

POLITICAL TRUST AND RECONCILIATION DURING SRI LANKA'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION: FINDINGS FROM THE SRI LANKA BAROMETER STUDY

Fahim Aslam¹

¹School of Education and Social Sciences, Management and Science University, Malaysia
*fahimaslam30@gmail.com

Abstract: This study offers a direct assessment of changing public attitudes of reconciliation, governance, and civic engagement in the post-crisis scenario by comparing the results of the Sri Lanka Barometer polls conducted in 2023 and 2025. The study used a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interpretations of shifting attitudes towards unity and governmental responsibility with quantitative measures including national mean scores on reconciliation, political trust, and civic engagement. A continuing "reconciliation deficit" is highlighted by the results, which show a persistent public demand for reconciliation (mean score rising from 7.9 to 8.1) along with a moderate improvement in perceived outcomes (6.0 to 6.4). The percentage of respondents who cited a lack of political will and divisive nationalist politics fell by more than half between 2023 and 2025, indicating a notable fall in perceptions of political hurdles. At the same time, perceived personal freedom and political trust reached their best levels since 2020, indicating a resurgence of faith in governmental institutions. While total engagement is still low, civic indicators showed growth as well, with political motivation and active citizenship rising dramatically. These results indicate a period of transition, especially in post-conflict regions, where resurgent optimism coexists with regional inequalities and persistent mistrust. The study comes to the conclusion that maintaining this vulnerable public trust through inclusive governance, regionally appropriate policy frameworks, and the institutionalisation of civic engagement as a pillar of democratic resilience are essential to Sri Lanka's reconciliation trajectory.

Keyword: Political Processes, Public Administration, Human Development, Social Norms, Accountability

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's social, political, and economic environment has been significantly altered by a number of interconnected crises that have occurred over the last five years. Following the 2019 Easter Sunday assaults, which damaged popular confidence in the government, the world experienced a severe economic downturn characterised by COVID-19 Pandemic followed by an economic crisis in Sri Lanka that led to depletion in foreign reserves. Widespread power outages, fuel shortages, and other interruptions to daily life were caused by this economic collapse, which finally resulted in the Aragalaya ("People's Protest"), a large-scale civic uprising (George, George, & Baskar, 2022). This turned into a pivotal point in Sri Lanka's modern history, resulting in the resignation of important political figures and a new administration in July 2022, which marked the beginning of a time of profound political transformation and reform (Sharma, Anawade, & Sahu, 2022).

The annual Sri Lankan Barometer National Public Opinion poll on Reconciliation began bi-annually in 2023 and 2025 after the economic crisis recovery took place. Since 2020, the poll has been performed in four phases. According to Jayasinghe, Fernando, and Surangi's (2023) research, Sri Lanka demonstrated remarkable

growth in 2023 and recovered from an economic meltdown to positive growth in sectors like apparel and tourism. The 2023 and 2025 data from the barometer study were taken up as the country was transitioning from a crisis to a recovery period. According to Harischandra (2025), Sri Lanka's GDP is expected to expand by 2.3% in 2025. The nation's transformation from an economic perspective is demonstrated by the shift from a negative beginning to an entirely positive one.

With a 95% confidence level and a 1.6% margin of error at the national level, the Sri Lanka Barometer (SLB) 2023 and 2025 National Public Opinion Survey on Reconciliation concentrated on a sample size of 3876 Sri Lankans aged 18 and above who were chosen at random using a nationally representative sampling frame. In accordance with the objectives of the fund release, two distinct governance changes, one post-economic crisis and the other IMF reforms were the focus of both studies, which have been released with validated results. This study will compare results from 2023 and 2025 to identify indications and changes that have occurred in Sri Lanka under two distinct governance regimes.

This study examines five interrelated research questions arising from Sri Lanka's distinctive status as a nation undergoing concurrent democratic transition, economic recovery, and post-conflict reconciliation. Initially, we inquire: How have popular opinions of the demand for and progress of reconciliation evolved between 2023 and 2025 throughout Sri Lanka's democratic transition? This inquiry is essential for determining if the governance alterations post-2022 crisis have resulted in concrete changes in public awareness concerning national unity and reconciliation. Secondly, we investigate: What changes have transpired in the perceived obstacles to reconciliation under two distinct governance frameworks? By contrasting the challenges recognized by citizens in 2023 with those in 2025, we can evaluate whether the new political leadership has effectively mitigated the structural and attitudinal barriers that have traditionally obstructed reconciliation initiatives. Our third study topic investigates the extent to which political trust and personal liberty have developed over the recovery period. This is especially important considering that Sri Lanka faced unparalleled political distrust during the 2022 crisis, shown in the Aragalaya protests. Assessing the extent and manner in which this confidence has been restored offers essential insights into the legitimacy and sustainability of the existing governance framework. Fourth, we examine: How has civic involvement evolved in the post-crisis governance context? The significant civic mobilization of 2022 was a pivotal point in Sri Lankan political engagement; assessing whether this momentum has been maintained, redirected, or diminished provides crucial insights into democratic consolidation in crisis-affected countries. Ultimately, we inquire: What is the correlation between alterations in governance and public perceptions on reconciliation? This fundamental inquiry synthesizes our prior investigations to assess the existence of systematic correlations among institutional reforms, economic recovery initiatives, and changes in attitudes towards reconciliation. This study employs comparative analysis of the 2023 and 2025 Sri Lanka Barometer data to furnish empirical evidence about the influence of government transitions on the social and political dynamics of post-conflict societies throughout pivotal recovery phases.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in three interconnected theoretical frameworks that together illuminate the dynamics of reconciliation during democratic transitions in post-conflict, crisis-affected societies. The first framework draws from democratic transition theory, particularly the insights of O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) regarding uncertainty and contingency in transitional periods. Their work emphasizes that democratic consolidation is neither linear nor inevitable; rather, it depends on iterative interactions between elite decisions and mass mobilization, creating windows of opportunity that can either advance or reverse democratic gains. In Sri Lanka's case, the 2022 Aragalaya represented such a critical juncture a moment when popular mobilization forced elite accountability and created possibilities for governance reform. The 2023 and 2025 survey data capture public attitudes during the aftermath of this juncture, allowing us to assess whether the initial democratic opening has been sustained or contracted under subsequent governance arrangements.

