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Back to Ruhunu, Maya, and Pihiti – A Sustainable Strategy for Regional Governance

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Abstract

In ancient Sri Lanka, the emergence of the three cardinal regional Divisions of Ruhunu, Maya, and Pihiti, signified some socio-historical compulsions for regional governance. However, when the centralised government had become weakened due to historical vicissitudes, as in medieval times, numerous small sub-kingdoms appeared across the Island. The British colonial process of regional governance, commenced with the Colebrook Commission established in 1832. Thus, the first major step in provincial administration taken by the colonial rule was in 1833 with the abolition of the service tenure system (Rajakariya or the duty by the King) and the general administration of Kandyan areas. In 1832, Five regional units were set up, based simply on cardinal directions, namely, the Northern, Southern, Western, Eastern, and the Central Provinces. The present structure of the nine existing Provinces, to which attempts have been made to devolve powers of governance in recent times under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, were in fact, created over 133 years ago (1889) during the heyday of colonial rule, for its own geopolitical advantage. It is argued that the nine existing Provinces into which powers have now been devolved for regional governance under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, are archaic, irrational, and wasteful as they were created during the colonial era under a different historical context. The present network of spatial administrative structures in Sri Lanka is also characterized by a chaotic and confusing array of Divisions, Zones, and Ranges that are mostly inherited from colonial days. These divisions are not necessarily compatible or coterminous with each other. The proposal made here, therefore attempts to demonstrate the feasibility of re-establishing a threefold regional structure for Sri Lanka, based broadly on the ancient Divisions of Ruhunu, Maya, and Pihiti. It is contended that if the proposal is implemented, it may bestow numerous advantages and bring some long-term stability to the Country. Among others, it may contribute to national security and long-term political stability, support economic progress, promote co-existence and national harmony, increase efficiency in the conservation of natural endowments of land, water and biota, and facilitate more effective planning to mitigate natural disasters. A smaller number of larger regions will make them economically strong and viable entities, with their own earnings, expanded markets, and abilities to invest in larger projects, reflecting some economies of scale. New Regions will ensure greater integrity and conservation of National Parks, Forest Reserves and other needs of conservation and would also be helpful in managing problems like human-elephant conflicts more efficiently.

Keywords: ancient regions, colonial provinces, cost, chaos and burden on treasury, three larger regions in place of nine, merits of the proposal, a new regional map for Sri Lanka

1. Learning from the Lessons of History

Despite its small size, Sri Lanka has much geographical diversity within its limited land area. Variations in her topography, climate, history, language, ethnicity, and local culture had always engendered regional sentiments and identities. The *parasol concept* of State (*ekachatra*), recognizing this ground reality evolved itself in order to satisfy the strong regional sentiments, while maintaining the ‘oneness’ (as signified by the prefixes of ‘*ek*’ and ‘*eka*’) of the country. *Mahavamsa* (Geiger, 1912) often refers to the reigns of ancient Kings who ruled the Island under one parasol (“.....*ëkachchatthena Lanka Rajjan akasi*”).

