*Internationales Asienforum, Vol. 35 (2004), No. 3–4, pp. 263–293*

# Autonomous Politicians and the Local State in Sri Lanka: On the Social Organisation of Politics and Administration*

MICHAEL ROLL

## 1. Introduction

Studies of the local state are still rare in the social sciences compared to the vast literature on national politics and administration. Although on the increase in recent years, many of the new studies focus primarily on formal institutions and processes, thereby neglecting the different forms of local embeddedness of formal institutions as well as informal arrangements and processes. These arrangements are particularly important in transformation and developing countries. Indeed, by overlooking them, important aspects of what constitutes the (local) state in these contexts are missed.[1] It is argued in this article that when a more open approach is applied, studies of

* The fieldwork on which this article is based was carried out as part of the integrated research training project (*Lehrforschung*) of the graduate study programme 'Development Planning and Development Politics' at the Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld from July to October 2002. The project was supervised by Prof. Dr. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka. Research in Sri Lanka was made possible by an invitation of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo. Financial support from the Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld, the Westfälisch-Lippische Universitätsgesellschaft and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is gratefully acknowledged. The author is greatly indebted to many Sri Lankans who cannot be mentioned here by name due to the delicate subject. In addition, the following persons greatly supported research in Sri Lanka: Markus Mayer (Development Studies Institute, University of Colombo), Christine Bigdon (then Resident Representative of the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg), Britta Klemmer and Ralf Starkloff. The research report *"Let us not talk politics." Autonomous Politicians, Clientelist Structures and 'Civil Society' in Southern Sri Lanka* is available at: http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/sdrc/teaching/lehrforschung/roll.pdf. For critical questions and helpful comments on research findings, the report and earlier drafts of this article, the author thanks the participants of a presentation initiated by Dr. Roland F. Steurer, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), 04.10.2002, Colombo as well as Rob James, Cathleen Kummer, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Jürgen Piechotta, Mr. Weliamuna and the editors of this journal. The responsibility for the final version, however, remains entirely with the author.

[1] For a similar argument that is still valid, referring particularly to social science literature on Sri Lanka, see Moore (1985: 203-204).

the local state are particularly conducive to a more comprehensive and realistic picture of the nature of the state in the countries concerned. It is at the local level where everyday forms of governance can be observed and investigated most comprehensively. These forms include everyday interactions between and representations and perceptions of actors representing 'the state' and 'society', respectively.

Social scientists who use the term 'local' nowadays have to clearly define their understanding of it to avoid arguing for some sort of 'container-localism'. The term 'local state' is used in an empirical-pragmatical sense in this article to refer to a sub-national field where certain actors, practices and phenomena that are in one way or the other related to the institution 'state' – here in particular politics and administration – gain relevance. The focus on the local state is thus a particular perspective for studying 'the state' in general.

By using an ethnographic approach to study the state from a local perspective, this study tries to analyse some of the most basic characteristics of the social organisation of politics and public administration in Sri Lanka. Apart from being a case study of Sri Lanka, this article also demonstrates the usefulness of the approach of 'political ethnography' for studying the state in its particular social context. As the analysis is based on the perceptions and interactions of citizens,[2] public servants and politicians, the concept of 'state-society relations' is most appropriate to describe the perspective.[3]

The research on which this article is based was conducted between July and October 2002. Apart from Colombo, the author lived in a small town in southern Sri Lanka for more than seven weeks. This place will here be called 'Southern Town'.[4] The methodological approach that guided research is based on principles of the Grounded Theory according to Strauss (1998), ethnography (Amann/Hirschauer 1997) and the Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge (Schröer 1997). Forty-seven ethnographic or explorative interviews (Spradley 1979; Honer 1994) were conducted either in

---

2 'Citizen' may analytically not be the most appropriate term as it is a very complex concept, already implicating, for example, a certain set of (citizen's) rights. However, for the want of a better term and keeping this limitation in mind, it will be used throughout this article.

3 Joel S. Migdal has worked extensively on state-society relations (1988, 2001). However, the way the concept is used here has a more explicit ethnographic turn.

4 In deep gratitude to all those who helped the author to understand their everyday life and practices a bit better, especially in the south of Sri Lanka, their identity as well as names of places are kept anonymous.

English or, with the support of an interpreter, in Sinhala and Tamil. Further data are based on numerous informal conversations, some non-participatory observations and newspaper articles. While most interviews have been recorded, field notes have been made on conversations and observations. All data have been transcribed for analysis.

Data have been analysed according to Grounded Theory methods for qualitative data analysis (Strauss 1998). Codes, analytical concepts and dimensions as well as connections and interrelations between them have been systematically generated from the data, based on their particular relevance in the field. In this process of analytical re-construction[5] of typical meanings and practices, the systematic confusion of existing social science terms, assumptions and interrelations is crucial and will hopefully contribute to a more adequate theoretical understanding of the phenomena concerned. The most important advantage of this methodological approach is that it allows the researcher to discover and understand the meanings and practices of the respective actors in their lifeworlds, instead of focussing on predetermined factors and criteria whose appropriateness and relevance in the particular context are unknown. The analysis presented below is based on some of the codes and on the connections between them that have been analytically re-constructed.[6]

## 2. Re-constructing State-Society Relations in Southern Sri Lanka

For the sake of clarity, two components of state-society relations will be separated that are in fact very closely interlinked with each other in everyday life in Southern Town, as well as in other places in Sri Lanka. These are the relations between public servants and citizens, and between politicians and citizens. Before starting with the analysis, some background information on the sub-national political and administrative set-up in Sri Lanka as well as on Southern Town is necessary.

---

5 The term 're-construction' refers to the epistemological status of this particular methodological and analytical approach (Amann/Hirschauer 1997: 34).

6 In this article the focus is on the public service and politics and their relations to 'society'. The important issues of 'civil society', religious or ethnic identities and conflict cannot be dealt with here. They will be analysed and discussed in another article.

## 2.1 The Sub-National Political and Administrative Set-Up in Sri Lanka

The current political and administrative set-up in Sri Lanka has four levels (see also UNESCAP undated): the national, provincial, district and divisional level. At the level of the province of which Sri Lanka has nine, Provincial Councils have been elected every five years since 1987. However, these bodies remain highly dependent on the centre with regard to funds and political decision-making (Waidyasekera 2000). A governor who is directly appointed by the president for each province holds extensive executive power and is responsible for appointing the chief minister and at least four other ministers at the provincial level. At the district level no elected body exists. Nevertheless, the District Secretary (formerly 'Government Agent' or GA) who is appointed by the central government, the District Secretariat under his authority as well as the District Co-ordinating Committee and the District Development Committee are important political and administrative bodies (Leitan/Selvakumaran 2000: 8). At the divisional level, the lowest administrative level, exists the Divisional Secretariat, established only in 1993. The Divisional Secretary (formerly 'Assistant Government Agent' or AGA) who is answerable to the centre through the District Secretary, heads this secretariat that is responsible for delivering most public services. This administrative body is also very dependent on financial transfers from the centre. The division itself is a purely administrative unit. But elected Local Authorities (LAs) exist at more or less the same level, although the areas they cover do not always strictly coincide with the divisions. According to a somewhat arbitrary classification, three different kinds of LAs have been set up in Sri Lanka since 1987. These are the Pradeshiya Sabhas (rural divisional councils: 258 throughout the country) for the areas considered to be 'rural', the Urban Councils (37) and the Municipal Councils (14). The members of these councils as well as the chairmen or mayors are elected in the local government elections every four years. The tasks assigned to the LAs are restricted largely to local service delivery. To fulfil their few responsibilities with regard to development planning, they often lack the necessary resources. Apart from some local sources of revenue, the LAs are highly dependent on transfers from the centre. There is no co-ordinated distribution of labour at the level of the division as was originally planned, such that the LAs would be responsible for planning, and the Divisional Secretariats for implementing these plans. Instead, the LAs remain largely isolated from most other government institutions and processes.

