

**YOUTH AND PLURALISM IN SRI LANKA: OPPORTUNITIES  
AND CHALLENGES**

*October 2021*

*The survey was conducted by:*

*Social Scientists' Association*

# Foreword

The survey on “Youth and Pluralism in Sri Lanka: Opportunities and Challenges” carried out in the latter part of 2021 by the Social Scientists Association gives a hopeful message. Despite the general deterioration in social, political and economic conditions at the present time, the attitudes of youth since 2019 (when we last conducted a youth survey) have shown an improvement with regard to issues of reconciliation. On virtually all topics addressed by the survey, the respondent youth gave answers that indicate a receptivity to measures that could strengthen the national reconciliation process.

A noteworthy feature of the survey findings is that the majority of youth see their fellow citizens as being entitled to equal rights and equal protection. The survey indicates the potential for a successful reconciliation process that is based on the concept of equal rights. However, the polarization of views on issues impacting on citizens as members of ethnic and religious communities, which also comes out in the survey, needs to be considered. It will be necessary to explore avenues for reconciliation and inter community solidarity in a manner that appeals to all communities.

We wish to express our appreciation to the Social Scientists Association for having accepted to undertake this survey at short notice and to financial support from the Strengthening Reconciliation Processes in Sri Lanka project which is co-financed by the European Union and the German Federal Foreign Office.

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# Introduction

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In August 2021, the National Peace Council (NPC) contracted the Social Scientists' Association (SSA) to conduct an island-wide survey on Sri Lankan youth attitude towards, and perceptions of, the concept of pluralism. The study was initially intended as the second component of a similar exercise undertaken in 2019. It was hoped that this study would contribute to understanding changes in youth perceptions towards pluralism over time. However, given the political developments between 2019 and the time of this study - the election of a new President and Parliament and the Covid-19 pandemic - this approach was abandoned. Both the NPC and the SSA strongly believed that the changes engendered in the past two years, made many of the concerns in 2019 appear less compelling, or even less relevant, today. Therefore, this survey predominantly explored new themes relevant to the concept of pluralism in 2021, while retaining some questions from the previous study. The findings discussed in this report reflect youth perceptions towards current concerns of pluralism in Sri Lanka.

There is a pluralism of pluralisms today (Bernstein, 2015). This reality makes it impossible to offer a history, or *one* definition, of pluralism. However, a review of the literature on pluralism, particularly cultural pluralism, offers some insights into its fundamental tenets. The primary contention of pluralism is that diversity need not be a source of strife, but rather a source of strength, which enriches society (Bernstein, 2015). Pluralism is committed to the celebration of diversity as a means to promote democracy, democratic ideals and the flourishing of human society. A pluralistic society is also an inclusive society. Members of all communities feel that they are equal to, and respected by, their fellow citizen from other communities.

It is also instructive to distinguish pluralism from the two related concepts of assimilation and multi-culturalism. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of the United States as a *melting pot* was very popular (Rasmussen, 2015). The country, which experienced unprecedented levels of migration from the European continent was imagined to be a place in which people from all cultures merge together to form something new- an assimilated "American" culture. Multi-culturalism on the other hand recognises the importance of cultural diversity and therefore is in contrast to assimilation (Rasmussen, 2015). It recognises that cultures must exist side by side peacefully. Pluralism goes beyond both assimilation and multi-culturalism in its call for the celebration of cultural diversity. Pluralism challenges assimilation as it could lead to the erasure of cultural identities, and it challenges multi-culturalism in that it encourages various ethnic, cultural and religious

communities to celebrate the diversity around them and to learn from each other. Thus, pluralism as a concept exceeds the limits of assimilation and multi-culturalism, in imagining a society where all communities are included, valued, celebrated and political, social and cultural institutions are designed to ensure this.

The need for a pluralistic social fabric has been long felt in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's post-independence history is characterised by a continuing struggle to engage healthily with its own diversity. From the denial of citizenship rights of *Malayaga Makkal* (Indian-Origin Tamils) immediately after receiving independence, to tensions and the armed conflict between the State and Tamil militants, to the mistrust of Muslims among Sinhalese and Tamils, and finally to the Easter Sunday attacks suggests that, as a country, Sri Lanka has been unable to harness the potential of its diversity, to create a just, equitable and flourishing society for all its members. However, there have been efforts at both the national and sub-national levels, by both state and non-state actors to encourage the celebration of Sri Lanka's diversity. It is hoped that this study will contribute to such efforts being made by NPC and other civil-society organisations to forge a pluralistic Sri Lanka.



# Methodology

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To meet its research objectives, this study employed two broad research tools: a survey, and a desk review. The methodology considered both the study objectives and the limitations and challenges in terms of time, resources and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Survey

Initially, a structured questionnaire was developed, which captured both local and national level issues relevant to promoting pluralism in Sri Lanka. The questionnaire captured attitudes towards pluralistic norms, attitudes towards Self and Other and attitudes towards the perceived limitations of pluralism at the local and national levels. A draft questionnaire was piloted to ensure that respondents could easily and clearly understand questions and concepts in the questionnaire. Learnings from the pilot study and the suggestions made by NPC were incorporated into the finalised questionnaire.

## Enumerator training

Sinhala enumerators and Tamil enumerators participated in two separate virtual training sessions. The trainings familiarised enumerators with the concept of pluralism, the content of the questionnaire, the approach to field-work and research ethics. SSA ensured that a majority of the enumerators were seniors, who had experience in data collection, as the spread of the COVID-19 virus required a novel approach to data collection, which will be outlined presently.

## Sample

The following sampling method was adopted for the study. A stratified random sampling method was adopted in selecting local authority areas for this study. The total sample was stratified across all 25 districts. Local authority areas within each district were randomly selected. Enumerators were then provided with a detailed breakdown of the specific respondents they were required to conduct interviews with.

The sample for the study consists of 973 interviews which were conducted across all 25 districts of Sri Lanka. Of the sample 582 are youth between the ages of 18-29 and 391 are adults between the age of 30-70. Furthermore, the sample includes 507 women and 466 men. The sample was also distributed across ethnicities to capture the views of 388 Sinhala respondents, 234 Sri Lankan Tamil respondents, 156 *Malayaga Makkal* (Indian Origin Tamil) respondents 194 Muslim respondents and 1 Burgher respondent. A summary of the distribution of the sample across district, age and ethnic category is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of sample - District, ethnicity and age breakdown

	Youth - 18-29 years						Adult - 30 - 70 years				
	Sinhala	Sri Lankan Tamil	Malayaga Makkal (Indian Origin Tamils)	Muslim	Burgher	Total	Sinhala	Sri Lankan Tamil	Malayaga Makkal (Indian Origin Tamils)	Muslim	Total
Colombo	12	19	1	17	0	49	5	16	4	9	34
Gampaha	17	0	0	0	0	17	7	0	0	0	7
Kalutara	17	0	0	1	0	18	6	0	0	0	6
Kandy	9	0	13	0	0	22	7	5	11	0	23
Matale	11	0	22	0	0	33	6	0	21	0	27
Nuwara Eliya	8	0	26	0	0	34	9	0	31	0	40
Galle	18	0	0	0	0	18	6	0	0	0	6
Matara	16	1	0	0	0	17	7	0	0	0	7
Hambantota	14	0	0	0	0	14	10	0	0	0	10
Kurunegala	12	1	0	17	0	30	6	0	0	6	12
Puttalam	5	0	0	3	0	8	12	0	0	0	12
Anuradhapura	19	0	0	0	0	19	6	0	0	0	6
Polonnaruwa	18	0	0	0	0	18	6	0	0	0	6
Badulla	2	0	0	0	0	2	5	0	0	0	5
Monaragala	18	0	0	0	0	18	6	0	0	0	6
Ratnapura	12	0	19	0	0	31	5	0	8	0	13
Kegalle	18	0	0	0	0	18	6	0	0	0	6
Jaffna	0	13	0	0	0	13	0	16	0	0	16
Mannar	0	15	0	4	0	19	0	6	0	5	11
Vavuniya	9	17	0	0	0	26	4	8	0	0	12
Mullaitivu	0	17	0	0	0	17	0	8	0	0	8
Kilinochchi	0	17	0	0	0	17	0	8	0	0	8
Batticaloa	0	12	0	17	0	29	0	5	0	28	33
Ampara	12	15	0	24	1	52	5	10	0	24	39
Trincomalee	9	17	0	17	0	43	8	8	0	22	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>391</b>

## Respondent selection

Given the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was neither possible nor prudent to conduct a household survey. Therefore, the research team adopted an approach which ensured a reasonable distribution of the sample across key demographic factors such as age, ethnicity gender, level of education and employment status.

Having randomly selected the local authority areas in which the survey was to be conducted, the research team identified enumerators within those same areas. Thereafter, in order to ensure that the enumerator did not conduct interviews with his/her friends, which would undermine the quality of the data, the following steps were followed:

1. Enumerators were instructed to forward a list of interlocutors in their area who could put the enumerator in contact with respondents.
2. The research team forwarded the details of the number and type of respondents to be included in the sample detailing the demographic features mentioned above, to the enumerators.
3. Thereafter, the enumerators informed the interlocutor of the specific respondents he/ she was searching for, and the interlocutor provided the enumerator with the required contact.

In the context of Covid-19, this approach ensured that the sample was reasonably distributed across key demographic criteria, while simultaneously minimising the biases of the enumerator in respondent selection and ensuring the health and safety of the enumerator and the respondent.

## Questionnaire implementation

Upon receiving a respondent's contact from an interlocutor, the enumerator obtained the informed consent of the relevant respondent and confirmed a convenient time to conduct the interview via telephone. The enumerator then contacted the respondent at the agreed time and completed the interview.

## Desk Review

The research team assigned a permanent researcher and an assistant to review research and other documents relevant to the study. The Desk Review was instrumental in developing a strong survey tool, and provided information required to situate the findings of the research in the current socio-economic and political climate which shapes youth aspirations to reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

# Reconciliation

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## Introduction

With the conclusion of the war in 2009, many who dreamed of a peaceful Sri Lanka, and the cessation of violence, began to imagine a future in which previously warring communities would be reconciled to one another. However, the task of healing the wounds between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim community has proved to be complex and challenging (Anon., 2011). Firstly, contradictory understandings and expectations of the processes and outcomes of reconciliation between Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils complicated endeavours to further reconciliation (Centre for Police Alternatives - Social Indicator, 2019). For example, whereas an average Sinhalese would foreground forgiving and forgetting as essential for reconciliation, the Sri Lankan Tamil community would emphasise truth and justice. Secondly, the association of the reconciliation process with Western agendas, and conspiracies to destabilise the country among many ordinary Sinhalese, delegitimised and brewed suspicion of efforts at reconciliation (Anon., 2011). Thirdly, in the North and East, many citizens are disillusioned with, and have lost faith in the possibility of their expectations being met through the reconciliation process. This in turn has caused an indifference, if not cynicism, towards the reconciliation process among many in the North and East. In such a context, it is important to understand ordinary citizens' attitudes towards reconciliation.

## Changes in attitudes towards reconciliation between 2019-2021

- The questionnaire asked respondents several questions to assess their attitudes towards the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. The same questions were asked in the 2019 study, providing the opportunity to compare shifts in perceptions regarding reconciliation over the intervening period. Despite significant political developments in the country between 2019 and 2021, the data suggests that more respondents have a positive appraisal of reconciliation today, particularly among the Sinhala youth.
- The data suggests that a vast majority of the sample do not believe that the reconciliation process endangers or is in any way detrimental to the country. On the contrary, there appears to be a common estimation that reconciliation will benefit the country.

- ❖ As the graph below indicates, agreement with the positive statement “The reconciliation process will change the country for the better” has increased between 2019 (85.5%) and 2021 (87.5%).

