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Introduction

One could start the story of an insurgent movement with a vignette of the frontline or a first encounter with some enigmatic rebel office. In fact, the deleted text that was once on this page did precisely that. While such an initial vantage point helpfully offers the reader a glimpse of the convoluted ground reality of an emerging state, it also risks depicting these territories as exotic and the author as an adventurous protagonist with privileged up-close knowledge of dangerous outposts. Indiana Jones turning to the camera to look his audience in the eyes one more time, before he enters a land of mystery and peril. To start on this footing would disguise that the depiction of these supposedly quaint and anomalous places derives in part from the peculiarities of international perceptions and from the compromised knowledge curve of people like me who seek to understand insurgencies. Let me therefore not start in Sampur or Omanthai or Jaffna but at the picturesque gardens on the northern outskirts of The Hague.

These parklands are home to the Clingendael Institute. As a junior researcher of the institute – perhaps best described as an academic outboard motor to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs – I had been put on a team of consultants that had been commissioned by a group of aid donors to write a ‘Strategic Conflict Analysis’ about Sri Lanka. It was 2005, and these donors had enthusiastically jumped aboard the bandwagon of the Norwegian-facilitated peace process between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which had started three years prior. However, the process appeared to be going off the rails, and donors were desperate to consider their options. Hence our assignment. Having completed several visits, interviews and consultations in previous months, I was sitting at my desk overlooking the ponds and greenery of the Clingendael estate to write up our report when the

phone rang. In hindsight, my struggle with the interpretative problems around the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka that has become this book started with that phone call.

My team leader Jonathan Goodhand – soon to become a friend and colleague – telephoned from London to coordinate our writing and discuss the remaining gaps in our draft text. One of these concerned the significance of the de facto LTTE state that had emerged in different parts of northeastern Sri Lanka, and which had started to consolidate under the auspices of the peace process. Having spent some time in LTTE-controlled territory doing field research for my master's thesis and for various applied assignments, I had gained some credibility on this topic in the Colombo expat circuit, or so I thought anyway. Due to security regulations and diplomatic protocol, employees of embassies and international agencies were confined to official vehicles and orchestrated visits to offices or field sites – wandering around LTTE-controlled areas or sleeping over in villages was a no-go for them. I told Jonathan I would get on with writing a few paragraphs on the implications of the LTTE's institutional landscape, with the breezing can-do confidence of a young, ambitious professional. But when I hung up and opened a new word document, I found myself ferreting for the right idiom.

It was widely known among activists, journalists, aid workers, academics and diplomats working in Sri Lanka that the LTTE had moved from a rudimentary taxation and policing regime to a more elaborate governing framework with an array of departments. Most of us had driven out to the Vanni, the primary site of the LTTE's sovereign experiment, to visit offices and shake hands with LTTE officials. The movement presented itself like a state, and the Norwegian peace facilitators appeared to treat them accordingly, but we all seemed to agree that this was not, you know, a real state. After all, it had no legal status or diplomatic recognition, and while the Tamil cause clearly had some legitimacy, the LTTE had a track record of violence and intolerance. Moreover, this supposed Tamil state was rife with overlaps and ambiguities. The tentacles of the Sri Lankan state continued to function in its territories. The provincial council, a state body that purported to give the Tamil-dominated regions a degree of autonomy, had effectively been pulled into the LTTE's orbit. Government teachers, nurses and bureaucrats went about their work in LTTE areas. The supposed subjects of the Tamil homeland exercised their franchise in Sri Lankan elections. If Tamil Eelam was a de facto state, it was a murky one; one with blurry boundaries and Janus-faced entities. LTTE offices in the Vanni were the talk of the town in Colombo, precisely because they were *not* normal but nonetheless presented and treated as if they were. And because of that unsettled character, nobody knew what would come next. The transformation towards a recognised state? A federal framework? A complete collapse? A new

twist with another unanticipated fissure? This was real-time historiography, and it read like a page-turner.

Institutions abounded in the convoluted political landscape of northeastern Sri Lanka, but what they actually did, on whose instructions and on what legal basis was often ambiguous. This book sets out to navigate this apparent institutional jungle and the associated discursive double binds. It is concerned with understanding the LTTE, a movement that has attracted lots of attention but little thorough scholarly study. However, my analysis places the movement within the larger historical trajectory of Tamil nationalist politics: the contestation before the armed insurgency (the political contentions from which the movement emerged), the contestation in parallel to it (alternative and rival enactments of Tamil nationalism) and the contestation that continued afterwards (the struggles of Tamil nationalism in the LTTE's void after its military defeat in 2009). In particular, I am interested in the interaction between the parallel trajectory of armed separatism and the North-Eastern Provincial Council (NEPC), an entity created under Indian duress to accommodate Tamil nationalist aspirations within Sri Lanka's democratic framework.