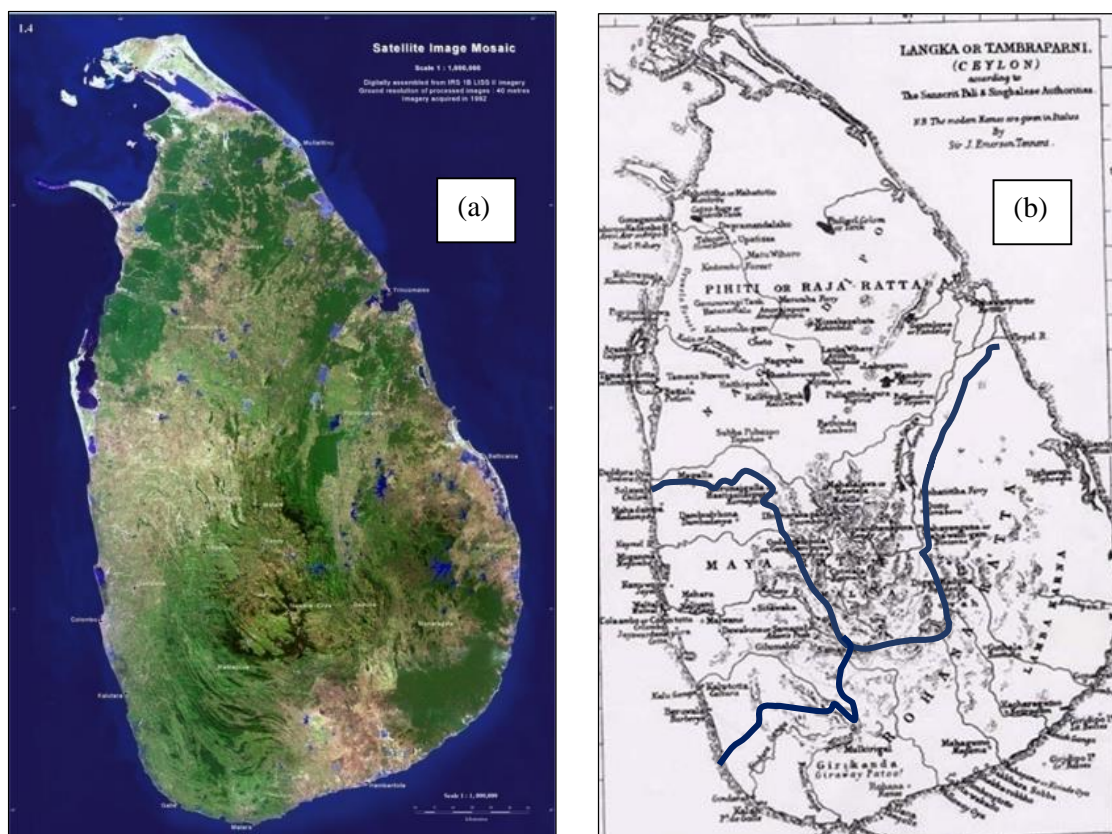


Figure 1: Unity in Diversity: (a) Natural Diversity (Survey Dept.), (b) Emergence of three Ancient Regions of Ruhunu, Maya and Pihiti as defined by the natural river systems (Tennant, 1859)

It is a noteworthy historical fact that, Ancient Regional Divisions of Sri Lanka were based primarily on her Major River Basin Systems. Traditionally, rivers were also used as cultural frontiers in the country (eg. *Benthota Ganga*). It may, therefore, be surmised that the hydraulic principle of defining regional administrative units by river basin boundaries was nothing so new but deeply embedded in the history and culture of the Island. Thus, while *Pihiti Rata* was defined in the East by the *Mahaweli Ganga*, its border with *Maya Rata* was defined by *Deduru Oya*. The boundary between *Ruhunu Rata* and *Maya Rata* in the Southwest, was accepted as the *Benthota Ganga* that was also treated as a cultural frontier.

Long before the advent of most modern Nation States, King Pandukabhaya (437 to 367 BC) (Paranavitane, 1957), who laid the foundation for a Unitary State of Sri Lanka, established a system of settlement boundaries with clusters of villages under the governance of local leaders or lords who had deep roots in their places of birth. Some pillar inscriptions (e.g. that of *Wewelketiya* near *Kahatagasdigiliya* by Mahinda IV, 956-972), demonstrated this time-tested approach towards rural governance as reflected in phrases such as “*sathgam samdaruwan*” (a cluster of seven villages governed by noble leaders who had much power and authority). After the Portuguese arrival and their occupation of the maritime regions, indigenous systems of governance went through drastic changes, creating unwelcome divisions even among the major community of Sinhalese, as ‘*up-country*’ and ‘*low-country*’, which hardly existed before.

In ancient Sri Lanka, the emergence of the three cardinal regional Divisions of *Ruhunu*, *Maya*, and *Pihiti*, signified some socio-historical compulsions for regional governance. However, when the centralised government had become weakened due to historical vicissitudes, as in medieval times, numerous small sub-kingdoms appeared across the Island. Queyroz (1917) mentioned that there were some 15 sub-kingdoms, including Jaffna, at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese. These sub-kings in-charge of different areas, were often referred to as ‘*uparaja*’, ‘*yuvaraja*’, ‘*raja*’, *mapa* or *epa* who had a direct royal descent. The King of the whole Country was referred to as the ‘*Maha Raja*’ (*maharakdha*, *mapurmuka*). In the Jaffna Peninsula sub-kings also bore the title of ‘*deeparaja*’ (king of the islands) while in other parts ‘*yuvaraja*’ was more commonly adopted.