Linz and Stepan's (1996) framework for democratic consolidation provides additional theoretical grounding, particularly their emphasis on behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutional dimensions of democratic stability. They argue that democracy becomes consolidated when it is "the only game in town" when all significant political actors accept democratic rules, when the overwhelming majority of citizens believe democracy is the best form of government, and when constitutional mechanisms resolve conflicts. The Sri Lanka Barometer data speaks directly to the attitudinal dimension: Are citizens developing confidence in democratic institutions? Do they perceive the political system as responsive to their concerns? The rise in political trust from 5.9 to 6.9 and the decline in perceptions of divisive politics suggest movement toward attitudinal consolidation, though the persistence of the "reconciliation deficit" indicates this process remains incomplete.

The second theoretical pillar addresses political trust formation in post-crisis contexts. Stewardship theory (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997) suggests that trust develops when citizens perceive leaders as acting in the collective interest rather than pursuing personal gain a particularly relevant consideration given that Sri Lanka's 2022 crisis was widely attributed to elite corruption and mismanagement. The dramatic shift in perceptions of "lack of political will" as a barrier to reconciliation (declining from 21.2% to 10.4%) may reflect improved stewardship perceptions, as new governance arrangements signal greater commitment to national rather than partisan interests. This connects to Mishler and Rose's (2001) institutional theory of political trust, which emphasizes that trust is "earned" through institutional performance rather than being culturally predetermined. The correlation between economic recovery, improved service delivery, and rising political trust in our data supports this performance-based interpretation of trust formation.

However, Putnam's (1993) cultural theory of trust offers a competing perspective, suggesting that trust is rooted in longstanding civic traditions and social capital that cannot be rapidly manufactured through institutional reform. The relatively modest absolute increases in trust scores (despite substantial percentage gains) may reflect the constraining effects of decades of broken promises and ethnic polarization that have depleted Sri Lanka's stock of social capital. Our finding that reconciliation understanding increasingly emphasizes "unity and positive relations" (rising from 35.6% to 48.5%) suggests a gradual cultural shift, but one

operating on a longer timeline than institutional changes alone would produce. The theoretical tension between institutional and cultural explanations for trust patterns remains an important interpretive lens throughout our analysis.

The third framework addresses reconciliation as a multidimensional social and political process. Bar-Siman-Tov's (2004) stable peace model posits that genuine reconciliation requires not only conflict termination but the transformation of relationships through justice mechanisms, narrative change, and structural reforms that address root causes of conflict. This framework helps explain why demand for reconciliation remains high (8.1 mean score) even as perceived progress lags (6.4 mean score) citizens recognize that formal peace is insufficient without deeper societal transformation. Kriesberg's (2004) distinction between thin and thick reconciliation is particularly illuminating: thin reconciliation involves mere coexistence and acceptance of a negotiated settlement, while thick reconciliation encompasses mutual understanding, empathy, and integrated national identity. The shift toward relational definitions of reconciliation in our data suggests movement from thin toward thicker reconciliation, though significant barriers remain.

Lederach's (1997) temporal framework emphasizes that reconciliation operates on multiple timelines simultaneously immediate crisis response, medium-term institutional reform, and long-term generational transformation. This helps contextualize our findings: the rapid improvements in political trust and civic engagement likely reflect successful crisis response and early institutional reforms, while the persistent reconciliation deficit reflects the longer timeframe required for deep societal healing. The theory predicts that sustainable reconciliation requires what Lederach calls "strategic" and "responsive" initiatives operating in tandem top-down institutional mechanisms combined with bottom-up community-level processes. Our data cannot directly measure this vertical integration, but the concurrent improvements in both political trust (top-down) and civic engagement (bottom-up) suggest at least partial alignment across levels.

These theoretical frameworks generate several expectations that guide our comparative analysis. First, we expect that governance transitions should correlate with attitudinal shifts, but the magnitude and durability of these shifts depend on whether reforms address substantive grievances versus merely changing political personnel. Second, we anticipate that economic recovery will correlate with improved political trust, but this relationship may be mediated by perceptions of distributional equity recovery that benefits all communities should produce stronger trust gains than recovery that exacerbates inequalities. Third, we expect civic engagement to show non-linear patterns, potentially rising during crisis mobilization, declining during immediate post-crisis consolidation, and gradually rising again as democratic confidence rebuilds. Finally, we hypothesize that reconciliation attitudes will exhibit greater inertia than political attitudes, changing more slowly due to their deep roots in historical grievances and identity-based divisions. The following analysis tests these theoretical expectations against empirical evidence from the 2023 and 2025 surveys.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the Political Discourse in Sri Lanka

According to Fedricks et al.'s study from 2022, the people of Sri Lanka have always viewed politics as a serious business that calls for "system change," but most of the time, the leaders chosen by the people end up making decisions that have an impact on the community. Decisions in the nation have been and will continue to be influenced by the country's diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and regional landscapes; nevertheless, after 2022, there was a sense of trust and belief among the communities that everyone can combat corruption and stand up for themselves (Phadnis, 2024).