## 2.2 Introducing Southern Town

Southern Town is a small town with a population of about 10.000. It is a district capital located in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. Despite being a district capital, Southern Town is rather small. Three busy streets frame the centre of the town. Major economic activities are fishing and trading of all kinds of goods in small shops or on the street. Most of the public servants working in the administrative institutions do not live in town but travel in and out by bus every day. Nearly all of them are Sinhalese Buddhists. The language used in everyday communication in the administrative offices is Sinhala. Around 98 per cent of the population in the Southern Province are Sinhalese Buddhists. However, in Southern Town almost half the population are Muslims. In the Urban Council (UC) of Southern Town, the United National Party (UNP) is the dominating party as it has been most of the time since independence.[7] Among the members of the UC, there are almost equal numbers of Sinhalese Buddhists as Muslims.

The region in which Southern Town is located is one of the poorest and most rural in Sri Lanka. With around 60 per cent, the unemployment rate in the area is one of the highest in the country. A large proportion of them are youth. These factors are often regarded as the major reasons for the two violent insurrections that started from the South in 1971 and in 1987. Both were staged by the only relevant Sinhalese political movement not founded by members of the anglicised elites of Colombo (Moore 1990: 176), the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP).[8] That these insurrections were fuelled by a pervasive "anti-systemic" or "anti-state" attitude (Mayer 2002a: 57) of a large part of the population, particularly the youth in the South, has now been ascertained by a number of studies and even by a Presidential Commission on Youth (1990).[9] Some government development projects were implemented in the area, following the last insurrection. These projects focussed on the rural population and were supposed to prevent another outbreak of violence. However, the particular dynamics and mechanisms that created the 'anti-state' attitude in the first place and still maintain it today

---

[7] The UNP and the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) are the two major parties in Sri Lanka. Since 1994 the SLFP is the most important party in the People's Alliance (PA) coalition. Useful summaries of Sri Lankan political history are provided by de Silva (1993a), Uyangoda (2000) and Moore (1992).

[8] Literally, "liberation front of the people". On these insurrections, see Rösel (1997) and Perera (1998), who compares political violence in the North-East and in the South.

[9] On the links of politics, youth and violence particularly in the South but also in a comparative perspective, see the pioneering work of Mayer (2002a, 2002b) and more generally Hettige/Mayer (2002).

have not been investigated in detail, nor have adequate reforms been considered. By generally analysing practices, meanings and mechanisms of politics, including administration, in Sri Lanka, this article is also a contribution to this task.

### 2.3 Public Service and Society

*Access to and Performance of the Public Service*

There is a popular expression in Sinhala currently used by many people to describe what public servants are doing in office: *ice gahanewa*.[10] It implies that "they are lazy, no? Always eating, smoking inside, they don't care about the people" (Interview 4). After some time in the field it became obvious that this negative opinion was not shared by everyone. Instead, "what type of people comes asking for help, they're treating in that way" (I. 7). It turned out that people who were characterised as 'respectable' or 'decent' and were well educated and in most cases also quite well-off (ibid.), had no problems in having their affairs attended to quickly. On the other hand

> "... if a poor person goes like that, will he do that for that poor person? No! He will do it one day but not at that time itself. He will keep it in a side, neglect it. Then he has to go three, four times again and again to remind him to do it" (ibid.).

Access to public services is socially structured. People who have 'something to offer' to public servants are much more likely to get what they want without problems and delay. The question remains what this 'something' could be. Surprisingly, for those people who had access, bribery as such was not an issue. They did not have to pay for getting a service that they were legally eligible to.[11] Instead, what was necessary was a special kind of social capital (Bourdieu 1983). By delivering services quickly to these people, public servants were trying to establish a claim based on reciprocity. In return for delivering public services to them they could expect to get their support if they needed it. Public servants saw persons with the required social capital as 'relational resources' which they could activate at a certain point in life: "Because he is helping him in this way, one day, if he needs a help or anything, one day he can go near him, no? Asking for that help" (I. 7).[12] If they are activated as a relational resource, these people

---

[10] Literally, this means "playing ice" or "playing cool".

[11] Of course, it was also possible to 'buy' certain services but that was the exception rather than the rule.

[12] For example, this could be in the form of assistance to someone in obtaining a place for his or her child in one of the elite schools in Colombo, or in finding a good job.

most often fulfil a 'relay function'. By channelling a public servant's demand to the required person that he or she knows, this person is able to mediate certain services or resources to this public servant.

> "That means if they need help or anything if they can't straight away search a way go and ask that help from that certain person, they knows that this person is very close to this second person. So they are having that intention that if they do this work for him through this person he get his work done from this certain person" (ibid.).

These informal connections between a person demanding a service, another who is able to deliver it and a mediator will be called 'chains of mediation'. There is nothing particularly new about this phenomenon but it is argued that the chains of mediation in Sri Lanka differ from broker- or mediator-mechanisms in other countries. The particular kind of social capital that is necessary to get access to public servants will be analysed and qualified in more detail below.

People who lack this specific kind of social capital and who do not have the money to pay bribes are usually the ones who experience the *ice gahanewa*-mode of administration. That means that although money can serve as a functional substitute, it is not only economically poor people who face these kinds of problems: "Uneducated peoples and Muslims community people are facing similar problems" (I. 2). Either their requests are totally neglected or it takes a long time and a lot of effort to get their affairs attended to. For these people the impression remains that "no one is working the right way" (I. 12) and that "they are cheating the government and the people" (I. 2).

*"Corruption is everywhere!" (I. 3)*

'Corruption' in the Sri Lankan context[13] includes, as it does anywhere, many different practices and phenomena. Apart from the classical 'bribery-corruption', 'corruption' is used by people in Sri Lanka to denote the different dimensions of politicisation, especially with regard to the public service. However, this section deals with some of the 'non-political' forms of corruption that came up frequently during fieldwork.

The first form is the least spectacular: bribery and speed money. As mentioned above, especially people who have no relevant social capital that public servants might be interested in, usually face the *ice gahanewa*-mode of administration. This reflects not only the frequently mentioned "laziness" of public servants (I. 4) but, at least in part, a strategy that will be called

---

[13] On corruption in Sri Lanka, see also the interesting Corruption Report of Transparency International Sri Lanka (2001/02) and the last chapters in de Silva et al. (2002).

'delaying services'. It means that public servants, after assessing just how pressing the need of the persons concerned is, delay the service or the fulfilment of their demands purposefully. Sometimes they ask people openly for some 'speed money' which could speed up the process of service delivery. But most often people already know that they have to give something to the public servant.[14] This 'something' could be some cigarettes or a tea in the canteen of the *kachcheri*[15] or a large sum of money, depending on the service that is required.[16] Many people think that public servants earn a lot of money by collecting bribes in addition to their salary.

A second form of corruption that people were very much aware of is what one person called "commission business" (I. 3). It includes all kinds of arrangements between technical officers who have to estimate the costs of construction work, and the respective contractors. People noted that technical officers usually overestimate the costs for a specific project and get their share of the commission that is left over.[17] In addition, strategies of bypassing the official tender procedures and distributing or collecting contracts by using 'alternative' mechanisms were mentioned frequently. According to several statements, commission business is widespread in the area and is in a number of cases responsible for the low and frequently dangerously low quality of public but also of private buildings.

A third form of corruption that came up very frequently in the interviews is what will be called the 'enforced gift'. The term refers to the practice of some public officers (e.g. income tax officers, price control inspectors and especially police officers of all grades) who go to shops and sometimes even to the private houses of shop owners and take goods without paying for them. Many business people and traders complained that several officers come quite frequently, which reduces their profit considerably. If business owners refuse to accept this practice and ask officers to pay, they face some sort of problem in the following days. A strategy commonly used

---

[14] Although many people could understand public servants who take bribes to improve their low salaries, they made a clear distinction between this kind of bribes and systematic bribery for enrichment that is seen as an outcome of the 'moral degeneration' in some sectors such as the police (see also the results in Transparency International Sri Lanka 2001/02: 11).

[15] People usually still refer to what is the District Secretariat today by its former name *kachcheri*.

[16] Typical 'small services' are birth certificates, identity cards or passports. 'Bigger services' include getting a land deed for which one would usually have to wait several years. With a large enough amount of money some local public servants can speed up the process to a few days.