2. Origin and Evolution of British Colonial Provinces

The present structure of the nine existing Provinces, to which attempts have been made to devolve powers of governance in recent times under *the 13th Amendment to the Constitution*, were in fact, created over 133 years ago (1889) during the heyday of colonial rule, for its own geopolitical advantage and convenience. The writer in earlier discussions (Madduma Bandara, 1991, also often stressed the fact that, it is necessary for Sri Lanka to develop a system of its own indigenous regions befitting its natural endowments, and at the same time ensuring long-term stability and national harmony, while stimulating the processes of nature conservation and enrichment. This approach would be in contrast with the colonial Provinces that were arbitrarily created for collection of revenue and for reinforcing the tactically oppressive ‘divide and rule’ policy. The present structure of the nine provinces was in fact the culmination of a process of restructuring provincial administration by the colonial rulers introduced after their conquest of Kandy in 1815, and the establishment of colonial rule proper with all its might after the 1818 freedom struggle.

destablished in 1832. Thus, the first major step in Provincial administration taken by the colonial rule was in 1833 with the abolition of the service tenure system (Rajakariya or the duty by the King) and the general administration of Kandyan areas. As de Silva (2005) (- the eminent historian, observed, “...in 1832, Five regional units were set up, based simply on cardinal directions, namely, the Northern, Southern, Western, Eastern, and the Central Provinces. The reconstitution of the new Provinces was partly related to an attempt to weaken the national feelings of the Kandyans... So, there was a distinct political motivation which was patently punitive” (Kodikara, 1991; Mills, 1933). The Central Province was made the smallest of all provinces, with the covert intention of penalising and keeping an eye on the *Kandyans* for rebelling against or resisting the colonial rule. In this scheme of fivefold

administrative divisions, “... *the Kandyan Province of Nuwara Kalaviya was attached to the Northern Province, the Kandyan Provinces of Sabaragamuwa, Lower Uva, and Wellassa were attached to the Southern Province, the Kandyan Provinces of Tamankaduwa and Bintenna were attached the to the Eastern Province, the Kandyan Provinces of Seven Korales, Three Korales, Four Korales, and Lower Bulathgama, were attached to the Western Province, while the Central Province was left with a limited area in the central districts (Kand Uda Pas Rata) of the Kandyan Kingdom.*” (Kodikara, 1991). The North Central Province including the Anuradhapura District was placed largely within the Northern Province, making villagers of Nuwarakalaviya that historically formed an essential part of the Kandyan Kingdom, to trek to Jaffna for their administrative, educational, and juridical requirements. So, the deliberate dispersal and dissipation of the Kandyan territory mostly for selfish geopolitical reasons, was accomplished through the creation of a highly arbitrary, fivefold Provincial structure. Of these, Uva and North Central Provinces that openly revolted against the British were condemned by design to remain neglected as the most backward and under-developed parts of the country, even today, nearly seventy-five years after the National Independence of 1948. By 1889, through colonial administrative evolution, Colebrook’s five provinces multiplied into nine, and these arbitrarily demarcated Provincial Divisions continue up to the present day, treating as though they are inviolable and sacrosanct, and nonsensically as appropriate spatioal units for devolution of political power.

