Securing the Urban Frontier: State Legibility Projects in the Postcolonial City

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Abstract

This study interrogates new 'legibility projects' in South Asian cities, where an expansion of state informational capacity is increasingly focused on urban rather than rural areas. A growing literature in political science disaggregates the foundations of state capacity in terms of 'informational capacity', and 'legibility', defined as the ways in which states literally read, decode, and categorize their populations to access information on their activities. In postcolonial South Asia, legibility projects largely aim to bring rural areas under the centralized authority of the state due to (1) their peripheralization under the colonial regime, and (2) ethnic struggles that emerged out of rural peripheries. This presents an empirical puzzle: if postcolonial states have typically sought to secure legibility over rural areas, then why have states reoriented their focus towards expanding legibility in urban spaces? Focusing on the specific case of Sri Lanka, and employing historical institutionalist methods, I compare how state legibility projects have differentially targeted rural versus urban space during the colonial, postcolonial, and postwar period. I argue that an expansion of informational capacity has been historically determined where the greatest threat to the centralized authority of the Sri Lankan state is found, and more specifically, where populations remain tied to informal political processes rather than those regulated by the state. Collective action and informal settlements in Colombo present new challenges to state authority, which are neutralized through legibility projects that aim to secure the urban frontier. My findings suggest a tendency towards highly centralized informational capacity in both urban and rural settings under the modern, postcolonial state.

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1 Introduction

This study interrogates new 'legibility projects' in South Asian cities, where an expansion of the state's informational capacity is increasingly focused on urban rather than rural areas. A growing literature in political science disaggregates the foundations of state capacity in terms of 'informational capacity': the ability for states to collect information on their populations and territories (Dinecco and Wang 2022; Lee and Zhang 2017). Informational capacity hinges upon legibility, defined as the ways in which states literally read, decode, and categorize their populations for purposes of collecting information on their activities.

I conceptualize urban development as a 'legibility project' across South Asia's urban frontier. Cities across South Asia constitute the new urban frontier, signaling possibilities of urban development to facilitate market growth, technological innovation, and global competitiveness. The urban frontier fundamentally relies on a spatial imagination of cities as ever-developable sites of capital production and accumulation. While the construct of the Frontier is rooted in settler-colonialism, where spatial imaginations of emptiness and primitivity render land available for colonial extraction, the concept has gained traction among scholars of contemporary South Asian urban politics (see Amarasuriya 2020; Anwar 2012; Kennedy et. al 2022; Perera 2006; Perera 2018; Rawnat Khan 2024). Comprising cities like Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Islamabad, Dhaka and Colombo, South Asia's urban frontier presents new arenas for experimentation in state planning, policy and development.

South Asia's urban frontier is a relatively recent phenomenon, and presents a shift from the postcolonial state's focus on developing informational capacity across rural, rather than urban territories. In the aftermath of independence, postcolonial governments opted to centralize power within a consolidated 'state' authority, transforming much of its rural territories through development projects that would bring them under the purview of central planning authorities. As will be detailed in the later empirical sections of this paper, the tendency of postcolonial states has been to secure 'legible' space in rural territories. This prompts questions on the timely expansion of South Asia's urban frontier. If postcolonial states have typically sought to secure legibility over rural areas, then why have states reoriented their focus towards expanding legibility in urban spaces?

This paper focuses on the case of Sri Lanka. Using historical institutionalist methods, casing and process tracing, I demonstrate how informational capacity was expanded over the Northern (rural) regions of the country in the postcolonial period, which fell under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the years of the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-

2009). But the urban capital, Colombo, was never isolated from the Sri Lankan government, nor did its residents ever abide by different tax, legal and political rules as they did in the North during the LTTE-controlled years. Legibility projects in Colombo must surely look different to those in the North, for Colombo has historically remained 'legible' to the state in ways which the North has not.

My findings contribute to literature on state capacity, where urban development primarily functions to boost the informational capacity of the state through the creation of legible city spaces. While standard urban politics literature has long recognized the city as the locus of political struggles, the urban-rural divide does not hold up as neatly in the case of postcolonial states, where in the aftermath of independence it is the rural, not urban, that experiences the greatest proclivity towards agitational struggles. As the urban frontier produces new potentials for political resistance in the city, urban development is carried out as a means of producing 'legibility' in increasingly heterogeneous, politically-charged city spaces, and monitoring the emergence of new protest movements.

Importantly, this paper finds that an expansion of informational capacity has been historically determined where the greatest threat to the centralized authority of the Sri Lankan state is found, and more specifically, where populations remain tied to informal political processes rather than those regulated by the state. While rural areas have historically been deemed non-compliant due to economic and political isolation, postcolonial governments have increasingly recognized non-compliant populations within urban spaces. These are residents of inner-city informal settlements, also known as mudukkus in the Sri Lankan context, who negotiate their everyday politics through local elites and communal norms. In these contexts, informational capacity is increased as a tool to enforce compliance with the dominant state order.

Securing the urban frontier through increased legibility has not only transformed the fiscal and technological potentials of the city — it has also produced new urban political relations. In Hyderabad, residents of informal settlements along the Musi River protest the demolition of their homes and their physical displacement to make way for the Musi River development project. In Bangalore, IT workers negotiate their position in India's 'new silicon valley' through protests against 14-hour workdays and unfair labor practices (Jacob 2024; Telangana 2024). Dhaka has frequently seen mass protests against government quotas, corruption, and impoverishment in the city, erupting in the recent 2024 Quota Reform movement, also known as the July Revolution. And in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the 'Aragalaya' movement saw the largest mass-resistance movement in the country since independence, where thousands gathered in the capital to protest the mis-management of Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis. Transformations of urban space have produced

new resistance, protest, political dissent, and civil society activism in response to rapid changes in the city. These new political relations are typically forged 'from below'; at the grassroots, and often forwarded by peripheralized communities that develop cross-cutting solidarities on gender, class and ethnic lines. I suggest that the ways in which states engineer physical urban space, such that states can produce legible populations and subvert threats of resistance, also functions to engineer political order.

2 Urban Development as a Legibility Project

This paper defines urban development as a legibility project based on spatially designing, mapping, and planning cities to bolster the informational capacity of the state. Urban development facilitates the consolidation of a 'strong', centralized state that can oversee its territories, its citizens, and their activities.