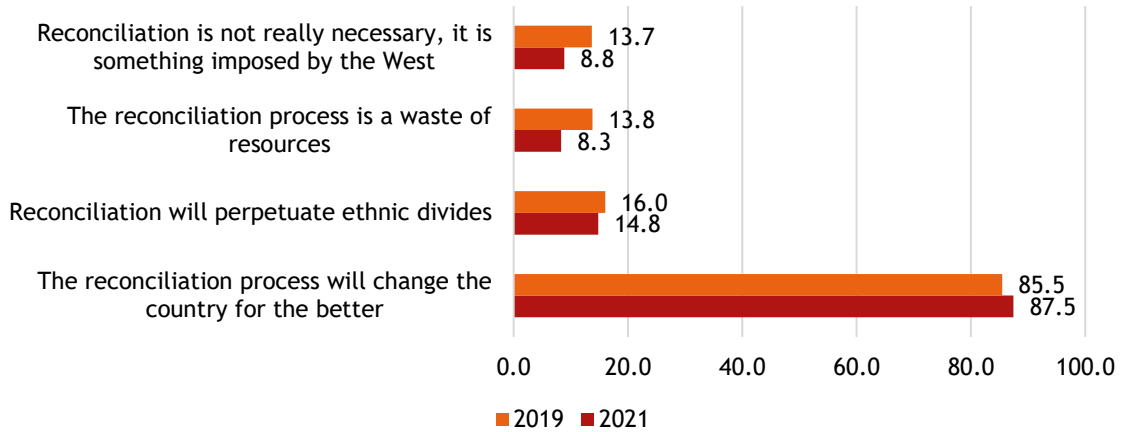
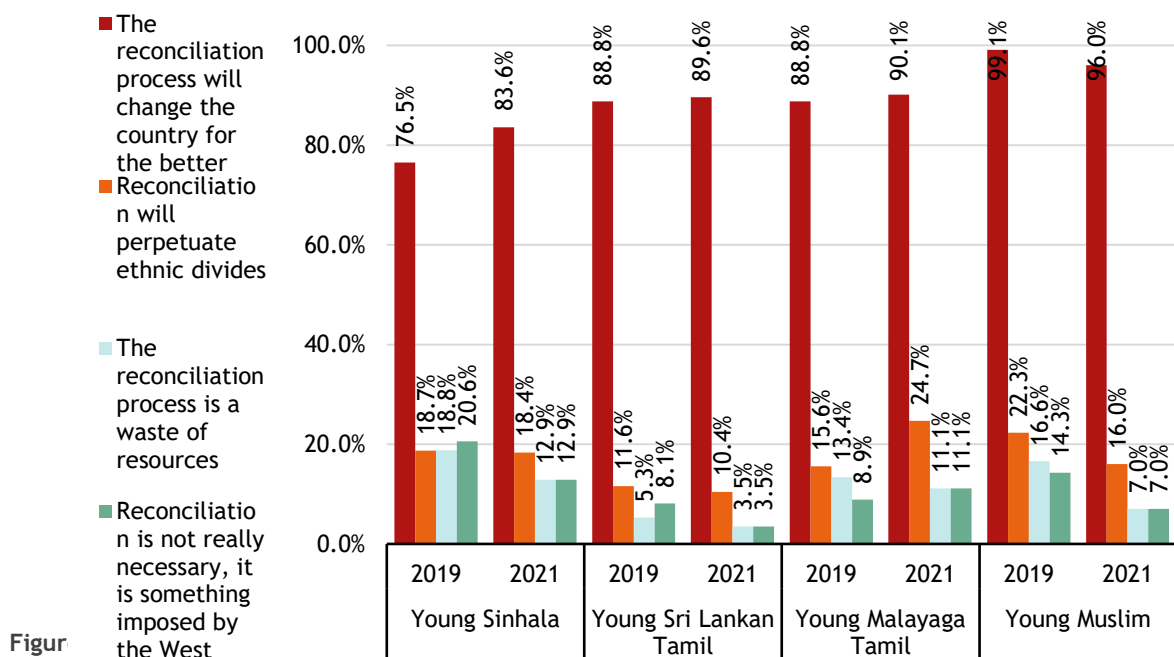


Figure 1: Changes in attitudes towards reconciliation between 2019 and 2021 - Overall

- ❖ Similarly, agreement with negative assessments concerning the reconciliation process has reduced noticeably.

- ◆ Whereas 16.0% agreed that the reconciliation process will perpetuate ethnic divides in 2019, this figure has reduced to 14.8% in 2021.
- ◆ A comparison of the data between 2019 and 2021 demonstrates around a 5% decline in agreement with the statements “The reconciliation process is a waste of resources” and “Reconciliation is not really necessary, it is something imposed by the West.”



Figure

- It is significant to note that support for reconciliation is higher among Sinhala youth who participated in the 2021 survey compared to the same category in 2019.
  - ❖ Among Sinhalese youth agreement with the statement “The reconciliation process will change the country for the better has increased by almost 10% from 76.5% in 2019 to 83.6% in 2021.
  - ❖ Furthermore, the data demonstrates that agreement with the negative statements among Sinhala youth has reduced in the same period.
    - ◆ Agreement with reconciliation will perpetuate ethnic divides has reduced marginally from 18.7% to 18.4%.
    - ◆ More significantly, agreement that reconciliation is a waste of resources and reconciliation is unnecessary has reduced to a little over 10% compared, to around 20% in 2019.
- Similar to 2019 though, a surprisingly high number of members of the minority community agree that the reconciliation process will perpetuate ethnic divides.
  - ❖ One in ten (10.6%) Sri Lankan Tamil youth agree with this statement.
  - ❖ This figure is higher among the *Malayaga Makkal* (Indian Origin Tamils) youth sample (24.7%) than even the Sinhala youth sample of this survey. In fact, among the *Malayaga Makkal* (Indian Origin Tamils) the number has risen from 15.6% in 2019 to 24.7 in 2021.

## Conclusion

Comparison between 2019 and 2021 data reveal a slight reduction in *the difference in support* for reconciliation between Sinhala youth on the one hand, and youth from ethnic minorities. It seems counter-intuitive that a positive estimation of the impacts of the reconciliation process should have increased between 2019 and 2021, particularly among Sinhala youth. Despite several national level developments between 2019 and 2021, which led many commentators to suggest that support for the reconciliation process would reduce (Uyangoda, 2019), the data suggests that, at least among the sample of this study, there is greater support for reconciliation today among Sinhala youth. These findings regarding reconciliation indicate that there is somewhat greater recognition among youth of the value of creating harmony among previously divided communities. The convergence of attitudes between minority and majority ethnic groups suggests the possibility of developing a more pluralistic Sri Lankan society, which is committed to a more harmonious future. Despite such positive developments, a note of caution must be sounded, as it is likely that

'reconciliation' is perceived differently in terms of substance by different communities/ ethnicities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to section on colonisation in the North and East for further discussion of this point

# Land

## Introduction

Land rights in Sri Lanka have received significant attention in the last few years. Communities from all ethnic groups across the country have been dispossessed of their land on various grounds. Citizens' land have been acquired by the Archaeology Department, Forestry Department, military, private companies and for development projects (The People's Land Commission, 2020). Regardless of the justifications, in the final analysis such moves serve to oust citizens from their homes, disrupt their ways of life and where it concerns an agricultural community, push citizens into poverty.

Concerns of land rights are particularly important to minority communities in Sri Lanka. In the North and East the Forestry Department, Archaeology Department and the military have acquired vast swathes of land in the name of protecting forest reserves, archaeological ruins and national security (Anon., 2018; Srinivasan, 2021). Given the consequences of acquiring private land mentioned above, ensuring land rights of minority groups has become central to promoting a pluralistic society.

## Support for ensuring land rights

- The questionnaire asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statement "The State should protect the private land rights of members of all ethnic groups."

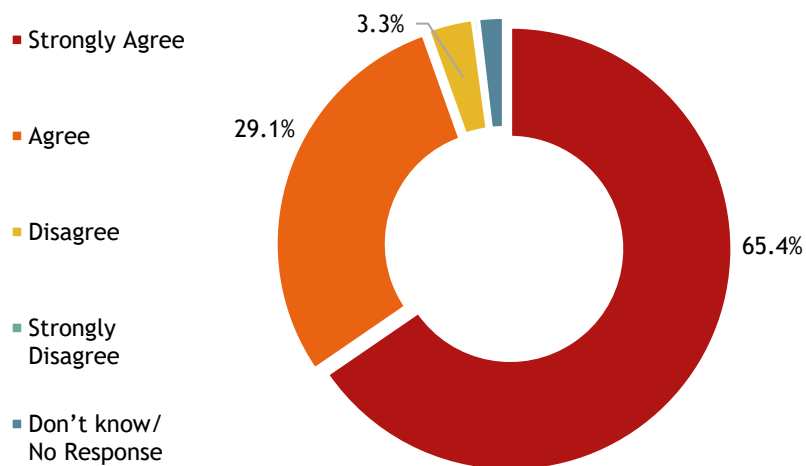


Figure 3: The State should protect the private land rights of members of all ethnic groups - Overall

- A vast majority of the sample recognise that the State has a duty to protect private land rights of members of all ethnic groups.
  - ❖ While 65.4% of the sample strongly agree with the statement, 29.1% agree.



- ❖ The high percentage who strongly agree with the statement, suggests that a majority feel strongly about the state’s duty to protect private land rights.

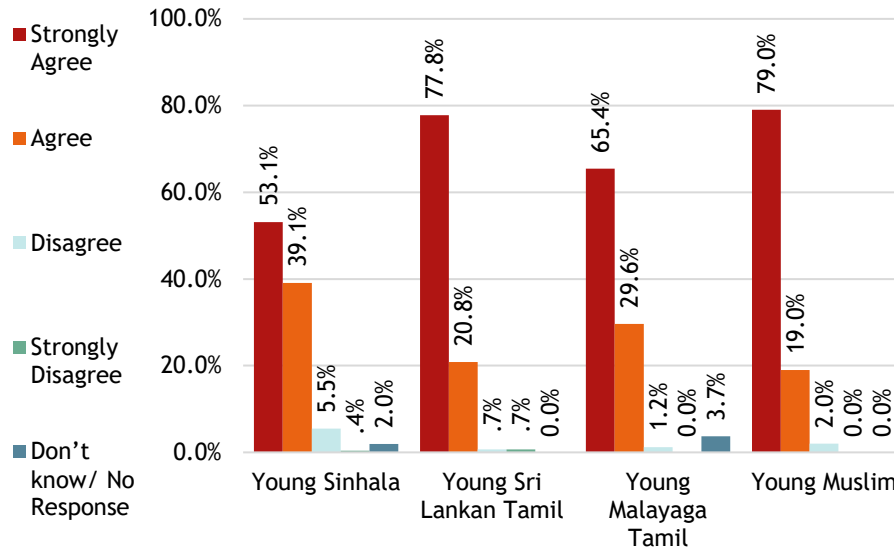


Figure 4: The State should protect the private land rights of members of all ethnic groups - Ethnic breakdown

- However, the strength of agreement is noticeably higher among youth from ethnic minorities compared to Sinhala youth.
  - ❖ Whereas 53.1% of Sinhala youth strongly agree that the state should protect private land rights of all ethnic groups, the same numbers are significantly higher among minority youth.
  - ❖ 77.8% of Sri Lankan Tamil youth and 79.0% of Muslim youth strongly agree that private land rights should be safeguarded by the State.
- ★ This data confirms the importance Sri Lankans in general attach to land rights. Regardless of ethnicity, all are agreed that the State should protect the private land rights of all ethnic groups.

## Perceptions towards undermining land rights

### Forestry Department

- In post-war Sri Lanka, citizens from the war zones have raised concerns that the Forestry Department is taking over the land they once cultivated and lived on during the war (Srinivasan, 2021). In Mannar and Mullaitivu for example, the Forestry Department has taken over large tracts of land belonging to Sri Lankan Tamils claiming that they come under their purview. Similarly, in the Ampara district the Forestry Department has made moves to take over lands belonging to Sinhala

farmers. Therefore, the questionnaire sought to understand the extent to which respondents endorsed such moves on the part of the Forestry Department.

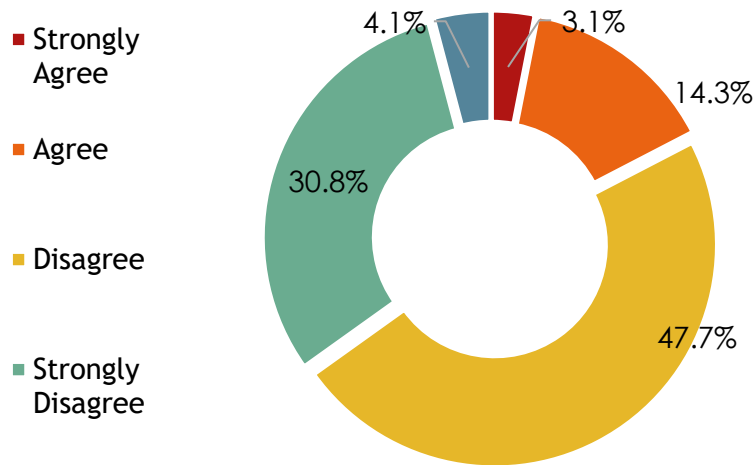


Figure 5: It is fair for the Forestry Department to take over people's private lands to protect forest resources - Overall

- Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “It is fair for the Forestry Department to take over people’s private land to protect forest resources.”
  - ❖ The data clearly shows that there is very little endorsement of taking over private land on the grounds of safeguarding forest resources.
  - ❖ In fact, the data reveals an opposition to such moves, with 47.7% of the total sample disagreeing with the statement, and a further 30.8% strongly disagreeing.