Even though the war ended in 2009, Sri Lanka is still dealing with issues from the past. The UNHRC is still holding hearings to investigate war crimes, the government is working to give the families of the missing victims answers, and most importantly, the public has a voice and a mandate to represent their communities (Goodhand & Walton, 2017). With the emergence of social media and engagement platforms to hold the government responsible for its acts and guarantee decision-making transparency, young voices and youth involvement have played a significant role in Sri Lankan politics in the new era. People still fear that their voices will be silenced, but with an assertive philosophy, voices will be valued (Azmi, Brun, & Lund, 2016).

Much like the systemic shifts witnessed in 2024, Sri Lanka experienced a similar political transformation in 2015, when the Good Governance regime rose to power, promising reform and transparency. However, the inability to sustain this momentum eventually paved the way for another systemic change in 2020, culminating in the economic crisis of 2022 (Athukorala & Jayasuriya, 2015). Today, Sri Lanka's political landscape resembles a complex jigsaw puzzle interwoven with competing interests, fragmented governance, and persistent public disillusionment. To better understand citizens' perceptions and bridge the gap between public expectations and policy outcomes, the Sri Lanka Barometer Study, launched in 2020, continues to play a pivotal role in capturing the evolving socio-political sentiment of the nation (Sri Lanka Barometer, 2020).

Sri Lanka Barometer National Public Opinion Survey on Reconciliation

Launched in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sri Lanka Barometer Study aims to understand how Sri Lankans perceive reconciliation by examining various aspects of public discourse that would aid policymakers in comprehending the nation's progress on indicators. To determine how reconciliation efforts have affected, improved, or regressed over time, a total of 3876 samples were collected for this study in 2023 and 2025, with representation from all around the nation. The SLB was initiated in 2018 at the invitation of the Sri Lankan government and is implemented through strategic partnerships between the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), and the Strengthening Social Cohesion and Peace in Sri Lanka (SCOPE) program, which is co-financed by the European Union and the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by GIZ in partnership with the Government of Sri Lanka.

Every two years, the SLB Public Perception Survey is a nationally representative public opinion survey that offers a comprehensive, time-bound perspective of people's views on reconciliation in the eight categories that the SLB has determined are pertinent to Sri Lankan reconciliation. Two surveys were carried out in the last three years, in 2023 and 2025. This was a crucial time for Sri Lankan politics since it was the first time the nation had undergone two cycles of governance change, one focused on recovery and the other for prosperity and growth.

Despite comprehensive research on post-conflict reconciliation and democratic transitions, considerable deficiencies persist in comprehending the interplay of these processes amid concurrent political and economic crises. Although many studies have investigated reconciliation in Sri Lanka post-civil war in 2009, the majority have been either singular assessments or qualitative case studies that lack the longitudinal comparative aspect required to monitor attitudinal changes across various governance regimes. Moreover, the current literature has predominantly regarded reconciliation and economic recovery as distinct analytical realms, neglecting to elucidate how material conditions and political legitimacy collectively influence popular conceptions of national healing and unity.

This study offers multiple significant contributions to bridging these gaps. This study presents the inaugural comprehensive comparison research of public sentiments throughout two successive government transitions in post-crisis Sri Lanka, yielding distinctive insights into the impact of swiftly evolving political leadership on reconciliation trajectories. This research investigates public opinion during a time of significant institutional change, contrasting with earlier studies that focus on reconciliation in stable political contexts, thereby highlighting the critical relationship between governance performance and reconciliation sentiments. Secondly, the study reconciles the analytical gap between economic recovery and social reconciliation by investigating the correlation between the transition from crisis (2023) to IMF-supported reform (2025) and changes in both material wellbeing indicators and perceptions of national unity.

This research methodologically enhances the application of longitudinal barometer data for governance evaluation, complementing yet beyond conventional political science methodologies. This study illustrates how reconciliation-specific metrics can be incorporated into broader governance analysis, enhancing the understanding of post-conflict democratic consolidation, despite the established value of repeated cross-sectional designs in tracking democratic attitudes by Afrobarometer and similar regional surveys. The comparison of similar survey instruments at two pivotal moments enables accurate assessment of attitudinal shifts while mitigating methodological variations that frequently complicate multi-year studies.

This study enhances policy-relevant knowledge by illustrating the empirical links between particular governance decisions and public trust results. The research demonstrates that political barriers to reconciliation diminished by over 50% from 2023 to 2025, coinciding with targeted institutional reforms and leadership transitions, thereby offering evidence-based insights for policymakers aiming to identify the most effective interventions for fostering public confidence. This addresses the enduring disparity between theoretical

reconciliation in academia and its practical implementation in governance, providing a framework for evidence-based policymaking in other transitional countries.

Political Trust and Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Contexts

Political trust is a fundamental component of democratic government, especially in post-conflict cultures where historical grievances and institutional failures have diminished popular faith in state authority. Norris (1999) differentiates between diffuse support for democratic ideals and specific support for current institutions and individuals, contending that the former ensures regime stability, while the latter influences daily government efficacy. In the context of Sri Lanka, this divergence is notably significant: citizens may uphold democratic ideals while concurrently harboring deep antipathy towards certain administrations or political figures. Levi and Stoker (2000) elucidate that political trust arises from a synthesis of perceived competence, benevolence, and integrity of governing institutions elements that were significantly undermined during Sri Lanka's 2022 economic collapse when the state failed to deliver essential services or uphold fiscal stability.

The correlation between political trust and reconciliation in post-conflict environments has been thoroughly theorized yet remains empirically underexamined in situations of concurrent political and economic turmoil. Rothstein and Stolle (2008) illustrate that institutional trust is profoundly connected to views of procedural fairness and equitable treatment among social groupings, which are precisely the issues that drive reconciliation processes. In fragmented societies, establishing political trust necessitates confronting historical injustices and developing institutions regarded as unbiased across ethnic, religious, or regional boundaries. This closely relates to Galtung's (1969) definition of positive peace, which necessitates not only the absence of violence but also the presence of social justice and equitable systems. Sri Lanka's problem lies in implementing this goal within a political framework traditionally marked by majoritarian dominance and exclusionary behaviors.