Joel S. Migdal's Strong Societies and Weak States (1989) provides a seminal study of state capacity in the 'Third World' — which, in this paper, will instead be referred to as postcolonial states [1] State capacity is defined as the ability for states to "achieve the kinds of changes in society that their leaders have sought through state planning, policies, and actions" (Migdal 1989, 4). For Migdal, these capabilities include "the capacities to penetrate society, regulate social relationships, extract resources, and appropriate or use resources in determined ways". Strong states exhibit high capabilities to complete their intended tasks, while weak states exist "on the low end of a spectrum of capabilities" (Migdal 1989, 4-5).

To identify what separates strong versus weak state capacity, it is crucial to evaluate the relative 'evenness' of capabilities across a state's territories. Strong states signal high capabilities due to centralization under a singular state authority. Weak states, on the other hand, demonstrate low capabilities due to their diffusion of power across multiple actors and territories. Becoming a 'strong' state is particularly desirable for postcolonial nations, who achieve independent statehood at a time when the global world order is structured according to the "predominance of the state" (Migdal 1989), and when established strong states — also former colonial states — continue to dominate global power relations. When Sri Lanka was made independent in 1948, the postcolonial state had to compete, at a global scale, for recognition and legitimacy from other power-holders (Tilly 1991). A strong state does not only hold a legitimate monopoly of power within its territories — it is also a state that garners legitimacy from recognition by other strong states. 'State-building', or the increasing of state capacity for postcolonial states, often meant the consolidation

[1] To specify further, 'postcolonial' states refer to polities that achieved independent statehood as part of the 'decolonization' wave following the end of World War II.

and centralization of power under an official state authority (Boone 2014; Mamdani 1996; Migdal 1989).

Studies in political science have since disaggregated state capacity to account for specific fiscal, bureaucratic, participatory, distributive, and informational capacities of states, to name a few. This paper focuses on informational capacity, or the capability of states to procure information on their citizens, through the concept of legibility (Scott 1998; Lee and Zhang 2017). In order for states to expand their informational capacity, states must be able to literally read and comprehend their populations. Legibility can therefore be taken in its literal definition: it constitutes the processes and mechanisms through which states 'read' their citizens, through measures such as data collection, censuses, categorization, mapping, surveillance technologies, official records and reports.

Importantly, the project of legibility is centered on the state's effort to centralize informational access and control. This process shifts power away from local elites, organizations, and communities, consolidating knowledge and authority within the hands of the state. By doing so, the state seeks to make society more legible and governable, ensuring that key information—such as population data, land ownership, and tax collection —become standardized and accessible to central authorities. In turn, this diminishes the role of local actors who act as intermediaries or substitutes for the state in other settings. Urban development therefore engineers legible, governable space under a centralized state authority.

The following table presents a typology of strong states and weak states, based on their informational capacity. 'Thin' legibility sees a diffusion of authority to local elites and non-state actors, creating web-like social and political structures. 'Thick' legibility sees a consolidation, or centralization, of authority under the state. Specifically, in the context of South Asia, 'thick legibility' is the move away from mandala-like political structures that dominated traditional modes of governance — what Stanley J. Tambiah (2013) has called a "galactic polity" — in favor of a centralized, consolidated polity.

Studies in political economy literature have often recognized the double-edged potential of high state capacity: while high capacity states harness the capabilities to achieve their intended goals, they can also turn despotic. This is especially true in the context of postcolonial states, where governing institutions are often inherited from their colonial predecessors, and where the development of such institutions have been determined by principal objectives of colonialism such as extraction, coercion, and domination. I invoke legibility not in the neutral sense of making organized or planned urban development schemes, but rather, to highlight the potentials of legibility to extend more insidious informational capabilities of states — specifically, those of surveillance

	Legibility	Informational Capacity
Strong States	'Thick', Centralized under singular state authority	Strong; high capabilities to penetrate, regulate, extract, and appropriate information (see Migdal 1989)
Weak States	'Thin', Diffused across multiple actors and authorities	Weak; low capabilities to penetrate, regulate, extract and appropriate information (see Migdal 1989)

Figure 1: State Capacity and Legibility

and intelligence gathering.

3 Urban Politics in Postcolonial States

My study focuses on the particular case of Sri Lanka, though my interventions in the literature are applicable across South Asia's new urban frontier. The desired expansion of legibility in Colombo, achieved through urban development, presents an empirical puzzle common to the case of most postcolonial states. In the aftermath of colonialism , these states have typically focused their efforts to expand informational capacity in rural, not urban spaces. But for most of the literature on urban politics, it is the city that is considered to be the locus of civic and political life, and therefore urban spaces that are assumed to be areas of thick legibility for the state (Harvey 2012; Lefebvre 2016; N. Perera 2008; S. Perera 2018; Purcell 2003). First, cities constitute a heterogeneous and dynamic space of everyday life, where citizens live and work in close proximity to one another. The task of urban planning - of mapping, designing, and connecting ordered urban spaces - is fundamentally one of expanding state legibility. Second, the tendency of mass social movements has been historically described as an urban phenomenon, where city life engenders a variety of political, social and economic struggles. Therefore, the task of creating legible urban space allows states to monitor, regulate, and establish ordered city spaces and relations. Significantly, the urban-rural divide has typically denoted a division between more politically complex city spaces and less politically complex rural areas, thus assuming that state legibility is consolidated in urban areas while peripheralized, or diffused, in rural areas. The trajectories of postcolonial states readily complicate this assumption.

I argue that an emphasis on expanded rural legibility in postcolonial states occurred for two reasons, which will be further elaborated in my empirical section. First, an emphasis on increased

legibility over rural space is a direct product of colonial legacies. Under the British colonial regime, the colonial state channeled its major planning efforts into developing the urban capital, which served as the center of the colonial administration. As a practice common across the British colonies, the colonial state opted to leave rural areas under the purview of local elites (Mamdani 2018; Wickramasinghe 2006). In contrast to the direct governance of cities, the British adopted a mix of direct and indirect control in rural areas, where their primary interest was in extracting agricultural surplus through taxes and raw materials. The result is a diffusion of power under the British colonial state; rural peripheries technically fall under the rule of the colonial power, but everyday politics are negotiated through the local elite. For the postcolonial state, therefore, an emphasis on increased rural legibility is crucial to assuming the image of a strong, centralized state that would counter the decentralized system of colonial rule in its rural territories. Second, an emphasis on rural legibility stems from the new and intensifying rural struggles that threaten the central government's singular authority within its territory.