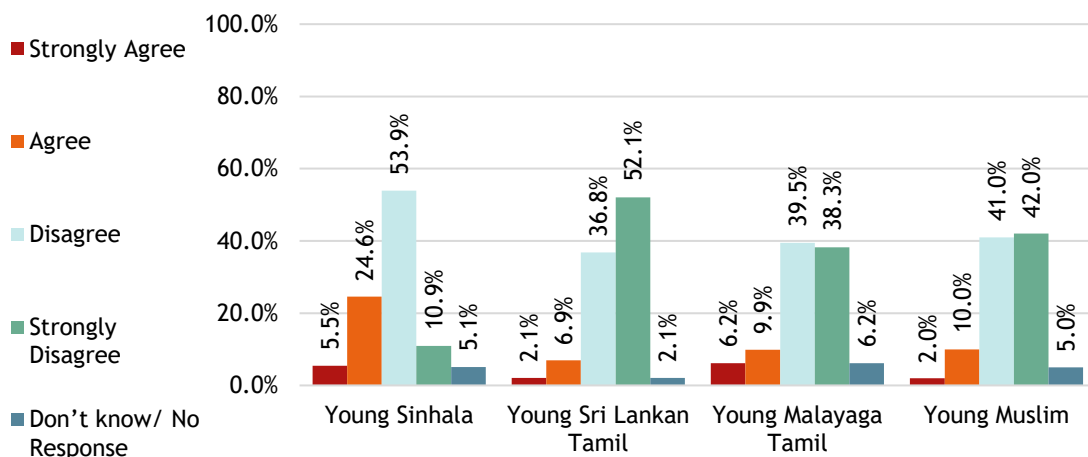


Figure 6: It is fair for the Forestry Department to take over people's private lands to protect forest resources - Ethnic breakdown

- Once again, the data reveals that disagreement and the intensity of disagreement among ethnic minorities is noticeably higher than that of Sinhala youth.

- ❖ Among Sinhala youth, 53.9% disagree, and 10.9% strongly disagree that it is fair for the Forestry Department to take over people's private lands to protect forest resources.
  - ❖ However, among Sri Lankan Tamil youth 52.9% strongly disagree and 36.8% disagree with the statement.
  - ❖ Among Muslim youth, 41.0% disagree and a further 42.0% strongly disagree with the statement.
- Furthermore, 30.1% of Sinhala youth either strongly agree (5.5%) or agree (24.6%) that it is fair for the Forestry Department to take over private lands to protect forest resources.
- ❖ Among Sri Lankan Tamil youth, less than 10% agree in any way with the statement (2.1% - strongly agree; 6.9% - agree).
  - ❖ Levels of agreement among Muslim youth are similar to that of Sri Lankan Tamil youth with 2.0% strongly agreeing and 10.0% agreeing with the statement.
- ★ **This data indicates the extent to which minority youth perceive the Forestry Department taking over private property as unfair. While most Sinhala youth oppose such moves of the Forestry Department to take over lands, the intensity of such opposition is noticeably less than youth from Sri Lankan Tamil or Muslim backgrounds.**

## Archaeology Department

- Since the conclusion of the war, the Archaeology Department has acquired lands in the North and East to protect archeologically important sites. Invariably, such sites are important to Buddhist or Sinhala communities. For example, in the recent past, the *Muhudu Maha Viharaya* in the Ampara district became the subject of controversy. There are tensions between Muslim communities living in the area, and the Archaeology Department which is attempting to take over their land (Vanniasinkam, et al., 2018). Furthermore, in the North the Archaeology Department has claimed places which are of religious importance to Hindus as archeologically important land. Therefore, many in the North and East accuse the Archaeology Department of furthering a larger project to "Buddhistise" the predominantly Hindu North and East, while simultaneously depriving people of their lands and livelihoods (Vanniasinkam, et al., 2018).

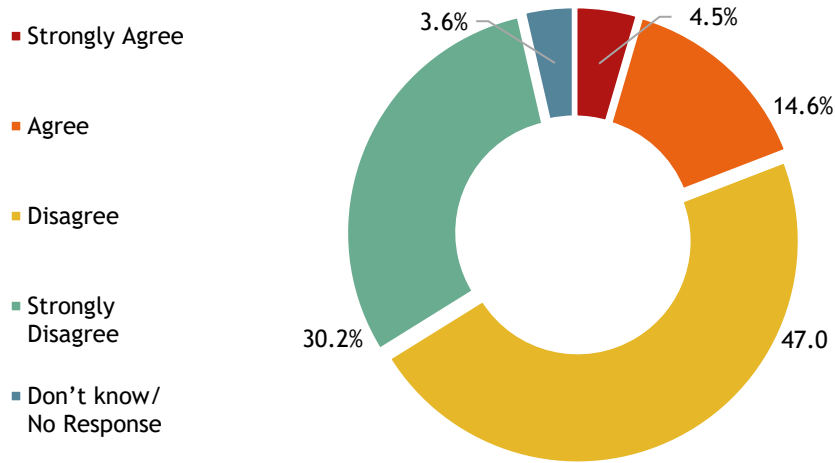


Figure 7: It is fair for the Archaeology Department to take over people's private land to protect artefacts - Overall

- Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed that it is fair for the Archaeology Department to take over private lands to protect artefacts.
  - ❖ In response 47.0% of the sample disagree, while a further 30.2% strongly disagree.
  - ❖ In contrast less than one in five respondents agree (4.5% strongly agree; 14.6% agree) with the statement.

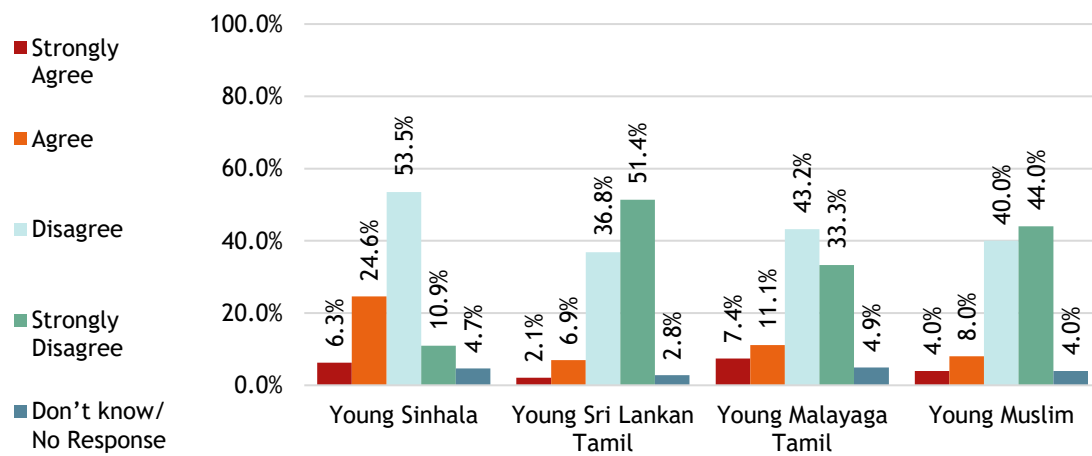


Figure 8: It is fair for the Archaeology Department to take over people's private land to protect artefacts - Ethnic breakdown

- An ethnic disaggregation of the data indicates that more minority youth disagree with the statement compared to Sinhala youth. Furthermore, the intensity of such disagreement is higher among minority youth.
  - ❖ In total, a majority of Sinhala youth (64.5%) either strongly disagree (10.9%) or disagree (53.5%) that it is fair for the Archaeology Department to take over private land to protect artefacts.

- ❖ Among youth belonging to minority communities though, the overall level of disagreement is at least 20% higher. Additionally, the data demonstrates that the intensity of such disagreement is greater in youth from ethnic minority groups in the sample.
  - Among Sri Lankan Tamil youth, 51.4% strongly disagree and 36.8% disagree.
  - Similarly, 44.0% Muslim youth strongly disagree and a further 40.0% disagree that with the statement that it is fair for the Archaeology Department to take over people's private land to protect artefacts.
- ★ This data reflects the extent to which the takeover of private lands in to protect artefacts is opposed more strongly by minority communities compared to Sinhalese.
  - ❖ The data suggests that the intensity of opposition among Sinhala youth is less. This may be because Sinhala youth perceive the takeover of land by the Archaeology Department as safeguarding their own history. Furthermore, such takeover has also largely taken place in pre-dominantly Sri Lankan Tamil or Muslim locations, which makes it a somewhat distant concern for Sinhala youth. However, it is significant that the majority of Sinhala youth disagreed with the takeover of land.
  - ❖ In contrast, among Muslim and Sri Lankan Tamil youth this is not the case. Opposition among youth in these communities may be because they not only experience the Archaeology Department taking over lands they understand to be theirs, but also fear that through such actions their own histories and cultures will be erased.

## Military

- In post-war Sri Lanka, the military has occupied vast areas of civilian lands in the North and East (Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research , 2017). Large military camps and sizable agricultural estates run by the military are scattered across the region. Communities have protested for years demanding the military return their lands to them. Unfortunately, the Sri Lankan government has been extremely reluctant to return lands occupied by the military in the North and East to their rightful owners.

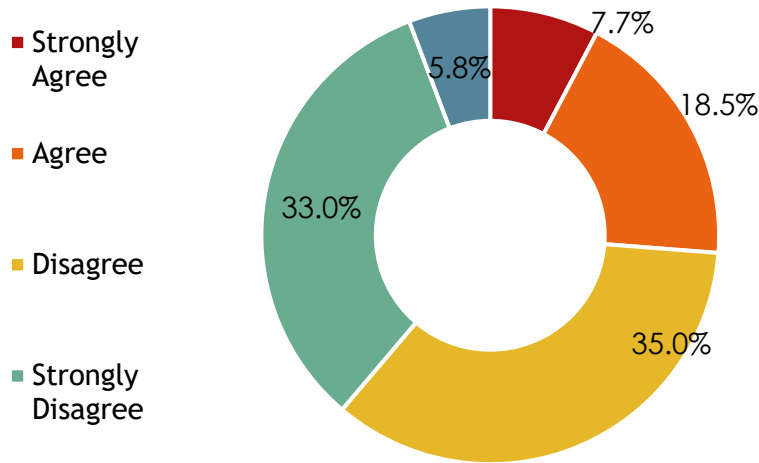


Figure 9: It is fair for the army to take over people's private lands in the North and East for security reasons - Overall

- Respondents were presented with the statement, “It is fair for the army to take over people’s private lands in the North and East for security reasons,” and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with it.
  - ❖ Whereas less than 20% agree that it is fair for the Archaeology or Forestry Department to take over private lands, in response to the statement concerning the military taking over private lands, agreement is noticeably higher at 26.2% (7.7%- strongly agree; 18.5% agree).

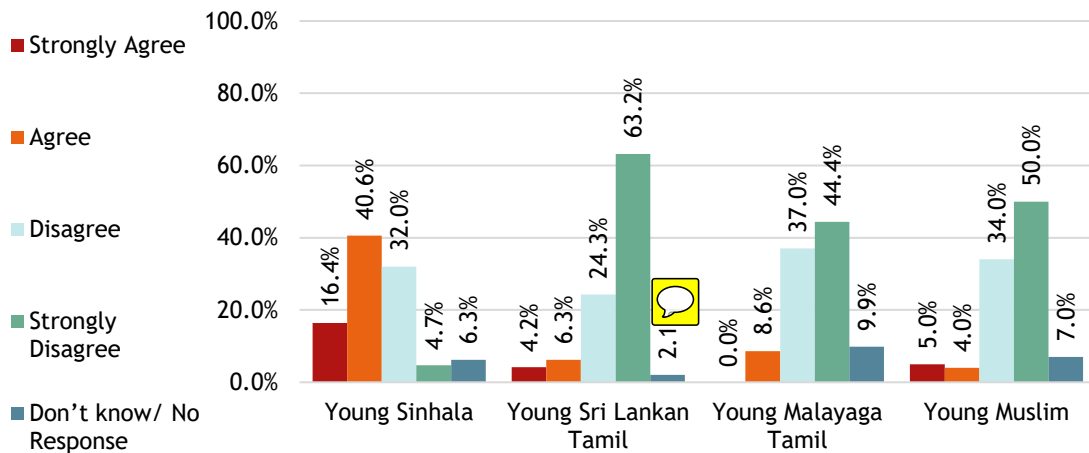


Figure 10: It is fair for the army to take over people's private lands in the North and East for security reasons - Ethnic breakdown

- The ethnic differences in the responses to this statement is stark.
  - ❖ Whereas more than half of the Sinhala youth sample either strongly agree (16.4%) or agree (40.6%) that military occupying civilian lands in the North and East on security grounds is fair, levels of agreement is drastically less among ethnic minority youth.

- ❖ Among Sri Lankan Tamil youth only 4.2% strongly agree that it is fair for the military to take over private lands in the North and East to ensure security, while a further 6.3% agree.
  - ❖ The figures among Sri Lankan Tamil youth are comparable among Muslim youth with 5.0% strongly agreeing and 4.0% agreeing with the statement.
- ★ **Agreement among Sinhala youth in the sample reflects concerns and fears of the majority community regarding the re-emergence of the LTTE, attempts of the North and East to secede, and perceived militaristic threats from Tamil Nadu. It is likely that among the 40.6% of Sinhala youth who agree with the statement (as against the 16.4% who strongly agree), there is some discomfort at the thought of dispossessing persons of their land. However, their fears compel them to value national security over and above the land rights of communities in the North and East.**
- ★ **The intensity of disagreement with the statement among Sri Lankan Tamil (63.2% strongly disagree) and Muslim (50.0%) youth in the sample is an indication of the extent to which their communities resent their lands being taken over by the military. The divergent opinions among the Sinhala youth on the one hand and Sri Lankan Tamil and Muslim youth on the other, is an indication of how divisive this issue is.**

## Colonisation of the North and East

- Over the past 10 years, many Sinhalese families have been settled in the North as part of a project to provide land and livelihoods to economically vulnerable groups. Sri Lankan Tamils perceive efforts at establishing Sinhala colonies in the North and East in post-war Sri Lanka as a state sponsored “Sinhalaisation” project, which seeks to alter the demographic composition of the area (Jayasuriya, 2018). Outside of the North and East, in predominantly Sinhala areas, colonisation projects are perceived as providing a pathway to increase interactions between Sinhala and Sri Lankan Tamil communities. Sinhalese perceive Sri Lankan Tamil resistance to colonisation projects as a rejection of living together in harmony, and a disavowal of the Sinhala-Buddhist belief that Sri Lanka, in its entirety, is a Sinhala Buddhist country.
- The questionnaire asked respondents the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “Coexistence among ethnicities can be strengthened through the State establishing Sinhala settlements in the North.”