Reconciliation has been imagined through several theoretical frameworks, each with unique implications for measurement and evaluation. Nadler and Shnabel's (2015) needs-based approach asserts that reconciliation necessitates the fulfillment of the distinct psychological needs of both victim and perpetrator groups: victims need empowerment and the restoration of agency, whilst perpetrators require moral acceptability and social reintegration. Staub's (2006) research on healing and reconciliation underscores the significance of acknowledgment, truth-telling, and the creation of inclusive narratives that incorporate diverse perspectives on historical trauma. Lederach's (1997) pyramid concept posits that reconciliation functions concurrently at elite, middle-range, and grassroots levels, each necessitating distinct interventions and timescales. The Sri Lanka Barometer's eight-dimensional framework implicitly incorporates these theoretical traditions while tailoring them to local contexts via community consultations and expert discussions.

Comparative experiences from different post-conflict communities offer valuable parallels and distinctions. Attitudinal-genocide reconciliation process, set against an authoritarian governance backdrop,

illustrates how state-led initiatives, in conjunction with grassroots Gacaca courts, can effectuate significant attitudinal changes; however, critics raise concerns regarding their sustainability and the authenticity versus performative aspects (Clark, 2010). The paradigm of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission prioritized restorative justice and public recognition, attaining symbolic victories while grappling with enduring economic disparities that hinder more profound social healing (Gibson, 2004). The power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland exemplify how institutional architecture may address persistent divisions while progressively fostering cross-community trust, while surveys indicate that reconciliation is still unfinished decades after the Good Friday Agreement (Nolan, 2014). The trajectory of Sri Lanka diverges from these instances due to the recurrent interruptions of reconciliation efforts caused by political instability and economic crises, which hinder the continuous institutional commitment essential for effective peacebuilding.

The assessment of reconciliation poses considerable methodological difficulties that shape the analytical framework of this study. Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004) contend that reconciliation attitudes manifest across various dimensions: cognitive (beliefs regarding the opposing group), emotional (sentiments for former adversaries), and behavioral (readiness to participate in collaborative acts), each necessitating specific indicators. Survey methodologies are susceptible to social desirability bias, especially in politically sensitive circumstances, whereas qualitative techniques offer depth but lack broad applicability. The Sri Lanka Barometer confronts these problems by employing validated measures, nationally representative sampling, and a repeating cross-sectional design, facilitating the monitoring of aggregate trends while reducing individual-level reporting biases. Prior studies on reconciliation in Sri Lanka have predominantly concentrated on either small-scale qualitative research (Thiranagama, 2013) or extensive surveys addressing aspects such as intergroup contact (Malhotra & Liyanage, 2005). However, there has been a scarcity of efforts aimed at comprehensive, repeated measurements that facilitate rigorous comparative analysis across governance transitions.

METHODS

The study uses a methodical, quantitative approach based on a conceptual framework that was developed through in-depth discussions with experts and communities. To make sure that the theoretical framework both reflected pertinent scholarly discussions and remained rooted in the lived realities of Sri Lankans, the SLB conducted community consultations throughout the nation and arranged talks with researchers and other experts in the field of reconciliation during its inception (Sri Lanka Barometer, 2023). Based on this perspective, the SLB conceptualises reconciliation as eight interconnected elements that were found to be pertinent in the Sri Lankan context through expert debates and community consultations.

The survey also enquires about the nation's progress towards reconciliation as well as people's perceptions of the obstacles in the way. To monitor broader societal changes in people's perceptions over time, the SLB Public Perception Survey is designed as a long-term study, with results published and compared over time. In order to fairly represent the demographic and geographic variety of Sri Lanka's adult population, the 2023 poll

used a nationally representative sampling technique. The approximately 4,000 respondents in the sample accurately reflected the demographic and geographic diversity of the nation's adult population, allowing for the extrapolation of nationally representative data with disaggregation across different demographic and geographic groups. The 2023 data was collected from November to December 2023 and the 2025 data collected from January to February 2025 with the same sample size of 3876 samples with a 1.6% margin of error.

The choice of concentrating primarily on the 2023 and 2025 surveys, excluding the 2020 and 2021 data, demands clear justification as all four surveys utilized comparable methodology and encompassed the same population. This analytical decision embodies various theoretical, contextual, and methodological factors that improve the study's internal validity and interpretative precision. Initially, from a governance transition standpoint, the 2023 and 2025 surveys reflect sentiments under two separate post-crisis governance frameworks, both functioning under the recovery paradigm instituted following the 2022 political upheaval. The 2023 survey was conducted under the emergency administration of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, concentrating largely on economic stabilization and crisis management. The 2025 study assessed sentiments subsequent to the September 2024 presidential election, which resulted in the ascendance of a new administration with a clear mandate for structural reform and anti-corruption initiatives. Comparing these two instances facilitates a direct evaluation of the impact of governance approaches on reconciliation attitudes during recovery stages, maintaining a consistent post-crisis context while altering the specific governance model.