Unlike theoretical assumptions which view urban centers as prime grounds for resistance and social movements, legacies of British colonialism generate a variety of political, separatist and ethnic struggles that primarily emerge from rural areas. In Sri Lanka, these struggles are articulated in terms of Tamil separatism in the Tamil and Muslim dominated North-East region, and in terms of socialist insurrection in the predominantly Sinhala south. This is also because ethnic categories and separations are a product of colonial rule, such that the concentration of Tamil and Muslim ethnic groups in the North East is also a product of centuries of colonial state engineering (Thiranagama, S. Obeyesekere 2011; N. Wickramasinghe 2006). But these waves are also felt across South Asian states, and are articulated in a variety of forms that challenge the presiding state authority. [2]

As rural areas become new sites of uprising, resistance and revolt, it is not the political struggles of the urban that threaten the primacy of the state, but those of the rural. Thin legibility, and weak informational capacity in rural areas can no longer be sustained in the postcolonial era — especially for a postcolonial state threatened by separatist and revolutionary movements. Following independence, an expansion of the Sri Lankan state's informational capacity was therefore a task of increasing legibility over rural space.

[2]This is a point for further inquiry in a future, extended comparative work. It will also be discussed during the conference presentation.

4 Data and Methods

In order to understand the linkages between state capacity, legibility, and shifting focuses of legibility projects, the following section summarizes trends in 'thick' and 'thin' legibility across three eras in Sri Lanka. 'Thin' legibility sees a diffusion of authority to local elites and non-state actors, creating web-like social and political structures. 'Thick' legibility sees a consolidation, or centralization, of authority under the state.

I adopt historical institutionalist methods to compare shifting trends in informational capacity between urban and rural Sri Lanka. Historical institutionalism prioritizes the sequencing, timing, and multifarious processes that shape the contours of institutional calibration. Institutions are not, for instance, independent rational choice actors that operate in conditions insulated from surrounding socio political structures. Rather, institutions are quite literally shaped by history — by sequencing, timing, shocks, and struggles that lead to institutional development, decay, and recalibration altogether. Institutions are forced out of, and created alongside, the demands and struggles that emerge with the governance of a society. For Thelen (1999, p. 388), historical institutionalists are fundamentally "rejecting a functionalist view of institutions", instead viewing institutions as "legacies of political struggles". By adopting this framework, I pay close attention to how legacies of colonialism, as well as timely political struggles, have shaped the expansion of legibility through urban development institutions.

I also employ nominal approaches to casing, as forwarded by Soss (2021). For Soss, casing is an 'ongoing research activity' that does not begin or end with the selection of cases. Unlike a realist approach to casing, which attempts to make sense of the 'real' nature of a phenomenon and justify its inclusion in the study, a nominal approach to casing instead recognizes how multiplex ways of knowing can generate discursive outcomes. Nominal approaches do not look for cases, but rather, look at social phenomena and ask the question of what this might be a case of.

5 Shifting Informational Capacity in Urban and Rural Sri Lanka

How does urban development constitute a legibility project under the Sri Lankan state? Moreover, how has urban informational capacity been expanded relative to that of the state's rural informational capacity? And in the case of Colombo, why does a state need to create legible populations in its own capital? The following section utilizes historical institutionalist tracing methods, archival data and casing to account for the genealogical continuities between urban and

rural informational capacity across three eras in Sri Lankan history.

Historical trends in the focus of 'state legibility projects' (in this paper defined as efforts to urbanize spaces in order to create readable populations) have been determined by colonial institutional decision-making. Under the colonial regime, legibility was primarily expanded over urban areas where the center of colonial operations occurred — that is, where colonial offices were located, where colonial authorities lived, and where the economic hub of the colonial administration was based.

Following the end of British colonial rule, trends in legibility demonstrate a tendency towards a strong, centralized state rather than a devolved, 'mandala' like state. While the function of legibility has been sustained since the colonial period — that is, forcing legibility over areas deemed illegible to a centralized state authority — the postcolonial Sri Lankan government breaks from colonial era practices that develop cities as the locus of state informational capacity. Rather, growing rural struggles require greater rural informational capacity for the postcolonial state, which must now negotiate the growing threat of Tamil separatism in the North, and Sinhala insurgency in the South. A centralized state authority is crucial for the Sri Lankan state to garner legitimacy within its borders, as well as from other power-holders (Lee and Zhang 2017; Migdal 1989; Tilly 1991).

Table 2 summarizes trends in legibility across three historical periods in Sri Lanka. I present an important finding: that the Sri Lankan state's strengthening, or weakening of informational capacity in the postcolonial era is primarily shaped by decisions under the colonial era which peripheralized the rural and centered the urban. During the postcolonial era, a disproportionate allocation of state resources were channeled to secure legibility over the rural North, where a growing separatist conflict challenged the central authority of the Sri Lankan state. The result is a gutting of urban resources, where the task of securing legible urban space is instead defaulted to private sector actors and NGOs during this period. The build-up of urban informational capacity in the postwar era is likewise determined by the gutting of urban informational capacity in the postcolonial era.

My overall findings suggest that legibility is expanded in both rural and urban spaces, yet an expansion of legibility projects depends on where the greatest threat to the centralized authority of the Sri Lankan state is found. In the postcolonial era, this threat is greatest in the rural North, but also in the Sinhala south, where separatist and insurrectionary movements challenge the legitimacy of the postcolonial state. In today's postwar context, resistance in Colombo presents new challenges to state authority, which are to be neutralized through urban development. Particularly, the persistence of mudukkus, or informal settlements, threaten both aesthetic and economic vi-

sions of the city. My findings suggest a tendency towards highly centralized informational capacity in both urban and rural settings under the modern state.