The political order around Tamil separatist aspirations poses an interpretative dilemma: representing the affected institutions as what they are *supposed* to be (based on their legal underpinnings) yields a skewed, if not plain misleading, picture because these underpinnings are themselves embattled. Conversely, describing institutions as what they *claim* to be (the aspirations projected in propaganda) yields an overly naïve, and equally misleading, rendition. Both approaches raise moral dilemmas around the validating effects of categorisation. After all, the difference between recognised sovereign states and other political actors is fundamental to the way we understand the world. States pass laws, other actors make up rules; states levy tax, other actors extort money; states exercise a legitimate monopoly of violence, other actors engage in unlawful intimidation, thuggery or terrorism; states impart sovereignty by recognising other states, non-state armed actors implicate the parties they engage with. Framing the institutions studied in this book as a State, as a state, as a 'state', as a state with prefixes (pseudo-, quasi-, de facto), a state-in-the-making or not a state at all is not a minor question of categorisation. For the people I describe in this book, rather more was at stake than for me, struggling to find the right words for a donor report. What we render these institutions to be is central to the ethno-political conflict in Sri Lanka. Blindly adopting LTTE propaganda raises both analytical and moral problems, but using the framework of the Sri Lankan state, the constitution and its democratic system to understand this embattled political landscape would miss the point. These supposed foundations are the concepts that are violently placed in question.

Rebel governance, violent democracy and everyday life amidst war

This challenge is not new. Many scholars have attended to forms of order and authority that exist beyond and in overlap with the state. The three bodies of work that stand out respectively focus on wartime order and rebel governance, violent politics within democratic arenas and the everyday lived realities of civil war.

The first body of work emerged as a response to debates of the 1990s which left the inadequate impression that societies experiencing war are zones of anarchy, barbarism and state failure. There is logic and order in civil war, these authors countered, even if it diverges from the good governance handbook. A first wave of interventions coined terms like ‘mediated state’ (Menkhaus 2006), ‘hybrid order’ (Boege et al. 2009) and ‘political marketplace’ (De Waal 2009), ‘warscape’ (Korf, Engeler and Hagman 2010) and a welter of interventions around the term ‘hybridity’ (Egnell and Haldén 2013; Justin and Verkoren 2022; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2016; Meagher 2012). These terms are good to think with, but they often remain fluid. The word *hybridity* highlights that things are mixed up, but without further operationalisation it tells us little about why and how that is the case.

The growing literature on rebel governance addresses this concern by delineating the mechanisms and institutions that insurgent movements and de facto states use to govern the territories and populations under their control (Arjona 2016; Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly 2015; Caspersen 2012; Hoffman and Verweijen 2019; Huang 2016; Mampilly and Stewart 2021; Staniland 2014). Some of this research touches on the LTTE (Mampilly 2011; Provost 2021; Stokke 2006; Terpstra and Frerks 2018). This scholarship describes how insurgent movements impose rules on the civilian population, establish a police and judiciary to uphold them, enforce loyalty, levy taxes, recruit cadres and foster legitimacy through minimal forms of service provision. Some insurgencies go to great lengths to establish an institutional mode of governing that resembles bureaucratic order. Part of this literature is so preoccupied with specifying and categorising the logics of insurgent rule that it appears to underemphasise the political energy vested in these practices. After all, the relentless efforts by insurgents to project a sense of normalcy coexists with their unruliness. Insurgent rule is often experienced as transgressive, spectacular, captivating and capricious. There is almost invariably a lingering anticipation of violence – how sure can one be that an armed movement sticks to its own rules?

The second body of work – on political strongmen, thuggery, mafia practices and violent democratic politics – is centrally preoccupied with