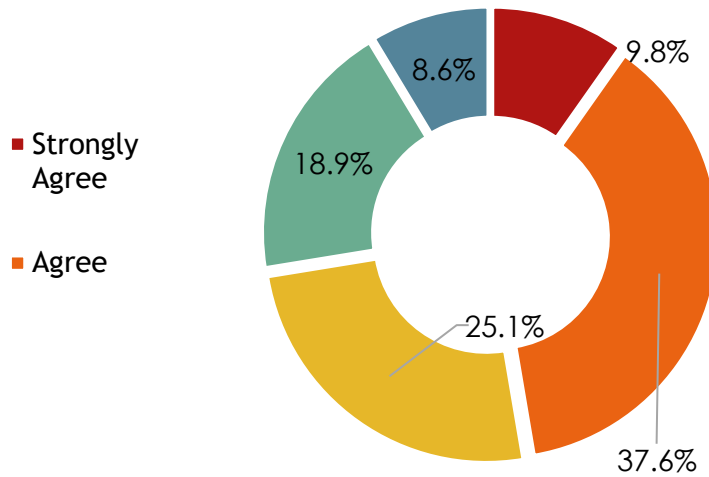


Figure 11: Coexistence among ethnicities can be strengthened through the State establishing Sinhala settlements in the North - Overall

- ❖ In response, 9.8% strongly agree, and 37.6% agree with the statement. The data therefore suggests that nearly half the sample agree that establishing Sinhala settlements in the North could strengthen coexistence.
- However, an ethnic analysis of these responses reveals polarised views on this topic.
  - ❖ More than three quarter of Sinhala youth (77.3%) either strongly agree (18.8%) or agree (58.6%) that Sinhala settlements in the North would be good for coexistence.
  - ❖ Support among minority communities is significantly less.
    - In fact, among Sri Lankan Tamil youth 30.6% disagree and 39.6% strongly disagree with the statement.
    - Sentiments among Muslim youth is largely similar with 37.0% disagreeing and 26.0% strongly disagreeing.

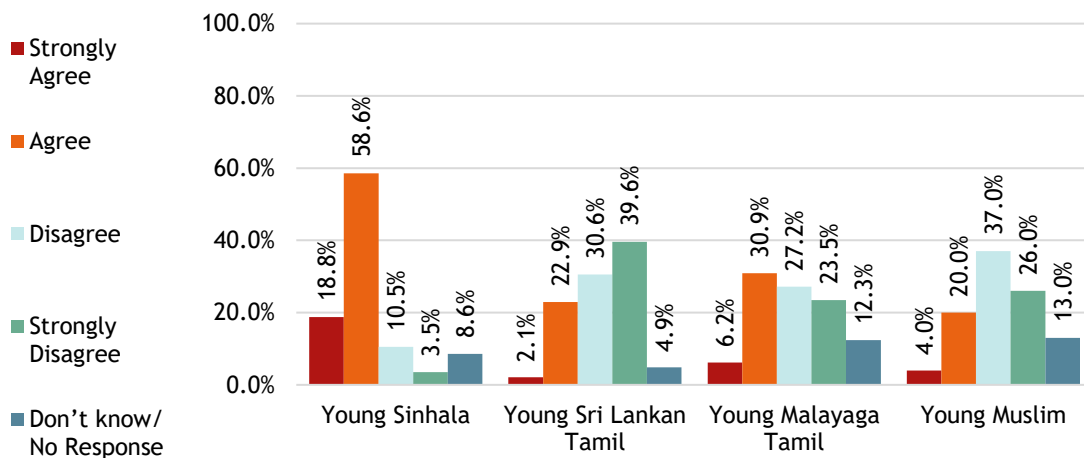


Figure 12: Coexistence among ethnicities can be strengthened through the State establishing Sinhala settlements in the North - Ethnic breakdown



- ★ The ethnically divided response to this statement demonstrates the difficulty of pursuing a pluralistic Sri Lankan society. It reveals that different ethnic groups have drastically different opinions on what could and could not strengthen relations among ethnic groups. In such a context, it is imperative to explore avenues for reconciliation and inter-group solidarity in a manner which resounds with all groups.
- ★ The findings also demonstrate that Sri Lankan Tamil youth are opposed to Sinhala settlements being established in the North and East. It appears that they prefer that Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils to live in the same country, but separately. This raises the question of whether Sri Lankan Tamil youth have a greater desire to see a multi-cultural Sri Lanka, rather than a pluralistic one.

# Memorialisation

## Introduction

In post-war Sri Lanka, the right to remember those who died as a result of the war continues to bitterly divide Sinhalese and Tamil communities (Ruwanpathirana, 2016). Since 2009, while communities in the North and East continuously demanded that they be permitted to remember their loved ones who died in the war, the Sri Lankan state has repeatedly resorted to aggressive measures to prevent such memorialisation. In contrast, post-war triumphalism in the South emboldened the Sri Lankan government to sanction and fund official events to remember, and even celebrate, the “sacrifices” of “war heroes.” Furthermore, the military and “war heroes” have come to occupy a pre-eminent position in the imagination of many Sinhalese, as the saviours of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation, whose sacrifices should never be forgotten (Hettiarachchi, 2016).

In such a context, recognising the right of all communities to remember the loved ones they lost during the war, both individually and collectively, is critical for fostering a pluralistic society. Acknowledging that all communities suffered immense loss due to the civil war, and providing space for all communities to remember and to grieve such losses is an essential step towards promoting a more pluralistic Sri Lanka.

## Support for right to remember

- Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that all ethnic groups should be given the opportunity to remember those who died because of the war.

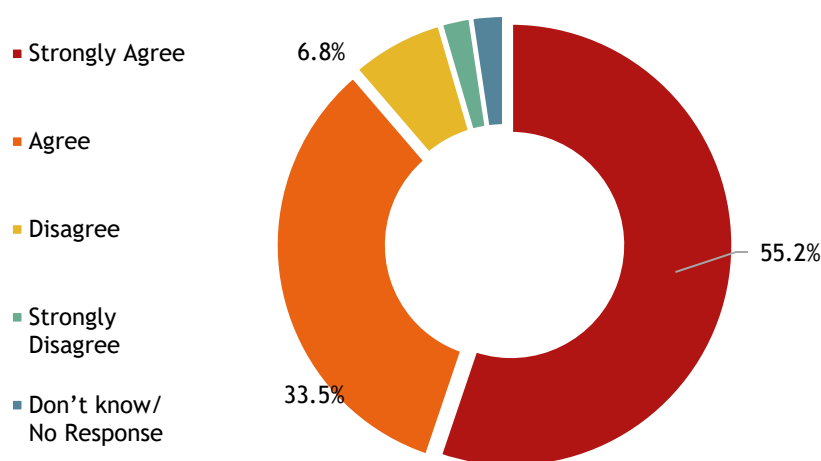


Figure 13: All ethnic groups should be given the opportunity to remember those who died because of the war - Overall

- According to the data, a vast majority of the total sample (88.7%) are in agreement that *all* ethnic groups should be afforded the opportunity to remember those who died due to the war.
  - ❖ More than half of the sample (55.2%) *strongly agrees* that all ethnic groups should be given the opportunity to remember those who died because of the war, while 33.5% *agrees* with the same.

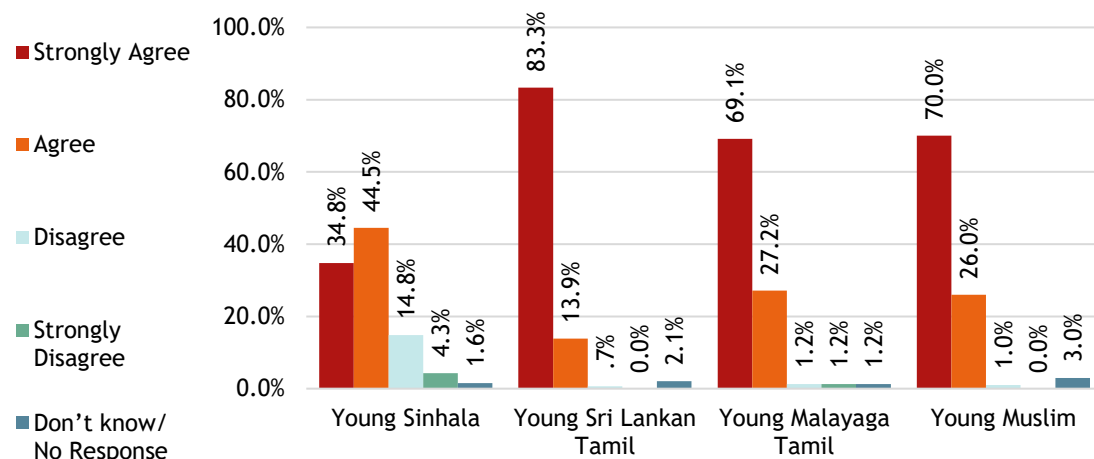


Figure 14: All ethnic groups should be given the opportunity to remember those who died because of the war - Ethnic Breakdown

- However, the data very clearly reveals differences in the extent to which different ethnic groups agree with the statement. The fractured nature of Sri Lankan society becomes evident when the degree to which respondents agree is analysed by ethnicity.
  - ❖ While more than four in every five Sri Lankan Tamil youth (83.3%) strongly agree that all ethnic groups should be given the opportunity to remember those who died as a consequence of the war, only a little more than a third of Sinhala youth (34.8%) say the same.
- The questionnaire also sought to assess if support for the right to remember those who died during the war may be tentative. Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “If all ethnic groups are given the freedom to remember everyone who died because of the war, it could lead to another war.”

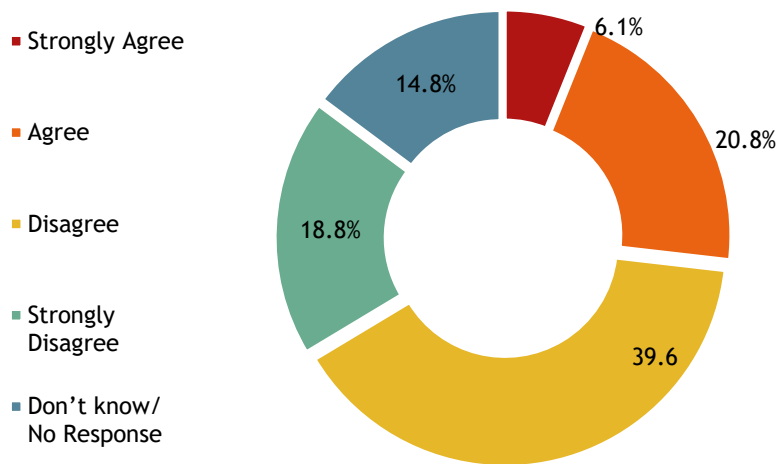


Figure 15: If all ethnic groups are given the freedom to remember everyone who died because of the war, it could lead to another war - Overall

- Despite the apparent support for allowing all ethnic groups to remember those who died during the war, the data reveals that more than a fourth of the sample either strongly agrees (6.1%) or agrees (20.8%) that granting the right to all ethnic communities to remember everyone who died during the war could lead to another war in the future.
  - ❖ Among Sinhala youth, more than a third of the sample either strongly agree (7.4%) or agree (29.3%) with the statement.
  - ❖ In contrast, a little more than one in ten Sri Lankan Tamil youth either strongly agree (4.9%) or agree (7.6%) that allowing all ethnic groups to remember everyone who died during the war is very low.
- Nonetheless, it appears that a majority of the sample (58.4%) do not agree that allowing all ethnic communities to remember everyone who died in the war would lead to another war.
  - ❖ Even among Sinhala youth, 39.8% disagree while a further 10.2% strongly disagree with the statement.
  - ❖ Among youth from minority communities, disagreement is highest among Sri Lankan Tamil youth (34.7%- disagree; 42.4% strongly disagree).