	Rural Legibility (North)	**Urban Legibility (Colombo)**	**Rural Informational Capacity**	**Urban Informational Capacity**
British Colonial Era (1865-1948)	Diffused to local elites	Centralized under colonial regime	Weak	Strong
Postcolonial Era (1948-2009)	Consolidated to counter lack of legibility under colonial regime and address growing Tamil nationalist movement	Diffused to local elites, NGOs, new civil and 'uncivil' society actors	Strong	Weak
Postwar Era (2009 - present)	Consolidated under Sri Lankan Armed Forces and the Department of Defense	Centralized under the Urban Development Authority and Ministry of Defense	Strong	Strong

Figure 2: Expansion of State Legibility Across 3 Eras

5.1 Legibility in the Colonial Era (1865-1948)

5.1.1 Legibility in British-Colonial Colombo

In Colombo, the British implemented urban development to secure the urban frontier of the colonial state. In Nihal Perera's The Planner's City (2008), Perera contributes archival research to dissect colonial city planning in Colombo. Upon the arrival of the British to Colombo, Perera writes, "The municipal leaders and the newspapers feared the 'unrecognized' environments of the poor which had been turned into a problem by the Housing Ordinance. The authorities were determined to refamiliarize these neighborhoods for the colonial community and the Ceylonese elite" (2008, 62). What Perera explains here is twofold. First, Colombo was illegible to British authorities who inherited a colonial city of the Dutch, and formerly the Portuguese. The city had been segregated along ethnic lines under the Portuguese, and the Dutch had structured the city around the central 'Fort' district and the surrounding neighborhood of Pettah. One of the first tasks of the British was to establish the Colombo Municipal Authority (CMC) in 1865 and introduce zoning laws to the city. The Colombo Municipal Authority (CMC) was established by the British in 1865, and serves as the first urban planning agency in Sri Lanka, tasked with administering urban governance. The CMC functions to reorganize Colombo according to zoning laws that produces legible space for colonial governance, where Colombo is divided into districts 1 through 15 and segregated according to both class and ethnic lines. Separating the city along class

lines, through the immiseration of the urban periphery and the fortification of the urban center (largely the areas occupied by colonial authorities and local elites within the colonial administration). The physical restructuring of Colombo reflected British commercial interests, where urban space was segregated according to class, ethnicity, and proximity to the colonial regime. The Colombo Port and its adjacent areas became dominated by British commercial interests, while the laboring classes, mainly Sri Lankan Tamils, Sinhalese, and South Indian Tamils, were housed in peripheral neighborhoods. In urban centers like Colombo, British planning focused on creating a commercial and administrative hub that would be legible to colonial authorities.

But second, the introduction of the 1915 Housing Ordinance which established informal settlements, locally known as mudukkus, as a problem that needed to be demolished, displaced, and sanitized. Workers in Colombo, having supplied labor to over 300 years of colonial rule under the Portuguese and Dutch prior to the British arrival, had formed mudukkus out of a lack of official housing for working class residents. Mudukkus represent community-forged housing and reclamations of urban space, and were occupied by the urban poor who primarily supplied labor to the factories, mills and ports operated in Colombo. The 1915 Housing Ordinance established the need for quantitative data, measurements and identification strategies in order to pursue effective urban planning (Perera 2008). Yet the collection of census data was complicated by the persistence of informal settlements. N. Perera writes:

> The increase in numbers of occupants in existing buildings and increase in the building of self-built housing created a hybrid environment that is not recognizable within the planning discourse built with clean and authentic categories (2008, 63).

Mudukkus represented an illegible urban space to the colonial regime. At one level, much of the political and economic structures of informal settlements relied on local elites and informal exchanges of goods and services. Mudukkus primarily emerged out of squatter colonies that, over time, claimed urban space and established residential settlements. Systems of tax, debt collection, or the supply of water and electricity within mudukkus were not negotiated through the official municipal authority, but rather, through local elites that emerged out of sociopolitical relationships that were formed in, and distinct to, the settlements. Moreover, mudukkus challenged the state's ability to collect quantifiable data on city occupants. Within mudukkus, new social relationships are forged through extended kinship networks. Living conditions within the settlements also produced new familial relationships, where members occupying housing units were not limited to the nuclear family. This complicated the task of neat categorization under the colonial census, where residents of mudukkus were fundamentally transient — residents lived with both blood relatives and extended families (and those in no relation at all), they occupied varieties of units

and moved frequently, and information within the mudukkus were controlled by local elites. The 1915 Housing Ordinance sought to criminalize occupants of mudukkus and legitimize their forced evictions to the urban periphery. The displacement of mudukkus also served to address visible poverty in Colombo, by creating aesthetic city centers that concealed the realities of urban poverty. Under colonial authority, creating legible urban space aimed to segregate the urban poor from the city's elite and commercial zones, especially in areas close to the colonial administrative and commercial centers.

5.1.2 Colonial-Era Legibility in the North

Across the British colonies in South Asia, a mixture of direct and indirect rule was adopted in rural areas so as to support the efficiency of colonial extraction. Under the British Raj in India, for example, zamindars (local landowners) were made intermediaries between the state and the peasants, retaining a traditional, feudal-like system for governing rural areas (Gooptu 2001). In Sri Lanka, the British similarly used local elites as intermediaries for governing rural areas — such as the Mudaliyar system predominant in the Kandyan regions, where local village chiefs (or "mudaliyars") were responsible for tax collection, maintaining law and order, and negotiating the everyday politics of village life. Colonial legibility in rural areas contrasted the centralized system in urban areas.

In Jaffna, located in Northern Sri Lanka, the British adopted strategies of indirect governance through the use of local elites. British governing policies reinforced the Vellalar caste hierarchy, where the Vellalar caste constituted a Tamil landowning and administrative elite. Specifically, as Jaffna's primary role within the colonial economy was the production of cash crops for export, the entrenchment of the caste system allowed Vellalar elites to impose a system of divided labor based on caste identities.

Importantly, however, caste divisions held long-lasting effects on Jaffna's political and social landscape, with the elite Vellalar caste playing a key role in the emergence of Tamil nationalism in the 20th century. As Vellalar elites were slowly integrated within the colonial administration, and intermingled with colonial elites to control Jaffna, their engagement with Western education, the press, and colonial administration gave them the tools to articulate grievances against marginalization by the Sinhala-dominated central government — a point which becomes crucial in the postcolonial era, as the rise of Tamil nationalism threatens the very existence of the Sinhala central government.