this abstruse coalescence of governable order and unruly capacities for violence. Many political figures straddle the divide between electoral politics and transgressive violence, between state governance and the networks of informality, patronage and corruption. And this transversal character is no political liability to them; it is what they derive their political relevance from. Effective politicians bend or break the rules, and though this is widely perceived as a dirty business, it is what many people understand 'normal politics' to be (Arias and Goldstein 2010; Bratton and Van de Walle 1994; Hagmann and Péclard 2010; Lund 2006), not least in South Asia (Breman 1974; Byrne and Klem 2015; Chandra 2004; Chowdhury 2003; Das and Poole 2004; Fuller and Bénèi 2009; Gupta 1995; Klem and Suykens 2018; Spencer 2007; Vaishnav 2017; Witsoe 2013). Political strongmen are capable of unleashing violence, and this ferocity fosters an aura of potency (Berenschot 2011; Hansen 1999, 2001; Michelutti 2010; Michelutti et al. 2018; Peabody 2009; Singh 2012; Suykens 2018; Tambiah 1996). Mafia-like leaders, parties, vigilantes, criminal networks – or some combination thereof – may impose rules, extract resources and enforce loyalty (Malik 2018; Michelutti et al. 2018; Piliavsky 2014a; Price and Ruud 2014; A. Sen 2007). They become 'de facto sovereign' (Hansen and Stepputat 2005, 2006).

This literature offers conceptual inspiration for studying the contested political landscapes of civil war, but there is an important distinction: while some of the de facto sovereigns of 'Mafia Raj' (Michelutti et al. 2018) develop a degree of autonomy, there is no aspiration to be sovereign in the sense of establishing a recognised independent state. The parasitism on state institutions is not a make-do practice in the transition towards a formal sovereign status; it is – and it remains – central to the whole strongman pursuit. This is different for insurgencies that pursue revolutionary, religious or separatist objectives of fundamentally reconstituting the state. South Asia is rife with such movements, as is evident from dedicated studies of the Maoists movement in Nepal (Gellner 2007; Lecomte-Tilouine 2013), the Naxalites (Kunnath 2012; Shah 2019), uprisings in northeast India (Baruah 2007) and cross-cutting and comparative work (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2009; Sen and Pratten 2008; Staniland 2014). Many of these movements adopt some of the above strongman practices, but they combine them with the establishment of proto-state institutions to advance an ideological aspiration that fundamentally challenges the state. Although the distinction between political strongmen and separatist militants matters, it would be a mistake to erect an epistemic wall between societies at war and purportedly peaceful societies and study political contestation in both universes as fundamentally distinct phenomena.

The third strand of literature ponders the lived experiences of the supposed subjects of competing claimants to sovereign power. This scholarship may be rubricated as the anthropology of war (Duschinski et al. 2018; Kelly 2008; Lubkemann 2008; Pettygrew 2013; Richards 2004; Spencer 2007; S. Thiranagama 2011), but similar insights may be gleaned from cognate fields like critical international relations and geography (Brubaker 2004; Cockburn and Zarkov 2002; Hasbullah and Korf 2013; Kirsch and Flint 2011; Stern 2005; Sylvester 2011, 2013). The defining feature of this literature is that it takes society's everyday reality as the primary analytical vantage point. It brackets the master narratives of war and asks how people understand and navigate the reality of war as it manifests in their lives. This perspective interrogates the divide between war and peace and highlights the manifold forms of normalcy that persist amidst a violent insurgency.¹ People go to school, work their lands, get a job, get married, celebrate religious events and so on (Kelly 2008; Pettygrew 2013; Sur 2021; Sylvester 2011; Walker 2013). More pertinent for the focus of this book, this also means that an insurgency does not simply shrug aside the institutions, hierarchies, subjectivities and authorities that exist in a society. These social, cultural, religious or economic forms of order may coexist, overlap, complicate or challenge governing attempts by an insurgent movement.

The rich anthropological scholarship of Sri Lanka's civil war offers many examples of this. There are ethnographies of wartime Hindu temples (Maunaguru and Spencer 2013; Whitaker 1997), social kinship and caste structures (McGilvray 2008), women's social activism (Walker 2013), inter-ethnic irrigation management (Gaasbeek 2010; Hasbullah and Geiser 2019), the transnational engagement by diaspora (Amarasingam 2015; Fuglerud 1991) and the lived experience of violence that persists in society (Daniel 1996). Sharika Thiranagama's work (2010, 2011) is perhaps most illuminating with regard to how social subjectivities, and associated institutions and hierarchies, transformed amidst the political landscape of the Tamil insurgency. She shows that the Tamil militancy constructed different kinds of life and death for different kinds of people: heroic lives and martyred deaths for cadres, precarious docility for Tamil civilians, ruthless eradication for traitors and coercive eviction for non-Tamils (S. Thiranagama 2010). Ultimately, war transforms all subjectivities, not just those associated with ethnicity. Larger political transformations are thus inevitably tied up with more personal contentions of gender, generation, caste, class, locality and ideology. And by consequence, the postwar predicament is one where personal and collective identities have to be negotiated anew because pre-war subjectivities have been irreversibly affected and wartime identities lose their grip.