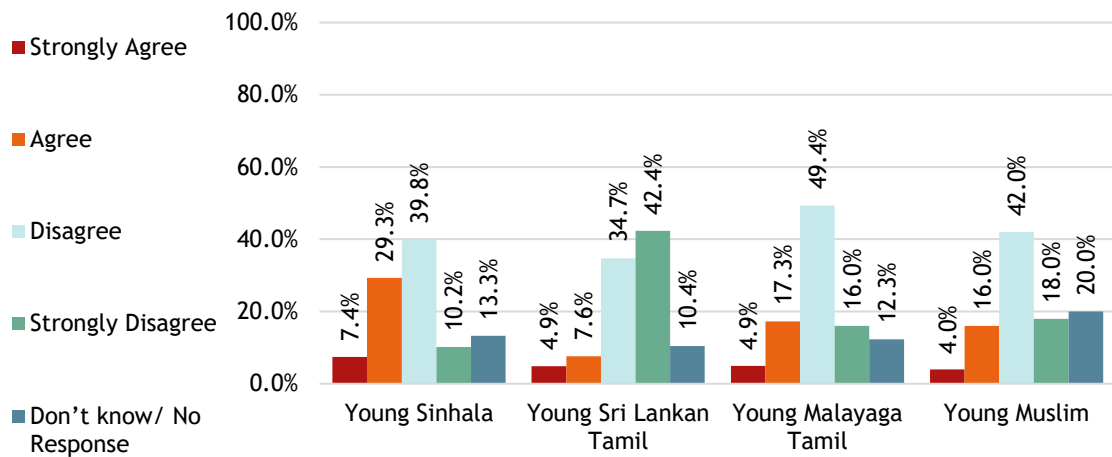


Figure 16: If all ethnic groups are given the freedom to remember everyone who died because of the war, it could lead to another war - Ethnic Breakdown

## Perception of Self's and Other's Right to Remember

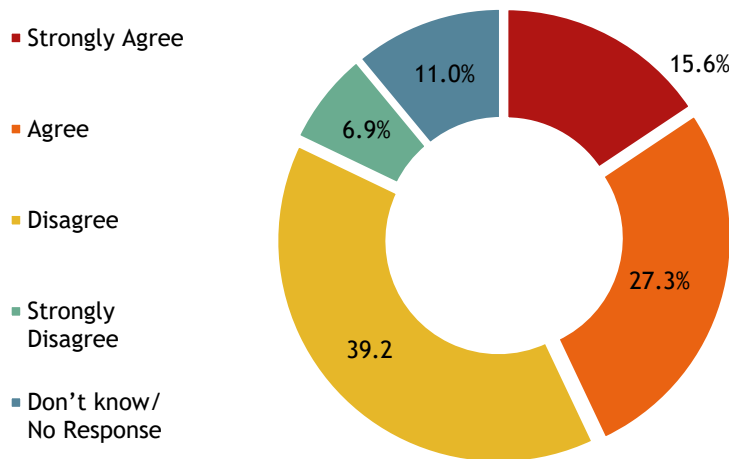


Figure 17: Your ethnic group's right to remember those who died because of the war has been curtailed - Overall

➤ The questionnaire also sought to measure the extent to which respondents believed that their ethnic community's right to remember those who died during the war is curtailed, and also the extent to which other communities have been granted that freedom.

- ❖ While 43.0% of the sample either strongly agrees (15.6%) or agrees (27.3%) that their ethnic community's right to remember those who died because of the war has been curtailed, 39.2% disagree and 6.9% strongly disagree with the same.

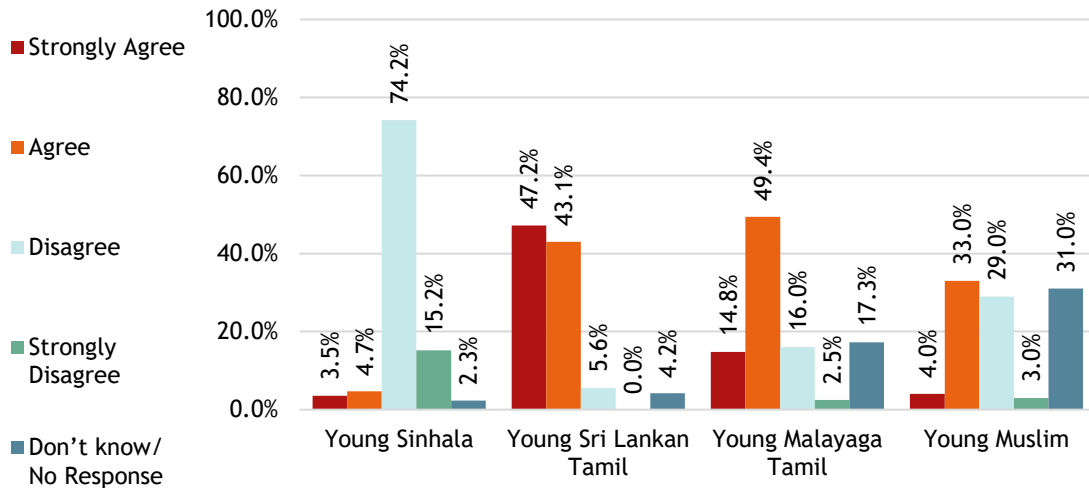


Figure 18: Your ethnic group's right to remember those who died because of the war has been curtailed - Ethnic Breakdown

- An ethnic analysis of responses to this statement confirms the stark discrepancy between the perceptions of Sinhala Youth and Sri Lankan Tamil youth.
  - ❖ Only a handful of Sinhala youth strongly agree (3.5%) or agree (4.7%) that their ethnic group's right to remember those who died during the war has been curtailed.
  - ❖ In sharp contrast to this, 47.2% of Sri Lankan Tamil youth strongly agree, and a further 43.1% agree with the same statement.
- These divergent experiences are further compounded by perceptions of the others ability to remember those who died during the war.
  - ❖ 11.1% of the sample strongly agree, and 40.5% agree that "Other ethnic groups have been given the freedom to remember those who died in the war."

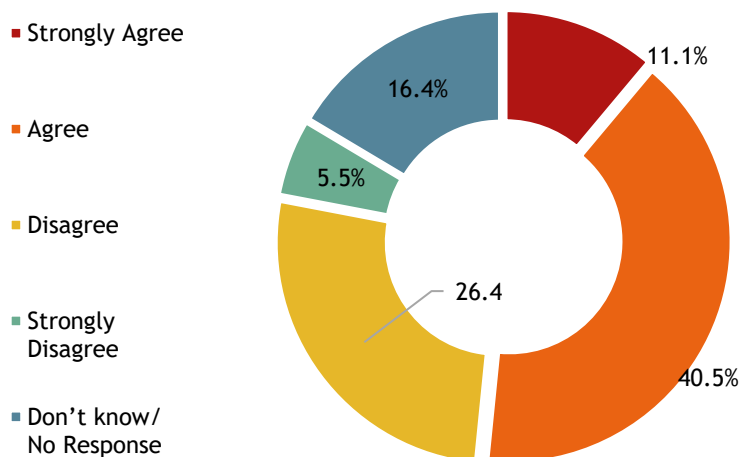


Figure 19: Other ethnic groups have been given the freedom to remember those who died because of the war - Overall

- Despite an overwhelming majority of Sri Lankan Tamil youth claiming that they do not have the right to remember those who died during the war, an ethnic disaggregation of this statement suggests that less than two fifths of Sinhala youth disagree that other ethnic groups have the right to remember those who died.
  - ❖ Only 6.6% of Sinhala youth strongly disagree, while a further 31.3% disagree, that “other ethnic groups have been given the freedom to remember those who died in the war.”
  - ❖ Furthermore, at least 14.8% of youth from all ethnic communities say they do not know about other ethnic group’s freedom to remember those who died because of the war.

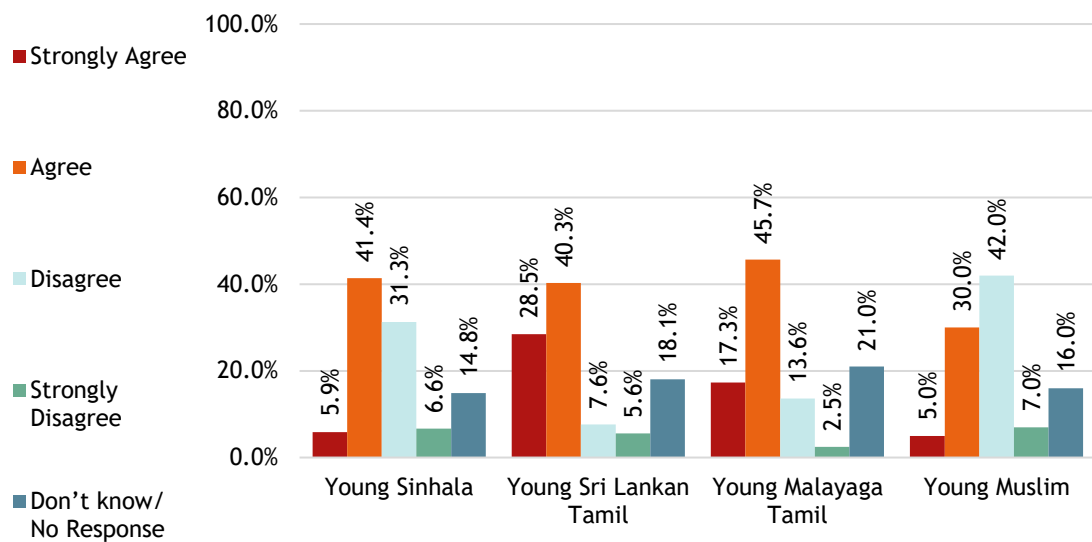


Figure 20: Other ethnic groups have been given the freedom to remember those who died because of the war - Ethnic Breakdown

## Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that within the sample there is widespread support for the right of all ethnic communities to remember their loved ones who died during the war. However, the intensity of such support varies across ethnic groups, with fewer Sinhala youth strongly supporting it compared to youth from minority communities. Furthermore, concern that permitting all ethnic groups to remember everyone who died in the war could lead to another ethnic conflict is higher among Sinhala youth compared to youth from other ethnic groups. The data therefore indicates that some Sinhala youth are faced with the uncomfortable dilemma of recognising the right of all ethnic groups to remember their dead, and balancing such attitudes against fears of it leading to another war in the future. In order to build a more pluralistic society, it is imperative that creative strategies are explored for working through this dilemma among Sinhala youth.

Having said that, it is also important not to lose sight of the large section of Sinhala youth who support the right to remember those who died, and also do not think that allowing such freedom will cause another war in the future. This group represents a potential catalyst for furthering conversations in the South on ensuring the freedom to all communities to remember and to grieve the destruction of the war.

Despite support for allowing all ethnic groups to remember their loved ones who died in the war, the reality of experiences of remembering appears to sharply divide Sinhala youth and Sri Lankan Tamil youth in the sample. Whereas an overwhelming majority of Sinhala youth do not agree that their group's right to remember those who died during the war has been curtailed, the exact opposite is true of opinions held by Sri Lanka Tamil youth in the sample, i.e. a majority believes their right to remember has been curtailed. A majority of Sinhala youth seem to be unaware of the inability Sri Lankan Tamil youth have in remembering those who died in the war. These findings point to the lack of dialogue between youth among the ethnic communities.



# Disappearances

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## Introduction

Many families in the North and East assert that their loved ones disappeared during and immediately after the conclusion of the civil war. In the North and East, it is not uncommon to hear of family members who “were disappeared” (as opposed to “disappeared”), highlighting suspicions that the Sri Lankan military may have been involved in such disappearances. Since 2009, Sri Lankan Tamils have been adamant, vociferous, and relentless in their demand that the government provide information on the whereabouts of their loved ones who disappeared (Ganguly, 2021). For many Sri Lankan Tamils, receiving such information is critical for closure, and for moving forward in their personal lives. At the group level, receiving such information is considered a key requirement for pursuing reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Despite obtaining information about the fate of those who disappeared being a central concern for communities in the North and East, such conversations and concerns are peripheral in the pre-dominantly Sinhala South. Many Sinhalese acknowledge that individuals did disappear during the war, but are nonetheless quick to assert that ten years after the conclusion of the war, such concerns should be set aside, and that all communities must look to the future. Many in the South find it difficult to fathom why people in the North and East still insist on discussing the whereabouts of the disappeared.

The ability to empathise with the grief and concerns of those from different cultures and backgrounds is foundational to a pluralistic society. Thus, examining attitudes towards obtaining information about those who disappeared during the war could provide some indication of the level of empathy within Sri Lankan society.

## Support for obtaining information regarding disappeared

- The questionnaire posed the statement, “Family members should have the right to obtain information about their relatives who disappeared,” and asked respondents the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with it.

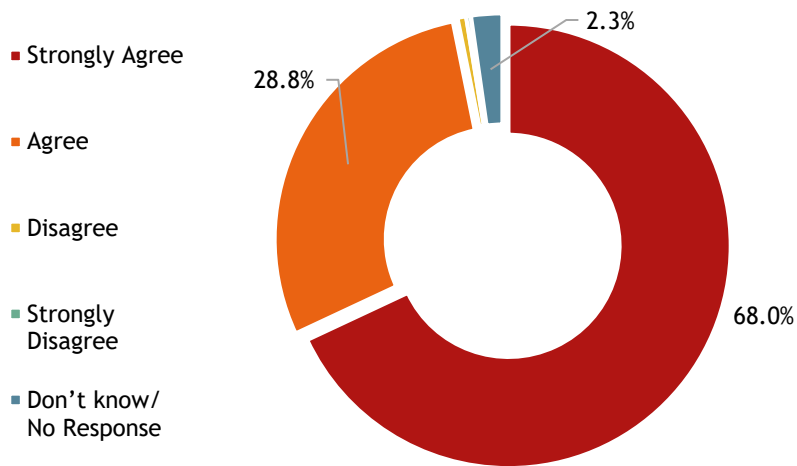


Figure 21: Family members should have the right to obtain information about their relatives who disappeared - Overall

- The data suggests a normative framework which recognises the right of family members to obtain information on their loved ones who disappeared. However, the buy-in to such a framework is not uniform.
  - ❖ 68.0% of all respondents strongly agree that family members should have a right to obtain information about their disappeared family members, while 28.8% agree with the statement.
  - ❖ This demonstrates that across almost three-quarter of the sample, there is strong support for the right of family members to obtain information about their relative who disappeared.