During the period of British colonialism, rural informational capacity can be described as weak in comparison to urban informational capacity. While the colonial regime strengthens its

legibility over the urban capital as the center of colonial operations, its informational capacity in the North is comparatively diffused, creating rural 'peripheries' that stand in contrast to the urban 'center'. In the North, the focus of colonial operations involved the extraction of agricultural and natural resources, which was better managed through the local, entrenched Vellalar system that dictated a division of labor based on caste hierarchies. While capital production directly supplies the colonial regime, it is a Tamil, landowning ruling class that takes on the role of the everyday political authority in the North, rather than the centralized colonial authority present in Colombo. Urban development and planning strategies secure legibility for the colonial regime in Colombo, while rural legibility is devolved to local governing authorities in the North.

5.2 Legibility in the Postcolonial Era (1949-2009)

5.2.1 Securing rural legibility

Legacies of colonialism complicate rural legibility in the postcolonial period. While the British opted to retain the Vellalar system in the North, this also led to the region being politically isolated from the central government based in Colombo. Independent Sri Lanka would forward a vision of an ethno-religious state that enshrined the hegemony of the Sinhala-Buddhist people, while the North increasingly called for self-determination through an independent state of Eelam. The synonymous rise of Tamil nationalism in the North culminates in the Sri Lankan Civil War, with years of active military operations spanning roughly from 1983 to 2009, although a military presence is sustained in the North today.

To retain the image of a 'strong' state — a legitimate and centralized state, prepared to navigate a global order premised upon the predominance of such states — the task of securing rural legibility becomes critical to the postcolonial state. A separate state of Eelam, governed by an autonomous government led by leaders of the Tigers, would shatter the strong state image.

Rural legibility is pursued in two key ways. First, in the immediate aftermath of independence, the postcolonial government launched major resettlement programs for the Sinhala rural poor to move to the rural north. Rather than a migration 'pull' towards urban areas (which popular literature on urban politics assumes), post-independence Sri Lanka sees a rural population movement, where the rural poor move towards "less densely populated rural areas in the dry zone of the north and east" for the promise of new opportunities (Amarasuriya 2015). Thus, "official planning for the first 40 years of the country's history focused on a vision of rural rather than urban modernity and on the socioeconomic potential of these apparently "empty" areas of the island's dryzone (Amarasuriya 2015; cf. Gunaratna 2006; Kearney and Miller 1985; Moore 1985,

1990; Spencer 1990, 2003). The Gal Oya (1949) and Mahaweli Development Program (1970s onward) were landmark irrigation projects designed to develop rural areas in the North, and resettle Sinhala farmers for new employment opportunities (Peebles 1990). These resettlement schemes have also been viewed as neo-colonization schemes, where the postcolonial state has attempted to engineer a Sinhala majority in traditionally Tamil areas. Gal Oya and the Mahaweli Development Program comprised highly politicized development schemes, which sought to weaken Tamil territorial claims and promote integration into the Sinhalese-dominated state.

Second, by the 1980s, the beginnings of the Sri Lankan Civil War necessitated extensive informational capacity in the North. However, legibility projects through resettlement schemes were halted with the rise of armed conflict. Efforts to urbanize the North were largely suspended during the height of the civil war, as resources and attention were diverted to military objectives. Instead, informational capacity in the North began to rely on a permanent military presence that could collect intelligence on LTTE activities, but also monitor Tamil civilians.

The military's role in boosting informational capacity involved the creation of high-security zones, which restricted civilian movement and access to land. The government's primary concern was security, and urban planning in these zones was tightly controlled by the military. The launching of Special Task Forces, a paramilitary unit attached to the Sri Lankan police, also carried out intelligence-gathering missions. Importantly, at this time the Sri Lankan government received substantial support from foreign governments and intelligence agencies, particularly from India, the United States, Israel, and Pakistan, during various phases of the civil war. This support included training, equipment, and intelligence-sharing (Kadirgamar 2013; Stokke 2006; Thiranagama and Obeysekere 2011).

5.2.2 Diffused urban legibility

The Colombo Municipal Council remained the primary institution for urban planning in postcolonial Colombo. Nonetheless, the CMC's informational capacity was limited at the time for a number of reasons. For one, despite efforts of the 1915 Housing Ordinance, mudukkus remained a core part of the cityscape. In fact, a rise in urban poverty following the liberalization of the economy in 1977 produced greater numbers of informal settlements in the urban capital. In the postcolonial period, mudukkus continue to constitute spaces of illegibility in the city.

Second, the opening of the economy introduces new actors within the urban development of Colombo, which complicates the ability of the Sri Lankan state to centralize its informational capacity. The Urban Development Authority Law No. 41 of 1978 established the Urban Development Authority (UDA) in response to growing pressures of neoliberalization and impoverishment

in the city. While the CMC had been designed to facilitate democratic city-planning processes between citizens and the state, the UDA was established to drive state-led urban development initiatives through centralized planning authorities. At the same time, however, the UDA encountered competition with the growing role of private sector actors which limited its role as a centralized planning agency. UDA-private sector clashes often stemmed from conflict over urban land use in prime areas of Colombo, where both the state and private developers sought to capitalize on real estate and commercial opportunities.

With economic liberalization, there was also a notable increase in the involvement of non-state actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, and private companies, in urban development projects. NGOs often worked on smaller, community-based urban development projects, particularly in the areas of housing, slum upgrading, and poverty alleviation. Their focus was typically on marginalized communities that were left out of the large-scale development projects spearheaded by the UDA. International Organizations and Donor Agencies such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and United Nations Development Program played a significant role in funding and advising urban development projects. These organizations often pushed for market-based reforms, including privatization of state assets and encouraging the private sector's involvement in urban development.

The key takeaway from this era is that economic liberalization introduced a variety of new actors into the project of urban development. As a result, I argue that the postcolonial era sees a 'diffusion' of urban legibility — where it is not the central state that holds a monopoly on legibility projects, but rather, multiple non-state and private actors who hold stakes in pursuing urban development. Whereas rural legibility is strengthened in the postcolonial era, urban legibility is comparatively weakened by an array of actors that complicate both the CMC and UDA's roles in centralized planning.

5.3 Legibility post-Sri Lankan Civil War (2009 - present)

Rural legibility up to this point is effectively consolidated through the sustained military presence in the north. Meanwhile, urban legibility in Colombo has become increasingly muddied due to the dwindling informational capacity of the Colombo Municipal Council, and the entrance of private sector companies, international organizations, and NGOs into the urban development market. Although the UDA is promoted as an institution for centralized urban planning, a variety of actors complicate the execution of the UDA's plans.

