “Tamil” D.S. division).

12 Annex No. VIII to Cabinet Memorandum My No. IIA/DA/141107, dated 29 November 2000.

13 These were: “Wadumunai (210 A/01), Uddichenai (210 A/02), Vakeneri (210), Poonanai West (210 E), Kallichchi (210A)” (spelling as in cabinet memorandum, which follows Sinhalese spelling rather than the Tamil spelling used in documents in Batticaloa), cf: Annex No. VII to Cabinet Memorandum My No. IIA/DA/141107, dated 29 November 2000. (Note that Kallichchi includes both Kallichai and Uthuchanai.)



Figures 8 and 9: The “two cartographies” of administration for Muslims from Kallichai (left) and for Tamils from Vadamunai and Uthuchanai (right)

Similar problems arise for Tamils who wish to return, as the second case, which is closely entangled with the first, indicates: It concerns Tamil inhabitants of Vadamunai and Uthuchanai. Their original homes are close to the Kallichai Muslims’ original homes. Tamil families were originally settled in this place by Tamil MP K.W. Devanayagam in the 1960s to protect the boundaries of Batticaloa district against intrusion by Sinhalese settlers. Many of these Tamils were displaced during the war, as their villages were located at the border zone between the LTTE and the military, and temporarily relocated to Sithandi and Wantharamulai. A number of these displaced Tamil families are now in the process of returning to their original homes. Their village is in a dilapidated state and they need urgent government support in terms of basic infrastructure and welfare benefits.

When trying to access government services, these families find themselves in an administrative limbo: In the boundary re-demarcation process, their G.N. division was shifted from KP West to KP South. As the new G.N. divisions have not been gazetted, they belong to two different administrative offices, according to the two maps: in terms of local and provincial government services, their village still belongs to KPW P.S. division, which is run by Muslim administrators and politicians, but in terms of central government services, to KPS D.S. division, which is a majority Tamil division. Sensitive issues around land administration continue to be handled by the “old map,” i.e. by KPW administrative offices.

To access these offices, Tamils have to travel to Oddamavadi and to deal with Muslim government officials, whom they mistrust. This situation causes a similar problem for them as it has for Muslims who wish to return to Kallichai.

A *third* case further indicates these struggles to access government services concerning so-called “Upcountry Tamils” who had been displaced from Mayilanthenne village in Punanai West G.N. division. Their village had been founded by S. Sowmeya Moorthy Thondaman, leader of the Ceylon Workers’ Congress (CWC), a party representing their interests. Their village was located in a highly disputed area along the Colombo–Batticaloa main road, which was heavily fortified during the war years. The inhabitants were repeatedly displaced during the war, but many are now returning. As Tamils, they feel they belong to KP South, the Tamil administered D.S. division, but for dealing with land matters, they rely on the government offices of KP West, where they do not feel comfortable dealing with Muslim administrators. Again, this situation arises because their G.N. division was selected to be shifted from KPW to KPS, but with the pending implementation of this re-demarcation of administrative units, they continue to be trapped in the two maps of the unresolved administrative set-up.

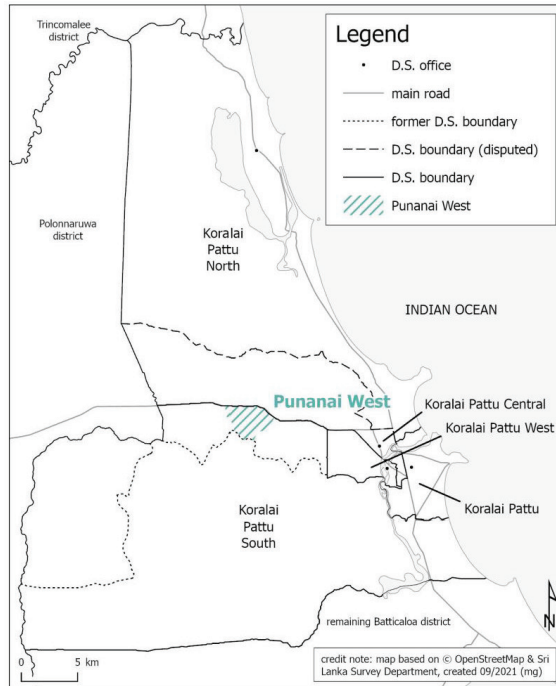


Figure 10: Punanai West in between the “two cartographies” of the administrative state

