Chapter VI
Decentralization and Local Government in Sri Lanka

The public debate over local government in Sri Lanka has been dominated by the ethnic conflict in the country. For the last 20 years efforts to change and reform local government in the country have focused on devolution as a means to provide increased representation for the Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic minority and resolve their demands for an independent state. As a result there have been few efforts over the last 15 years to improve local representation and development. Although there have been many changes in local government over the last 25 years, most have been cosmetic in nature, changing the names of offices and councils but having little impact on the power relations between the national government and local governments or in the efficiency of local government.

Background

Sri Lanka has been a unitary state since the nation was granted its independence from Great Britain in 1948. The unitary system was imposed by the British during the colonial era despite the colony’s ethnic diversity. Today, Sri Lanka’s ethnic majority, the Sinhalese comprise 74 percent of the population.¹ The Sinhalese speak an Indo-European language, Sinhala and most are Buddhists. A small percentage of the group converted to Christianity during the colonial era and continue to practice it. The Sinhalese are the predominant group in the south, central and western portions of the island. The Sri Lankan Tamils are the largest ethnic minority and comprise 12.7 percent of the population. The Tamils speak a Dravidian language and most are Hindus. However, as with the Sinhalese, a small percentage are Christians. An-

¹ This figure and later population figures are based on the 1981 census (Government of Sri Lanka 2001). This was the last complete census conducted in Sri Lanka. In 2001, a census was carried out in all areas except for much of the north and east. Thus, its results do not accurately reflect the population distribution between ethnic groups.