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The limits on critical voice in conflict-affected universities: Evidence from Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka

Ian Russell

School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Chrystal Macmillan Building, 15a George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This article explores key factors that can impact upon the ability of post-war universities to engage in open debates and acts of critical voice, drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted in universities in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. The main factors identified relate to the entanglement of universities with political forces, academic networks and associated practices of social sanctioning, and the social histories of university communities. I argue that grappling with these factors enables an enhanced understanding of the limitations on critical voice in conflict-affected universities and, thus, of the conditions under which universities might contribute to peacebuilding and recovery.

1. Introduction

One of the most enduring depictions of the university is as a space of open and critical discussion, a space that contains and brings forth individuals and groups that can effectively interrogate dominant narratives and that can publicly and powerfully intervene in key social and political debates (Giroux, 2020). In post-war contexts, this aspect of universities has been proposed as an important dimension of how they might support recovery and peacebuilding (Milton, 2013; Pacheco, 2013). Universities might, for instance, foster critical discussions on campuses; promote better relations between communities by generating narratives of reconciliation; or publicly explore the underlying drivers of conflict (Milton and Barakat, 2016). Such a constructive role for universities in conflict-affected contexts cannot, however, be taken for granted. In addition to the role that universities can have in reproducing the social status quo (Lebeau, 2008; Milton, 2017), there are examples of universities working to legitimate inequalities and violent action (Chege, 1996; Smith and Vaux, 2003). Making sense of the possibilities for universities to play a significant role in processes of post-war recovery and peacebuilding, therefore, requires examining what can shape, and thus what might limit, their ability to engage effectively in critical discussions on campuses as well as in wider acts of critical voice.

Grounded in evidence from universities in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka, this article investigates key factors that can impact upon the ability of post-war universities to engage in open debates and acts of critical voice, exploring three overlapping and intersecting dimensions. First is the nature of political influence over universities, which I discuss using the concept of political entanglement. A second set of factors emerge from the implications of speaking out for the place of academics in social networks. Finally, there is the dimension of what I call embodied social histories, referring to the behaviours and structures that come to be embedded in university communities as result of historical experiences, particularly those of conflict and crisis. I argue that grappling with these factors enables an enhanced understanding of the limitations on critical voice in post-war universities.

I begin by exploring the notion of universities as sites of critical discussion that are capable of contributing to post-war recovery and by outlining my analytical approach to universities. The next section provides an introduction to the research upon which the article is built. I discuss key features of the two case contexts, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka, focussing on aspects of the respective political environments that are important for grasping the circumstances in which the universities operate. This contextual information then feeds into my exploration of political entanglement in the following section. Here, I consider how political forces can stack the top of universities and how this influence can spread throughout universities by means of the social networks that constitute university communities. The subsequent section supports these points by examining the financial and social costs associated with exclusion from these networks, which can encourage academics to avoid ‘rocking the boat’. Finally, I turn to the effects of the social histories of universities on critical voice. This acts to ground the preceding discussions in established social and political mechanisms for instilling silence in conflict-affected communities.

E-mail address: irussell@ed.ac.uk.

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2. Critical voice and universities as social groups

The notion that universities can be important critical agents in society is grounded in the recognition that universities are not just conduits for information but can also generate and contest narratives of the way the world is, was, will be, and should be (Feuer et al., 2013; Smith, 2005). The works of scholars such as Giroux (2020) and Freire (1970) point to how education can act as a way of transforming the social order by engaging students and staff in a collaborative naming and knowing of the world. Correspondingly, university campuses can be sites where different groups discuss and contest ideas and narratives of past and future and compete for influence in, and over, one of the key institutions of legitimised knowledge production.

Examples of a critical role for universities can be seen across space and time (Pacheco, 2013). Protest movements across the world in recent years, including those in Chile, Lebanon, and India, have seen students playing a key role in instigating and organising action. There is also a rich history to draw upon of university staff and students taking leading positions in independence struggles, with many African anti-colonial groups having origins in organisations that had formed in the continent’s emergent universities or in the higher education systems of the colonisers (Luetscher et al., 2016). More recently, Lebeau highlights that, despite decades of government neglect, African ‘higher education institutions... have often remained key sites for debate, critique and mobilisation on behalf of political change, especially but not exclusively in the direction of democratisation and the resolution of conflicts’ (2008, p.139).