[17] This practice is usually referred to as 'kick-back' in the academic and policy literature.

by police officers is to inspect the business owner's transport vehicle very thoroughly during the next traffic control. The fines that ensue and the costs of the required repairs are usually high enough to discourage the respective person from complaining again. The practice of the enforced gift is thus "a sort of demanding, so if you don't give, they will harass" (I. 23). To check whether there was a difference between Muslim and Buddhist shop owners, the author went to another town and visited all the hardware shops there. The hardware shop sector had turned out to be particularly severely affected by this practice. As in all other examinations regarding this question, the result was clear: all three Muslim shop owners had suffered the loss of significant shares of profit due to this practice while none of the Sinhalese owners had ever faced it.[18]

*"Police can do anything." (I. 27)*

Together with the judiciary, the police is perceived as being the most corrupt institution in most South Asian countries (Transparency International 2002a, 2002b). This perception was reflected in the interviews. The police was clearly the most visible state representative at the local level according to observations, conversations and interviews. Access to the police is possible in Southern Town according to the same criteria as for the public service in general. Therefore the group of people experiencing and thinking that "the police can do anything" (I. 27) is more or less the same as that which faces *ice gahanewa* in the administrative offices.

An important difference between the police and other public servants is that the former directly represent and are required to implement the state monopoly of legitimate violence. Thus, police forces have legal authority and possibilities at their disposal that they can also activate informally (e.g. checking people's cars, filing cases against people, arresting them etc.). A second point is closely connected with this. The police and the law enforcement authorities in general are supposed to be the institutions to which people should turn for help against unlawful treatment. They are the ones who should represent the monopoly of legitimate violence and the rule of law as the two most important features of a *Rechtsstaat* (state based on the rule of law). If the feeling of the people is that these authorities cannot or do not fulfil these tasks, the rule of law is very likely to degenerate and become overruled by other mechanisms of social organisation.

---

[18] That this pattern is structural rather than unique was confirmed by many people, both Muslims and Sinhalese alike.

*"The main thing is, nobody is there to look after this." (I. 3) – The (Restricted) Autonomy of Public Servants*

Public servants and police officers can be seen as being autonomous with regard to the section of the population that lacks the social capital necessary to obtain access to them. If they are denied the services that they are legally eligible to, they do not know any authority to which they could turn to complain about this exclusion. The concept of 'autonomy' will be used in this article as follows: Autonomy is the possibility of acting continually according to one's own will without having to fear restrictions of action in the future. Thus, autonomy is always autonomy *from* something. In the context of the social organisation of politics and administration at the local level in Sri Lanka, the three most important dimensions from which a person can be autonomous are (other) state institutions, citizens and law. Looking at how autonomy was established and how it is being defended and upheld is one important way of discovering informal strategies, mechanisms and structures of power.

To ensure their autonomy with regard to people who lack the necessary social capital, public servants and police officers have developed specific strategies. Most important is their potential – and the selective demonstration of it – to 'create trouble' for those who complain and try to challenge their autonomy. This 'trouble' can be many things: from a thorough check of the vehicle by traffic officers to imprisonment or even the use of physical violence. People are very much aware of this potential. Another, somewhat milder strategy to defend their own autonomy against charges by citizens is to simply pass on the responsibility for a certain task or problem to another authority. This is quite easy in the Sri Lankan context as the responsibilities that different institutions at the local level have are not very transparent to the public and sometimes not even to the officials themselves. The local branches of the line ministries of the central government often not only make themselves autonomous from citizens but also from other official authorities at the local level by simply isolating themselves and not cooperating with them. This is the case especially with regard to the elected LAs. As in Southern Town, they are often completely excluded from the planning and implementation process of the central government authorities at the local level. People are very much aware of the weakness of their LAs. The local branches of central government ministries were seen as following their own agenda that neither elected members of the LAs, nor the local population could control or influence.

The police as well as other public officers can use the power and authority they have and collect bribes and enforced gifts without putting themselves at great risk. Many interviews indicate that the everyday experience

of this autonomy has led to resignation and lethargy among those thus deprived. This applies particularly to Muslims as many of them own shops and businesses and are thus particularly exposed to these practices. In this regard a Muslim hardware shop owner from Southern Town complained:

> "They are giving trouble, we can't do in freedom our things. ... After my period it [his shop; M.R.] is closed. I don't want like this! Very difficult! I don't like it to give to my son even" (I. 23).

A first conclusion is that the autonomy of the police has a particularly negative impact on state-society relations. The police has established not only autonomy from the people but also from the rule of law. At the same time it is the authority that is endowed with the monopoly of legitimate state violence precisely for defending the rule of law in society. This means that the autonomy of the police has effects that are much more serious than 'only' the material loss through bribes and enforced gifts. It contributes to the erosion and de-legitimisation of the rule of law as the dominant reference system for regulating social life. Yet the autonomy of public servants as well as police officers is not absolute. Rather, they are only autonomous with regard to a certain part of the population. In the following section, the factor that restricts the autonomy of public servants and at the same time equips a part of the population with the social capital necessary for getting access to public servants and their services will be discussed: "The name is 'public service'. But those who do it are politicians." (Conversation Protocol 8).

## 2.4 Politics and Society

*"In Sri Lanka the whole state apparatus has gradually been politicised." (I. 18)*

Although criteria of caste and pre-colonial social stratification remain important particularly in rural areas, the increasing penetration of society by state institutions[19] has led to "new dimensions of social stratification" (Perera 1985) in Sri Lanka.[20] Together with the growing penetration of society by the state, the institutions that have been established or integrated into the new political and administrative structure have been increasingly politicised from the centre (Perera 1985: ch. 9; Wijeweera 1988; Ranugge 2000; de Silva 1993b; Gunadheera 1997; Gunasekera 1992: 238). The interviewees'

---

[19] 'Traditional' or colonial local leadership positions have been transformed into administrative posts (Gunasekera 1992: 235-238), a number of rural organisations or committees have been established at the local level (Perera 1985: 136-177), the public service has been expanded greatly and state-owned companies have been set up.

[20] For details on this transformation process that I cannot go into here, see Perera (1985), Wijeweera (1988) and Gunasekera (1992).

statements largely correspond with the findings of historical studies that this process of politicisation had reached its first peak in the early 1970s.[21] By then the "MP Raj"[22] and politics in general had come to be of crucial importance for the everyday life of Sri Lankans at every level of society. This is still the case today. In almost all the interviews and conversations, politics proved to be of paramount relevance to people. Based on these data, the analytical term 'autonomous politician' seems to be most appropriate for understanding and explaining the position and importance of politicians in Sri Lanka. Two dimensions of autonomy are most important according to the definition given above. The first one is that of *having the possibility to act* according to one's own will. This dimension of autonomy will be analysed as the 'power' of politicians. The second dimension covers what is central for the concept of autonomy and will therefore simply be called 'autonomy': to act continually *without having to fear restrictions of action in the future*. It is this aspect of the autonomy of politicians from state organisations, citizens and law which will be analysed.

*"There is no big person than politician." (I. 27) – The Power of Politicians*

The most important authority that politicians have is to allocate jobs.[23] These are by no means only high positions in the public service but also temporary positions and jobs in state-owned enterprises (Mayer 2002a: 152). Assistance in obtaining land deeds and contracts are other services politicians can readily provide. All these services are 'constituency services', according to the classification of Oberst (1985). Politicians can also

---

21 'Politicisation' in the Sri Lankan context usually refers to the substitution or subordination of a 'traditional' local leadership elite to local party 'brokers' or even Members of the National Parliament (MPs) (Oberst 1985: 56; Rösel 1997: 233), to the increasing importance of party affiliation at all levels of society and the increasing dominance of politicians from the centre over other sectors and (administrative) levels of society. Although this point cannot be further discussed here, it should be noted that Sri Lanka's public service could work relatively insulated from political interference and was seen as a model of administrative honesty and efficiency in the 1940s and 50s (for detailed accounts, see the sources quoted on politicisation in the main text above).

22 This term refers to the powerful position that MPs had come to occupy over their respective electorate and especially the administrative sector in the wards from which they had been elected at that time (de Silva 1993b: 96).

23 Unless stated otherwise, the term 'politicians' refers to MPs and ministers only, politicians from the centre. It is obvious that generally ministers have more power than MPs from one of the parties in government. However, regarding the issue of autonomy, the differences between ministers and MPs were not considerable.

channel public resources like government funds or the decentralised budget[24] to a certain area and for specific purposes by dominating the relevant local decision-making councils like the District Co-ordinating Committee ('development work' according to Oberst). According to the experiences of a local development consultant in these committees, "they meet but the politicians dictate terms. None of the officials could take independent decisions. They have to follow the dictate of the politician" (I. 18).