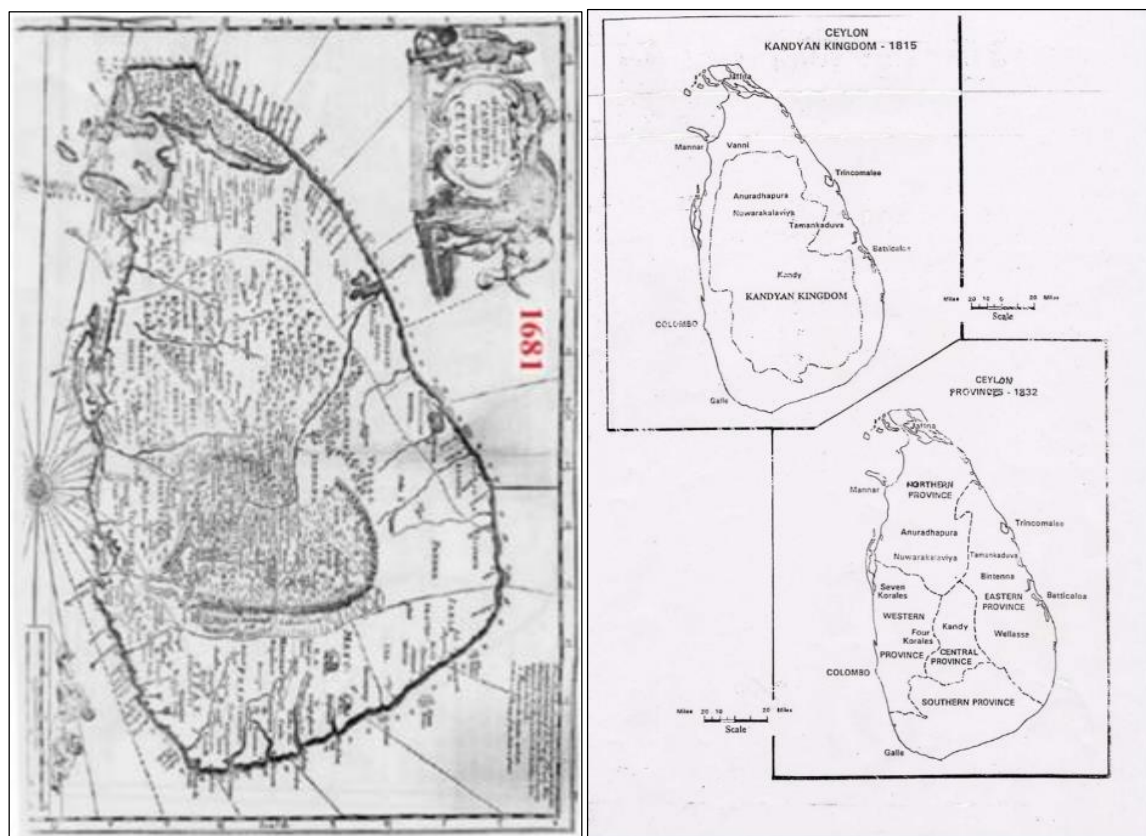


Figure 2: The Kandyan Kingdom (Knox, 1681) and the Colonial Division into Five Provinces in 1833 (Colebrook Commission, 1832)

It is obvious that the 9 existing Provinces, to which attempts have been made to devolve powers of governance, were created almost 130 years ago (1889) during colonial rule for their own crafty needs and advantages. This had been reiterated in several writings during the last three decades by several writers (Kodikara, 1991; Madduma Bandara, 1991 2001). It was also repeatedly stressed that it is necessary for Sri Lanka to develop a system of its own home-grown regions, befitting its natural endowments that ensures long-term sustainability, stability, and national harmony, while promoting nature conservation and regional development.



Figure 3: The structure of existing 9 Provinces inherited from the colonial past and the present system of 25 Administrative Districts National Atlas, Surveyor Generals Department (2007)

3. Issues Often Sidelined in Devolution Debates

At present, out of the nine colonially inherited Provinces, four continue to remain ‘land-locked’ in a small island, without any opening to the sea and its resources. Some provincial boundaries are straight lines drawn by survey draughts men as in the case of the boundary between Uva and Eastern Provinces created haphazardly during the colonial era. The Eastern Province in general is a geographical monstrosity extending along the eastern coastal belt covering over one-fourth of the coastline of the whole Island. So are the belt-like distributions of Southern and Western Provinces and the Puttalam District bearing the coastal administrative legacy of occupation of maritime areas by different colonial powers, attempting to expand towards the borders of the Kandyan Kingdom.

4. Chaotic Administrative Divisions Today

The present pattern of spatial administrative structures in Sri Lanka is characterized by a chaotic and confusing array of Divisions, Zones, and Ranges that are mostly inherited from

colonial days, but not necessarily or compatible or coterminous with each other. For example, the Irrigation Department has its own set of 14 administrative divisions that are hardly related to natural river basins or to the potential for development of water resources. Similarly, the Education Authorities have their own Zones of administration. Forest and Wildlife Conservation Departments have their own ranges, largely related to exploitative and hunting interests during colonial times. The Health Authorities have their own health divisions, not necessarily compatible with those of general administrative divisions. It may be noted however, that Electoral Divisions are based on existing administrative Districts, or their combinations, and Divisional Secretariat Divisions as in the case of local government electoral areas. On top of all this, from time to time, different governments attempted different Economic Development Zones, or District Development Councils, that appeared and disappeared with changing political fortunes.

5. Attempts towards Constitutional Reforms since Independence

Since the National Independence (1948), there were three Constitutions (including the present one) that governed this Country. The first was the Solebury Constitution. Despite the fact that it was master minded by constitutional experts like Jennings and veteran political personalities like D.S. Senanayake, it did not last for more than 25 years. This was followed by the Republican Constitution of 1972 during the regime of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, which had a much shorter life span of 6 years, until it was superseded by the present Constitution enacted during the early phase of the regime of President J.R. Jayawardena. The last one, enacted in 1978, and despite numerous amendments made from time to time, survived for over four decades and remains still in force through several governments that assumed office sometimes with massive majorities. This was amidst the harsh criticisms it attracted from different political personalities, such as those of President Chandrika Bandaranaike, who have gone to the extent of sarcastically referring to it as a “*Bahubhootha Vyawasthawa*” (muddled or non-sensical constitution). At the same time, it may be observed that the relatively frequent number of amendments made to it over the years, signaled that all was not well during its troubled life span of nearly forty-five years.