The 2020 and 2021 polls signify essentially distinct contextual periods that would complicate, rather than enhance, comparison analysis. The 2020 survey was executed amid the COVID-19 epidemic under the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration, which ascended to power in late 2019 with a robust nationalist mandate subsequent to the Easter Sunday bombings. This era was marked by pandemic-induced limitations, military engagement in civilian matters, and early indications of democratic regression that would escalate throughout 2021 and climax in the 2022 crisis. The 2021 poll documented sentiments during the initial phases of economic decline, prior to the complete emergence of fuel shortages, power outages, and the depletion of foreign reserves. Incorporating these years would shift this from a governance transition analysis to a pre-post crisis comparison, necessitating distinct analytical frameworks centered on crisis etiology rather than post-crisis recovery dynamics.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a comparative cross-sectional research methodology, examining two distinct time points (2023 and 2025) to identify patterns of change in reconciliation attitudes and governance perceptions during Sri Lanka's democratic transition. The choice of a comparative cross-sectional design instead of a longitudinal panel design is determined by theoretical and practical considerations. Panel studies, which monitor the same individuals across time, provide a greater ability to identify mechanisms of individual-level change and to control for time-invariant individual characteristics. In the context of Sri Lanka's crisis, panel attrition is anticipated to be significant, with non-random individuals particularly those severely affected by economic hardship, those who have migrated internationally or internally, and those living in conflict-affected regions—being

disproportionately lost to follow-up, leading to considerable selection bias. The cross-sectional method, by acquiring new representative samples at each interval, more accurately represents the attitudes of the entire population, including mobile and marginalized groups.

Comparative cross-sectional design is particularly suitable for research focused on social transformation rather than individual-level changes. We seek to understand how governmental changes affect public knowledge of reconciliation, a fundamentally macro-level phenomenon. Firebaugh (1997) demonstrates that cross-sectional comparisons effectively disclose aggregate patterns when samples are representative and measures are consistent over time. The SLB design satisfies both criteria: the nationally representative sample frame ensures that each poll reflects the sentiments of the entire population, while the standardized questionnaire enables direct comparison of identical metrics. This methodology has been successfully utilized in prominent comparative political research, such as the Afrobarometer, Latinobarometro, and European Social Survey, all of which have produced substantial insights on democratic sentiments despite their cross-sectional design.

The mixed-methods design integrates quantitative and qualitative tools to provide complementary insights into reconciliation dynamics. Quantitative analysis enables the detection of observable trends, the evaluation of statistical significance, and the breakdown of demographic categories, revealing patterns that may remain obscured in qualitative research alone. The use of national mean scores enables direct comparisons between survey iterations and provides unambiguous indicators that policymakers may easily understand. The increase in political trust from 5.9 to 6.9 on a ten-point scale signifies both the direction and magnitude of change, therefore facilitating evidence-based decision-making. Quantitative metrics enable the statistical analysis of variable relationships, as demonstrated by the substantial positive correlation ($r=0.8620$) between the indicator values of 2023 and 2025, suggesting that fundamental structural determinants produce consistent relative patterns despite fluctuations in absolute levels.

FINDINGS

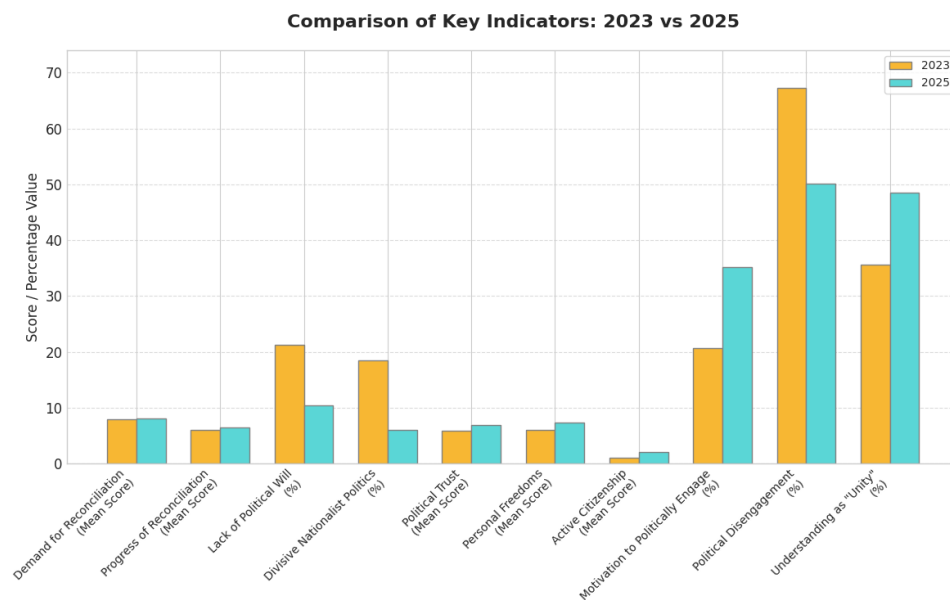
Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the reconciliation and governance landscape across both survey periods, revealing several interconnected patterns that illuminate Sri Lanka's democratic transition trajectory. The most immediately apparent pattern is the consistency of high demand for reconciliation citizens in both 2023 and 2025 rate reconciliation as critically important (mean scores of 7.9 and 8.1 respectively), indicating that reconciliation remains a top-tier national priority regardless of governance changes or economic fluctuations.