Fourth, struggles over access to state services are not confined to rural areas. The re-demarcation of boundaries between Tamil and Muslim administrative divisions is equally an issue in the densely populated (both Muslim and Tamil) quasi-urban settlements of Valaichenai, and in Oddamavaddi, a Muslim settlement. In this congested urban sprawl, old and new D.S. divisions intersect in a densely populated space that is squeezed between the lagoon and the sea. The boundaries of the three new D.S. divisions KP, KPW and KPC are not clearly demarcated. Unclear boundaries create disputes between different administrative units: For example, the boundaries between KPC and KP D.S. divisions are not officially surveyed, but run through the middle of Valaichenai, separating KPC (Muslims on the western side) and KP (Tamils on the eastern side). The Valaichenai main road serves as proxy boundary. Any issues arising around land properties along both sides of this road risks becoming “a big issue” in the ethnicized territorial politics. Any purchase of land that involves a buyer from one ethnic group and a seller from another easily becomes a question of politics. As a result, this grey zone along the road becomes an untouchable territory, where investments are indefinitely suspended.

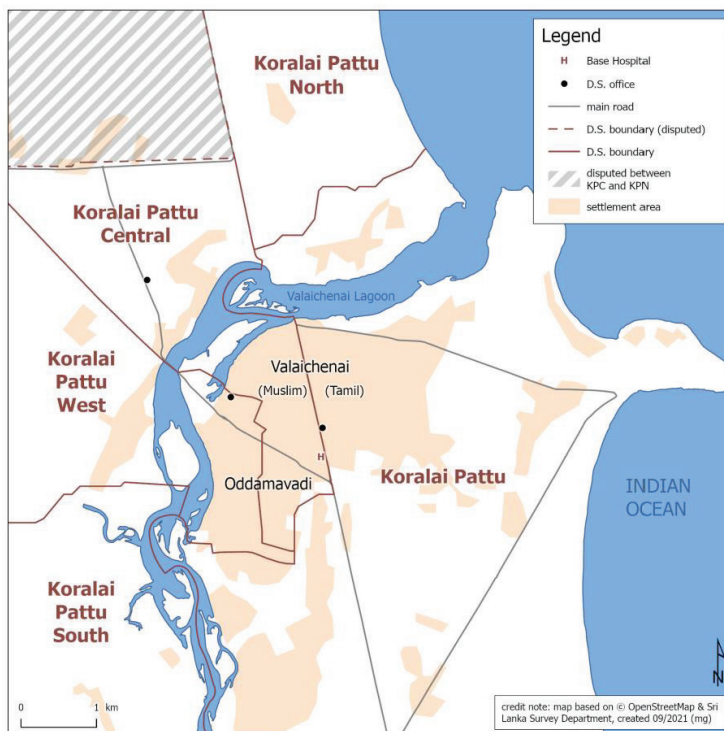
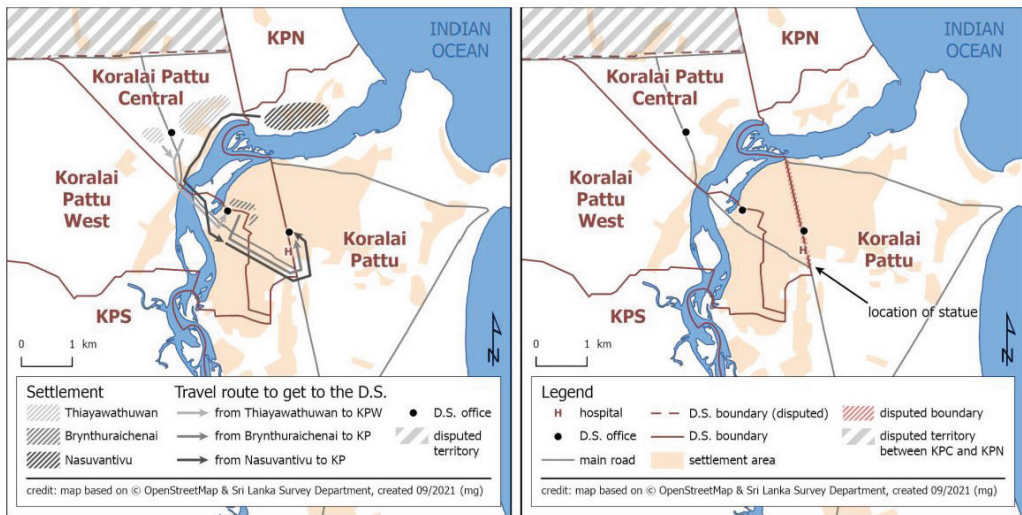