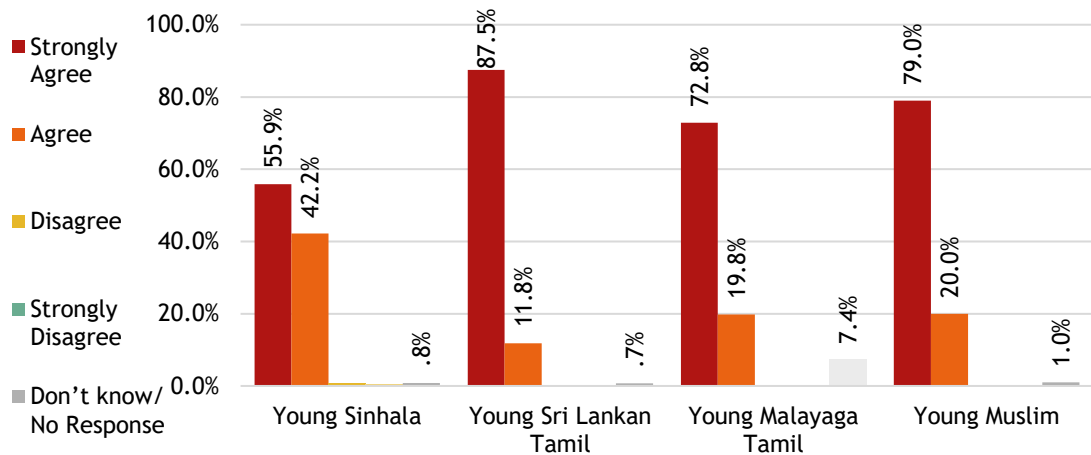


Figure 22: Family members should have the right to obtain information about their relatives who disappeared - Ethnic Breakdown

- However, the level of agreement with the statement varies across ethnic groups.
  - ❖ 55.9% of Sinhala youth strongly agree that family members should have the right to obtain information about relatives who disappeared.

❖ The corresponding figures for Sri Lankan Tamil youth are drastically higher (87.5%).

➤ In order to ascertain if respondents had any reluctance in family members obtaining information regarding disappeared persons, the questionnaires asked to what extent the respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Searching for what happened to those who disappeared, could be a barrier to cooperation among ethnic groups in the future.”

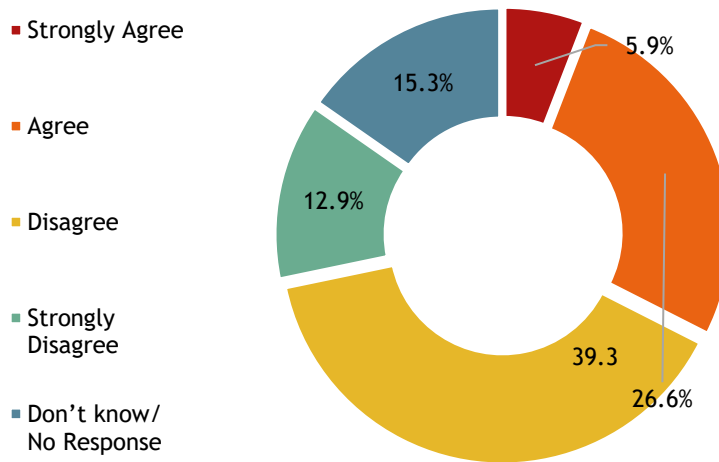


Figure 23: Searching for what happened to those who disappeared, could be a barrier to cooperation among ethnic groups in the future - Overall

➤ Despite nearly all respondents agreeing that family members should have the right to obtain information regarding those who disappeared, almost one third of the sample either strongly agrees (5.9%) or agrees (26.6%) that searching for what happened to those who disappeared could be a barrier to cooperation among ethnic groups in the future.

❖ While nearly one third of Sinhala youth either strongly agree (5.1%) or agree (27.7%) agree with the statement, this figure is much lower among Sri Lankan Tamil youth, standing at around one fifth (7.6% strongly agree; 14.6% agree).

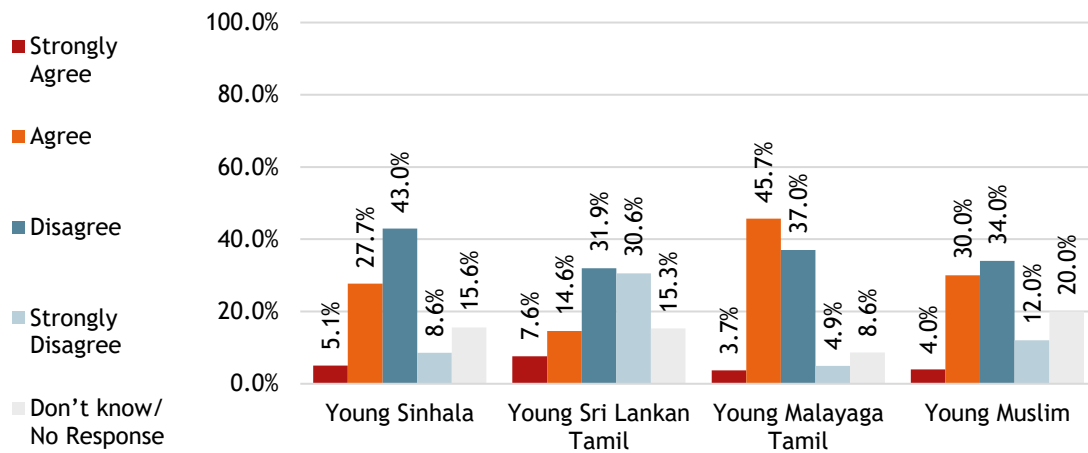


Figure 24: Searching for what happened to those who disappeared, could be a barrier to cooperation among ethnic groups in the future - Ethnic Breakdown

- However, ethnic disaggregation of the data also suggests that concerns finding out what happened to those who disappeared could hinder ethnic cooperation is not taken seriously by a majority of Sinhala (52.8%) and Sri Lankan Tamil youth (62.5%).
  - ❖ Among Sinhala youth, 43.0% disagree, while 8.6% strongly disagree that searching for what happened to those who disappeared could be a barrier to cooperation among ethnic groups in the future.
  - ❖ Among Sri Lankan Tamil youth the proportion which disagrees is marginally higher than Sinhala youth with 31.9% disagreeing and 30.6% strongly disagreeing.

## Perception of Self and Other obtaining information regarding disappeared

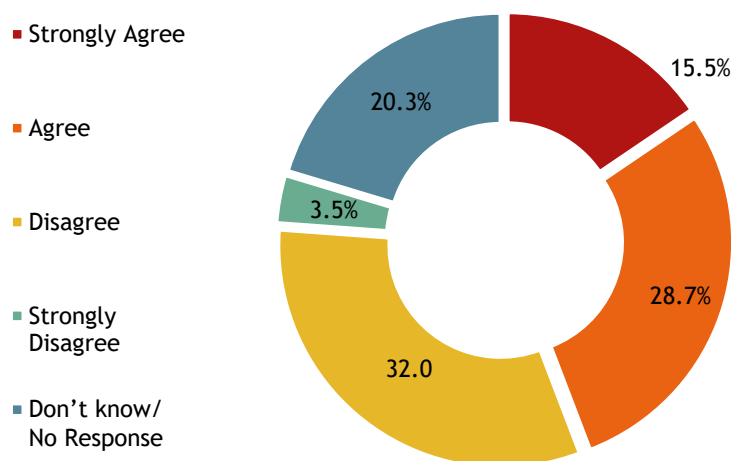


Figure 25: Your ethnic group's right to obtain information about relatives who disappeared has been ignored by the government - Overall

- For those whose family members disappeared during the war, obtaining information regarding their fate is critically important. Respondents were asked to what extent

they agreed with the statement “Your ethnic group’s right to obtain information about relatives who disappeared has been ignored by the government.”

- ❖ Nearly half of the sample (44.2%) either strongly agree (15.5%) or agree (28.7%) with the statement. A further 32.0% disagree while 3.5% strongly disagree that their ethnic group’s right to obtain information about relatives who disappeared has been ignored.

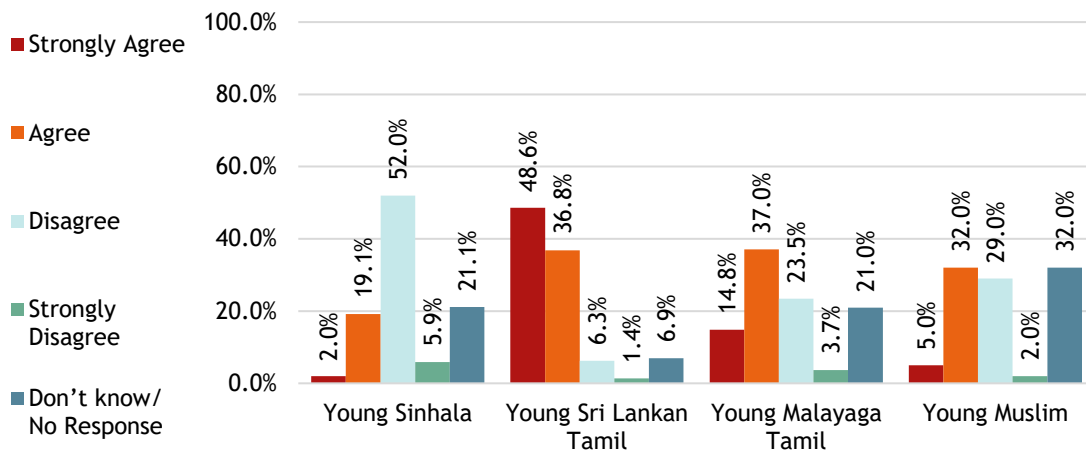


Figure 26: Your ethnic group’s right to obtain information about relatives who disappeared has been ignored by the government - Ethnic breakdown

- The data reveals a vast chasm between perceptions of Sinhala youth about the government’s response to their ethnic groups’ right to know about the fate of those who disappeared, and that of Sri Lankan Tamil youth.

- ❖ Only 2.0% of Sinhala youth strongly agree with the statement, while 48.6% of Sri Lankan Tamil youth strongly agree with the statement. A further 36.8% of Sri Lankan Tamil youth agree with the statement.

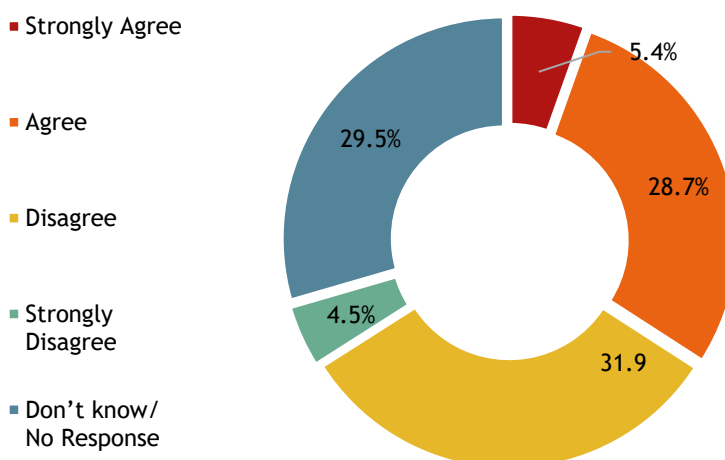


Figure 27: Other ethnic group’s right to obtain information about relatives who disappeared has been ignored by the government - Overall

- When asked whether the government has ignored other ethnic groups' right to obtain information about family members who disappeared due to the war, 5.4% strongly agree while a further 28.7% agree.
- That 29.5% say they don't know about the other community is deeply troubling as it highlights the chasm between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.
- Despite a vast majority of Sri Lankan Tamil youth claiming that the government has ignored their group's right to learn about what happened to those who disappeared during the war, nearly half of Sri Lankan Tamil youth either disagree (36.3%) or strongly disagree (4.7%) that other ethnic group's rights to know about what happened to those who disappeared has been ignored by the government.