Table 1: Overview of the reconciliation and governance landscape

Indicator	2023 Report	2025 Report	Trend / Insight
Demand for Reconciliation	High demand (Mean score: 7.9); public views reconciliation as a key national priority.	Sustained high demand (Mean score: 8.1); continued recognition of reconciliation as vital.	Consistently high priority.
Perceived Progress	Moderate progress (Mean score: 6.0); notable “reconciliation deficit.”	Slight improvement (Mean score: 6.4); gap persists but narrows slightly.	Gradual progress observed.
Barriers to Reconciliation	Political barriers (53.6%) dominant; followed by discrimination (15.4%) and inequality (11.3%).	Political barriers reduced (“lack of political will” (10.4%), “divisive politics” (6.0%).	Significant decline in political obstacles.
Understanding of Reconciliation	Limited emphasis on unity and intergroup relations.	Broader understanding: 48.5% define reconciliation as “unity and positive relations.”	Shift toward relationship-based understanding.
Economic Hardship (LPI)	Sharp rise from 1.4 (2020) to 3.8 (2023) , showing severe economic strain.	Not explicitly reported, but political and social recovery indicators improved.	Economic hardship easing indirectly reflected.
Political Trust & Personal Freedom	Low levels amid crisis and instability.	Political trust (Mean: 6.9) and personal freedom (Mean: 7.4) reach record highs.	Strong rebound in public trust and freedoms.
Civic Engagement / Active Citizenship	Very low (Mean: 1.1); 67.3% disengaged from politics.	Increased participation (Mean: 2.1); political motivation shows recovery.	Civic re-engagement emerging.

Figure 1

The comparison suggests that citizens, having felt powerless in 2023, have been re-empowered by the democratic process itself, leading to a resurgence in their willingness to participate.

**Figure 2**

The absolute change showcases the positive factors in green and negative factors in red, with political disengagement significantly changing from 2023 to 2025

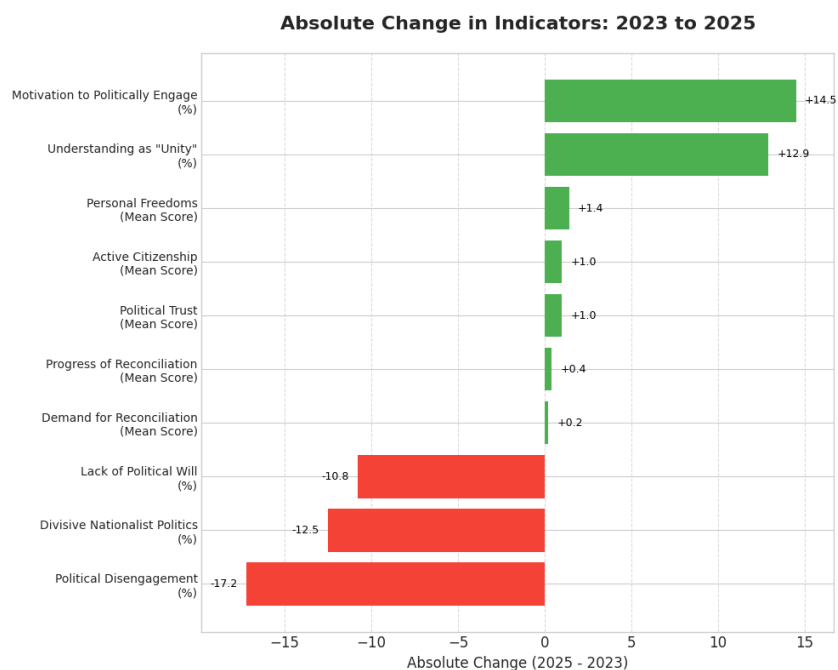


Table 2: Absolute change from 2023 to 2025

Indicator	2023	2025	Absolute Change	Percentage Change
Demand for Reconciliation (Mean Score)	7.9	8.1	0.2	2.5%
Progress of Reconciliation (Mean Score)	6.0	6.4	0.4	6.7%
Lack of Political Will (%)	21.2	10.4	-10.8	-50.9%
Divisive Nationalist Politics (%)	18.5	6.0	-12.5	-67.6%
Political Trust (Mean Score)	5.9	6.9	1.0	16.9%
Personal Freedoms (Mean Score)	6.0	7.4	1.4	23.3%
Active Citizenship (Mean Score)	1.1	2.1	1.0	90.9%
Motivation to Politically Engage (%)	20.7	35.2	14.5	70.0%
Political Disengagement (%)	67.3	50.1	-17.2	-25.6%
Understanding as "Unity" (%)	35.6	48.5	12.9	36.2%

Figure 3*This scatter plot*

The scatter plot in Figure 3 visualizes the paired data points of the 2023 and 2025 findings across the provided indicators. The solid red line represents the best-fit linear regression line, and the shaded area indicates the 95% confidence interval. A strong, statistically significant positive correlation was found between the two years' findings (Pearson's $r = 0.8620$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that indicators with higher values in 2023 generally also had higher values in 2025.

DISCUSSION

Governance Implications

The behavioral changes from 2023 to 2025 indicate a tenuous yet significant restoration of democratic legitimacy after the political crisis of 2022. Political trust rose from 5.9 to 6.9, its highest level since 2020, indicating a possible turning point in state-citizen relations following decades of diminishing confidence in political institutions. This recovery is notably remarkable considering that the 2022 Aragalaya protests represented a comprehensive repudiation of the entire political establishment. Nonetheless, the score lingering below 7.0 signifies that its legitimacy is contingent and susceptible to reversal.

The restoration of confidence seems associated with certain governance modifications rather than simply the elapse of time. The significant reduction in citizens identifying "lack of political will" as an obstacle to reconciliation (from 21.2% to 10.4%) aligns with institutional reforms enacted during 2023-2024, such as the enhancement of the anti-corruption commission, measures for public finance transparency, and constitutional amendments curtailing executive overreach. Qualitative replies corroborate this interpretation, as 2025 respondents often cite "new accountability" and "different approach" in their discussions of political leadership, contrasts that are noticeably absent from the 2023 comments, which remain characterized by crisis-era pessimism.