This book contributes to each of these three scholarly fields by studying the evolution of Tamil nationalist politics – the aspiration of Tamil self-government – from the conceptual vantage point of performative politics. As discussed ahead, this enables me to place political institutions (and the tussles over their legitimacy and legality) in the context of everyday practices and experiences. Rather than delineating rebel governance as a discrete phenomenon, my analysis highlights the interactions and overlaps with parallel repertoires of order and authority, including those of caste and clan strictures, bureaucratic hierarchies and party politics. And as such, the book highlights the longevity of institutional practices. The repertoires of order and authority that we observe during civil war have antecedents that preceded the war and ramifications that outlast it.

A performative perspective on separatist insurgency

The literatures cited earlier offer helpful analytical perspectives and analogies to explore the institutional manifestations of Tamil separatism. However, they do not resolve the analytical dilemma around a movement that pursues a sovereign status but lacks a legal foundation, a democratic mandate and international recognition. It acts like a state but is not one. As discussed at the outset, this leaves us with an interpretative problem because much of our analytical idiom is conjugated with the language of the state. I will adopt a performative perspective to grapple with this problem. More concretely, this book will approach the pursuit of Tamil nationalist aspirations as contentious enactments of political order through the practices of politicians, bureaucrats, insurgents, community leaders, voters and other participants of political life that enter the scene. This does not resolve the ‘to be or not to be’ dilemma around the state or non-state status of Tamil separatist activities; instead, it usefully places that unsettledness at the heart of the analysis.

A performative perspective helps us see that the manifestation of the state in people’s everyday experience can diverge rather dramatically from the formal design of the state’s institutional apparatus. This is especially true in a South Asian context, where everybody knows that politics does not stick to the supposed bounds (Chatterjee 2004; Klem and Suykens 2018; Michelutti et al. 2018; Piliavsky 2014a; Ruud 2009). Legally mandated institutions can be rendered politically impotent, while informal institutions without a legal basis can become powerful political platforms. A government department may be responsible for administering the allocation of roads, schools or hospitals, but political patrons may wrest that role from them when they impose themselves

as public benefactor. Government prerogatives may be decentralised to peripheral regions, but the ability to action these prerogatives may continue to reside in the capital. Such cunning and trickery is widely perceived as 'normal' South Asian politics, but it becomes particularly significant in a context where duplicity and transgression are not just about the distribution of government resources but about the shape of the sovereign arrangement at large. When an insurgent movement initiates its own set of state institutions or co-opts existing ones, it makes little sense to premise our analysis on an institutional diagram with formal governance structures.

Instead, we need to focus on how political institutions, irrespective of their legal mandate, are enacted. Political anthropologists (Geertz 1980; Gilmartin 2012; Hansen 2009; Hocart 1941 [1927]; D. Rutherford 2012) have underlined that the organised spectacle, symbolic repertoires and the mystification of courts and kings should not be understood as accessories that obfuscate an otherwise rational core of the state; rather, they *are what the state is*.² This is perhaps most evident in the way bureaucratic institutions persistently churn out displays of orderly categorisation and procedure to grapple with the rather more unruly power dynamics that continuously percolate their work (Amarasuriya 2010; Bear and Mathur 2015; Das and Poole 2004; Gupta 2012; Hansen 2009; Hull 2012a, 2012b; Jeffrey 2013; Klem 2012; Mathur 2015). Importantly, institutional performance can have both validating or invalidating effects: it may bestow institutions with power, significance and legitimacy, or display impotence, precarity, demise and humiliation.

A performative perspective on political institutions dislodges the official frameworks that purport to direct state operations. Instead, it uses a theatrical idiom to describe how the meaning and significance of state institutions are continuously reproduced through citational practice (Weber 1995), mimicry (Bhabha 1994) and institutional bricolage (Douglas 1970). While some of these dynamics operate at the mundane level of everyday routines and are perhaps best described as institutional *practice*, others have much more theatrical qualities and involve institutional *performance* with an identifiable stage, script and audience. The perspective of performative politics has many intellectual parents, including not only the political anthropologists cited above but also Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical conception of everyday life and Butler's (1990) notion of performativity. Several recent interventions have applied these ideas to political movements that contest the state, in contexts as diverse as Tibet (McConnell 2016), Western Sahara (Alice Wilson 2016), Cyprus (Bryant and Hatay 2020) and Turkey (Watts 2010). Related work focuses on the performative efforts manifest in peace accords and post-accord state-building.³ Given the close resonance with my own analysis, I will discuss these contributions in some detail.