For post-war contexts, the performance of these critical functions by universities has the potential to interact with conflict dynamics and legacies. Universities might, for example, act as a critical evaluator of the social and political landscape in the wake of war (Pacheco, 2013), thereby helping policy makers to navigate processes of recovery. Similarly, academics can help communities to explore the underlying drivers of conflict and suggest new ways forward that avoid reproducing the social conditions that led to conflict. University staff and students might also mobilise for forms of transitional justice (Paulson and Bellino, 2017) or create and propagate constructive discourses, and practices, of commemoration (Pacheco, 2013). Furthermore, campuses themselves are sites where people from across wartime social fracture lines can meet and engage in dialogue (Davies, 2004). As Milton and Barakat put it, ‘Campsites offer unique arenas that can act as incubators of civil society in which young people participate in student unions, groups, and societies and learn skills vital to citizenship including democratic governance, independent organisation, debating and dialogue’ (2016, p.412).

In this view, the very act of critical dialogue on campuses can be seen as part of forming a new post-war citizenry. While promising, such ideas about the potential of universities to drive constructive social change need to be set alongside their recognised role in the reproduction of the social status quo (Milton, 2017). Castells (2001) and Lebeau (2008), for instance, persuasively argue that the selection and socialisation of elites has been one of the core functions of universities. By reinforcing the perceived legitimacy of structural inequalities, education institutions, and academic research, can cause social structures and points of tension surrounding the outbreak of conflict to be problematically normalised as being part of the ‘natural’ order of things (Freire, 1970; Saini, 2015). Furthermore, the public interventions of academics and student leaders can also work to legitimate acts of violence against different social groups and to lend intellectual authority to movements towards conflict (Chege, 1996).

What these contrasting roles for the university make clear is the contingent nature of any critical contribution universities might make in post-war contexts. To better understand this contingency, this article examines influences on the ability of individual academics and university communities to ‘speak out’, which underlies the array of critical functions discussed above, by investigating how social and political dynamics in, and around, conflict-affected universities can shape the ability of university members to engage in critical discussions and acts on campuses and beyond. I explore not only the reasons for silence in conflict-affected universities but also the selectivity of silence in these universities, with certain discourses and voices allowed or incentivised while others are stifled.

Before proceeding, it is beneficial to briefly elaborate upon what, precisely, is meant when talking about a university. Although the term crosses borders relatively effectively, the real form and functioning of universities varies substantially. It is important, therefore, to conceptualise the university in a way that enables these differences to be captured. Drawing on Elder-Vass (2010), I see universities as social groups, as opposed to aggregates of atomised individuals, that are attached to formal institutional structures, which give them some bounds and shape. Formal institutional structures, which are the elements of universities that most easily cross borders, do not, however, define or determine everything about a university. This is a particularly significant distinction to make with regards to conflict-affected universities. While formal institutional structures may appear relatively unchanged after conflict and crisis, for example with the same organisational charts and positions, the social constitution of the universities can be strongly affected in ways that consequently affect their functioning (Russell, 2022). As I will illustrate, emphasising the social group aspects of universities, and how they are altered by conflict, renders visible an important array of silencing and stifling processes in post-war universities that can limit their ability to realise a constructive role as critical agents in society and as places of critical discussion. Rather than discounting the significance of legal restrictions on speech, for example, I believe this approach complements examination of such legal considerations and, furthermore, allows for a clearer articulation of how their effects come to be realised at the university level.

3. Methods and research background

The arguments presented in this article draw upon research conducted in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka in 2018 and 2019 as part of a larger study of the limits on universities contributions to post-war processes.1 The initial approach to case selection was guided by both security considerations, excluding contexts with ongoing instability, and concern with accessing participants who had experienced multiple phases of post-war recovery. From the list of potential cases, the final selection of Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka as cases related to the value of looking at two markedly different wartime and post-war environments, for example with regards to the nature of the two conflicts and the relative strength of the state in each case (Bastian, 2013; Tom, 2017), for generating insights that can be usefully adapted to a range of conflict-affected situations. The comparative process of shuttling the analysis back and forth between, and within, the two contexts clarified important commonalities and provided a valuable, within-study means of thinking through the validity of translating findings beyond the environment from which they were drawn.