Numerous amendments within a short life span perhaps reflected a common underlying perception among many past political leaders, that, the “problem is with the dancing floor than with the dancers”! Some attempts were also made to replace the prevailing Constitution during the last four decades, with several Reform Committees (at least four major ones, in 1997, 2006, 2016, and 2019) appointed by different Heads of State, that were eventually forgotten or abandoned halfway, due to changing political fortunes and historical vicissitudes. Some Committees on Constitutional Reforms, despite their relatively enlightened membership, were also subjected to the same fate. The failure of such attempts had perhaps contributed to the repetition of serious political storms that often degenerated to the extent where laws of the jungle reigned occasionally. One common feature in almost all these attempts was the ‘Unit of Devolution’ which had become a significant bone of contention in the whole episode. In addition, devolution of powers over the subjects of land and police had also lingered on making some related amendments to remain in limbo, for the last three decades.

Given such dismal past experiences of political reform performance, that were often dominated by visible and invisible, alien or colonial strains of thought, it may be argued that, the time had come to make fresh attempts in the present context of a virulent and unprecedented form of central Government in office with much concentrated power and authority, to develop an indigenous Constitution, born from the soil, based on lessons of history, owned and nurtured by the majority of people in this Country. As some writers perceptively observed, legacy of the colonial rule in its manifold manifestations, has also ‘crippled our minds’ (Gunatilake, 1984) and abilities of thinking ‘out of the box’. In this context, it may be pertinent to mention that all democratically elected governments since National Independence, have signally failed even to restore the old name of the Country, or reintroduce the traditional National Flag which was brought down publicly by the British Colonial Rulers in 1815. In the context of regional governance, successive governments have also failed to abandon or at least modify significantly, the old colonial structure of 9 provinces.

It is against the above briefly narrated historic-political setting that, one has to consider the proposal made here, for reintroducing the ancient regional Trinity of *Ruhunu, Maya, and Pihiti*, that has assumed some fresh significance in the present debates on ‘enforcing the 13th Amendment in full’, or ‘13+ arrangements’, or any other political rhetoric and slogans. The role played by India through the ‘Indo-Lanka Accord’ (GOSL, 1987) and the task of satisfying its underlying aspirations by an over-flexible local leadership, for increased devolution of political power for the provinces, obviously with little understanding of the long-term consequences, may also need not be belittled as an essential part of the macro-picture jugglery and the jigsaw. It is necessary to find appropriate ways and means to such expediency that may eventually go against the long-term interests of the country.

As observed earlier, the nine existing provinces into which powers have now been devolved for regional governance under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, are archaic and wasteful as they were created during the colonial era under a different historical context.

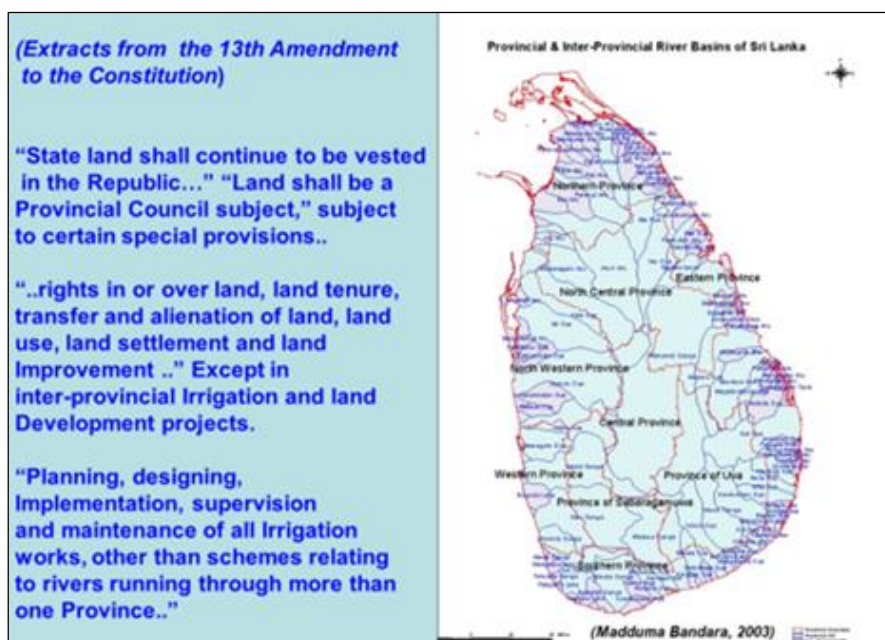


Figure 4: Rivers are to the Constitution classified as “Provincial” and “Inter-provincial” Under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution

