

Government services: Anytime, anywhere, any official language, now

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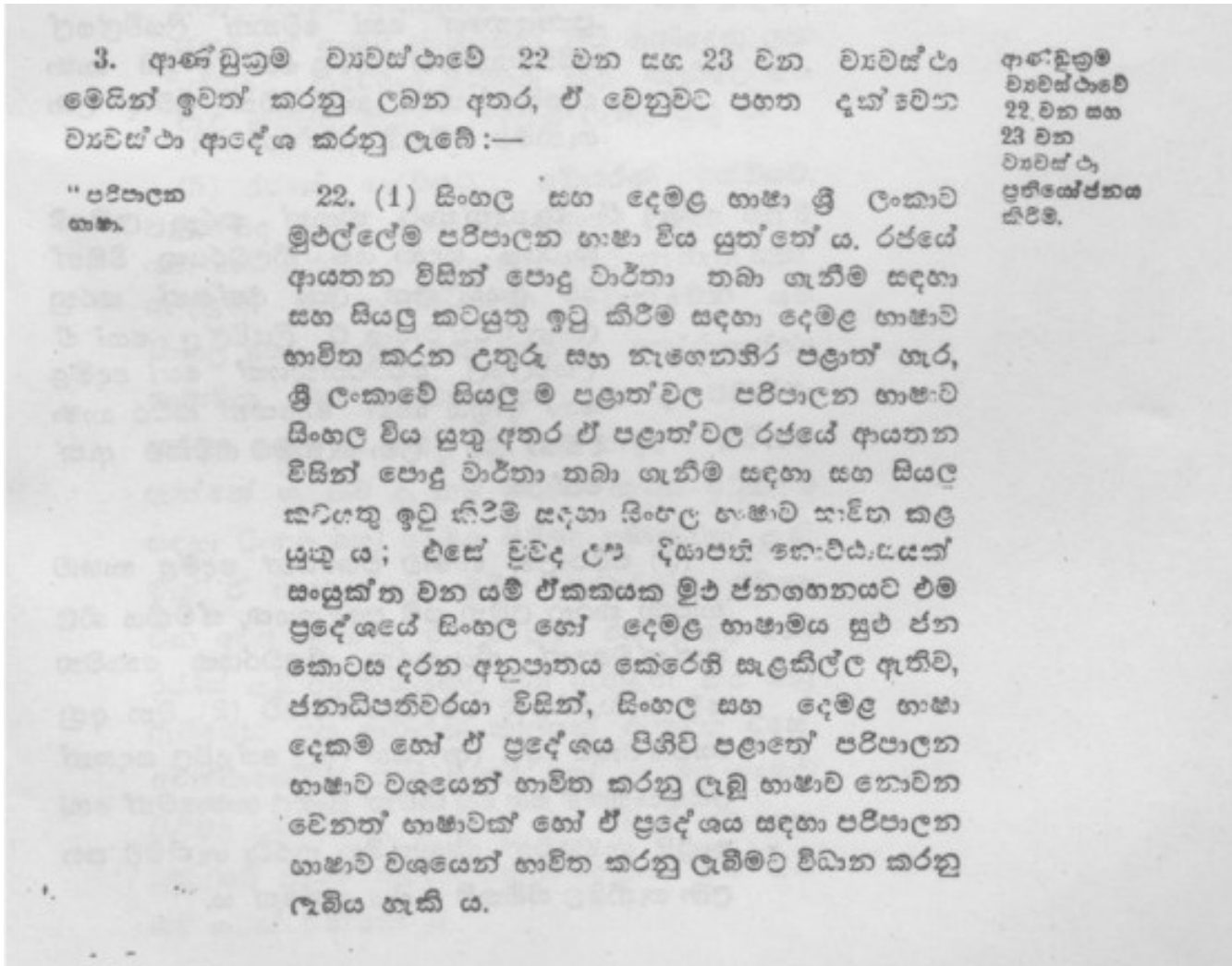
TEDx Colombo, 19 July 2009

A lawless land (or at least one where laws are selectively implemented . . .)

- The unimplemented
 - 17th Amendment (whole)
 - 13th Amendment (parts)
 - 16th Amendment (parts)
 - Art. 126(2) of the Constitution . . . The list goes on

- But let's focus on 16th Amendment

16th Amendment to the Constitution – Article 03



How Canada stayed as one country . . .

- Federal government conducts its business in both official languages and **provides government services in both languages**;
- Encourages or mandates lower tiers of government (most notably the provinces and territories, but also some municipalities) to conduct themselves in both official languages and **to provide services in both English and French** rather than in just one or the other;
- Places obligations on private actors in Canadian society to provide access to goods or **services in both official languages** (such as the requirement that food products be labelled in both English and French);
- Provides support to non-government actors to encourage or promote the use or the status of one or the other of the two official languages. This includes grants and contributions to groups representing the English-speaking minority in Quebec and the French-speaking minorities in the other provinces to assist with the establishment of an infrastructure of cultural supports and services.