The primary material of the research is 67 semi-structured interviews, 36 in Sierra Leone and 31 in Sri Lanka, conducted with staff, students, and other actors involved in the two university sectors.1 In Sierra Leone, the research focussed on the two main public universities, Njala University and the University of Sierra Leone (particularly Fourah Bay College). In Sri Lanka, I concentrated mainly on the University of Jaffna, which was heavily impacted by the war, although I also spoke with academics from elsewhere in the country. The process of finding

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1 Ethical approval for the research was sought and received from the University of Edinburgh.

2 Explicit permission was sought from participants with regards to attributing interview material. Interview quotes and insights have, therefore, been anonymised where permission was not received or in cases where ethical considerations require anonymisation.
Three dimensions of Sierra Leonean history are particularly relevant for understanding the post-war circumstances of its universities. First, Sierra Leone’s political landscape in the last fifty years has been marked by a long period under a one-party state; instability and coups during the 1991–2002 civil war; and, most recently, political polarisation between the two main political parties, the All People’s Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP). During the rule of Siaka Stevens and his APC, from 1968 until 1985, Sierra Leone was transformed into a one-party state (Tom, 2017). Centralised state power was fused with networks of personal patronage, supporting Stevens to maintain his grip on power (Kailala, 2016). The shadow state (Cubitt, 2012) that was set up under Stevens acted to direct funds on the basis of securing of his power (Kaifala, 2016). The shadow state (Cubitt, 2012) that was set up together of the data from both cases into a more complete picture of the complexity of the two cases and to identify commonalities and differences, which ultimately encouraged further refining of concepts and interpretations. The series of factors discussed in this article represent the final drawing of the one-party state and the turbulence of the civil war, which lasted for almost three decades. They eliminated opposition groups and dealt extremely harshly with those that they painted as traitors (Satkunanathan, 2016; Thiranagama, 2010), with the repression and violence extending to universities in the north and east as well. The state’s response to the civil war, and to leftist insurgencies in the 1970s and 1980s; and the centralisation of power and violence extending to universities in the north and east as well. The state’s response to the civil war, and to leftist insurgencies in the 1970s and 1980s; and the centralisation of power and nationalisation of the time. Sinhalese politicians made ‘opportunistonic use of the perception by the majority community that those minority groups perceived as having had undue influence under the British—Tamilis, Muslims, and Christians—must be ‘kept in their place’” (Thiranagama, 2013, 96). Real and perceived violence and discrimination against the Tamil population led over time to increasing calls for a separate Tamil state in the north and east and eventually to a separatist insurgency in the 1980s (Stokke, 2012).

The main armed group of the civil war, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), emerged initially from the University of Jaffna (Wickramasinghe, 2014), with Jaffna Town being the elite centre of the Tamil population. The LTTE managed to gain territorial control of northern and eastern parts of the island, including Jaffna, during the course of the war, which lasted for almost three decades. They eliminated opposition groups and dealt extremely harshly with those that they painted as traitors (Satkunanathan, 2016; Thiranagama, 2010), with the repression and violence extending to universities in the north and east as well. The state’s response to the civil war, and to leftist insurgencies in the 1970s and 1980s, was brutal, and victims of state violence were mostly left without recourse to justice. Despite the end of the war in 2009, when the LTTE leadership was gunned down in a bloody last stand, the militarisation of the country connected with the insurgencies and the civil war largely continued, albeit with ebbs and flows.

3.2. Research context in Sri Lanka

The context in which universities operate in Sri Lanka has been deeply shaped by the political instrumentalization of ethnicity; a civil war lasting from the early 1980s until 2009, as well as two leftist insurgencies in the 1970s and 1980s; and the centralisation of power and practices of militarisation and repression (Nissan and Stirrat, 2004; Wickramasinghe, 2014). As in other colonies, colonial censuses and other governance practices, and reaction to these practices, led to the reification of different ethnic categories, which are further connected to religious denominations. The Sri Lankan population is predominantly constituted by a majority Sinhalese population, which is majority Buddhist; a much smaller Tamil population, which is majority Hindu; and a small Muslim population, which is used as an ethnic and religious category. Independence in 1948 came with a constitution that was open for majoritarian rule, reflecting the strengthening Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism of the time. Sinhalese politicians made ‘opportunistic use of the perception by the majority community that those minority groups perceived as having had undue influence under the British—Tamilis, Muslims, and Christians—must be ‘kept in their place’” (Thiranagama, 2013, 96). Real and perceived violence and discrimination against the Tamil population led over time to increasing calls for a separate Tamil state in the north and east and eventually to a separatist insurgency in the 1980s (Stokke, 2012).