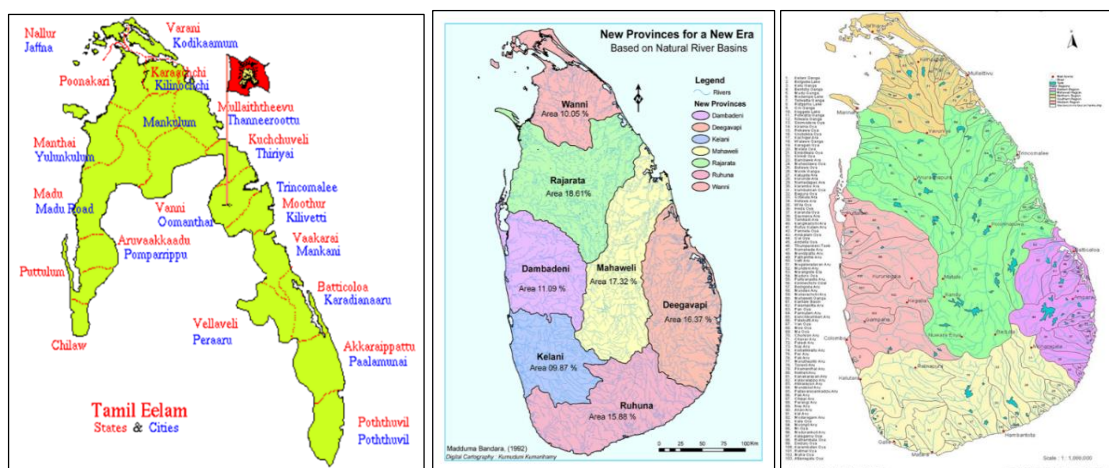


Figure 5: A map of the rebels advocating separatism and two other proposals based on river basin boundaries (Madduma Bandara, 1991, and the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, 2003)

6. Some Convergence in Public and Political thought

The silent discontent prevailing at present among the general public with regard to the continuity of the Provincial Governance, which is generally viewed widely as a “white elephant” and a burgeoning Local Government machinery too heavy for a poor small country, are often considered as colossal wastes of state resources. On the other hand, the ironical stimulus of the present chaotic state of affairs, provides opportunities to move forward towards fresh and innovative lines of thinking. As noted earlier, it was often stressed that, it is indispensable for Sri Lanka to develop a system of its own indigenous governing regions, befitting its natural endowments and conservation of its land, water, and biotic resources in an era of climate change generating unprecedented impacts. Any such, exercise also needs to be rooted in historic ground realities, with some promise of ensuring long-term stability and promoting veritable and lasting national harmony.

A former Leader of the opposition, Hon. R. Sambandan, addressing the Parliament in January 2015, observed that for a small country like Sri Lanka, 3 or 4 Provinces would be sufficient (Sambandan, 2015). Even though he may have had different thoughts about re-demarcating the boundaries of such regions, there appears to have been some convergence of thought regarding the need for a smaller number of provinces befitting a small island.

The Public Consultation Committee for Constitutional Reforms appointed by the last Government (Lal Wijenayake, 2016), shared similar sentiments, and proposed in their Report that, “Sri Lanka may best be divided into 5 major regions based on river basins, while ensuring that each province will encompass a share of the coastal seaboard allowing direct access to the oceanic resources”. While these developments in general, signify the evolution of some convergence of collective thinking, it is possible to argue that any visionary political leadership with long-term thinking for the country, would be capable of converting the above thoughts into reality through appropriate implementation strategies.

7. Towards a New Map of Sri Lanka

The proposal made here, attempts to demonstrate the feasibility of re-establishing a threefold regional structure for Sri Lanka, based broadly on the ancient Divisions of *Ruhunu*, *Maya*, and *Pihiti*. It is likely to bestow numerous advantages and bring some long-term stability to the Country. It also indicates the value of lessons learned from history and the fact that it is not merely an abstract thought, but a realisable proposal within a relatively short period of time if there is political will and commitment.

The proposal is summed up and illustrated through a New Map of Sri Lanka, depicting the structure of three regions bounded by natural river basins as adopted in the historical past (See Map 6). A table of basic statistics derived from the last full Census of 2012, is presented including the land areas coming within each major region, their total populations, and their ethnic compositions. Our earlier proposals (Madduma Bandara, 1991, 2021), that indicated more regional units based of river basins are revisited and modified here to suit the growing public sentiments to have a minimum number of major regions. The proposal would drastically reduce the colossal public expenditure now committed to maintain the nine colonial provinces along with their Governors, Cabinets, Councils, infrastructure, and attendant bureaucracies, that signally failed to reach the desired goals.

In this exercise as noted earlier, ancient regional Divisions that were primarily based on natural river basins were identified and adopted. Thus, the border between *Pihiti Rata* and *Maya Rata* was marked by the Deduru Oya, which also reflects the transition from Dry Zone to the Wet Zone. Similarly, the border between *Ruhunu Rata* and *Pihiti Rata* was marked by the *Mahaweli* Basin, while the *Benthota Ganga* on the Southwest, marked the border between *Ruhunu Rata* and *Maya Rata*, which also signified a cultural transition zone.