Fiona McConnell's (2016) account of the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGiE) conceptualises the administration around the Dalai Lama in northern India as a 'dress rehearsal' for a state to come. She uses concepts like scene-setting, stage, playwright, cast, script and audience to describe how this exiled administration replicates state-like conduct while grappling with the challenges of a mobile diasporic population, the lack of international recognition and the inability to operate in the Chinese-occupied Tibetan homeland. Because of its protracted liminality, questions of veracity and fakery hang over the TGiE's performative practices like the sword of Damocles, but it is partly from this precarity and uncertainty that they derive their meaning. Even when the prospects of performing an actual recognised state become ever dimmer, the practice of rehearsing a state-to-come produces tangible effects, McConnell argues. It instils legitimacy, erects a screen for national aspirations and gives material shape to the political theology around the Dalai Lama, the administration's holy playwright. A very similar line of reasoning – though without a saintly monarchic figure in plum-coloured robes – may be found in Alice Wilson's (2016) book on the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a government in exile linked to Polisario that aspires a separate state in Western Sahara.

Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay (2020) theorise the anomaly of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) as an 'aporetic state', an aspirational entity that is riven by irresolvable contradictions. Referring to the TRNC's institutions as *de facto* presents them as both real and not real; it simultaneously acknowledges and denies them as fact. They factually exist, but they are perceived as made-up and thus factitious. They comprise a performance of state conduct that emphasises its own provisional status, and by exhibiting this quality of still being in-the-making – a condition of being incomplete or stuck – such performances question their own veracity. While this is especially salient in the TRNC, Bryant and Hatay underline that this contingency of status is inherent to sovereignty. The performance of sovereignty requires an audience to validate its credibility, to confer recognition, but no matter how convincing the performance, sovereignty always remains contingent and incomplete. Its purported end state is endlessly deferred.

For the Kurdish political parties in Turkey that Nicole Watts (2010) describes, this deferral takes place in a more repressive setting. The Turkish republic affords minimal legal and political margins, but Kurdish parties participate in elections and assume governing responsibilities in Kurdish-majority provinces. Watts argues that these parties entered office to use Turkish state bodies as loudspeakers for Kurdish nationalism and to project an alternative governmentality. They engaged in 'as-if politics' (a term she draws from Wedeen [1999]) but then applies in a more subaltern manner) to nurture

Kurdish subjectivity and undermine Turkish authority. The stakes of these subaltern strategies were high. As-if politics gave oxygen to the Kurdish struggle, but many of the protagonists faced state retribution and imprisonment.

The approach taken in this book builds on these accounts, though the contexts of a government in exile (TGiE, SADR), a consolidated de facto state (TRNC) and cross-border separatism (Turkish Kurdistan) are quite different. The performative perspective that these authors take helpfully addresses the problematic binaries of state versus non-state, real recognised sovereignty versus aspirational sovereignty. As becomes clear from these books, a performative lens defies the implied opposition between performance and reality. It does *not* view performance as *real* persons who enact *fictional* characters to stage an *imaginary* script which is then interpreted back to reality by *real* people in the audience. Rather, the point of a performative perspective is to deliberately side-step the question of veracity and explore the effects of staged practices. It assumes an inter-subjective reality: meaning and knowledge of ourselves and the world around us are continuously reproduced through the citational practice of discourse. Performance is simultaneously an interpretation of social reality and a part of it.

Interpreting the institutional efforts of an insurgency in performative terms, therefore, does not imply affirmation of whatever act is being staged. This is important for normative reasons, lest my account of Tamil nationalist politics be misunderstood for a Tamil nationalist account.⁴ But it also has analytical dimensions: an approach that is overly preoccupied with insurgent performativity could fall prey to a form of fetishism that elides the contingent and precarious nature of these efforts. Insurgent performance is not a stand-alone phenomenon that is isolated from the world by the parameters of the stage. It interacts with diverse audiences and rivals, and it is situated in a political landscape of armed conflict that shapes the bandwidth of what can be credibly performed. To understand the performative efforts of an insurgency, we need to look beyond the phenomenon itself because it involves off-stage coercion and violence to keep performances and audiences in check and ward off competition. Moreover, it derives meaning from other junctures in space and time. It involves citational practice and mimicry of previous or contending repertoires. It competes and overlaps with the efforts of state institutions. The trappings of the state can be turned into platforms of agitation, and the language and institutions of the state can be redeployed for a contrarian political project. The state's technology of power, to use a Foucauldian phrase, comprises dual use technology; insurgent movements may co-opt or replicate the state apparatus for contrarian sovereign ends.