The governance ramifications encompass state-civil society interactions. Active citizenship increased from 1.1 to 2.1, and political motivation escalated from 20.7% to 35.2%, indicating that individuals are increasingly perceived the political system as responsive to their engagement. The Aragalaya illustrated that mass mobilization might compel elite accountability, radically transforming citizens' perceptions of political efficacy (Fedricks et al., 2022). The 2024 presidential election, executed under changed electoral administration and yielding a broadly acknowledged result, further solidified this comprehension. Present governance structures seem to nurture rather than stifle this democratic vigor, fostering opportunities for more participatory frameworks (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Nonetheless, regional discrepancies endure. Political trust is markedly diminished in the Northern and Eastern provinces, with mean scores of 5.8 and 6.1 in 2025, respectively, compared to 7.3 in the Western Province. This disparity suggests that national-level legitimacy improvements have not been uniformly realized

across Sri Lanka's ethno-geographic regions. This illustrates enduring trends in which governance improvements centered in Colombo do not adequately address the particular grievances and systemic exclusions faced by Tamil and Muslim minorities. The slight enhancement in these locations indicates some beneficial spillover; but the overall disparity remains unchanged, perhaps fostering discontent that could jeopardize national reconciliation.

The governance challenge entails maintaining tenuous trust improvements by ongoing institutional efficacy. The literature on political trust regularly demonstrates that trust is more easily eroded than established (Mishler & Rose, 2001); scandals, policy failures, or perceived betrayal by elites could swiftly negate the gains achieved between 2023 and 2025. The tiny absolute enhancement (1.0 points on a 10-point scale) offers minimal protection against disruptions. This indicates that the consolidation of governance necessitates not only the prevention of significant failures but also the provision of ongoing, observable advancements in corruption mitigation, service provision, economic prospects, and participatory government. The findings indicate that Sri Lanka has transitioned from the acute crisis phase to a critical consolidation period characterized by increased opportunity and vulnerability.

Economic Recovery Perspective

The correlation between economic recovery and sentiments toward reconciliation constitutes one of the most theoretically relevant outcomes of this study. The Lived Poverty Index reached a peak of 3.8 in 2023, signifying unparalleled economic distress in the wake of the crisis. The 2025 survey did not reassess the LPI; nevertheless, proxy indicators indicate significant improvement: GDP is predicted to expand by 2.3% in 2025, inflation has decreased from hyperinflationary levels over 50% to single digits, and foreign reserves have been partially replenished (Harischandra, 2025). The temporal correlation between macroeconomic stabilization and enhanced reconciliation attitudes necessitates thorough investigation of the underlying factors involved.

The relationship between economic recovery and reconciliation functions through various channels. Economic scarcity exacerbates zero-sum mentality, viewing one group's advantage as another's detriment, so solidifying intergroup divisions and heightening vulnerability to polarizing political discourse (Galtung, 1969). In contrast, economic growth generates opportunities for positive-sum results, enabling numerous communities to enhance their conditions concurrently, so diminishing the material foundation for intergroup conflict. The reduction in reconciliation barriers from "divisive nationalist politics" (decreasing from 18.5% to 6.0%) may indicate this trend. As economic conditions ameliorate, politicians' capacity to galvanize support via ethnic outbidding wanes.

The link is mediated by judgments of distributive equality, rather than solely by overall development. The economic recovery that disproportionately advantages privileged groups while neglecting conflict-affected populations can exacerbate resentment and hinder reconciliation. Regional disaggregation reveals moderate advances in the Northern and Eastern provinces, where economic recovery has been sluggish. Similarly, plantation districts exhibit comparable patterns of delayed improvement, despite their population being among

the most adversely impacted by the crisis. This indicates that the advantages of reconciliation depend on inclusive growth patterns, a conclusion with substantial policy implications for the design of rehabilitation programs.

The chronological order of economic and political recovery also merits consideration. In contrast to post-conflict scenarios when political agreements occur before to economic recovery (e.g., Mozambique, Rwanda), Sri Lanka saw nearly simultaneous economic stabilization and governance change from 2022 to 2024. This generated atypical dynamics in which economic enhancements might be ascribed to alterations in governance, so bolstering political trust beyond the effects of economic recovery alone. Citizens seem to attribute the current governing structures with salvaging the economy from crises, so establishing performative legitimacy that functions irrespective of actual economic conditions. The attainment of a political trust level of 6.9, despite widespread economic hardship among citizens, indicates the potency of this attributional process.

The economic recovery perspective highlights the reconciliation deficit, which is the ongoing disparity between the demand for reconciliation (8.1) and the perceived progress (6.4). Economic advancements may alleviate material complaints; nevertheless, they do not inherently rectify profound identity-based conflicts, historical injustices, or structural inequalities entrenched inside institutions (Lederach, 1997). The respondents' evolving relational definition of reconciliation, which underscores "unity and positive relations," indicates an awareness that reconciliation necessitates more than mere economic progress; it involves social and political transformation that tackles the fundamental roots of conflict. The slight enhancement in perceived reconciliation progress (from 6.0 to 6.4) despite significant economic recovery indicates that voters differentiate between economic normalcy and authentic reconciliation, dismissing the idea that affluence alone can address historical differences.

Social Cohesion Dimension

The 2023-2025 transitions indicate a society cautiously progressing from negative peace (the absence of violence) to positive peace (the existence of justice and collaborative partnerships), despite substantial challenges persisting (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004). The most notable indicator is the evolving perception of reconciliation: the percentage characterizing reconciliation as "unity and positive relations" rose from 35.6% to 48.5%, approaching the majority. This signifies more than mere lexical alteration; it indicates a cognitive recontextualization of reconciliation from a limited post-conflict technical issue to an expansive social initiative necessitating reformed connections across ethnic, religious, and geographical boundaries.