The authority of politicians to appoint, transfer and promote public servants is crucial for understanding their power over the public service, as it enables them to sanction those who do not work according to their orders and to appoint less resistant candidates instead.

> "If it is a government servant, he also belongs to the politician, he also doing according to the politician. In Sri Lanka I'm sadly say, government servants are very afraid of the politicians. So, if they do against politician, surely two weeks or three weeks later he are transferred to the remote area. That's why government servants, they are doing not a – they are doing – they are – they are doing against their mind" (I. 27).

The potential to influence almost every decision made by public servants by employing these means, equips politicians with the power to deliver constituency services and to do development work, in the terminology of Oberst (1985). Due to the very high penetration of Sri Lankan society by state institutions, these structures and mechanisms are of crucial relevance to even the lowest administrative level in the most remote corner of the country. As a public officer at the lowest administrative level, a *grama niladhari*[25], stated:

> "I can't do independent work. ... We have to work under politicians. If I work independently that thing, the Minister can challenge: Hey you, why not do for my friend? Then he can transfer us also" (I. 29).

The structures of the political as well as of the administrative system in Sri Lanka can be described as highly centralised and tightly controlled by members of the central government. One of the curiosities of this particular system is that after every change in government a massive exchange of administrative personnel takes place at all levels throughout the country. The decisive factor here as elsewhere is party affiliation.

---

[24] Under the decentralised budget system each MP is provided with a certain amount of money every year for development purposes in the electoral district from which he or she was elected. In 2002 the amount was 3,5 Million Sri Lankan Rupees which was the equivalent of around 35.000 Euro at that time.

[25] *Grama niladharis* ('Village Officers') work under the Divisional Secretariat. They are decentralised public servants as they live and work in the area they are responsible for and link the population with the state administration and vice versa. Their position goes back to the colonial 'Village Headman' (de Silva 1993b: 89).

Concerning the power of politicians, there is a big difference between MPs who belong to one of the parties in government and those who are in the opposition.[26] If a party is removed from power, her MPs almost immediately lose most of the necessary authority over the administrative sector and the power that goes with it. While the MP can continue to do development work, he[27] no longer has the capacity to deliver constituency services.[28] Thus, unlike in the period shortly after independence when positions of traditional authority and connections to the holders of these positions were most important, nowadays it is predominantly formal positions and connections to people in these positions that structure politics. The formal position is important as it provides the respective person with a number of constitutionally guaranteed rights as well as authority, power and access to resources. As necessary as these capacities are for ministers or MPs to do their work, they are also crucial for exercising informal and sometimes also extralegal practices.[29] These practices have developed historically and become institutionalised to a great extent.[30]

*"Nothing but their own power!" (I. 17) – The Autonomy of Politicians*

According to the research findings, the most relevant dimensions of autonomy of politicians are the following: autonomy from political authorities at the lower levels, autonomy from citizens, autonomy from law which very often goes together with the use of or the threat of violence, and finally, autonomy from local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

The first dimension is closely related to decentralisation in Sri Lanka. Even if the political and administrative system have remained highly centralised, the issue of decentralisation, or rather devolution has been dis-

---

26 See Oberst for interesting data on how fast and consistently constituents adapted to a change in government and switched to the MPs of the new government with their demands (1985: 55-72).

27 Using the male form only reflects the fact that the bulk of politicians in Sri Lanka are male while women are strikingly absent (see also Kiribamune 1999).

28 To deal with this 'problem', changing party membership according to the new power relations is a strategy adopted by some MPs or even ministers despite the clear ideological left-right orientation of the two major parties in Sri Lanka.

29 For studying these hybrid forms of politics where formal and informal spheres are closely and systematically interrelated, the concept of 'neo-patrimonialism' that is currently being rediscovered by authors working on similar phenomena in African countries, is very useful (see e.g. Erdmann 2002).

30 'Institution' and 'institutionalisation' are highly ambiguous terms in the social sciences. The concept as used here is based on that of sociological Neo-Institutionalism (Hasse/Krücken 1999). For an example of its usefulness in explaining processes of social transformation and development, see Mense-Petermann (2002).

cussed extensively throughout the country (de Silva 1996; Siriwardena 1998; International Centre for Ethnic Studies 1998). But discussion has focussed almost exclusively on the conflict in the North-East. Slater (1989) argues that the decentralisation measures implemented in the late 1980s have led to a re-centralisation and have actually been used as instruments for enhancing and strengthening the control and authority of the central government over the local level. Interviewees' assessments of the decentralisation process support this argument. Members of LAs reported that public servants, working for the local branches of line ministries, usually see themselves as superior to the elected LA members. The LAs were not informed or consulted when development measures were planned or implemented by central government agencies in their area. Thus, they can be considered as also suffering from the autonomy of the public service that has strong links to the centre. Here again, a critically important factor is party affiliation as a senior district officer made clear:

> "After the elections, local government elections, the party in power, they won almost all except one local government body here. So, now the government, they are having very cordial relations with the local government. The Provincial Council, they don't like it very much. ... They leave them out, they try to leave them out because they are in the opposite side" (I. 21).

The power and the resources at the disposal of the elected councils at both sub-national levels are very restricted. The central government has generally retained various possibilities of effectively restricting the power of the respective councils whenever it wishes to do so. These decisions are arrived at according to the party composition of the respective council. People are very much aware of the fundamental weakness of the LAs towards the central government. On the responsiveness of LA representatives to the population, a businessman remarked: "Oh, they promise that they will listen. But they will not, because they are all controlled by the main government. Even the money is granted by the government" (I. 17). This perception indicates that LAs and their members may serve some purposes, but decision-making on local development issues is certainly not one of them.

The second relevant dimension is autonomy from citizens. The focus will be on the importance of elections, as this issue came up frequently in the interviews and is usually considered to be the most decisive instrument for controlling and restricting the autonomy of politicians. Three sub-dimensions are relevant here: the election system, the voting procedure and the perceived usefulness of elections. The election system in Sri Lanka will be considered first. The change from a first-past-the-post system where each electoral district had an MP, to the list-based proportional representa-

tion system was felt strongly at the local level according to the interviewees:[31]

> "The earlier system of the government, every electorate they nominated one MP, so we can go to him and tell something, no? The current system, the preferential system, we don't have a particular MP for us. They stay in Colombo now. Once in a blue moon only they come to this area and do some good thing with the television that they show their face and [He claps his hands; M.R.]. No, not a single one is here, staying around here. Their house and everything is in Colombo and they are passing a good life" (I. 23).

Prior to 1989, MPs could be contacted in their house or office in the electoral district at least over the weekend (Oberst 1985: 60). They were also personally responsible for 'their' area and according to Oberst's research, each MP did meet with nearly all of his constituents during his term in office (ibid.: 55). "Before we voted for person, now for party. Now we loose contact. If we want to contact him, he doubts that I voted for him or his party" (C.P. 17). With this loss of direct responsibility of one MP for a particular area, a small but significant potential of citizens to hold their politicians accountable for what they do – or do not do – was lost and thereby the autonomy of MPs increased.[32]

With regard to the voting procedure many people are disillusioned. Several cases of electoral malpractice were reported. Personal intimidation, the strategic use of the national social security programme Samurdhi[33] for electoral purposes and the counting of votes that had not been cast, were some of the strategies reported most frequently.[34] Resignation and lethargy were among the attitudes evinced with regard to the perceived usefulness of elections:

> "So if we want to see a change, so we have to wait another six years till another government will come. So even if another government comes there is no difference. According to the past experience, we have seen both parties governing the country, but both do the same. If both are not good, what can we do?" (I. 17)

---

31 Although the new constitution that introduced this change was promulgated in 1978, the first parliamentary election where it was actually practiced took place only in 1989.

32 One explicit reason for introducing the proportional representation system was to accommodate the different minorities in Sri Lanka. It is interesting to note that the comments quoted above as well as many similar ones came from Muslims.

33 Samurdhi (prosperity) is basically a welfare allowance programme that also includes some credit and insurance components.

34 The fact that these practices are widespread and are exercised in some areas in a systematic manner is confirmed by a study on electoral malpractice in Sri Lanka (Peiris 2002; see also the website of the Centre for Policy Analysis for information on elections and violence: http://www.cpalanka.org).