Argument and contribution

This study explores how the Tamil nationalist movement in Sri Lanka has enacted, imposed, contested, reworked, flipped and erased the institutions of legitimate government. It juxtaposes divergent enactments of sovereignty, which unfold both in competition and partial overlap with each other. The LTTE's attempt to establish an incipient Tamil state was the most pronounced example, but in parallel to this, the NEPC enacted a hampered form of shared sovereignty, and Tamil political parties projected nationalist aspirations from within the democratic arena. The frictions, stand-offs and amalgamations between these assertions of sovereignty decisively shaped the history of conflict in Sri Lanka and the dynamics of Tamil nationalism. The 2009 end of the war marked the defeat of the LTTE state and the triumph of a singular Sri Lankan sovereignty while the notion of shared sovereignty – along with what remained of the provincial councils – was left to crumble. This watershed moment profoundly reconfigured Tamil nationalist politics, but the contradictions and overlaps continued, albeit in different ways.

Focusing on the way sovereign aspirations are staged, dramatised and publicly consumed helps us see how political dynamics can transgress, undermine or reverse the institutional logics of the democratic landscape. Political performativity has the capacity to unmoor the foundational premises of the state. It can bolster (or undercut) the potency and legitimacy of a state institution; it can serve to re-enact that institution for contrarian ends; and it can instil insurgent institutions with the potency and legitimacy to supplant those of the state. Transgression and violence are a central element of these contentious political repertoires. By implication, the political performativity that I describe is often precarious. Political authority can unravel, sometimes with breathtaking speed: scripts may take an unexpected turn, the curtain may fall more quickly than anticipated, protagonists may be killed, valorising drama can degenerate into a farce or a mockery, it can fall prey to satire.

My basic contention in this book is that we need to understand separatist militancy as an arena of contingent political performance. Rather than assuming that institutions are constructed on legal foundations, we must consider them as aspirational enactments capable of establishing legitimacy, which may grow legal roots afterwards. Questions around the veracity and authenticity of insurgent institutions remain unadjudicated because of the violent contingencies around these performative efforts. This ambivalence accounts for the political energy around the insurgent experimentation with sovereign rule: the awe, excitement, perturbation and anxiety. More specifically, I argue that the trajectory of

Tamil separatist politics in Sri Lanka comprises several competing repertoires, including the sovereign experiment of the LTTE, but also the institutional forms of a compromised Tamil bureaucracy and the performativity of Tamil political parties. Each of these efforts entailed contingent and precarious performance, and as such they experienced moments of buoyancy, spectacle and triumph as well as rupture and defeat. And as their fortunes changed over the course of the conflict, the repertoires of Tamil separatism shifted vessel, some performative spaces expanded, while others were overrun, and this required new forms of improvisation, self-moderation or regained prowess.

This argument broadly corroborates the existing performative accounts of sovereign aspirants, including governments in exile (McConnell 2016; Alice Wilson 2016), *de facto* states (Bryant and Hatay 2020) and ethno-nationalist militancy (Watts 2010). My analysis expands the focus from the insurgent state performance itself to other Tamil nationalist endeavours, which existed before, alongside and after the LTTE militancy. The trajectory of the conflict is not confined to the rise and fall of the LTTE militancy; it encompasses tensions, overlaps and bricolage between performances of Tamil aspirations, which are subject to mutual encroachment and dissociation, erasure and reassemblage, legacies and rival heirs. The temporal span of this book also adds an important dimension to the extant scholarship. The potential of rupture or defeat is firmly present in the existing accounts but primarily as a continuously deferred threat: the North Cypriot state is incomplete (Bryant and Hatay 2020), the Tibetan government is constantly aware of its possible downfall (McConnell 2016), Kurdish politics entails a continuous cat-and-mouse dynamic with state repression (Watts 2010). In this book, the ruptures of sovereign erasure, through the 2009 defeat of the LTTE, stand at the heart of the analysis. It is in the wake of this watershed moment that the Tamil nationalist repertoires beyond the LTTE gained new traction and significance. Tamil performative experimentation did not end with the war; it changed vessel and form.