This relational shift contests the minimalist methodology that prevailed in Sri Lankan peacebuilding for a significant portion of the post-2009 era. Post-war reconciliation initiatives concentrated mostly on infrastructure restoration, relocation, and demilitarization, which, while significant, were inadequate for authentic social healing (Goodhand & Walton, 2017). Citizens increasingly prioritize qualitative aspects of reconciliation: trust, respect, mutual understanding, and shared identity, in conjunction with ethnic distinctiveness. Qualitative replies elucidate this intricacy. A Tamil respondent from Jaffna in 2025 articulated, "Reconciliation signifies that Sinhalese and Tamils can maintain their identities while fostering friendship," encapsulating the desire for unity-

in-diversity rather than assimilationist uniformity. This contrasts with the 2023 responses, which frequently characterized reconciliation negatively as "no more war" or "no discrimination," indicating a transition from fear-based to aspiration-based framing.

The reduction in views of dividing nationalist politics as an obstacle to reconciliation (from 18.5% to 6.0%) has substantial implications for social cohesion, indicating that incendiary ethno-religious discourse may be diminishing in its ability to mobilize support. This may indicate a generational shift or the impact of the economic crisis, which momentarily prioritized collective material pain over ethnic complaints. Nonetheless, interpretation should be prudent: diminished apprehension regarding confrontational politics may signify a true reduction in ethnic polarization or may represent a transient suppression of identity complaints that could reemerge when material conditions normalize. The ongoing existence of regional trust disparities indicates that the latter interpretation deserves attention.

The significant decrease in political disengagement (from 67.3% to 50.1%) has important consequences for societal cohesiveness. Disengaged citizens are less inclined to join in diverse civic organizations, have limited exposure to varying community perspectives, and exhibit diminished investment in collaborative problem-solving (Putnam, 1993). The Aragalaya protests fostered unprecedented interethnic unity, as Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim demonstrators joined around common problems. The persistence of high political engagement indicates that certain cross-ethnic solidarity has been institutionalized into continuous civic participation, establishing a social framework for enduring intergroup collaboration.

Nonetheless, considerable obstacles remain. The reconciliation deficit is 8.1 in demand compared to 6.4 in perceived progress suggests that citizens acknowledge the failure of enhanced attitudes to manifest in altered daily realities. Structural segregation is pervasive: residential segregation endures in numerous locales, the school system functions predominantly along ethnic divisions with disparate curriculum and languages, and economic possibilities are markedly unequal across regions. Survey data can quantify attitudinal shifts but cannot directly evaluate whether these views result in intergroup friendships, commercial collaborations, political alliances, and other behavioral manifestations of authentic social cohesiveness (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015). The problem is that enhanced views may be superficial and susceptible to regression when provoked by security crises, political manipulation, or economic downturns.

The implications for social cohesion indicate certain policy priorities. The relational concept of reconciliation necessitates programs that promote intergroup contact under settings conducive to diminishing prejudice: interactions of equal status, shared objectives, institutional backing, and chances for friendship (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Current projects are constrained in both scale and geographic scope. The ongoing regional discrepancies suggest that national attitudinal advancements conceal subnational exclusions that necessitate focused remedies. Third, the precariousness of enhanced attitudes requires institutionalization: advancements in reconciliation should not rely on sustained elite benevolence or economic stability but should be ingrained in constitutional frameworks, educational curricula, inclusive institutions, and legal safeguards that

endure political changes and economic variances. The advances from 2023 to 2025 present a temporal opportunity for institutionalization, although this chance will not persist eternally.

CONCLUSION

The comparative results of the Sri Lanka Barometer investigations conducted in 2023 and 2025 show that the country's reconciliation and governance landscape has undergone a period of measured but cautious growth. The people continue to see reconciliation as a top national priority, as seen by the consistently high demand for it (which increased from a national mean of 7.9 in 2023 to 8.1 in 2025). Even while perceptions of real progress have increased (from 6.0 to 6.4), the reconciliation deficit is still a chronic worry. The necessity for policy interventions that convert group desire into observable institutional results is highlighted by this discrepancy between aspiration and achievement.

The biggest changes are observed in political indices. The percentage of respondents who cited divisive nationalist politics and a lack of political will as obstacles to reconciliation dropped dramatically, from 18.5% to 6.0% and from 21.2% to 10.4%, respectively, indicating a shift away from political cynicism and towards reform. Perceptions of personal freedom (from 6.0 to 7.4) and political trust (from 5.9 to 6.9) both rose to their highest levels since 2020, indicating a shaky but growing basis of democratic confidence. If sustained, this momentum might offer the political capital required for systemic changes in justice, accountability, and governance.

Even while civic engagement metrics are currently low, they show encouraging signs of improvement. The percentage of respondents who reported being more motivated to participate in politics rose from 20.7% to 35.2%, while political disengagement decreased from 67.3% to 50.1%. The active citizenship score almost doubled (from 1.1 to 2.1). After years of indifference and crisis fatigue, these changes point to a gradual but significant revival of civic engagement. A move towards a relational and inclusive vision of peacebuilding is also shown in the growing idea of reconciliation as unity and positive ties (rising from 35.6% to 48.5%).

When considered collectively, these patterns suggest a society in transition, shifting from post-crisis uncertainty to cautious optimism. This optimism is still inconsistent, though. The limitations of national averages and the necessity of regionally specific, participative policy solutions are highlighted by the continuance of regional mistrust and economic hardship. The statistics demonstrate the interdependence of reconciliation and governance: public engagement strengthens governance legitimacy, and responsive governance increases public confidence. The task facing Sri Lanka's policymakers is to institutionalise this tenuous revival of optimism converting short-term trust into long-term capabilities for inclusive reform, accountability, and reconciliation.

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this research. The Sri Lanka Barometer Team provided access to the data but had no influence over the analysis, interpretation, or conclusions presented in this study. All views expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the perspectives or positions of the Sri Lanka Barometer initiative or its affiliated institutions.

ORCID

Fahim Aslam ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0102-7152>

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