But do we have the money to do all this?

Two languages, one country . . .

- It's not that Sri Lanka has not tried
 - Efficiency bar and other requirements to ensure government officials are bilingual, since before 1972
 - Official languages provisions in 1972 and 1978 Constitutions
 - 13th Amendment making Tamil an official language (1987)
 - 16th Amendment replacing provisions re languages of administration (1988)
 - Official Languages Commission, created by Act 18 of 1991
 - Etc.

N. Ram's interview of President Rajapaksa & President's Secretary Weeratunga, 21 years after 18th Amendment (July 2009)

- **President:** Yes, in Parliament. And in my Parliament speech, I spoke in Tamil also. And I spoke only in Tamil when I gave a small message when we started the new ITV Tamil channel, Vasantham.
- **LW:** The public service is learning Tamil. Some are following courses of 40 hours of spoken Tamil.
- **President:** I learnt that in one school the master said: "If the President can learn Tamil, why can't you all? You are students. You must learn Tamil." We are paying people in the public service for learning Tamil, to encourage them.
- **LW:** There is a one-time payment if you pass Tamil. But if they go for classes also we pay. H.E. [His Excellency] has issued a directive that with effect from July 1 we will not recruit people to the public service unless they know Tamil – and vice versa, that is, Tamils must know Sinhala, Sinhalese must know Tamil.
- **President:** Let them learn, let them learn. I can remember that in 1970 as a young MP I said that we must teach all Sinhalese Tamil and all Tamils Sinhala. If that had happened, I think there would have been a different world.

Still talking after all these years: Best evidence of failure to implement

If something has not worked for decades, keep doing more of the same?

- *Cujusvis hominis est errare, nullius nisi insipientis in errore perseverare (To err is human, to persevere in error is only the act of a fool)*
 - Marcus Tullius Cicero, Phillipics, XII, 2.
- *The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results*
 - Albert Einstein

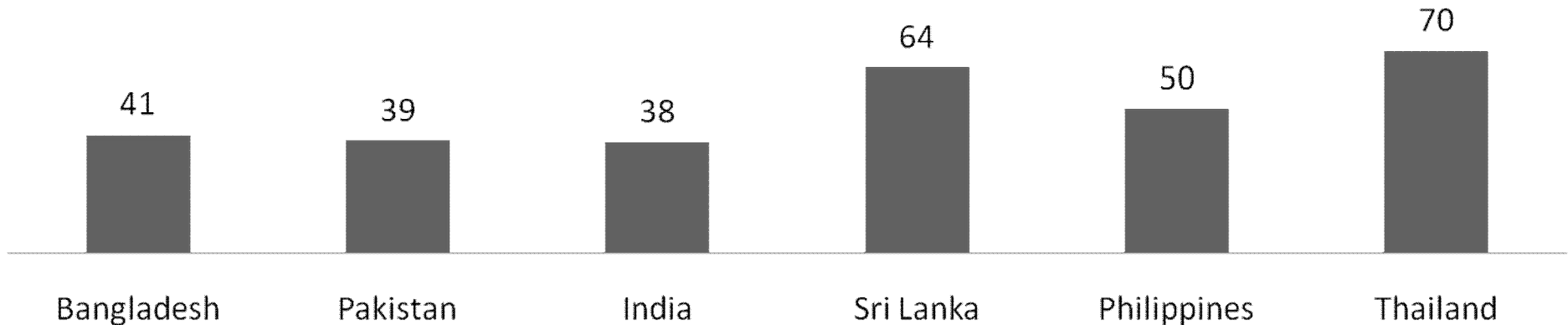
**Foolishness or insanity?
Cicero or Einstein?
Take your pick**

Something different . . .

In addition to good things like bilingualism at hiring, exploit the ubiquity of the phone