At a time when the UDA is increasingly becoming obsolete to preferences towards NGOs,

private corporations, and foreign investment, and when the Sri Lankan government has simultaneously defaulted much of its intelligence and surveillance operations to the military, the UDA is absorbed under the Department of Defense. In Sri Lanka, a unique phenomenon has occurred where urban legibility in the postwar era not only relies on centralized planning under the UDA, but also on military and policing institutions used to secure legibility in the North.

Table 3 depicts the UDA's changing leadership from 2010 to the present day. Between 2010-2015, during the years of Mahinda Rajapaksa's prime-ministership, the UDA was streamlined under the Department of Defense — coincidentally headed by Mahinda's brother, defense minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Nimal Perera, personally appointed by Rajapaksas, served as chairman for the duration of the period of institutional convergence under the DoD. From 2016-2019, the change in government to the pro-democracy, pro-market UNP signals a break in joint military-UDA appointments — it is only in these years that a non-military affiliated chairman (Dr. Jagath Munasinghe) is appointed to the UDA.

The table ends with UDA appointments in 2022 given Sri Lanka's mass Aragalaya movement which ousted the Rajapaksa government. Upon Mahinda Rajapaksa's resignation as prime minister, and Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation of the presidency, five-time former prime minister Ranil Wickremasinghe took office as 'acting president' until the 2024 elections. However, note that despite the change of presidency in 2022, with Wickremasinghe also replacing Mahinda Rajapaksa as Defense Minister, neither the UDA chairman nor the Minister of Urban Planning changed in 2022. Rather, UDA appointments made by the Rajapaksa government are sustained after the resignation of the family.

Year	**UDA Chairman**	**Minister of Defense**	**Minister of Urban Planning**	**Joint UDA-Military appointment**
2010-2015	Nimal Perera	Gotabaya Rajapaksa	Mahinda Rajapaksa	Yes
2016	R. S. S. Samaratunga	Ranil Wickremasinghe	Maithripala Sirisena	No
2017	Jagath Munasinghe	Ranil Wickremasinghe	Maithripala Sirisena	No
2018	Jagath Munasinghe	Ruwan Wijewardene	Maithripala Sirisena	No
2019	Jagath Munasinghe	Kamal Gunaratne	Maithripala Sirisena	No
2020	Nimesh Herath	Kamal Gunaratne	Mahinda Rajapaksa	Yes
2021	Nimesh Herath	Kamal Gunaratne	Prasanna Ranatunga	Yes
2022	Nimesh Herath	Mahinda Rajapaksa/Ranil Wickremasinghe	Prasanna Ranatunga	Yes

Figure 3: Military and UDA leadership, 2010 - 2022

Since the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War, the greatest threat to a centralized Sri Lankan state is no longer that of Tamil nationalism and separatism. Legibility has been extended over the North through the fortified presence of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, and the capabilities of intelligence agencies to monitor and surveil Tamil communities in the region. Historically, the involvement of the armed forces in development schemes has served to establish the predominance and legitimacy of the Sri Lankan state.

An expansion of informational capacity in the urban capital therefore suggests that there are threats to the legitimacy of the Sri Lankan state increasingly being articulated in Colombo. I suggest that in the postwar era, the task for the Sri Lankan state now becomes placating growing unrest and dissatisfaction in urban spaces — as Colombo residents increasingly question the end of war, push for postwar justice and greater governmental transparency, and organize around an explosion of social issues in a rapidly changing postwar capital. Rather, an expansion of urban legibility is being invoked at this specific moment because Colombo is increasingly a site of people's struggle and mobilization.

To demonstrate this point, I present a short case study of the UDA's Colombo Municipal Development Plan for 2022-2031. The plan calls for the transformation of Colombo as "Aquarina", a design to promote aestheticism and the image of Colombo as a city submerged in water. Fundamentally, the plan calls for a transformation of Colombo as a tourist city, a luxury city, and a 'peaceful' city, contrasting images of the Sri Lankan civil war.

5.4 *Mudukkus* as the Illegible Urban

Mudukkus continue to constitute illegible urban space, just as they did under the colonial and postcolonial era. But apart from their aesthetic threat to the Aquarina vision, mudukkus fundamentally challenge logics of private property and unrestricted market growth. Muddukus are primarily sites of urban commons, where collective and communal living represents the 'commoning' of urban space. The commons are the negation of private property; they dispel logics of privatization in favor of sharing public space and resources (Lefebvre 2016; Purcell 2001; Vasudevan 2014). Residents tap water and electricity lines, set up 'informal' housing without permits, and occupy buildings that have been abandoned due to skyrocketing rent. Often comprised of 'squatter colonies', mudukkus stand in direct contestation to the order of property rights. Through the very existence of mudukkus, logics of the Aquarina city are dismantled.

In order to secure the urban frontier, the Aquarina vision necessitates mass displacement through urban resettlement programs. Section 6.4 outlines the urban settlement strategy to be

carried out by the UDA:

> Correspondingly, about 40% of the land can be released for optimal development activities and many of the Low-Income Settlements in the said area have already been relocated under the Urban Regeneration Project implemented by the Urban Development Authority. Accordingly, the implementation of this project will enhance cargo handling capacity, improve efficient customs and port operations and improve living and recreational facilities.

Since 2014, the National Housing Policy has essentially sanctioned forced evictions by the UDA. Backed by the military, operating both 'within' and 'through' the UDA, evictions from muddukus have seen militarized force (CPA 2014). Discipline is necessary to displace visible signs of urban poverty that disrupt the Aquarina vision . Through the backing of the defense sector, the UDA harnesses enormous disciplinary power through its ability to call on militarized police force. Disorder constitutes a disruption to urban development; as a result, the UDA is legitimized in its policing of order. The UDA actively polices the disorder of the postmodern city through its role in evicting inner-city communities. In 2010, 'Mahinda Chinthana' (translated as Mahinda Rajapaksa's vision for the future) stated that, "By 2020, (the) city of Colombo will have no more shanty dwellers" (CPA 2014). The persistence of informal settlements presents a key threat to centralized governance in urban Colombo. Mudukkus are not integrated within government planning agencies, nor do residents comply with government-provided services such as water. As such, the state is also unable to tax these communities in the same way the government would tax formal housing residents.