The empirical narrative presented in this book is based on multi-sited and multi-scaler qualitative fieldwork conducted over a period of twenty years. Perspectives are drawn from the everyday encounters in public space, workaday engagement with state officials, discussions with political figures at all scales, from village-level organisers to party leaders, peace envoys and presidents. The four main pillars undergirding this book are long-term fieldwork around the village Sampur in the east coast district of Trincomalee; ethnographic research on the provincial council apparatus in the east and north; fieldwork on several election campaigns; and a cluster of interviews and archival analysis on the Norwegian-facilitated peace process.⁵ These methods are subject to limitations, and they harbour dilemmas around the interpretation, representation and

attribution of sources.⁶ However, they derive strength from the interconnections between diverse empirical strands and a sustained engagement over a long period of time.

Organisation

This book is organised into a conceptual discussion (Chapter 2), followed by four empirical chapters and a conclusion. The empirical part starts out with the rise and fall of the LTTE's sovereign experiment (Chapter 3). The three subsequent chapters study Tamil nationalist struggles in the wake of the 2009 LTTE defeat, through village-level scuffles over socio-cultural delineations of Tamil purity (Chapter 4), manoeuvring and realignment within the provincial bureaucracy (Chapter 5) and attempts by Tamil political parties to project a nationalism for which there was no space in the postwar democratic order (Chapter 6).

More specifically, Chapter 2 addresses the foundational challenges of interpreting separatist politics. It builds on the recent literature on sovereignty, and it offers a more thorough discussion of the qualities and merits of a performative perspective on separatist experimentation. It also offers rudimentary contextual and historical background: Sri Lanka's troubled engagement with the notion of shared sovereignty as a proposed antidote to ethno-nationalist conflict and the escalation from conflict into war.

Chapter 3 comprises the empirical mounting block for the rest of the book. It builds on observations in LTTE-controlled territory to describe how the movement became a de facto sovereign formation that mimicked the state. It highlights the tensions and paradoxes inherent to this endeavour. LTTE rule was simultaneously orderly and capricious: alongside its state-like institutions and procedures, it nurtured a cult of violence, with the *talaivar* (leader) as its supreme referent. In parallel to the creation of its own institutions, the LTTE engaged in sovereign encroachment through fuzzy boundaries, institutional overlap and tactical restraint. The chapter goes on to show how the Norwegian-facilitated peace process of the 2000s offered the LTTE a conduit to elevate its sovereign mimicry to the international stage, thus eliciting an implied international recognition and parity of status with the Sri Lankan government. The spectacle of this Tamil state-to-be captivated many foreign observers. The LTTE's ability to act on the international stage was facilitated by the Norwegian mediators preserving the appearance of symmetry in the peace talks. However, when the peace process started to disintegrate, this apparent symmetry was overrun by the staunch asymmetries in the prevalent policy outlooks in Delhi,

Washington and elsewhere. The LTTE continued to project a Tamil state-to-be, but due to the change in context, its performative efforts lost their authoritative charm and in fact came dangerously close to being perceived as a farce.

Chapter 4 conceptualises the 2009 defeat of the LTTE as a moment of sovereign erasure. It studies postwar Sampur, which was reduced to rubble when the military wrested it from the LTTE and subsequently became an inaccessible military zone. The chapter explores the common local reference to Sampur as a 'pure Tamil' place, and it describes how the residents struggled to reconstitute this purity after their return in 2015 – a prism for postwar Tamil society at large. This struggle harbours cultural disorientation and moral panic amidst *intra*-Tamil divisions of caste and *kudi* (clan): struggles over unwanted mixture and purification that Tamil militants had denounced but which came up again after the war.

Chapter 5 highlights the remarkable pliability of state institutions by showing how the NEPC was first staged as a moderated form of Tamil government instigated by India, then became a politically beheaded bureaucratic entity that was gradually drawn into the LTTE's orbit and finally emerged as a site for competing efforts of staging political normalcy after the war. The heart of the chapter comprises an ethnographic study of postwar administrative life in the Eastern Provincial Council (now de-merged from the north). I illustrate how the tenacity of this entity centres on the bureaucratic inclination to try and keep politics out. Ironically, this contradicts the purported role of the councils as a lesser form of Tamil self-determination. What was conceived as a platform of shared sovereignty with significant powers and law-making competencies has evolved into a truncated channel for the distribution of state resources in pursuit of balanced regional development. As a result, the provincial councils are institutionally resilient but politically impotent.

Chapter 6 looks at postwar positioning of Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK), the foremost Tamil political party. ITAK suffered from political schizophrenia: it pitted itself against Sri Lanka's democratic framework but simultaneously participated in it. To grapple with this contradiction, I posit, ITAK resorted to three anti-political repertoires: oath-of-allegiance politics, political abstinence and the politics of performing institutional deficiency. Bereft of recourse to the LTTE's sovereign experiment and faced with growing competition within the Tamil political arena, these anti-political repertoires came under severe strain. ITAK's schizophrenic challenges culminated in the spectacular breakdown of the Northern Provincial Council, which ceased to function in the final year of its term due to ruptures within the Tamil nationalist coalition.