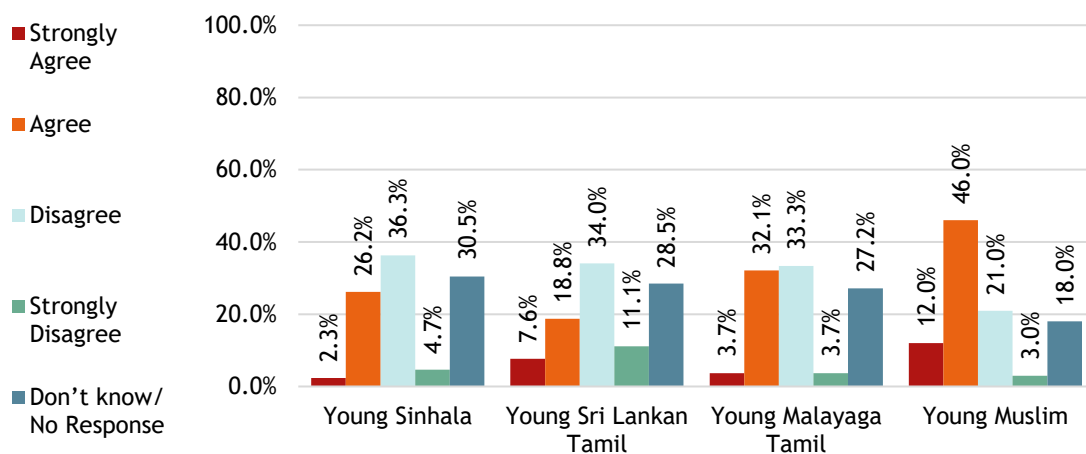


Figure 28: Other ethnic group's right to obtain information about relatives who disappeared has been ignored by the government - Ethnic breakdown

## Conclusion

The findings suggest that there is reasonable space among Sinhala youth to garner greater support for pluralism, by intentionally pushing forward a conversation on providing information to family members on the fate of the disappeared. This may be inferred from the fact that a majority of Sinhala youth in the sample support providing information regarding the disappeared to their loved ones, and are also dismissive of the notion that such an endeavour could be a barrier to inter-ethnic cooperation. However, such moves must be cognizant of the fact that the level of sensitivity among Sinhala youth to the concerns of family members of the disappeared is not as high as among ethnic minority communities. In furthering a conversation demanding that information on the fate of the disappeared be provided to their loved ones, it is imperative that the concerns of Sri Lankan Tamils are made more real to Sinhalese youth, which could raise sensitivity, awareness and support among them for this issue.

The findings also demonstrate the vast chasm between Sinhala youth and Sri Lankan Tamil youth. Firstly, almost a third of the sample claim that they do not know whether the State has ignored the rights of other ethnic groups to obtain information about their loved ones who have disappeared. This speaks to a lack of engagement between youth on issues which are central to the concerns of reconciliation and establishing a more pluralistic society. Secondly, while an overwhelming majority of Sri Lanka Tamil youth strongly insist that the State has ignored their ethnic community's right to obtain information on what happened to the disappeared, it is tragic that only a handful of Sinhala youth in the sample strongly agree that other ethnic groups' right to obtain information about those who disappeared has been ignored by the State. These contrasting experiences suggest that conversations about finding out the fate of the disappeared are alien to Sinhala youth, and therefore precludes them from even recognising that other ethnic groups' rights have been ignored by the State.

Read together the findings indicate that while there is widespread support to provide information about the disappeared to their family member, there is a lack of sensitivity about the experiences of ethnic others among Sinhala youth in the sample. This suggests that while there is space to talk about the ascertaining the fate of the disappeared, this space has not been sufficiently worked on to engender a national consciousness or conversation about providing closure to family members of the disappeared by providing them with the information they so earnestly demand.

# COVID-19

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing cleavages in Sri Lankan society. The pandemic also crystallised and further entrenched deep-rooted inequalities, and prejudices in Sri Lankan society. While acknowledging the tragic impact of the virus on vulnerable groups, this report will focus only on the effects of the virus on the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

Two issues are central to discussions regarding the Muslim community in Sri Lanka during COVID-19. First, as the virus entered the country in March and April 2020, mainstream and social media fueled a narrative framing the Muslim community as being vectors for spreading the virus (Siddiqui & Nozell, 2021). Several news items insinuated that the virus was spreading more rapidly among the Muslim community, suggesting that Muslims and their ways of life posed a health hazard to others. Secondly, the government's decision to mandatorily cremate the bodies of all COVID-19 victims, caused immense grief and angst among the Muslim community, whose religious beliefs require that their dead be buried (Qazi & Thasleem, 2020). When Muslim leaders requested permission to bury their dead, other ethnic groups understood it as Muslim exceptionalism, which privileged Muslim religious beliefs ahead of the health and well-being of the rest of the society.

The ability to be sensitive to the beliefs and practices of other religious groups is central to promoting a pluralistic society. The experience of the Muslim community during COVID-19, provides an useful point of departure for examining on the tolerance of other beliefs in Sri Lankan society.

## Support for religious rights in the context of COVID-19

- “Attention should be given to the funeral rites of all religious groups when making health guidelines related to the COVID pandemic.” This statement was presented to all respondents, and they were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with it.
- The data suggests that a majority of the sample think that attention should be given to funeral rites of all religious groups when drafting health guidelines in the context of the spread of COVID-19.
  - ❖ More than half the sample either strongly agree (37.7%) or agree with the statement (22.1%).



- ❖ However, almost two in five respondents either disagree (25.4%) or strongly disagree (13.8%) that health guidelines relating to funerals in the time of COVID, should pay attention to the funeral rites of all religious groups.

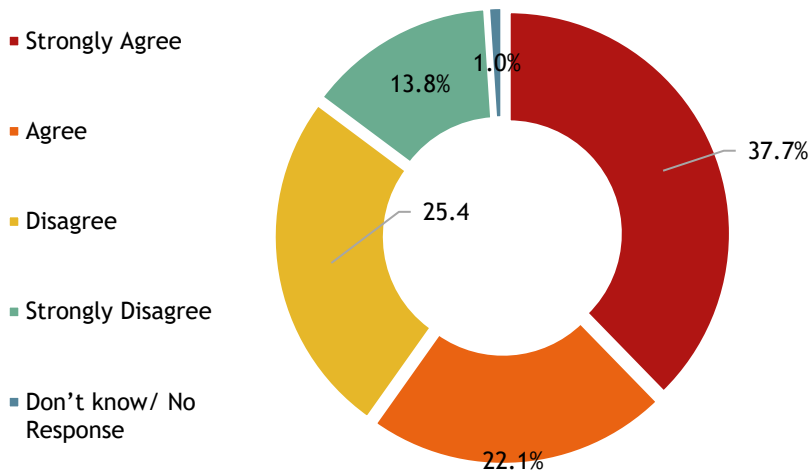


Figure 29: Attention should be given to the funeral rites of all religious groups when making health guidelines related to the COVID pandemic - Overall

- A disaggregation of the data by religion indicates a deep difference in opinion between Muslim and Sinhala youth on this issue.

- ❖ Unsurprisingly, almost all Muslim youth either strongly agree (81.0%) or agree (17.0%) with the statement.
- ❖ In contrast only 11.0% of Sinhala youth strongly agree, while a further 17.7% agree with the statement. Among Sinhala youth, almost three quarter of the sample disagreed (44.1% disagree; 26.4% strongly disagree) that all religious groups sensitivities ought to be considered when drafting health guidelines for funeral rites during the pandemic.

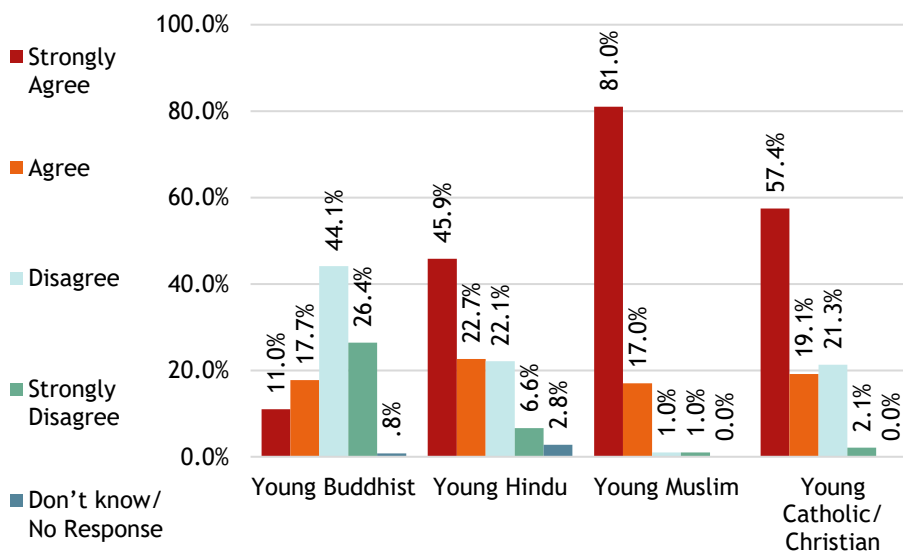


Figure 30: Attention should be given to the funeral rites of all religious groups when making health guidelines related to the COVID pandemic - Ethnic breakdown

- Even though a majority of the sample recognise that all religious groups’ funeral rites should be considered when making health guidelines related to the COVID pandemic, a majority of the sample also agree that “The bodies of all persons who have died because of COVID should be cremated, regardless of religious beliefs.”

- ❖ 62.9% either strongly agree (39.3%) or agree (23.6%) with the statement.

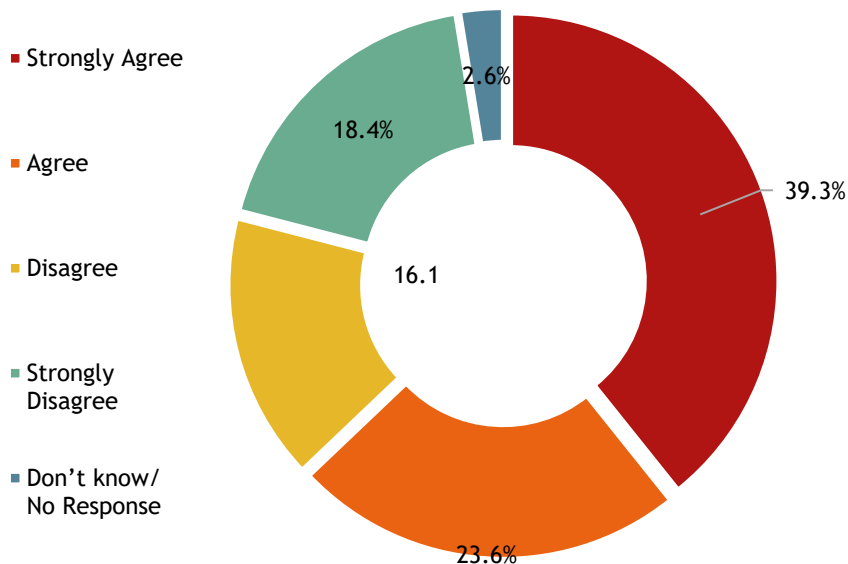


Figure 31: The bodies of all persons who have died because of COVID should be cremated, regardless of religious beliefs - Overall

- The religious disaggregation of this data reveals the extent to which the Muslim community may be isolated during the COVID-19.

- ❖ Among the Muslim youth, 65.0% strongly disagree with cremating the bodies of those who died of COVID-19, while 24.0% disagree with the proposition.

- ❖ In contrast, more than 65% of youth from all other religious groups either agree or strongly agree that the bodies of all persons who died of COVID-19 should be cremated, regardless of religious beliefs.

- 51.2% of Buddhist youth strongly agree with this statement, while a further 33.5% agree to the same.
    - Among the Young Hindu sample 43.1% strongly agree and 26.5% agree. Data among Catholic/ Christian youth (46.8% - strongly agree; 21.3% - agree) is similar to that of Hindu youth.

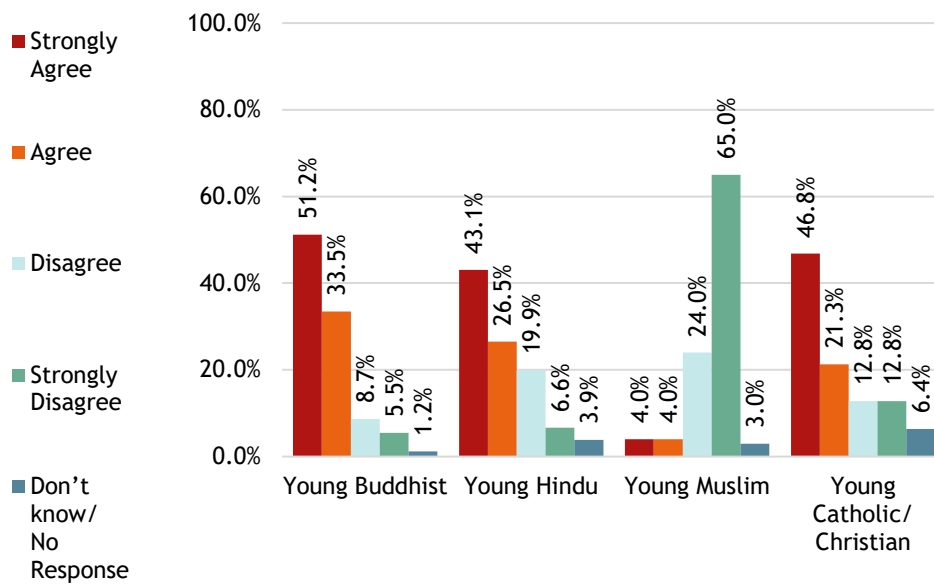


Figure 32: The bodies of all persons who have died because of COVID should be cremated, regardless of religious beliefs - Ethnic breakdown

## Perception of Self's and Other's religious rights in the context of COVID-19

- Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement "The State has unfairly curtailed funeral rites of your religious group because of the COVID pandemic."
  - ❖ Of the total sample, 8.3% claim that they strongly agree, while a further 28.3% state that they agree with the statement.
  - ❖ However, 48.5% of the data disagree that their religious group's funeral rites have been unfairly curtailed by the State.