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4. Findings

4.1. Politics, political entanglement, and the university

Political involvement in universities has been a significant feature of the higher education sectors in both Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. The influence of political forces was sometimes described in research conversations in terms of politicisation. While this term undeniably captures
something meaningful about experiences with politics, it seems to
tightly mis-frame the situation. Instead, I choose to discuss the
connection between universities and political forces as political entan-
glement. I do this, first, as the notion of politicisation implies a technical
or apolitical body that becomes tainted with politics, rather than rec-
ognising that politics is always present in some form. Second, I want to
move away from this unidimensional approach – politicisation or
depoliticisation – and towards grappling with different forms of entan-
glements with political forces, seeking to point to the complexity of such
links. For example, multiple political connections can be ‘tangled up
with each other. One political party’s influence over university admin-
istrators may encourage the opening up of greater space for student
groups affiliated with that party while shutting down the space available
for groups affiliated to opposing political forces. Finally, the idea of
entanglement speaks to how the interaction of political forces with one
element of a university may have further effects through the structures
and connections in that social group, much like how pulling at one cable
from a tangled nest of wires may move the entire nest.

I offer here a grounding example of political entanglement before
diving into issues concerning the political appointment of senior uni-
versities in the next section. In Sierra Leone, following a discussion of the
perceived sidelining of the university by the previous government, a
Head of Department at Njala University explained, ‘When the last
elections happened, this university took sides. Colleagues here decided
[that] the past government has not paid any attention to us, so we better
take our chance. Let’s align ourselves with one of the political parties in
the hope that, if they win, hopefully our problems will be solved’. This
connection between the university and national politics was advertised
through a billboard outside the campus proclaiming staff support for
Julius Maada Bio’s 2018 presidential campaign. While this is arguably
political entanglement at its most direct, it is also a response to a
perceived, subtler form of entanglement, where, without overt affiliation,
the relative funding of different universities had been influenced by
party political dynamics.

Another comment from a different lecturer at Njala clarifies these
points. They argued that ‘The academia, we have become so much a part
of the politics that nationally we do not speak out. Because we are also
part of the national politics. For example, Njala is known as the college
for the SLPP. University of Sierra Leone was tainted as the college of
APC. So, the two major parties have so many inroads academically that
lecturers… it seems as if we are being muzzled’. First, there is an implicit
recognition of how public universities can be connected with the
regional dynamics of politics, with the southern areas where Njala is
based being traditionally tied to the SLPP and the APC having stronger
roots in the West and Freetown where the University of Sierra Leone is.
Second, there is an articulation of the consequences of political entan-
glement, with the perceived influence of political parties impacting
upon the space for lecturers to voice ideas and to critique the govern-
ment and political parties. This begins to illustrate the ways in which
political entanglement can have constraining consequences for critical
voice.

4.2. Stacking the top and filtering through the faculty

An important form of political entanglement is the political
appointment of senior figures in universities, who can then influence
hiring and positions throughout the rest of the university. In Sierra
Leone, the President serves as the Chancellor of the universities, with the
ability to select the Pro-Chancellor as well as the Vice-Chancellor, who
also serves as Principal. The latter serves as the main administrative
actor in each university and the former effectively serves as the Presi-
dent’s official representative in university bodies, such as in the Uni-
versity Court, the highest administrative body of each university, where
they act as the Chairman. Each university campus also has a Deputy
Vice-Chancellor, appointed by the University Court, who is responsible
for the running of the campus. The constitution of the University Court is
mostly in the hands of the government in power at the time, with the
University Court then having a substantial power in deciding who is
Vice-Chancellor and who occupies other senior roles (Government of
Sierra Leone, 2005). The presence of such structures facilitating strong
government influence in university appointments is not an accidental
development. Instead, it appears to be part of the effects of Siaka Ste-
vens’ pre-war efforts to consolidate power and to restrict the potential
for moves against the government by powerful university communities
(Paracka, 2001).