Figure 3 provides a map of proposed resettlements launched by the UDA. Low-income residents are increasingly pushed to the outskirts of the city limits (signified by green houses on the map). What occurs is the production of 'containment zones' (Parenti 1999), described as "an increased immiseration of the urban periphery" (Parenti 1999; p. 106). Containment zones function as a sort of urban reservation, where populations are displaced to the periphery after their labor has been made redundant in the quest for profit and neoliberal reform. The UDA's resettlement plan evidences how the urban frontier relies on the dispossession of mudukkus that come to represent the urban commons. By forcing residents out of mudukkus and into government-regulated tenement housing, communal living is effectively disrupted.

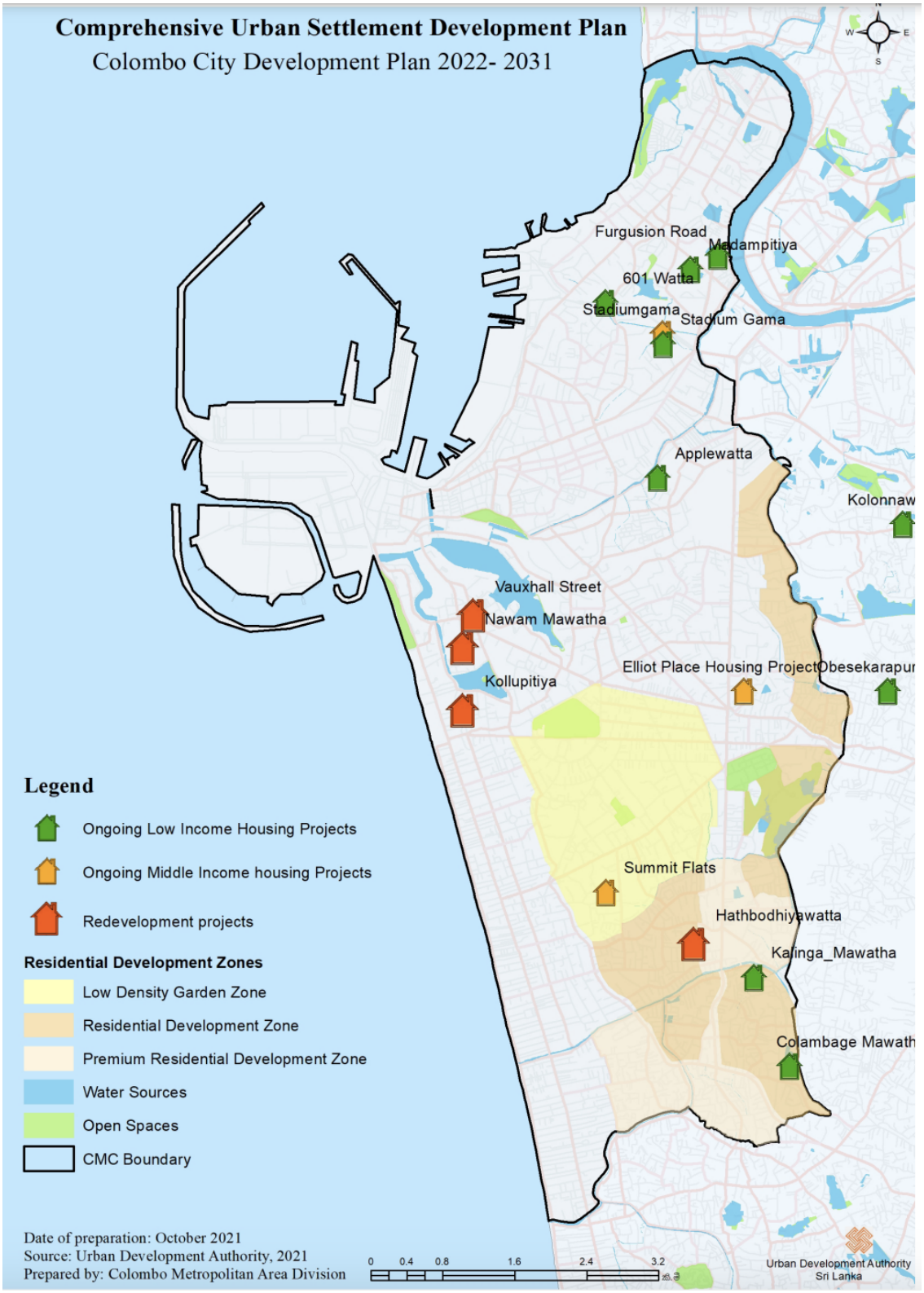

Figure 4: UDA Urban Settlement Development Plan 2022-2031

5.5 Weaponizing Public Space

The following section may possibly constitute an entirely different paper. It adds sections of a separate paper of mine which explored the state's repressive tactics in response to the 2022 Aragalaya

Movement. However, I have included this section as I would welcome any comments/suggestions, and I hope it may lend itself to some fruitful discussion.

The rise of social movements in the city has produced new questions of legibility for the state. Despite being 'public', squares and other open public spaces remain illegible to the state in the instance of protests and people's collective action. These seemingly public spaces in the city remain illegible to the state, because it cannot readily predict where protests and collective action sites will emerge. 'Legible' public space would be public space that is readable, accessible, and intervenable in the instance of protest. In addition to the physical legibility of public spaces, information gathering mechanisms such as surveillance technologies and intelligence services To make protest space 'legible' requires specifically cordoning off certain areas that permit protest, while criminalizing it in other spaces (for a related study, see Schwedler 2022). Part of the lack of legibility over collective action sites is that the assembly, organization, and activities that occur in preparation for protest are discussed through activist networks that subvert interception by the state. Using encrypted messaging applications and social media has been a primary way for activists to organize.

To this purpose, the Sri Lankan government has proceeded to 'weaponize' public space through various UDA orders and notices which demarcate designated protest sites. In addition, the UDA's informational capacity is extended through its absorption under the Ministry of Defense, where the UDA now harnesses military intelligence services and intel from the Criminal Investigations Department (CID). In 2020, an 'Agitation Site' was officially sanctioned by the state as a designated grounds for protest (Perera 2020). The sign demarcating an "Agitation Site" was posted by the Urban Development Authority. The site is located at the historical grounds of the Tamil satyagraha during the struggle for independence from the British.

