

**THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ETHNIC CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA: Economic Liberalization, Mobilizational Resources, and Ethnic Collective Action.** *Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series.* By Nikolaos Biziouras. New York: Routledge, 2014. xii, 226 pp. US\$145.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-74233-7.

In *The Political Economy of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Nikolaos Biziouras, an associate professor of Political Science at the US Naval Academy, argues that the conventional view posits a linear relationship between economic liberalization and ethnic conflict. In contrast, he seeks to demonstrate that the relationship between economic liberalization and ethnic conflict is non-linear: “I expect to find little, if any, ethnic conflict at low and high levels of economic liberalization, and high levels of ethnic conflict at medium levels of economic liberalization” (15).

Stating that “economic freedom requires ... governments to refrain from many activities” (27), Biziouras defines levels of economic liberalization ranging from low to high in relation to the extent of state involvement in the economy, specifically fiscal exposure, trade openness, and regulatory intervention. Notwithstanding references to “measuring and coding,” the book does not provide details on how composite indices on levels of economic liberalization were derived. As a result, the categorization of low, middle, and high levels of liberalization appear vague and arbitrary.

Biziouras seeks to prove his thesis—high levels of ethnic conflict at medium levels of economic liberalization—through a historical case study of economic liberalization and ethnic collective action in Sri Lanka. Fitting the historical facts of the Sri Lankan case into this neat thesis, he attempts to trace ethnic conflict to a singular causal variable, namely economic liberalization.

Biziouras presents the British colonial period in Sri Lanka as characterized by “high economic liberalization” with a prevalence of caste-based as opposed to ethnic-based coalitions: “the market rather than the state determined the chances for upward mobility, and it did so without an emphasis on ethnicity” (40). In reality, however, the very origin and consolidation of the colonial economy, including its legal, fiscal, trade, land, and labour matters, were determined largely by a class of British “planter-officials” who constituted the colonial state rather than by objective market forces (Asoka Bandarage, *Colonialism in Sri Lanka: The Political Economy of the Kandyan Highlands, 1833–1886*, Mouton, 1983). Again, it was not the market but non-market forces, such as the greater number of English-language schools established by Christian missionaries in the Northern Province, that gave preferential access to Tamil Vellalas over the majority Sinhalese in the colonial administration.

Biziouras attributes the “inter-ethnic peace” between the Sinhala and Tamil elite prior to 1936 to what he says was the maintenance of a high level of economic liberalization by the British (62). But the reason for the unity between the Sinhala and Tamil elite during the first two decades of

the twentieth century was due largely to the assumed parity between the “two majority communities” (Asoka Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy*, Routledge, 2009, 33). Despite their much smaller numbers than the Sinhalese, the Tamils were able to gain a politically equal if not a dominant position in the Legislative Council. Again, this was due not so much to market factors as to the Tamil elites’ close cooperation with the British colonial state. It was the threat and eventual disruption of the assumed ethnic parity following electoral democratization, not the “medium level of liberalization,” as argued by Bizioras, that set the stage for the ethnic conflict.

Bizioras’s singular focus on levels of economic liberalization as the determinant of ethnic conflict results in a dismissal of the confluence of geographic, political, ideological, and other factors in ethnically-based political mobilization. The narrow focus on the domestic dimension leads to a neglect of the regional dimension of the Sri Lankan conflict and the role of South India. Separatist Eelamist sentiments were first heard in Sri Lanka when the majority status enjoyed by the Tamils in the Legislative Council was threatened in 1920. Following the break-up of the inter-ethnic Ceylon National Council, Sri Lankan Tamil leader Ponnambalam Arunachalam stated the objective of the Ceylon Tamil League at its inaugural meeting in 1923: “to keep alive and propagate ... throughout Ceylon, Southern India and the colonies ... the union and solidarity of ‘Tamil akam’, the Tamil Land” (Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*, 35). Arunachalam was influenced by growing Tamil nationalism in South India at the time. He was the first Tamil leader to articulate a sense of Sri Lankan Tamils as an oppressed group and seek refuge in a vision of Tamil Eelam.

Bizioras attributes the increasing ethnic conflict in post-independence Sri Lanka to a “medium level of economic liberalization” and mobilization by both Sinhala and Tamil ethnic political entrepreneurs of their respective critical masses. But, this limited explanation ignores the fact that to a large extent, from the beginning of Sri Lanka’s political independence from the British, Sri Lankan Tamil (as opposed to Indian or “plantation” Tamil) political mobilization was not motivated by upward mobility within the Sri Lankan state as much as by efforts to separate from it. In other words, economic benefit was and is never the sole motive of ethnically based political mobilization, as claimed in the book under review. Sri Lankan Tamil separatism was born irrespective of the level of economic liberalization and well before discriminatory language, university entrance, or employment policies were introduced by Sri Lankan governments to redress the subordination of the Sinhala majority during British colonial rule. The establishment of the Sri Lankan Tamil State Party in 1949 was preceded by calls from the Sri Lankan Tamil elite to the British to create a separate state, as in the case of India, in order to avoid majoritarian dominance following independence.

In attributing the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict solely to an arbitrarily determined “medium level of economic liberalization,” this book fails to grasp the complexity and multi-causal nature of the conflict and to make a useful contribution to the literature on Sri Lanka. The book states that most recent cases of ethnic conflict elsewhere (Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Rwanda, Burundi, and Indonesia) have also occurred at “medium levels of economic liberalization.” However, in failing to provide any comparative information whatsoever on these cases, the book also fails to make a contribution to the broader literature on the political economy of ethnic conflict.

*Independent Scholar, Chevy Chase, USA*

ASOKA BANDARAGE

**VIETNAM'S SOCIALIST SERVANTS: Domesticity, Class, Gender, and Identity.** *Asia's Transformations*, 44. By Minh T.N. Nguyen. London; New York: Routledge, 2015. xxvi, 201 pp. (Figures, maps, tables.) US\$145.00, cloth. ISBN 978-1-13-802341-3.

Domestic work is a subject much researched in international migration studies, but very little has been written on it in domestic rural-urban migration studies. Yan Hiarong's and Sun Wanning's research on Chinese domestic workers in the “post-socialist era” are among those few outstanding works. Put in this context, Nguyen's book on Vietnamese domestic workers is an important contribution towards filling the research gap in domestic migration studies and post-socialist society.

This book's research question examines “ways in which class identities are forged and contested through the practices and discourses of domestic service, which is central to middle-class domesticity in Vietnam” (xx). Her finding is that “these dynamics build on cultural notions of gender and rural-urban difference, which in turn have been shaped by the ethos of state socialism and a moral economy specific to the country” (xx). The major sources for this book are the author's interviews with individuals from four different groups in Hanoi: live-in and live-out domestic workers, cleaners/junk traders, and private hospital caregivers.

The arrangement of the book's chapters is as follows. The introductory chapter puts forth the author's theoretical and major viewpoints, with a brief description of Vietnamese social change after *Doi Moi*. Chapter 2 depicts the backgrounds of employers and domestic workers, and the institutional arrangements used to recruit domestic workers. The title of chapter 3 is “Power at work,” but its main theme addresses Vietnamese cultural concepts like harmony or affection, which influence personal interactions. Set against this background, the following three chapters explore three dimensions that domestic workers experience: discursive (chapter 4: unruly servants, erotic bodies, and cultural delinquents); material (chapter 5: needs, consumption,