As the above suggests, senior university figures sit in politically
precarious positions. At Njala University, for example, the senior staff
were greatly changed following the 2018 election. As Professor Ibrahim
Abdullah described it, referring to the colours associated with the two
major political parties, ‘Today is red, we bring red people. Tomorrow is
green, we bring green people. That is not how you run a national
institutions’. Bringing this closer to the issue of critical voice, a lecturer in
Education at Njala commented that ‘The fact that as soon as we change
government, they change all the academics that is one thing to make you
silent. You, the VC, know immediately that I’m here because I have to
satisfy the current regime. Otherwise, I would have lost my job. You
know immediately that you have to toe the line’.

In Sri Lanka, the process of Vice-Chancellor appointments is slightly
extended. While the President directly nominates the Chancellor of each
university, the Vice-Chancellor is chosen from three candidates that are
recommended to the President by the UGC (Government of Sri Lanka,
1978). Although the UGC has responsibility for that recommendation,
the Universities Act stipulates that the names should originate with each
University Council. University Councils, however, are explicitly consti-
tuted in such a way that the majority of members are selected by the
UGC. The precariousness of the Vice-Chancellor position, and its relation
to political currents in society, is evident in the dismissal of two
Vice-Chancellors in 2019. Discussing the decision to remove the
Vice-Chancellor of Jaffna University, for example, the Chairperson of
the UGC at the time affirmed that ‘According to the Constitution, the
President has the sole authority for appointment and removal of Vice-
Chancellors’ (Mudalige, 2019).

The Sri Lankan situation is mixed with the complexities of the war,
particularly at Jaffna. The LTTE appears to have been capable, even
when not in territorial control of the university area, of influencing
university candidate selection. Professor Jeevan Hoole, a Tamil aca-
demic, commented that, during the conflict, ‘People who didn’t support
the Tigers went quiet. Those that supported the Tigers became VCs and
that and this. Ironically, although it’s the president who appoints, the
Tigers made sure all three people were amenable to them’. When this did
not happen, the LTTE could use the threat of violence and the mobi-
lisation of resistance from elements of the community to bring about the
desired results. Crucially, these wartime dynamics appear to have set
some features of post-war politics at the university, where appeals to
certain sorts of Tamil nationalism, often those aligned with the views
previously espoused by the LTTE, can be important for gaining com-
munity support.

Issues related to the political dynamics of Vice-Chancellorship in Sri
Lanka are not limited to Jaffna. Speaking about the factors leading up to
the widespread university strikes in 2011 and 2012, after the end of the
war, Dr Witharana, a lecturer at the Open University in Sri Lanka,
commented on the broader issue of appointments, noting that ‘It was a
time when we were also feeling pressure from the government because of
high politicisation within the university sector. Appointments were
done to Vice-Chancellor posts, Deputy Vice-Chancellor posts, and even
the council. So… highly politicised. We started feeling that we were
losing the kind of autonomy we had’.

What we see at the top of universities in both countries during their
wartime and post-war periods, therefore, is a certain precarity amidst
political influence over positions. This creates incentives for toeing
certain lines and for keeping quiet and constrains the space for critical
discussion. Part of the value of describing these dynamics in terms of
political entanglement is that it illuminates how connections at the top have effects that filter throughout universities due to the relationships between people within universities – the idea noted earlier of a nest of cables, where pulling one can move others.

Looking at Jaffna University, we see that while roles such as Dean are often filled through elections, it is, nevertheless, possible to stack the odds in favour of preferred candidates or to block others through administrative means. A former union activist and academic at Jaffna explained how such elections can be managed, saying that ‘the President is appointing the Vice-Chancellor… the Vice-Chancellor appoints the Heads of Departments, and only the head of a department can become the Dean…. In a way, they are similarly controlled’. Such reshuffles then potentially have implications for where staff feel they stand with regards to the power structures within universities. For example, a lecturer at Njala commented, referring to the shifts in the academic structure that follow a change in government, ‘One way they put you in your place is that they make sure they have removed all of the top officials…. As soon as they came, they made sure there were elections and they had all the Deans that they wanted’. Through such mechanisms, the political alignment of the top university figures and bodies can spread throughout institutions (Colombo Telegraph, 2013; Tarawallie, 2015), with similar dynamics as at the institutional scale then being replicated at the level of faculties and departments. In such ways, political influence – even if it’s just keeping quieter or toeing a particular line – can spread throughout faculties.