Although the JVP has achieved some remarkable electoral results, people did not (yet) consider them to be a real alternative to the two dominating parties as they still remember the past of the JVP and are too scared to vote for them. The criteria for 'qualifying' to contest for a seat in parliament also contribute to the impression of the people that there is no alternative available (see also Perera 1998):

> "In our country the system – voting, I mean the election system, it depends on the strength and the money. ... Strength means the people who are backing and who can face anything and who can fight and who can do these things. And the money. So without these things you can't contest in an election. So educated graduates are not up to that standard" (I. 10).

If elections are considered as an instrument for pushing competing parties to create better policies, the choices in Sri Lanka seem to be quite limited from the voter's point of view. This experience of voters indicates that specific mechanisms, according to which politics is being exercised, have been institutionalised to such an extent that they do not change fundamentally, even if a new government comes to power. These mechanisms as well as alternative functions that elections might have in this context will be dealt with below. But with regard to the potential of citizens and voters to supervise their politicians, the opinion prevails that "we have no power to control them since they control us" (I. 17).

The next dimension of autonomy is autonomy from law and is often connected with the exercise or the threat of physical violence. First, a long passage from an interview will be quoted that illustrates these aspects only too clearly. The section quoted is about the 2001 parliamentary elections and the attempt of an MP and 'his men' to intimidate people at a local polling station.

> "M.R.: Did they fight?
>
> A: Well, they didn't hit the people individually. But their behaviours has damaged our soul. ... On the election day ... at the polling station ... the officer in charge, a head of a police station was [there] with around twenty people to give security to the polling rule but in spite of that this fellow [the MP; M.R.] ... and his supporters, fully drunken came with the van with sticks and knives and all that and hit the JVP cadres around here and who was voting ... But the JVP they had come to observe them as a reporter from the paper, newspaper. They always smash those guys and smash cameras but the police was here.
>
> M.R.: And what did they do?
>
> A: I mean we were watching it to our own eyes! ... Weapons and they [police officers; M.R.] had everything but he [officer in charge; M.R.] was not dare enough to do anything, he remained silent and said: go, go, go. But, I mean that's how – then we, we really suffer. To whom we are voting to join parliament!? That is an authorised person that we are voting! ... When they go to parliament they reveal their real state ... By showing swords and sticks and knives and guns and weapons and everything in front of the police like proving that they are not

> afraid of police, not afraid of civil law! Nothing but their own power! ... That was the present government party. So, I mean this is the real situation, so we are really disbelieve, desperated. And if we feel like going to a police station for some reason we remember that, we go to the persons like that. But how comes we expect any right from those person? If he cannot act at that time for those who came with arms and other things, they hit and blame the police to the face and they remain silent! So there is nothing more to say. It is evident – and who possess the power. So the next moment if somebody wants to be powerful and strong and go over police, what he has to do is to join the politician party" (I. 17).

People were very much aware of the incapacity of the police to secure the rule of law. Whether the police secures the rule of law or not depends of course also on their willingness to do so. But in the interviews, the lack of power of the police to do so was always strongly emphasised. Everybody knows that police officers are also facing physical violence, will lose their job or will be transferred elsewhere if they do not accept the autonomy of politicians. Thus, the police cannot fulfil its crucial function as the institution to which people can turn in the last instance to secure their rights according to the rule of law. Instead, other mechanisms of authority based on other principles have been established as one interviewed person stated when reflecting on the weakness of the police:

> "... that's the main thing that people have disbelief in this, everything that happens around. I mean they feel that they are very neglected, they are very – I mean – useless. So even I, I feel that. If we thinks, okay, we have to go to the police and we have to go to no other organisation for help, for any right. Then the next minute we think, oh, what the use of going there? No need, because he works – we know that police – he works for the chairman [of the UC; M.R.], maybe for the minister, maybe for the PA, right? And if we want something we have to go to the minister, maybe the PA, maybe the chairman" (ibid.).

People are very much aware of this permanent and general undermining of the rule of law by the 'rule of politics', even when it takes place at the highest level of the state.

> "Now even the earlier government came to power, they inquired, inquired, inquired about he [member of the former government; M.R.] got that land, this and that and then postponed. Now, these people come to power, they will also inquire, inquire. No punishment. Useless. The commission [to investigate allegations of corruption against members of the former government; M.R.], that is only another waste, waste of time and waste of money" (I. 3).

That even the rivalry between the two major parties does not lead politicians to make effective use of the force of law in their dealings with each other is thus another factor that gives people the impression that this undermining of the rule of law by the rule of politics has become an institutionalised practice, rather than just the fault of one of the parties.

Together with the rule of law, politicians have also taken over the monopoly of violence. Instruments of state force like imprisonment and the

execution of verdicts can be used and influenced by politicians. But physical violence as well has become a characteristic of politics and a practice of single politicians in Sri Lanka, especially since the late 1970s.[35] At all levels, violence used by politicians is accompanied by impunity for the respective actors in most cases. In the interviews, in informal conversations and in newspaper articles, people expressed disillusionment and a feeling of powerlessness as well as of personal threat in response to these trends.

Organisations that could probably challenge this system of politics at the local level are local NGOs, but their representatives stated that they encounter a high level of suspicion whenever they try to contact public servants. They emphasised that politicians only have contacts with and support only these NGOs in the area that have a large membership and a certain degree of popularity: "that's interesting for politicians" (I. 28). Another characteristic of NGOs in Southern Town as well as apparently in the rest of Sri Lanka – maybe except Colombo – is that they focus primarily on delivering services and resources and not on political advocacy work. The experience of the few organisations that try to do this kind of work in and around Southern Town is that people largely ignore or even fear activities and organisations that offer neither political connections nor immediate material gain. They are perceived as being both useless and dangerous.[36] This process of "rural disempowerment" (Röseberg 2002: 193) through top-down political control and integration has contributed to creating a very "apolitical discourse of development" (ibid.: 208; see also Bastian 1998), at least in rural areas. It has thereby also helped to secure the autonomy of politicians.

Even at the local level, politicians from the centre are the decisive authority and can act autonomously from and largely unchallenged by other actors. Of course, autonomy is never absolute. Yet, despite their different

---

35 According to Perera, violence as a means of politics was institutionalised in Sri Lanka by the UNP when it came to power in 1977 (1998: 19-26), and has become endemic since. During the civil war in the North-East and the government's (para-)military campaign against the JVP in the South, political violence reached unprecedented heights. The collaboration of the government with paramilitary troops in these wars and of politicians with "gangsters" (Uyangoda 1997) and personal teams of 'thugs' in everyday life, has intensified the "steady criminalization of democratic politics" (Perera 1998: 86) in Sri Lanka. For Perera, this "continuity of political violence and the inability or the apparent disinterest of the state (irrespective of which political formation represents the state)" (ibid.: 85) poses the most serious threat to democracy in the country.

36 It could have been expected that the experience of excessive use of violence by both sides, the JVP and the government during the last JVP insurrection, might have discouraged citizens from engaging critically with politics in an organised form. However, according to several interview partners these experiences did not have a significant impact on political activism.

perspectives on, and connections with the political system, all interviewees agreed that, as one of them put it, "the end-power is by the politician" (I. 17). If politicians have succeeded in monopolising power in certain spheres to such an extent and if they have achieved such a high degree of autonomy, there is only little that people can do against these practices. It will thus be interesting to look at how they manage this situation and how they adapt to and make use of these practices.

*"Because when somebody wants to do something we always have to go through the politicians." (I. 17) – Mechanisms of Politics*

The term 'mechanisms' of politics refers to the different possibilities of getting access to services or resources by using 'politics'.[37] The term includes both the work that the client is required to do to enable him to use this mechanism, as well as the services or resources that the patron is delivering. Two sorts of mechanisms can be distinguished. One is the 'party mechanism', the other the 'minister mechanism'.[38] Both have to be seen as a continuum where the latter is at the stronger end. However, the distance between both ends is not very great as access to MPs and ministers in Sri Lanka is still relatively easy, compared to other countries.[39] Apart from direct access, access through 'mediation' is also possible as will be pointed out below.