In the present exercise, historical boundaries that were traditionally employed to demarcate the three ancient regions, were marked on a modern map of major river basin watersheds of the Island. The results obtained as depicted on the New Map of Sri Lanka, were challenging, but promising. Thus, *Ruhunu Rata* covered an area of about 33% of the total land mass of the Country, while *Pihiti Rata* encompassed some 53% of the total territory. The *Maya Rata* on the other hand, with a high density of population proved to be much smaller spatial unit. It may be observed that, both *Ruhunu Rata* and *Pihiti Rata* encompassed relatively larger spatial units, since they included extensive conservation zones and National Parks such as *Yala*, *Wilpattu*, *Hurulu*, and *Wasgomuwa*.

The relevant population figures were derived from the Census data of 2012, aggregated at the *Grama Niladhari* Division levels. Considering the population distribution, *Maya Rata* has the largest share with about 40% of the total for the Island. Then comes the *Pihiti Rata* which has nearly 35%, while the *Ruhunu Rata* accounted for some 25% of the total. In terms of the ethnic composition, *Pihiti Rata* included some 64% Sinhalese and 36% of the minorities of Tamil, Muslim, and other communities. *Ruhunu Rata* covering part of the Southeastern coastal areas including the major townships of Batticaloa and Ampara, has nearly 75% Sinhalese and 25% of all other communities. In the *Maya Rata*, a high concentration of Sinhalese accounting for some 84% was found, while the balance 16% comprised all other minorities. It may be of interest to note that, Sinhalese population formed the majority of the total in all the three major

regions. The interpretation of these results is left to individual readers according to their personal preferences and political predilections.

8. Some Merits of the ‘Three Region’ Proposal

It is argued here that the following positive impacts and advantages are discernible and could reasonably be anticipated if implemented appropriately.

- The proposal results in a smaller number of only three larger regions, compared with the present 9 provinces. It therefore, if implemented, reduces the colossal expenditure now incurred continuously on different areas of provincial governance. For instance, among other advantages, there will be only three Governors and three Chief Ministers and a smaller number of Provincial Ministers (15 in place of the present 45).
- Every Region has a sea frontage and there will be no land-locked Provinces as in the present set-up, created by the colonial rule. It is therefore natural for a small Island, to have direct access to the riches of the seas from all regions.
- Inside each major region, a system of smaller number of sub-regions based on amalgamated regional sub-watersheds could be created replacing the present Divisions and Districts as appropriate.
- The use of a neutral criterion like river basin watersheds, following the traditions of the historical past, may bestow some benefits for more efficient natural resources management. For example, it will do away with the need for ‘Inter-provincial rivers’ created under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.
- It may also help in safeguarding the investments on land and water resources development that comprises the largest share of all State investments since National Independence.
- A smaller number of larger regions will make them economically viable spatial entities, which have their own earnings and sustainable regional economies, expanded markets and abilities to invest in larger projects.
- New Regions will also ensure the integrity and conservation of National Parks, Forest Reserves, and other forms of nature conservation and better management of problems like soil and coastal erosion, human elephant conflicts, and crop protection from wild animals more efficiently.
- The proposed new regional structure will also help in managing natural disasters such as floods and droughts that are likely to increase and intensify in an era of global climate changes, as the use of natural river basins can prove to manage them more efficiently.
- The proposal can facilitate economic progress without extreme urban biases, and glaring differences such as those between the core and the peripheral areas, while containing depopulation of rural areas due to increasing migrations to the Capital and other Cities.

9. A Critique

In some discussions on the subject, a question was raised as to why a small country needs regionalization at all, when it can be governed from a single Centre. The answer to this lies in the exceptional diversity of the Island despite its limited land area, as reflected in its climate, land and soil, water, flora, and fauna as well as in human diversity. Its proximity to the Sub-continent of India, and the midway location between the East and West in terms of sea routes, further engendered such diversities while also generating significant security concerns. Therefore, a three-fold regionalization evolved through some historic logic, and it prevailed in the Island from time immemorial. It continued until the dawn of western colonial domination which created a regionalization of a different sort, as foreign invasions were by naval powers who desired to create a system of maritime provinces based mainly on their limited military capabilities to expand into the interior. This was one of the historical reasons for the existence of belts like maritime provinces and land-locked territories up to the present day. Our cardinal contention is that there is a need to rationalize and reorganize the primary regions and administrative sub-divisions along with their areas and functions from a long-term national development perspective.