4.3. Networks and social sanctions

The next piece of my argument relates to networks, which are key for understanding the pressures for conforming and self-censorship. In both Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka forms of patronage politics are widespread throughout bureaucracies (Amarasuriya et al., 2009; Bastian, 2013; Cubitt, 2012; Harris, 2013), with the hierarchical nature of academic institutions providing ample opportunities for practices of political patronage. The role of social and political patronage networks is key to understanding silencing in universities. As Bastian notes for Sri Lanka, political power has long been ‘utilised to delineate state resources… to groups networked with members of the political class. Family, kinship, links through old school networks, etc., provide this network’ (2013, 9).

In Sierra Leone, Siaka Stevens’ pre-war ‘shadow state’ further entrenched colonial-era logics related to the centrality of personal connections for accessing resources (Bolten, 2012; Cubitt, 2012). The networks formed through personal and professional experiences, including those resulting from the political appointment of senior figures, can provide academics with pathways through which they can access resources. By speaking out, however, one’s position in these networks can be put in jeopardy, endangering both present material security and future economic and political progress. This can create potent incentives for those intertwined with networks of university patronage, or those wishing to join them, to keep silent or follow the party line.

In Sierra Leone, for instance, it was highlighted by interviewees that a number of the government cabinet in 2018 had previously been university staff. For example, the Minister of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, Dr Memunatu Pratt, had previously headed the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at Fourah Bay College. As well as cabinet positions, academics can also get access to jobs with parastatals or on various boards and commissions, which can provide financial benefits to mitigate issues with academic salaries. A retired engineer and university administrator suggested that such appointments in Sierra Leone had become less technical and more political, with government singling out candidates rather than requesting support through professional associations. The links that academics have through their current and former students with the elite stratum of society (Osei, 2021) also appears to be significant. Professor Gbla at the University of Sierra Leone observed that, ‘You have former students at the university who are now big people in politics [who] still also have a way of influencing the university. So, they also contribute a lot in terms of the crisscrossing between politics and the university’.

The presence of opportunities tied to political alignment and shows of support, particularly at the level of senior administration, likely works together with the negative professional consequences of speaking out against political interests to reinforce a logic of not ‘rocking the boat’ within universities in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. A lecturer in Education at Njala, for example, articulated this when discussing the departure of academics to form part of the new government in 2018, saying, ‘so many of us were taken as ministers, deputy ministers. [People think] I have to be quiet because maybe I will be called upon. Others will say these are my friends. And others are saying that if I say anything, I may lose my job’. Similarly, a lecturer at the University of Sierra Leone expressed a comparable sentiment in a conversation about promotions, commenting ‘And if they identify you to be somebody who appears not to pander to their whims and caprices, honestly it’s clear here… you’ll be disadvantaged…. So, in former regimes people stayed quiet rather than being identified as… [being] in the opposition’. In Sri Lanka, a Professor of Education at the Open University described how speaking out in the Senate could act as a ‘black mark’ against someone. Furthermore, they commented that in an interview with the first woman Vice-Chancellor in Sri Lanka, the Vice-Chancellor had acknowledged that ‘We have faculty boards, we have senate, we have council. But people don’t talk at these meetings. They just keep silent. They are bowing down to the authority, especially women’.

It is not only financial costs that need to be considered. Social sanctions can encourage conformity to the dominant political logics and structures of the university. These mechanisms for censorship were highlighted by the case of a lecturer and former union organiser in Jaffna who had been involved in the publishing of union reports on recruitment irregularities. Asked about the space for critical voice in the post-war period, they told me that ‘We have started some sort of critical discussion. Then what happened was, that is my personal experience, they will try to outcast me… in the sense that they may not be prepared to talk with me. If I go to the senior common room, then everyone will try to avoid you’. The social cost of such ostracising tactics took a toll over time, causing them to change their behaviour. ‘I couldn’t tolerate that, and I stopped all this…. Once I realised that I am being outcast, isolated… then I stop these activities. And after that, I started to behave like a normal academic. This is part of the problem’. They stopped writing and openly discussing their political views.