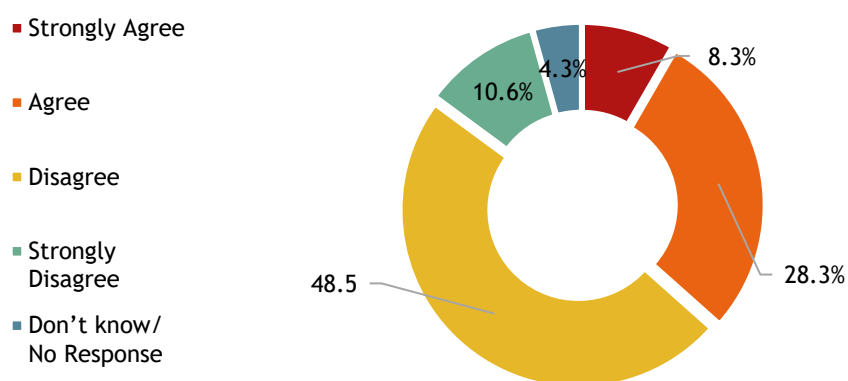


Figure 33: The State has unfairly curtailed funeral rites of your religious group because of the COVID pandemic - Overall

- An analysis of this data by religion demonstrates that far more Muslim youth strongly agree with this statement, compared to all other religious groups.
  - ❖ Whereas 24.0% of Muslim youth strongly agree that the State has unfairly curtailed their religious groups funeral rites in the context of COVID-19, the

corresponding figures for Buddhist youth (2.8%), Hindu youth (7.2%) and Christian or Catholic youth (2.1%) is significantly lower.

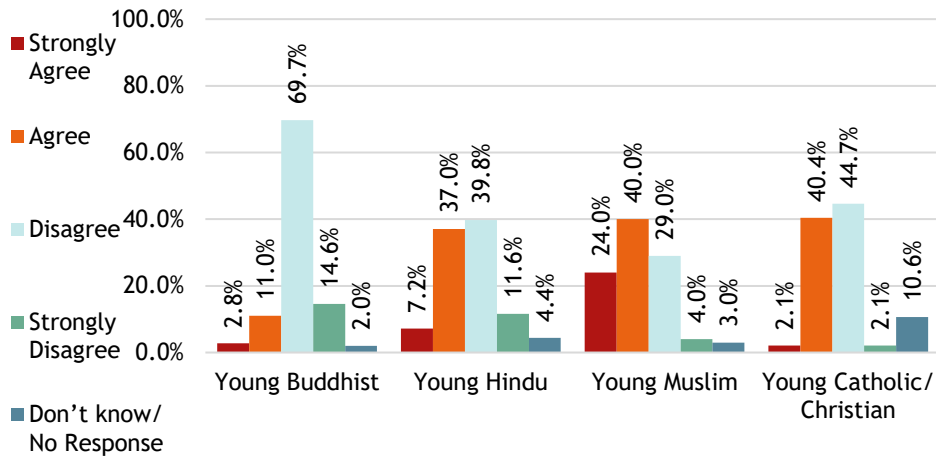


Figure 34: The State has unfairly curtailed funeral rites of your religious group because of the COVID-19 pandemic - Religious breakdown

- A majority of the respondents did not agree with the statement that the State has given other religious groups too much freedom to perform their funeral rites because of COVID 19.
  - ❖ 52.5% disagreed and a further 12.5% strongly disagree that the State has given other religious groups too much freedom to perform their funeral rites because of COVID 19.
  - ❖ However, more than a quarter of the sample also agree with the statement (5.3% - strongly agree; 22.8% agree).

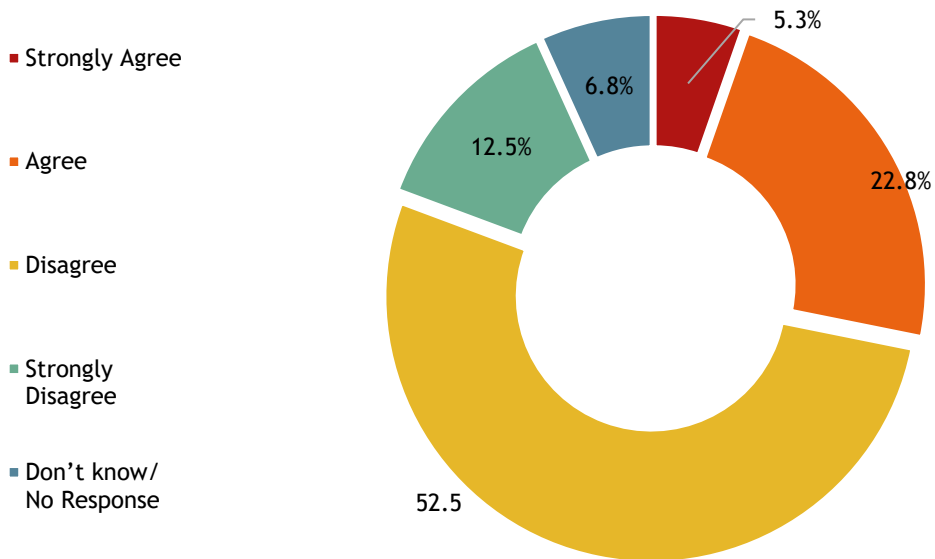


Figure 35: The State has given other religious groups too much freedom to perform their funeral rites because of COVID 19 - Overall

- An analysis of responses to the statement according to religion does not suggest that many youth from religious communities agree that the State gave other groups too much religious freedom to perform their funeral activities.
  - ❖ While 59.0% of Muslim youth disagree with this statement, almost half of youth from all other religious groups also disagree (46.1% - Buddhist youth; 49.7% Hindu youth; 48.9% - Catholic/ Christian youth) that the State gave too much freedom to other religious groups to perform their funeral rites in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

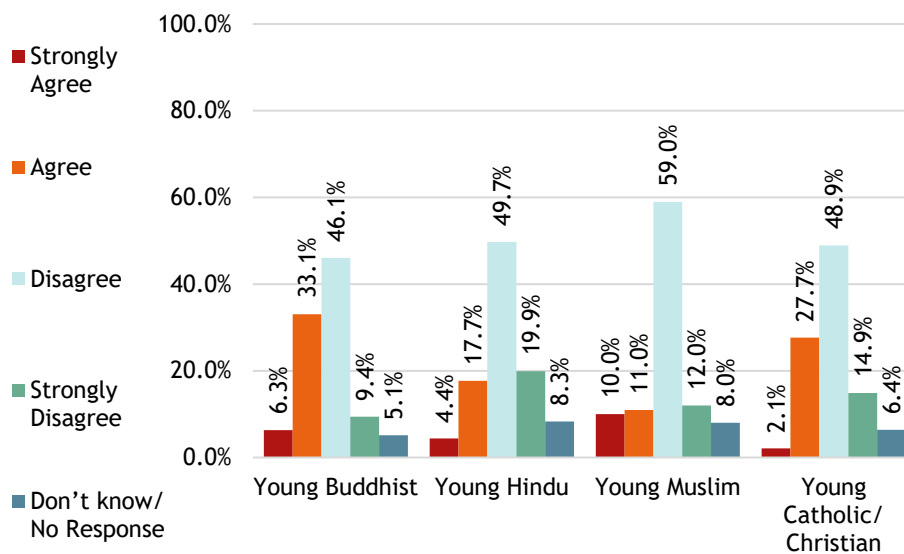


Figure 36: The State has given other religious groups too much freedom to perform their funeral rites because of COVID 19 - Religious breakdown

## Conclusion

Unlike the findings on the right to remember and the right to receive information about the disappeared, there does not appear to be a clear normative framework on attitudes towards funeral rites during COVID-19. Much of the support for respecting rites of religious groups when drafting health guidelines for funerals during COVID-19 is drawn from youth belonging to minority religious groups, particularly Muslim youth. In contrast, among Buddhist youth in the sample, a clear majority is opposed to paying attention to religious beliefs when drafting health guidelines for funeral rites during the pandemic.

The findings also highlight the extent to which the Muslim youth may be isolated in their concerns about the forced cremation of COVID-19 victims. A majority of Muslim youth who participated in the study strongly feel that their funeral rites were unfairly curtailed by the State. Furthermore, while a majority of Muslim youth in the sample strongly disagree that the bodies of all victims of COVID-19 should be cremated regardless of religious beliefs, among all other ethnic a clear majority support the cremation of COVID-19 victims. It

appears that misinformation regarding the health hazards of burying victims of COVID-19 has provided a simplistic justification for many non-Muslim youth to disregard the alleged religious beliefs of the dead, in the interest of ensuring health and wellbeing of the living. This data underscores the challenge of building a pluralistic society, within a social milieu gripped with fear and unable to be tolerant of religious beliefs to different to one's own.

## Conclusion

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The findings of the survey highlight both the possibilities and challenges of promoting a pluralistic Sri Lankan society, in which diversity is celebrated, and all communities feel included. The survey very clearly shows that there is an acceptance of the values of pluralism amongst those who were sampled. There is widespread agreement that the reconciliation process will be beneficial to the country, that all ethnic groups' private land rights should be secured and that all ethnic groups have a right to remember and a right to obtain information on those who disappeared. This suggests that the foundations of a pluralistic society are, to a certain extent at least, already in place within Sri Lankan society.

However, the challenge is how to build a pluralistic society upon such foundations.

1. There are varying levels of support for the values of pluralism presented to the respondents in the survey. Despite the overall acceptance of pluralistic values across all youth, it appears that *more* Sinhala youth held such values *less* strongly than youth from ethnic minority communities. This presents the challenge of garnering greater support for pluralism amongst Sinhala youth.
2. Despite the widespread acceptance of the values of pluralism, the data also demonstrates less willingness to stand by such values when presented with concrete situations. For example, even though an overwhelming majority recognised the duty of the State to protect the private land rights of all ethnic groups in the country, a sizable section of the sample also agreed that it is fair for the Archaeology Department or the military to take over private lands on various grounds. This raises the challenge of strengthening support for pluralistic values to the extent that it also translates into consistently abiding by such values in as many instances as possible.
3. The overall positive assessment of the reconciliation process must be read in conjunction with other questions asked in the questionnaire. Such an endeavour highlights the divergent understandings of what constitutes 'reconciliation' to the different ethnic communities. For example, while a majority of Sinhala youth believe that settling Sinhalese in the North and East will promote greater ethnic co-operation, many minority youth strongly hold the opposite view. This suggests that all individuals and organisations committed to promoting reconciliation must grapple with such differences in opinions regarding the processes and outcomes of the reconciliation process, and also explore new possibilities for reconciling divided communities.

4. The data also shows a breakdown of communication and dialogue between youth from various ethnic communities. On the one hand, a notable proportion of the youth sampled report that they do not know about the situation of other ethnic groups in relation to the right to remember and obtaining information about the disappeared. On the other hand, in some instances while an overwhelming majority of youth from one ethnic group would claim that they have been wronged in specific ways, there would be a relative insensitivity among youth from other ethnic groups to such grievances. This presents the challenge of creating a safe space not only for youth from all ethnic groups to openly articulate their grievances, but also for identifying strategies for deepening empathy towards those who are different among youth from all ethnic communities.
5. The findings on funeral rites in the context of COVID-19 indicates that Muslim youth may be severely isolated from other ethno-religious groups in specific instances. Support for the right to remember and the right to obtain information on the disappeared is appreciably *higher* among non-Muslim youth sampled, compared to their acceptance of considering religious rights to when drafting health guidelines to conduct funeral rites during COVID-19. Furthermore, findings on perceptions of funeral rites and religious rights during COVID-19 indicates a congruence of opinions among Buddhist, Hindu and Christian youth, who are opposed to accepting Muslim religious rights. This is particularly concerning as it confirms that non-Muslim youth may have little tolerance for Muslim religious beliefs and practices. This then presents the challenge of promoting a pluralistic society that celebrates not only ethnic diversity, but also religious diversity.

Therefore, while the survey recognises the many opportunities for individuals, and national and international organisations to intervene to promote a pluralistic Sri Lankan society, the challenges outlined above will necessarily have to be cautiously navigated in order to ensure that existing tensions and concerns are not aggravated, while amplifying the positive impacts of interventions. It is also encouraging that the comparison between 2019 and 2021 data revealed an improvement in support for reconciliation between Sinhala youth on the one hand, and youth from ethnic minorities. Despite the changes that took place at the macro political level where ethno nationalism became part of state policy, the data suggests that at least among the sample of this study there was greater support for reconciliation among the youth. These findings indicate that there is greater recognition of the value of creating harmony among previously divided communities which can be built upon to strengthen respect for pluralist values and practices in society.



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