Figure 11: Local boundaries in the highly congested urban sprawl of Oddamavadi and Valaichenai, and locations of D.S. divisional secretariat offices

The unclear demarcation further causes confusion and contestation over who is responsible for which populations in this highly congested urban space. In particular, this leads to situations where government offices located nearby a residential area claim not to be responsible for these residents. As a result, residents have to travel long distances to the government offices officially responsible for their requests. For example, the area around the new D.S. divisional secretariat building of KPC, Thiyawathuwan, is still administered by KPW P.S. in Oddamavadi, but KPW P.S. shows no interest in developing these areas, as its government officials consider this area to have been shifted to KPC. Residents of the Brynthuraichenai North and South G.N. divisions are located nearby KPW D.S. and P.S. offices, but the responsible KPC D.S. office is located far away, and the responsible local government office is the KP P.S., which is “Tamil” and not trusted by local Muslim residents. This creates confusion among local residents, as many residents in that area belong to the same families and mosques but are separated administratively. In all these sites, people live close to a government office they cannot use, as they belong to another administrative unit.



Figures 12 and 13: Access to the administrative state (left) and struggles over administrative boundaries (right)

A similar problem arises for Tamil residents in the island of Nasuvantivu, which belongs administratively to KP D.S. and P.S. offices. Residents of the island have to travel long distances, passing by KPC and KPW D.S. and KPW P.S. offices before they reach KP offices. Such travel is not only costly and time consuming,

making access to government welfare precarious for poor, old or disabled citizens, but also potentially dangerous when inter-ethnic relations between Muslims and Tamils are tense. Many people are then unable to access government offices, as they are afraid to travel through settlements inhabited by another ethnic group. Access to the administrative state thereby becomes entangled with the politics and conflict dynamics of ethnic geographies in Batticaloa district.



Figures 14 and 15: State Minister Sathasivam Vijayanthiran inaugurates the status of Swami Vipulananda at Valaichenai Junction on 21 May 2021

Furthermore, throughout eastern Sri Lanka, political activists erect ethnic territorial markers to claim a particular space as ethnic territory, often with tacit or even open support from local politicians (Spencer et al. 2015). Similar disputed territorial markers have also been erected in Valaichenai. For example, on 21 May 2021, a statue of Swami Vipulananda, a famous Tamil Hindu author, poet and teacher (1892–1947), was inaugurated by Minister of State Sathasivam Vijayanthiran at Valaichenai Junction. The statue was built in the middle of the roundabout of the junction, which is located at the territorial boundaries between Muslim and Tamil settlements and administrative units (KPC and KP, see figure 12), close to the local bus stand, police station and petrol station. Muslim politicians considered this a provocation, as the roundabout is located in the middle of a border area between “Muslim” and “Tamil” areas, and Muslim politicians considered this an attempt from Tamil activists to claim that area as a Tamil space. This example indicates the entanglement of access to the administrative state and the territorial politics of ethnic purification.