Social repercussions are not just limited to the workplace, however. A comment from Professor Jeevan Hoole, who had received threats when they tried to take up the Vice-Chancellor position at Jaffna during the war, takes these consequences further: ‘People won’t recruit my children. People won’t marry my children because we are known as dissenters. And things don’t come a dissenter’s way’. This social censorship can be extended from covering simply what is said to who it concerns. This is a significant factor in its own right, particularly when it comes to the danger of being cut out of social networks in the university – can also encourage self-censorship.

4.4. Social histories and critical voice

The final factor to consider is the social histories of universities, which can help shape behaviours and environments in ways that are consequential for critical voice. This is a significant factor in its own right while also adding important context to the preceding discussions. I concentrate predominantly on the University of Jaffna and the wartime influence of the LTTE in order to lay out the social history of a university
in sufficient depth. Although I focus on the historical embedding of silencing practices, it is important to also recognise the significance of the broader post-war context for influencing the possibilities of critical voice. For example, the rule of Mahinda Rajapaksa, and his brothers, in the early post-war period from 2009 to 2015 was accompanied by the occurrence of threats towards those who raised a dissenting voice. As one interviewee described when justifying calls for autonomy as part of university industrial action during this period, ‘There were a lot of interesting situations even in senate meetings where you cannot express your views freely. Those who are critical about the system would be identified as those that are against the country’. The experiences in Jaffna can be understood as part of a transition, with some continuities and some disjunctures, from the rule of the LTTE in the north to the militarised rule of the Rajapaksa brothers in the early post-war period (Satkunanathan, 2016).

In Jaffna, a significant aspect of the silencing environment under the LTTE and afterwards was labels such as patriot and traitor, which formed part of the discursive systems that held in check critical voices in society and within universities. As Shalika Thiranagama writes, ‘The LTTE was fighting a war on two fronts, one against an external enemy, the other against an internal foe, in an effort to define a people and a place, a task that brooks no opposition and necessitates frequent cleansing’ (2010, p.127). Further, the LTTE ‘was able to define treason, first, as that which was against the LTTE and, second, that opposing the LTTE was the same as treason against one’s own self-determination and national homeland. All forms of political action such as human rights activism not allied with the LTTE were described as treasonous’ (p.133). As detailed in the documentary Demons in Paradise (2017), the LTTE’s treatment of those deemed to be a ‘traitor’ was brutal and generally without mercy.

The high price of dissent was combined with the intimacy of the LTTE’s infiltration of life in Jaffna, where the LTTE could mean a family member, close friend, or colleague. The network of informers operated ‘s infiltration of life in Jaffna, where the LTTE could mean a family homeland. All forms of political action such as human rights cleansing one interviewee described when justifying calls for autonomy as part of the early post-war period in Sri Lanka and those from during the pre-war one-party rule in Sierra Leone, with the disappearances of critical intellectuals being a common feature of both. It is within this historical context that the mechanisms of censorship in Sierra Leone’s universities appear to have become prevalent. For instance, the practice of ‘muzzling’ academics through incorporating them in patron-client relationships was central to Stevens’ mechanisms for controlling the one-party state and limiting dissent.

The politically polarised landscape emerging from war in Sierra Leone meant that control over these mechanisms came to be subject of contestation. The provision of financial and other opportunities for academics on the basis of political ties appears to have continued but so too has the risk of being identified with the wrong political side. For some, it seems, operating in this environment means keeping relatively silent on issues that may be painted as partisan critique so as to avoid sanction. For others, it means picking a side, at least temporarily, with the hope of receiving rewards for supporting the party line. Through its overt affiliation to President Maada Bio, Njala University appears to fall in the latter category, although staff strikes over delayed pay suggest that such loyalty is certainly not unconditional. Whether or not the gamble brings long-term rewards, it would seem likely that the choice of Njala University staff to declare a side will have consequences if the political pendulum swings back to the APC. While pointing to the potential risks of such a strategy, this also indicates the agency of university actors in navigating mechanisms of censorship in different ways.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that the possibilities for critical voice by, and in, university communities are fundamentally intertwined with the particular political, social, historical, and economic contexts of those communities. In political entanglement, I have offered a means of speaking about the complex and varied ways by which political forces are connected to universities and can, thereby, influence their functioning. Part of the way in which these connections can function to constrain critical acts is through the incentives associated with belonging to networks. Speaking out endangers access to social connection and the potentially lucrative, and sustaining, opportunities accessible through networks. These networks are also embedded in particular social histories, such as the experience of living through the precarious and repressive environment at Jaffna during the war, which entrench certain behaviours and approaches to speaking out.