The party mechanism is sufficient for everyday activities like routine interaction with public servants or the distribution of welfare services. An example is Sri Lanka's social security programme Samurdhi. It is well known for being heavily politicised and for having a strong ethnic, pro-Sinhalese bias. Furthermore, around 40 per cent of the poorest households are excluded while at the same time around 60 per cent of households that are not formally eligible are included (Jansz 2000; Kumarasinghe 2002). Access is usually granted if party affiliations with the governing party exist. People affiliated with other parties are often excluded from welfare services. Another example for the effective exclusion from public services depending on

---

[37] Due to the particular analytical approach of this study, the terms used throughout the article have been generated from the data. These analytical terms are considered to be more adequate and precise with regard to the particular context, although some of the phenomena could also be described and analysed by using related standard concepts from the social sciences such as 'patronage' or 'clientelism'.

[38] The term 'minister mechanism' is used as people usually referred to ministers. MPs were mentioned as well, as they can deliver similar services and resources.

[39] It is significant that Sri Lanka has the highest number of ministers worldwide. After the 2001 elections the number rose to an all-time high of 61 cabinet, project and deputy ministers (www.srilankaelections.com; 10.12.2002).

party affiliation comes from the UNP Urban Council Vice Chairman of Southern Town. When the PA was in power, he was simply too scared to go to the Divisional Secretariat in his town to collect official documents. The party mechanism is always ambivalent for the clients: "If the PA in power every opportunities are given to them. There is no chance for UNP or JVP. When the UNP in powers actually the situation is the same" (I. 8). Although in everyday interaction, it suffices to be known as a supporter of a particular party in order to get access to government services, the reason this mechanism works is that every supporter could potentially contact the minister whenever a service is denied to him or her. The minister mechanism as such is used for more ambitious demands like getting a job, promotion or transfer:

> "... any person who wants to get a transfer, any teacher, anyone in the administration, anyone in the police who wants to get a transfer would not apply to his immediate boss or his head of the department direct, but he would first go to the politician and try to canvass the politician to influence the transfer" (I. 18).

The minister mechanism is also frequently used in the construction business as technical officers and contractors reported. The constructor usually approaches the minister to get a letter from him ordering the technical officer in charge to allocate the contract to this particular person or company. These contracts bring the contractors a much higher profit than other contracts acquired through a competitive tender procedure. Other businessmen also try to get contracts or official documents with the help of ministers (see also Moore 1985: 198). A Chamber of Commerce official complained: "There is a dispute of some commerce ... they must learn to go to their chamber or something than running to the politician" (I. 26).

To be able to use the minister mechanism, merely belonging to the respective politician's party is usually not enough. As some contractors reported, they call the minister – or even more than one – before the election campaign starts and offer him support for the party rallies, for example by providing their private cars or transport vehicles. They also ensure the minister that their friends and relatives will vote for him. Donating money to finance the election campaign was not involved in these cases. The minister mechanism works similarly for people who want to get jobs in government-owned enterprises or in the public service. People have to help the minister or his party during election times to 'qualify' for getting a job later. These services are highly personalised (Perera 1985: 164). But people were aware that almost anyone who offers enough money can also buy jobs without working for the party.

Even development projects of international donor agencies can often not work without having to deal with the autonomy of politicians, and sometimes even with the minister mechanism. Sri Lankan members of a bilateral

donor agency reported that in their case a minister blocked the implementation of a large project for a considerable period of time. Local staff could only convince him to agree to the project by arguing that by presenting himself to the population as the person who brought the project to this particular area, he could also benefit from it politically.

The minister mechanism is also of great importance as far as protection against the autonomy of public servants and the police is concerned. This is also the explanation for the findings concerning the different hardware shop owners presented above, where the Muslim owners turned out to be vulnerable to the 'enforced gift' practice of public officers while the Sinhalese owners did not have these problems.

> "The Sinhalese also a bit more powerful than the Muslims. They are, you know, some are from powerful families. They can – they are without fear because majority is Sinhalese, no? They can go to politicians and make reports" (I. 28).

Muslims are in a structurally weaker position as they are generally not as much involved in these political networks as the Sinhalese and thus often lack the necessary social capital.[40]

So far, only the direct forms of the mechanisms of politics have been discussed, either through contact with the MP/minister or through the routinised everyday form, the party mechanism. But there are forms of mediation also. However, most of the people interviewed for this study contacted MPs and ministers directly if they did so at all. The indirect forms are more likely to exist outside of urban areas and towns (Gunasekera 1992: 240–248). One of the few mentions of mediation is the following answer to the question of whom a teacher would approach if he or she wanted to be transferred to another school:

> "The closest politician he or she has access to. And then they work up. Let's say for instance if he or she has access only to the local government ... only a member who is not powerful enough to influence the Director of Education, right? What he does, he or she, who wants a transfer goes to this authority member, then goes with him to the politician who gave him nomination for that elections and then he says, he is a very close political sympathiser of ours, he helped us in these elections, so can you please give a letter, so and so. So it goes up that way" (I. 18).

Based on this and other information and the strikingly similar findings of Gunasekera (1992), one conclusion about the nature of these local political 'brokers' in Sri Lanka can be drawn. Brokers in Sri Lanka usually lack the autonomy which is normally *the* characteristic of an intermediary who me-

---

[40] That does not mean that Muslims are not members of these networks at all. However, many Sinhalese are in these networks from the very beginning due to family connections, which is generally not the case with Muslims.

diates between different levels. Gunasekera argues that brokers in Sri Lanka "lack any independent resources of their own" and that their "power is essentially unstable and impermanent" (ibid.: 246–247) as they usually have no monopoly on anything that they could offer to politicians. In most cases they will lose their position immediately if the MP/minister loses his seat. That is why Gunasekera concludes that brokers "cannot be considered 'brokers' in the conventional sense" (ibid.) and why she prefers the term 'henchman' in the Sri Lankan context. All that a henchman has to offer to the local population is his or her connection to the MP or minister. Thus the person remains absolutely dependent on the MP/minister with regard to every service that he or she can offer. The henchman is only a link in the short, vertical chain of mediation and as such he or she is easily exchangeable.

## 3. On the Social Organisation of Politics and Administration: The 'Octopus-Mode' of Politics in Sri Lanka

Some conclusions about politics and public administration in Sri Lanka can now be drawn that are largely applicable to the whole country. Apart from interviews with people from other parts of Sri Lanka, newspaper articles and scientific literature on Sri Lankan politics and administration have been analysed in order to check whether the findings can be generalised. Two recent empirical studies of different parts of Sri Lanka that are relevant to the subjects central to this article generally support these conclusions (Mayer 2002a, 2002b; Bigdon 2003).

Three dimensions will be discussed in order to summarise the findings and draw conclusions. These are the political system, political practices and, finally, the meaning of politics. Formal and informal characteristics can be distinguished in each dimension. The distinctive ways in which actors strategically use and combine both formal and informal elements, are particularly crucial.

Sri Lanka is characterised by a very high degree of penetration of society by the state. Formally, the political as well as the administrative system is strongly controlled and dominated by the central government authorities in Colombo. The introduction of the Provincial Councils and the decentralised LAs in 1987 have not fundamentally changed this structure but rather enhanced the capacity of the centre for a more effective control of the local level. What took place in Sri Lanka, even with regard to other kinds of local organisations, was an "integration of social and political organisation in the framework of a national state and the corresponding absence of autonomous

local social institutions." (Moore 1985: 228). But as Fox has shown in his "lessons from Mexico", if spaces for associational autonomy do not exist, a "transition from clientelism to citizenship" (Fox 1994) is highly unlikely.

By using their formally strong position as members of the central government in informal ways as well, MPs and ministers have established themselves as the most powerful authorities in their respective electoral districts. This comprehensive power over many sectors of society extends even beyond the rule of law. Politicians can therefore be described as being autonomous and the predominant form of authority in society as the rule of politics. It is this specific structure of Sri Lankan politics with its practices and meanings that can be called the 'octopus-mode' of politics.[41] While the head of the octopus symbolises the MPs and ministers – the head and 'source' of power – the numerous tentacles that spread out from there represent both the (downward) authority that politicians can exercise in all sectors of society, as well as the chains of mediation or (upward) access to politicians. As politicians are largely autonomous, the tentacles are moveable and the politicians decide what kind of connection they want to establish, to maintain or dissolve.