The impossibility of purification

The proposal to create a new administrative unit – Koralai Pattu Central (KPC) – started as a local demand for more self-government. Making the state more responsive to the desires and requests of local people through the devolution of power and the decentralization and deconcentration of government functions has been widely proposed as a potential solution to “the ethnic problem” in Sri Lanka. The idea is that devolved and decentralized administrative units could attend the needs of specific ethnic communities, giving them a sense of representation and recognition. But the devolution debate, which has taken shape since the 1990s (Siriwardena 1996), has highlighted different political positions on devolution as much as its controversial political nature (e.g. Liyanage 1998, Thangarajah 2003, Thiruchelvam 2000). In our case study, the ethnic tensions between Muslims and Tamils who have made a “local demand” for self-government is a highly controversial political issue. The central government’s response to this local “will of the people” has subsequently produced multiple struggles over control of the local administrative state in northern Batticaloa. Hasbullah and Korf (2009), Hasbullah and Geiser (2020, 67ff.) as well as Yusoff and Sarjoon (2016) report similar struggles from Amparai district. Devolution and decentralization as designed in these cases leads to an “ethnicization” of the administrative state, thereby deepening rather than solving “the ethnic problem.”

The ethnicization of the state apparatus, propagated as a solution to the ethnic tensions between Muslims and Tamils in Batticaloa, increases the territorial anxieties it is supposed to solve. The formation of new administrative units required shifting G.N. divisions and re-demarcating administrative boundaries in the shadow of the political jockeying of Muslim and Tamil politicians (and, in their shadow, Muslim and Tamil government officials), who were anxious to make a deal to compensate for “lost territory” in one place by shifting territory in another. This territorial jockeying to create “pure” ethnic units of administration simply produced new minorities who do not feel represented by state officials of another ethnic group. Many of these struggles over boundaries concern only relatively small territories or number of populations, but in the ethnically polarized politics of Batticaloa, they quickly become a big issue.

Territorial politics thus end up as a politics of spatial purification, prominent in northern Batticaloa and with powerful effects. It has become common practice to ask if a division is “Tamil” or “Muslim”, implying an ethnically defined administrative container. And yet, this work of purification is doomed to fail, in the sense that it cannot solve the anxieties of experiencing a lack of representation in the local administration. Creating ethnically pure administrative territories remains an impossibility: Every attempt to carve out and re-demarcate ethnically pure containers leaves some ethnic minorities behind in the newly demarcated container spaces. The “tales of two maps” in northern Batticaloa, with the overlapping administrative maps of “old” P.S. boundaries and “new” D.S. boundaries, is indicative of these problems.

What makes this politics of spatial purification self-defeating is the “fear of small numbers,” as Appadurai (2006) called it: The impossibility in achieving a coherent community – a pure collective – is what seems to instigate fear, antagonism and political contestation between Muslims and Tamils. Our study of the nitty-gritty details of boundary demarcations in northern Batticaloa has shown that the design to create ethnically “pure” administrative units simply produces new “small numbers”: Wherever a new boundary is drawn, new minorities are created. These newly created minorities remind the majority group in that unit of “the small gap which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of ... a pure and untainted ... ethnos” (Appadurai 2006, 8). The project of creating pure ethno-territories on the administrative map will never be complete and comprehensive, and this incompleteness produces political contestation and resentment. The case of KPC shows the impossibility of demarcating local administrative boundaries to the satisfaction of local people in eastern Sri Lanka, for their demands are deeply contradictory and antagonistic. These local requests are often couched in an ethnic register and thereby problematically reproduce the imaginations of nationhood and community that their political leaders propagate.

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A Tale of Two Maps: Territorial anxieties, political cartography, and the impossibility of boundary demarcation in Sri Lanka

This study argues that a “territorial anxiety” has been plaguing Sri Lanka’s ethnic relations for decades. This anxiety continues to haunt Sri Lanka’s politics even since the civil war ended. To illustrate the multiple ills this anxiety produces, we provide an ethnographic case study of the politics of boundary demarcations of local administrative units in eastern Sri Lanka, more specifically the controversy around Koralai Pattu Central Divisional Secretariat (D.S.) division (known as KPC) in Batticaloa District. By tracing the history of administrative boundary demarcation and ethnic segregation in the region, our study shows that administrative boundary demarcations are used as an attempt to purify administrative (and political) entities into ethnically homogenous territorial containers. This politics of purification produces unsolvable contradictions. The case of KPC reveals lessons not only for Batticaloa’s politics but for boundary demarcation politics for administrative or electoral purposes in Sri Lanka and South Asia more broadly.

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