By describing key mechanisms by which self-censorship and silencing practices come to be realised in universities, this article represents an important addition to scholarship on universities and their ability to realise their critical functions (Altbach, 2001; Zeleza, 2003), not least by extending consideration to the specific contexts of Professor Raveendranath in 2006, following a campaign of intimidation against Eastern University academics (Hoole, 2007). Speaking in relation to the limited space for critical publications at Jaffna, the former administrator explained that ‘if you release [a book]… questioning caste, religion – that’s what the university must do… consider problematic fields – if you have some radical ideas in that book… they won’t allow it. Even though, now, no threats from LTTE, but indirectly self-control, self-adapting with LTTE’. What these quotes illustrate is that the historical weight of repression is not so easily lifted, with negative consequences for the possibilities of critical voice in post-war Jaffna. It is not, however, that all speech is similarly restricted. Certain approaches to Tamil nationalism, for example, continue to find expression, while others are subject to sanction through some of the means described above. Furthermore, the forms and boundaries for (self-)censorship are changing in the post-war period. The LTTE was a predominantly secular organisation, while in the post-war Jaffna space there is scope for social silencing along religious lines based on the ‘Hinduisation’ of the university.

While Jaffna is, perhaps, an extreme case, there are similarities between the descriptions of the early post-war period in Sri Lanka and those from during the pre-war one-party rule in Sierra Leone, with the disappearances of critical intellectuals being a common feature of both. It is within this historical context that the mechanisms of censorship in Sierra Leone’s universities appear to have become prevalent. For instance, the practice of ‘muzzling’ academics through incorporating them in patron-client relationships was central to Stevens’ mechanisms for controlling the one-party state and limiting dissent.

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conflict-affected universities (see also Bellanger et al., 2022). The study serves as a complement to existing work that focusses more on the legal dimensions of censorship and direct mechanisms of state silencing (e.g., Aktaş et al., 2019; de Figueiredo-Cowen, 2002) by highlighting the potency and prevalence of other silencing factors within university communities themselves, although, as the discussion of political entanglement suggests, the two areas can be deeply connected. In a similar way, the findings of the article also nuance important arguments concerning the effects of broader political and intellectual trends on critical reflection and public intellectualism, such as the extension of neoliberal logics into the university (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2020), by illustrating pathways by which distinct political climates come to have to distinct effects on the ability of academics to speak out both within and outside campus walls. Crucially, the research sounds a note of caution with regards to the idea of universities making significant post-war contributions through their critical functions (Milton and Barakat, 2016; Pacheco, 2013) as the findings point to the complex and multi-dimensional work that may be required for universities affected by conflict and crisis to be in a position to make such contributions.

To close, it is useful to further comment on the implications of the article’s arguments for universities in different contexts. As discussed earlier in the article, universities in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka face different environments for critical voice, with the sense of direct threat associated with public intellectualism much more apparent during the research in Sri Lanka than in Sierra Leone. These differences were substantially tied to the higher degree of militarisation in Sri Lanka, the sharper social fracture lines of the island’s conflict, and the divergence in endings to the two wars – brutal military victory in Sri Lanka and stumbling negotiated peace in Sierra Leone. This suggests that the limits on critical voice will vary depending on the specific forms of conflict and crisis experienced by universities. As such, it is likely that universities affected by civil wars will experience different forms of impacts on critical voice than universities affected by invasions, such as in Ukraine. Finally, it is valuable to note that while this article points to how experiences of conflict and crisis can significantly affect the possibilities for critical voice in post-war universities by altering the political environment, dynamics and memberships of networks, and the social histories of university populations, many of the points discussed in the article, such as the significance of social networks and sanctions, can also be relevant for universities that have not been affected by armed conflict.

Author statement

Dr Ian Russell was the sole researcher involved in this study, although feedback was received from a number of sources, particularly Professor Jonathan Spencer and Dr Hazel Gray.

Conflicts of interest statement

No potential conflicts of interest identified by the author.

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References


Ian Russell is a Lecturer in African Studies and International Development at the University of Edinburgh. His previous research focussed on universities in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka and their interactions with processes of peacebuilding and development. His current work concentrates on quantification and governance in Africa and elsewhere.