What constitutes political practice in this system? In distinction to the Western understanding of what the responsibilities of legislators are, in Sri Lanka "law-making is not found to be the most important function of the legislatures" (Oberst 1985: 3). Instead, Oberst identifies constituency service and development work as the two most important tasks of MPs in Sri Lanka. While both of these practices could be described as different forms of 'delivery work', a second function of MPs has been analysed in this article and identified as being at least equally important.[42] What can be called 'security work' describes the fact that legislators are expected by their supporters to both protect them from law and sanctions according to law, as well as from suffering from illegal practices such as bribery. Both categories of practices are highly personalised (minister mechanism), either directly or indirectly with the help of a henchman (chain of mediation). However, for normal public services, party affiliation with the party in power serves as a substitute (party-mechanism). Those who do not have contacts or do not support the 'right' party are left with the option of paying bribes,

---

[41] One of the interviewees compared the political system of Sri Lanka to an octopus because of the many linkages that exist between different sectors (I. 18). The way the metaphor is used here is different. Nevertheless, the author owes the idea to this particular person and is very grateful for it.

[42] On the everyday relevance and importance of what is here called 'delivery work' in Sri Lankan politics, see also Moore (1985: 224) and Spencer (1990: 228-229).

hoping for a public servant who does not exploit his or her restricted autonomy or just suffering in silence. Most of these political practices are informal but nevertheless well institutionalised. To understand this it is necessary to turn to the third dimension of the octopus-mode of politics: the meaning of politics:

> "People depend on everything from politicians, so the people think the politicians are the best people to do everything. That idea is created or that ideas has come because this political interference. The people, uneducated people think politicians can do anything. So they think that every person must go behind the politician." (I. 10)

The practices and mechanisms of politics in Sri Lanka are seen as legitimate by most people. The success of politicians depends on their success to deliver services, resources and security to a large part of the population in their respective electoral district. The long tradition of an extensive welfare system in Sri Lanka has helped to create these expectations and is very likely to have greatly facilitated this kind of politics. The politicisation of the public service gave people, especially in the rural areas, one more reason for regarding politicians as the "new power elite" (Gunasekera 1992: 240) they had to turn to with their problems and demands. Regardless of what they thought about the new system and its mechanisms, if they did not want to "go empty-handed" (I. 28), they had no option but to use the party- or minister mechanism. It was striking how openly some businesspeople detailed the procedure for getting a contract with the support of a minister. None of them seemed to have any doubts about the legitimacy of this practice: "In Sri Lanka we must do like that" (C.P. 11).[43] Using Niklas Luhmann's concept of causality which is based on the assumption that causality can only be understood as a social construction of causality (1995: 7), it is possible to conclude that people learnt to attribute the delivery of services, resources and even security to the political system and the politicians themselves, thereby developing a special pattern of everyday rationality and expectations based on this pattern. Even if most interviewees knew that this is not the way politics is supposed to work, they have adapted to their everyday realities. The institutionalisation of this kind of politics also helps to explain the widespread "passive 'receiving mentality'" (Mayer 2002c: 3) or "dependency syndrome" (I. 18) among the bulk of Sri Lanka's rural population. People expect the state and politicians to deliver services, jobs and welfare payments as they have 'always' done. In a poor and rural area like

---

[43] Even if Oberst's study dates from 1985, it is interesting to see that one of his findings was that legislators themselves see it as their duty to distribute particularised benefits and do not express any concern about the usefulness and legitimacy of this practice (1985: 67-68).

southern Sri Lanka the dependency on these political transfers is particularly high.

According to the specific historical trajectory (Bayart 1991) of the Sri Lankan state, citizens as well as politicians have developed routines and rationalities that are usually not questioned in everyday life as they have proved to be functional for a long time and still are so today.[44] As almost no other options were available, people have adapted to the system and have learnt to use it for getting their things done. Children have been socialised within this system and have learnt that politicians are primarily responsible for delivering jobs and services (Mayer 2002a: 229). For many people, these personalised material benefits are the motivation to vote for a specific politician: "the people themselves have also developed attitudes to sustain the politicisation" (I. 18).

It is important to emphasise that the system works according to a specific logic and rationality shared to a large extent by politicians and citizens alike. An institutionalisation of the rule of politics has taken place, irrespective of which party is in power.[45] To take this institutionalisation of politics into account also helps to understand its potential to cause violence down to the village level (Spencer 1990). If politics is the main mechanism for getting access to power and resources, politicians as well as public servants and citizens have much to lose (or win) if constellations of power change.

One last important point with regard to the institutionalisation of the rule of politics is that the system is so comprehensive, especially in peripheral Sri Lanka, that it is almost impossible for anybody to set up an organisation or organise activities independent of the political sphere (see also Fernando, quoted in Saravanamuttu 1998: 114). As everybody is aiming at establishing vertical links because they have proved to be functional, horizontal linkages, necessary for being able to resist domination by central leadership (Fox 1992: 7), are largely neglected. The comprehensiveness and power that the rule of politics has developed in Sri Lanka and that is par-

---

[44] The mechanism of routinisation of causal attribution and action as such is crucial here. The mechanism is the same, whether people have learnt to attribute causality to persons or to abstract systems as in most Western societies due to a specific historical process of development. Together with Luhmann, Gidden's discussion of personal trust and trust in abstract systems is important on this point (1996: 107).

[45] Of course, neither the concept of causality according to Luhmann nor the term 'institutionalisation' imply that change is not possible. Rather, they emphasise that change always takes place in a particular context and that the 'old logics' will have a substantial impact on the process of transformation itself that then leads to new structures (for a case study, see Mense-Petermann 2002).

ticularly obvious at the sub-national levels is well articulated in the following quotation:

> "In Sri Lanka each and every place is subjected to the politicians. Right? From a single telephone call from a higher politician everything is done – to his mind, not the secretariat's mind. So even the police people they have to do that. They have to listen to the politicians because they think that they … survive there because of the politician. Because the power of their life, their existing, what they believe is this politician" (I. 17).

The octopus-mode of politics that has evolved in Sri Lanka has established the rule of politics as the dominant mechanism of authority and social organisation. Unless this structure is explicitly recognised, analysed and finally addressed by offering effective and law-based alternative mechanisms for interaction of citizens (in the real sense of the term), the public service and the political apparatus, it is likely that any kind of reform will lead merely to further creative adjustments of the practices of politics according to the established rationalities and meanings.

## References

Amann, Klaus/Hirschauer, Stefan (1997): 'Die Befremdung der eigenen Kultur. Ein Programm'. In: Hirschauer, Stefan/Amann, Klaus, eds: *Die Befremdung der eigenen Kultur. Zur ethnographischen Herausforderung soziologischer Empirie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 7–52.

Bastian, Sunil (1998): 'Development NGOs and Ethnic Conflicts'. In: Tiruchelvam, Mithran/Dattathreya, C.S., eds: *Culture and Politics of Identity in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, pp. 102–135.

Bayart, Jean-François (1991): 'Finishing with the Idea of the Third World: The Concept of the Political Trajectory'. In: Manor, James, ed.: *Rethinking Third World Politics*. London/New York: Longman, pp. 51–71.

Bigdon, Christine (2003): Decentralization, Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka. An Assessment of Federal Proposals, Devolution Policy and the Realities of Recognition of Minorities at the Local Level. (Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics. Working Paper No. 14). Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg. Available at: http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg. de/abt/SAPOL/HPSACP.htm.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1983): 'Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital'. In: *Soziale Welt* (Special issue), pp. 183–198.

De Silva, K. M., ed. (1993a): *Sri Lanka. Problems of Governance*. Kandy: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

------ (1993b): 'The Bureaucracy'. In: de Silva, K. M., ed.: *Sri Lanka. Problems of Governance.* Kandy: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, pp. 83–98.

------ (1996): *Devolution in Sri Lanka. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and the Debate on Power Sharing. A Documentary Survey with an Introduction by K.M. de Silva.* Kandy: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

De Silva, K. M./Peiris, G. H./Samarasinghe, S. W. R. de A., eds (2002): *Corruption in South Asia. India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.* (ICES South/Southeast Asia Studies Series: 4). Kandy: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

Erdmann, Gero (2002): 'Neopatrimoniale Herrschaft – oder: Warum es in Afrika so viele Hybridregime gibt'. In: Bendel, Petra/Croissant, Aurel/Rüb, Friedbert W., eds: *Zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur. Zur Konzeption und Empirie demokratischer Grauzonen.* Opladen: Leske + Budrich, pp. 323–342.