10. Summary and Conclusions

In summary, it is likely that the new regional structure may enhance long term political stability; support economic progress; promote co-existence and national harmony; increase efficiency in the conservation of natural endowments of land, water, and biota; and facilitate more effective planning to mitigate natural disasters. A smaller number of larger regions will make them economically strong and viable entities, with their own earnings, expanded markets, and abilities to invest in larger projects, reflecting some economies of scale. New Regions will ensure greater integrity and conservation of National Parks, Forest Reserves, and other needs of conservation and would also be helpful in managing problems like human-elephant conflicts more efficiently.

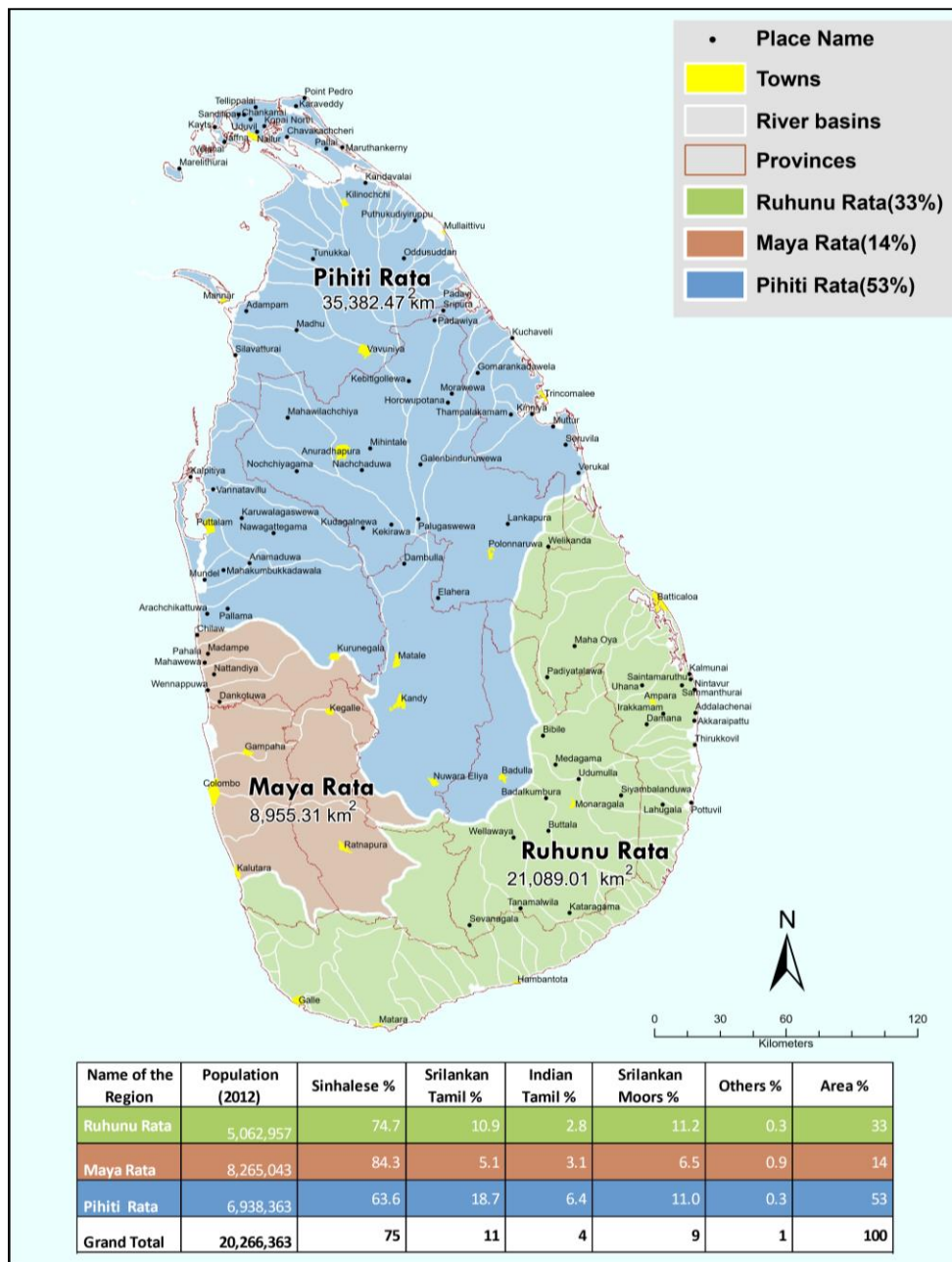


Figure 6: A map of the three Ancient Regions -Still applicable for Sri Lanka, based on historical traditions and natural river basins.

Source: Compiled by the author, 2023

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