The state's demarcation of an 'Agitation Site' in 2020 generated mixed reactions. On one hand, the move signaled an affirmation, by the state, of protest as a valuable and intrinsic contribution to democracy. By demarcating an 'agitation site' in Colombo, where numerous protests have historically occurred, the state appeared to legitimize visible protest in the capital city whilst paying homage to the protests of the past. But while the Agitation Site was purported as a viable, protected space for dissent given its accreditation by the state, a more insidious reading tells otherwise. The UDA is backed by extensive coercive strength, namely through the UDA's function under the Ministry of Defense, and its shared information-gathering with the Criminal Investigations Department. Under military direction, the UDA has been tasked with various land grabs and forcible displacement of inner city communities. Given the state's heightened role in urban development and the militarization of public space, any and all allocations of public land

comes with strings attached — undercut deals, threats, intimidation, ulterior agendas. As the coercive strength of the state has grown in the post-war years, the sanctioning of an agitation site can be viewed as an attempt to streamline protests and concentrate them in a singular location. Such efforts make protest activity easier to regulate and intercept.

In 2022, Sri Lanka's mass protests dubbed the Aragalaya (People's Struggle) transformed into an occupation movement in the heart of Colombo. The occupation site, named 'GotaGoGama', was formed at the state-sanctioned Agitation site as a tactical move by organizers, who sought to circumvent state backlash by using a lawfully sanctioned space to hold protests.

The July 22nd raid on GotaGoGama activists revealed overt uses of military force to expel protestors. Minister of Urban Development Prasanna Ranatunga issued a statement proposing a change of location for the agitation site; under Ranil's government, the 'Agitation Site' was retracted. Though his presidency is owed to the Aragalaya, it is this very movement that Ranil's government squashed with extensive state machinery. Aragalaya activists created protest infrastructures at Galle Face; subsequently, the state has weaponized this same public space as a means of repression. By retracting the 'Agitation Site', GGG activists were no longer protected by the supposed rights of free association and assembly. Rather, core activists were charged with unlawful occupation of public property. The state has adopted new means of weaponizing public space in order to criminalize rights of free assembly and association.

Since the Aragalaya, the Wickremasinghe administration has pushed legislation for the creation of 'high security zones' (HSZs) around Colombo (Fonseka 2023). HSZs have typically been demarcated by the state in the context of the civil war, in order to target and militarize areas suspected of LTTE activity. Thus, the creation of HSZs holds a particular connotation of 'anti-terrorist' action in post-war Sri Lanka. Wickremasinghe's proposed HSZs comprise public spaces across Colombo, signaling an attempt to prevent any and all means of dissent and association. The most significant yet unsurprising location of a HSZ is the area surrounding the former 'Agitation Site' at Galle Face Green. Moreover, the gazette signals increased government efforts to suppress protest and confer arbitrary powers of arrest. The increased militarization of urban space serves to weaponize public space. This includes, but is not limited, to the physical presence of military personnel and the visible armament of such personnel. Public space is weaponized by the state at its whim; space is public and allocated for protest, and then weaponized in order to criminalize and dispel protesting citizens. Moreover, the designation and retraction of demarcated protest sites highlights a project of legibility — where the Sri Lankan state engineers physical space through planning orders under the UDA, such that it can permit or criminalize protests when necessary.

6 Conclusion

This study questions why, in the context of South Asia, states have reoriented the focus of legibility projects towards the city rather than rural areas. I argue that legibility projects, operationalized through urban development, newly focus on the city as a site of political struggle. An expansion of informational capacity has been historically determined by where the greatest threat to the centralized authority of the Sri Lankan state is found. In today's context, resistance in Colombo presents new challenges to state authority, which are to be neutralized through urban development. My findings suggest a tendency towards highly centralized informational capacity in both urban and rural settings under the modern, postcolonial state.

I have traced the genealogical contours of rural versus urban legibility, while also tracing linkages between colonial-era urban planning agencies and the UDA. In doing so, I demonstrate how colonial authorities relegated much of the control of the North to local authorities, in favor of bolstering the colonial state's informational capacity in the urban capital. Nonetheless, this trajectory is effectively reversed following the expulsion of the British from Sri Lanka. The post-colonial government rejects devolved administrations in favor of securing a strong, centralized state authority as part of a wider nation-building project. An expansion of informational capacity is instead extended to the North , where legibility remained thin due to a lack of robust institutional entrenchment under the colonial era.

The end of the Sri Lankan War sees an unprecedented advance in urban legibility, where the UDA is absorbed under the Ministry of Defense. In earlier eras, informational capacity in the North was expanded through a sustained military presence that physically and symbolically reinforced the authority of the Sri Lanka state. This was largely due to the North constituting the heart of the Tamil nationalist movement, which for much of Sri Lanka's postcolonial history, has remained the primary challenge to a centralized Sri Lankan state under a doctrine of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

The postwar era extended the geographical remit of the military beyond the North when the UDA was merged under the Ministry of Defense in 2010. Since 2010, legibility in urban versus rural Sri Lanka can no longer be neatly divided according to the predominance of the UDA in urban spaces, and the predominance of the military in rural spaces. Rather, the postwar period sees a merging of urban development and military institutions in order to secure legibility in the urban capital. While studies of aggregated state capacity may suggest that postcolonial states are weak, a deliberate analysis of informational capacity suggests strengthening across both rural and urban territories that point to a larger centralization of state power.

A summation of the findings are as follows:

- That in postcolonial states,'legibility' projects are originally conceived as a way to bring rural areas under the purview, and centralized authority, of the state.
- That 'legibility' projects primarily serve to create readable, identifiable populations and enable the monitoring of their activities. While legibility can be extended for positive policy implementation and planning, I suggest a more insidious purpose — one that centers surveillance and control of vulnerable populations within the state.
- That a new orientation towards legibility in the 'city' is due to increasingly complex political and economic relationships formed in urban spaces. Legibility projects today focus on *informal settlements* and *collective action* in the urban capital, where both informal settelements and protest movements resist the centralized order of the state and present a fundamental challenge to how states collect information on their populations.

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