Fox, Jonathan (1992): 'Democratic Rural Development: Leadership Accountability in Regional Peasant Organisations'. In: *Development and Change* 23 (2), pp. 1–36.

------ (1994): 'The Difficult Transition from Clientelism to Citizenship. Lessons from Mexico'. In: *World Politics* 46 (2), pp. 151–184.

Giddens, Anthony (1996): *Die Konsequenzen der Moderne.* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Gunadheera, Somapala (1997): 'Career Assurance and the Integrity of the Public Service'. In: Somasundram, M., ed.: *The Third Wave: Governance and Public Administration in Sri Lanka.* Delhi: Konark Publishers, pp. 295–310.

Gunasekera, Tamara (1992): 'Democracy, Party Competition and Leadership: the Changing Power Structure in a Sinhalese Community'. In: Brow, James/Weeramunda, Joe, eds: *Agrarian Change in Sri Lanka.* Newbury Park/New Delhi/London: Sage, pp. 229–260.

Hasse, Raimund/Krücken, Georg, (1999): *Neo-Institutionalismus.* Bielefeld: transcript.

Hettige, S. T./Mayer, Markus, eds (2002): *Sri Lankan Youth: Challenges and Responses.* Colombo: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

Honer, Anne (1994): 'Das explorative Interview. Zur Rekonstruktion der Relevanzen von Expertinnen und anderen Leuten'. In: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 20 (3), pp. 623–640.

International Centre for Ethnic Studies (1998): *Sri Lanka. The Devolution Debate.* Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

Jansz, Frederica (2000): 'Samurdhi: a gift for party loyalists'. In: *The Sunday Leader*, 16.07.2000, p. 6.

Kiribamune, Sirima, ed. (1999): *Women and Politics in Sri Lanka. A Comparative Perspective.* Nedimale, Dehiwala: International Centre for Ethnic Studies Kandy and Sridevi Printers.

Kumarasinghe, Uditha (2002): 'Rs. 650 million for Samurdhi next year'. In: *Daily News*, 26.09.2002, p. 13.

Leitan, Tressie/Selvakumaran, N. (2000): Institutional Development and Capacity Building. (RDSC/NIBR Research Project on Formative Evaluation of Moneragala Integrated Rural Development Programme MONDEP. Working Paper No. 4). Colombo: Regional Development Studies Centre.

Luhmann, Niklas (1995): 'Kausalität im Süden'. In: *Soziale Systeme* 1 (1), pp. 7–28.

Mayer, Markus (2002a): *Jugendkonflikte und Entwicklungsplanung. Eine sozialgeographische Analyse der Lebenschancen Jugendlicher und der Potentiale dezentraler Planung in Sri Lanka.* Saarbrücken: Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik.

------ (2002b): 'Violent Youth Conflicts in Sri Lanka: Comparative Results from Jaffna and Hambantota'. In: Hettige, S. T./Mayer, Markus, eds: *Sri Lankan Youth. Challenges and Responses.* Colombo: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, pp. 208–246.

------ (2002c): 'Empowering Youth. An Approach from Southern Sri Lanka'. In: *VISTAS, Journal of the Social Sciences* 1 (1), pp. 41–53.

Mense-Petermann, Ursula (2002): 'Kontinuität und Wandel. Zum Erklärungspotential institutionalistischer Ansätze in der Transformationsforschung'. In: *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 12 (2), pp. 227–242.

Migdal, Joel S. (1988): *Strong Societies and Weak States. State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

------ (2001): *State in Society. Studying how states and societies transform and constitute each other.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moore, Mick (1985): *The State and Peasant Politics in Sri Lanka.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

------ (1990): 'Sri Lanka: The contradiction of the social democratic state'. In: Mitra, Subrata Kumar, ed.: *The Post-Colonial State in Asia. Dialectics of Politics and Culture.* New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp. 155–191.

------ (1992): 'Sri Lanka: A Special Case of Development?' In: Brow, James/Weeramunda, Joe, eds: *Agrarian Change in Sri Lanka.* New Delhi/Newbury Park/London: Sage, pp. 17–40.

Oberst, Robert C. (1985): *Legislators and Representation in Sri Lanka. The Decentralization of Development Planning.* Boulder/London: Westview.

Peiris, G. H. (2002): Profiles of Electoral Malpractices in Sri Lanka. Unpublished manuscript. Forthcoming in a book on *Corruption in Governance* by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy.

Perera, Jayantha (1985): *New Dimensions of Social Stratification in Rural Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Lake House.

Perera, Sasanka (1998): *Political Violence in Sri Lanka. Dynamics, Consequences and Issues of Democratization*. Colombo: Centre for Women's Research.

Presidential Commission on Youth (1990): *Report of the Presidential Commission on Youth*. Colombo.

Ranugge, S. (2000): 'State, Bureaucracy and Development'. In: Hettige, S. T./ Mayer, Markus, eds: *Sri Lanka at Crossroads. Dilemma and Prospects after 50 Years of Independence*. New Delhi: Macmillan, pp. 50–62.

Röseberg, Martin Christian (2002): *Initiating and Sustaining Participatory Processes: Small Farmer Organization Development: Case Studies from Sri Lanka and the Philippines*. (Nijmegen Studies in Development and Cultural Change 35). Saarbrücken: Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik.

Rösel, Jakob (1997): *Der Bürgerkrieg auf Sri Lanka. Der Tamilenkonflikt: Aufstieg und Niedergang eines singhalesischen Staates*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Saravanamuttu, Paikiasothy (1998): 'Sri Lanka: Civil Society, the Nation and the State-Building Challenge'. In: Rooy, Alison Van, ed.: *Civil Society and the Aid Industry. The Politics and Promise*. London: Earthscan, pp. 104–133.

Schröer, Norbert (1997): 'Wissenssoziologische Hermeneutik'. In: Hitzler, Ronald/ Honer, Anne, eds: *Sozialwissenschaftliche Hermeneutik. Eine Einführung*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, pp. 109–129.

Siriwardena, Regi, ed. (1998): *Sri Lanka: The Devolution Debate*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

Slater, R. P. (1989): 'Central Control or Local Reform? The Case of Decentralisation in Rural Sri Lanka'. In: *Planning and Administration* 16 (2), pp. 70–79.

Spencer, Jonathan (1990): *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble. Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Spradley, J. P. (1979): *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Strauss, Anselm L. (1998): *Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung. Datenanalyse und Theoriebildung in der empirischen soziologischen Forschung*. München: Fink.

Transparency International (2002a): Police, then judiciary most corrupt public institutions in South Asia reveals TI survey. Available at: http://www. transparency. org/pressreleaserarchive/2002/2002.12.17.south_asia_survey.html [04.03.2003].

------ (2002b): Corruption in South Asia. Insights & Benchmarks from Citizen Feedback Surveys in Five Countries. Available at: http://www.transparency.org/pressreleases_archive/2002/dnld/south_asia_reports. pdf [04.03. 2003].

Transparency International Sri Lanka (2001/02): Corruption in Sri Lanka. Executive Summary. Available at: http://www.cpalanka.org/research_papers/corruption_in_SL_English.pdf [04.03.2003].

UNESCAP (undated): Local Government in Asia and the Pacific: Country Paper Sri Lanka. Available at: http://www.unescap.org/huset/lgstudy/country/srilanka/srilanka.html [20.07.2002].

Uyangoda, Jayadeva (1997): 'Gangsterism. Its Political Sociology'. In: Uyangoda, Jayadeva/Biyanwila, Janaka, eds: *Matters of Violence. Reflections on Social and Political Violence in Sri Lanka.* Colombo: Social Scientists Association, pp. 106–108.

------ (2000): 'A State of Desire? Some Reflections on the Unreformability of Sri Lanka's Post-Colonial Polity'. In: Hettige, S. T./Mayer, Markus, eds: *Sri Lanka at Crossroads. Dilemma and Prospects after 50 Years of Independence.* New Delhi: Macmillan, pp. 92–118.

Waidyasekera, D. D. M. (2000): *Decentralization and Provincial Finance in Sri Lanka.* (Research Studies: Governance No. 6). Colombo: Institute of Policy Studies.

Wijeweera, B. S. (1988): *A Colonial Administrative System in Transition. The Experience of Sri Lanka.* Colombo: Marga.