The final chapter recapitulates my findings and draws overall conclusions.

Notes

- 1 The question of normalcy has spawned some debate on the interpretative place of violence – to emphasise or de-emphasise it, to normalise or abnormalise it. In response to Nordstrom (1997, 2004), who apporions a crucial role to violence in her ethnography, Lubkemann takes issue with the presumed ‘hegemony of violence’ and proposes to consider ‘war as a social condition’ (2008: 12–15), thus highlighting the centrality of local struggles, which may interact with the wide dynamics of war but are no derivative of it. In a similar vein, Richards (1996, 2004: 11) argues that war ‘needs to be understood in terms of the patterns of violence already embedded in society’. Partly as a result of that, the spatial and temporal demarcations of war and peace are often fuzzy and contested: many people find themselves in the social condition of ‘no war, no peace’ (Richards 2004).
- 2 In parallel, and closer to home for the Westphalian state order, post-structural interpretations of the state have gained currency (Abrams 1988 [1977]; Foucault 1997; Mitchell 1991).
- 3 Jeffrey’s (2013) account of the civil servants in post-accord Bosnia Hercegovina studies how bureaucrats (and other state officers) ‘improvise’ state sovereignty, as they navigate the compromised nature of the new-born state, the competing nationalist forces and the continued presence of international overlordship. See also Dixon’s (2019) work for a performative angle on front- and backstage politics around the Northern Irish peace process.
- 4 I endeavour to take Tamil nationalist positions seriously and to question state-centric perspectives of sovereignty. In Sri Lanka’s embattled discursive landscape, this could easily be interpreted as a political stance. My interest, however, is not to advocate Tamil nationalism or separatism (as should be clear from the many instances where I critically interrogate the Tamil nationalist project) but rather to analyse it as a phenomenon in its own right.
- 5 This book draws on a sequence of research engagement over the last two decades, and as such the data gathering evolved in parallel to my own academic maturation. More specifically, the data gathering process started – in hindsight – with six months fieldwork for my master’s thesis in Trincomalee and Jaffna in 2000–2001. The next major effort comprised my doctoral research in different parts of eastern Sri Lanka, including Trincomalee (about six months over the period 2007–2011). A third significant portion of fieldwork was undertaken as part of a Swiss-funded project on settlement politics in eastern Sri Lanka, where I mainly focused on Sampur (during visits of several weeks in 2013, 2015 and 2016). The final effort, which has retrospectively shaped this book as a whole (and Chapter 5 in particular), was an Australian-funded project focused on Sri Lanka’s provincial councils. This involved an effort of institutional ethnography among provincial bureaucrats and took place in 2018 and 2019. In addition, one applied research project significantly contributed to this book:

the evaluation of Norwegian peace efforts commissioned by the Norwegian government (2010–2011), which offered my colleagues and me unrivalled access to the highest levels of government in Sri Lanka, Norway, India and elsewhere, as well as access to classified Norwegian archives. Finally, I gathered material during event-driven visits – notably after the tsunami in 2005 and for the first-ever Northern Provincial Council elections in 2013 – as well as during applied research assignments when I worked for the Clingendael Institute, a think-tank in The Hague (from 2004 to 2006).

- 6 There are significant methodological challenges and limitations. I was unable to speak with many key figures (including some of the senior LTTE leaders), and I did not have access to some of the most significant occurrences of the war (most obviously the massacres at the end of the war). Much of my analysis relies on interview material. As always, such accounts may be prone to biases from the normative colouring of conflict and an inclination of informants to enlarge or reduce their own contribution. Many of these interviews moreover focused on the past and thus relied on people's memory. I have tried to confront these challenges and limitations through triangulation and careful reflection on the basis of my collection of diverse perspectives, at several locations and levels, over a relatively long period of time. A final challenge concerns the treatment of sources: balancing the imperative of being empirically specific and protecting people's privacy, welfare and safety. My approach has been to name informants who occupy such important positions that anonymisation would become absurd ('a Sri Lankan president said') and who are moreover well positioned to go on record. This is a small group. For a slightly larger group of people, who are featured at several instances throughout a chapter or several chapters, I use pseudonyms. I have left all other informants anonymous by referring to them by the categories that matter to the section at hand ('a senior bureaucrat said', 'an older Tamil man from Jaffna said').