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As Fighting Flares in Civil War, Key Buddhist Shuns Nonviolence

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By Emily Wax
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COLOMBO, Sri Lanka -- Draped in his burnt-orange robe, Athurliye Rathana strolled onto the veranda of a posh hotel here one recent evening and an entire wedding party adorned in fine silks knelt as one, in a gesture of respect and honor to one of the country's best-known monks.

"I guess I'm popular," said a slightly surprised Rathana, 45, rubbing his shaved head. "I knew our Sri Lankan people love monks. But I didn't know they loved the 'Parliament Monk.' "

Rathana is a celebrated figure in this predominantly Buddhist nation, where monks are cherished for their spiritual guidance. But he is known for more than just his religious leadership. Dubbed the Parliament Monk and the War Monk by the Sri Lankan press, he is a legislator who has pushed for the use of military force to end this island nation's 25-year civil war, which has left 70,000 dead and displaced nearly a half-million people at its height.

"Am I an extremist? Sometimes I am. Sometimes I am not," Rathana said over green tea, when asked about reports from foreign human rights groups that accuse his party of hindering peace talks. "The point is that we need to end this war. And we are forced into a military solution."

Rathana fits into the tradition of monks across [Asia](#) who have embraced political causes. Last fall, monks in [Burma](#) risked their lives to rise up against the country's ruling military junta; more recently, monks in [Tibet](#) have been at the center of ongoing protests against the Chinese government.

The sporadic war in this country has divided and weakened society, reigniting long-standing ethnic tensions between the majority Sinhalese, who are predominantly Buddhist, and the minority Tamils, who are mainly Hindus and Christians. In recent months, there has been a surge in fighting between government troops and the [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam](#), the separatist group known as the Tamil Tigers, or LTTE.

The government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa has regained territory in the eastern reaches of the island, known as the Wild East. But in the thick jungles of the north, heavy fighting still rages. Aid groups operating in the region say hundreds of Tigers and civilians have died over the past few months, though claims cannot be independently verified because the government does not permit journalists to travel near the front lines.

Rathana's party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya, is led by monks and is the staunchest supporter of the government's military offensive. The party does not represent most monks in [Sri Lanka](#), who are largely committed to nonviolence.

"As a Buddhist monk, I think every bad thing should be finished," Rathana said. "Here in Sri Lanka, we have terrorists who brutally murdered people. As monks, we must defend ourselves and fight back. That is reality."

As many as 30,000 mostly Sinhalese young men have signed up for the army in the past few months, spurred in part by activism by Rathana and others. The Tigers still control the northern tip of the country and have vowed to continue their struggle for a separate Tamil homeland.

The war has left the north and east of this former tourist haven a shambles. White-painted monuments of Buddha are battle-scarred. Many of the roads leading to the country's mostly Tamil east are potholed and nearly impassable, with checkpoints every few miles where government troops search travelers and their luggage.

Caught in the middle are Tamil civilians. Many fear both the Tigers, who forcibly recruit children and adults, and government troops, whom human rights groups have accused of carrying out false arrests and abductions.

While Rathana is treated like a rock star in [Colombo](#)'s elite circles of Sinhalese, he has vocal critics.

Mano Ganesan, a Hindu Tamil member of Parliament, characterized him as "highly divisive and offensive." He said Rathana and his party have "not helped in pushing for a peaceful solution. They are only creating more militant Tamils."

"This is not Buddhism at all," Ganesan said. "This is using Buddhism to justify politics and a policy of war."

Rathana's name, meanwhile, invokes panic among many ethnic Tamils, who say they are often targeted for harassment by police and paramilitary groups.

Palitha Kohona, Sri Lanka's foreign secretary, said the government was taking those issues "very seriously. But the LTTE is using this to

fight a propaganda war. We are reaching out to moderate Tamils to help us fight the terrorists."

Rathana said his entry into political life was not easy, explaining that his parents were unable to accept his political calling at first. Born into the upper middle class -- his father was a prosperous goldsmith -- he became a monk at age 15.

In his youth, he was a communist. But his views on government changed as he watched the 1998 bombing of the [Temple](#) of the Sacred Tooth Relic, in the spiritual capital of Kandy, home to a tooth allegedly snatched from Buddha's funeral pyre, he said.

Rathana has defended keeping foreign monitors out of Sri Lanka, saying the country has for too long been ruled by outsiders, from the Portuguese to the Dutch to the British. The British once favored the Tamils for jobs in their administration, and the Sinhalese, Rathana said, "had to fight to regain representation in the government, even though we were the majority."

"We can sort this out on our own. We tried to discuss things, but the LTTE always wanted to fight," he said, sounding more like an army general than a legislator or monk. "We must do our duty on the battlefield."

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