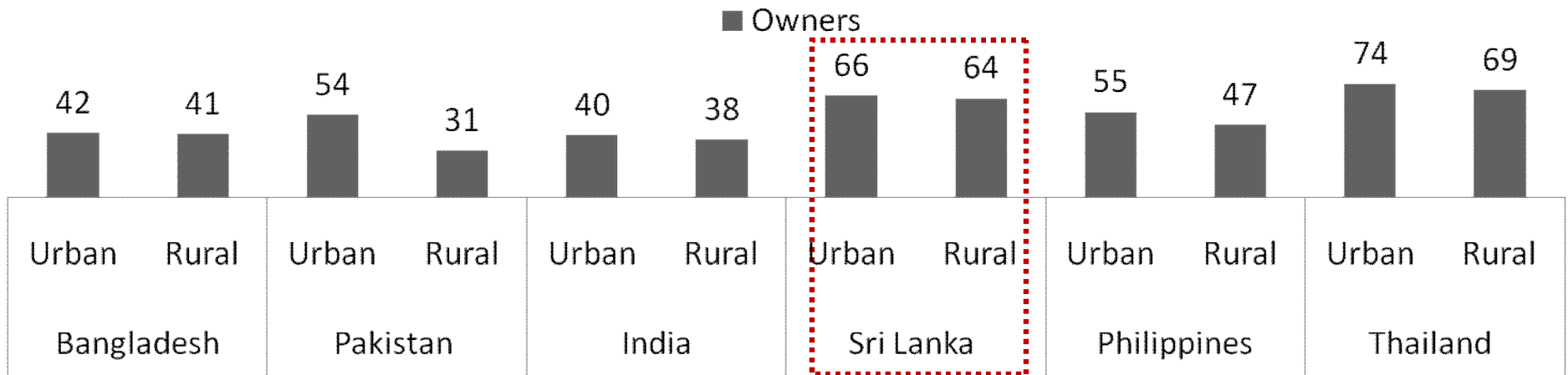
LIRNEasia research: Almost all of LK Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) households use phones; 64% own one

Total phone ownership: mobile + fixed (% of BOP households)

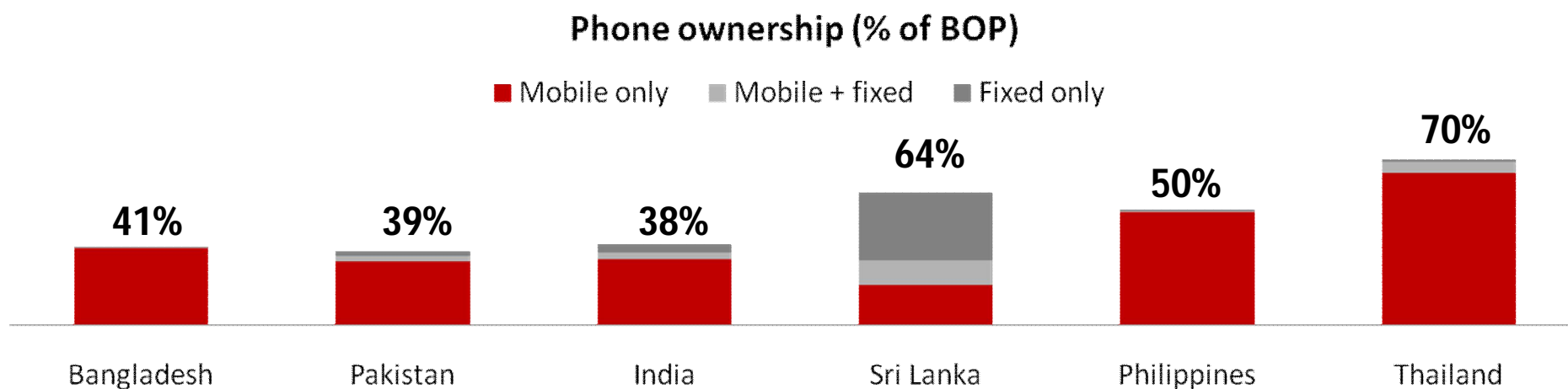


No significant difference between rural and urban phone ownership in LK

Total phone ownership: mobile + fixed (% of BOP)



LK BOP is less keen on mobiles (32%); CDMA effect*



Prevalence of CDMA is a negative; but citizens may choose to take the CDMA “fixed” phone with them in a bag when they go to government offices!

Radically different context now

- At BOP, 64% of Sri Lanka households have some kind of phone; 32% have mobile
 - Including North and East will bring % down, but including SEC A, B, and C will increase % → can safely conclude that 65-70% of households in LK have some kind of phone
- ~12 million active SIMs for 20 million people

Leverage 1919

- Government Information Center (1919) has been in operation for several years
 - Call at almost anytime (0800-2000 hrs), from anywhere (including outside Sri Lanka) and obtain information from a call-center agent on government-related questions
- Why not add real-time interpretation function?
 - Official interpreters on duty 0800-2000 to provide remote interpretations services to any citizen/government official
 - May be increase to 24/7, 365/year depending on demand

How would it work?

- Citizen or official brings 1919 into the conversation
 - Speaker phone, or
 - Three-way conferencing
 - If documents involved, fax or scan/email
- Given large and increasing amount of codified information on government rules and procedures at 1919, added value can be provided
- Scarce resources of bilingual government officials can be optimized
- Low to no cost
- Side effects of
 - Getting people used to interacting with government over the phone/online
 - Making corruption more difficult

Deeds, not words

- Trust building for political consensus
- Plucking low-hanging fruit, cheaply . . .
- Improving government services
- Contributing to reducing corruption . . .

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