

# Sri Lanka, Ethnic Conflict, and the Rise of a Violent Secessionist Movement

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At independence, Sri Lanka was expected to flourish among its newly liberated South Asian counterparts.[1] It had gained universal suffrage as early as 1931, and had a relatively peaceful transfer of power from its colonial rulers to the local government. As well, its minority Tamil population was seen as a passive people not prone to violence.[2] Yet the ethnic conflict that soon engulfed Sri Lanka is one of the world's most violent and prolonged secessionist movements since the end of the Second World War. Furthermore, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was, "arguably the most disciplined, dedicated, and ruthless guerrilla organization in the world." [3] Although recently defeated in 2009, the underlying ethnic divides which propelled the rebel movement are far from being resolved. The following attempts to explain why this peaceful minority eventually became a violent secessionist group dedicated to the goal of establishing Tamil Eelam (homeland).

From independence in 1946 to the beginning of the civil war in 1983, Tamil demands changed from peaceful attempts to gain language equality to violent demands for a distinct Tamil nation and complete secession from Sri Lanka. This, I will argue, is due to the Tamil's loss of faith in every aspect of the Sri Lankan state. I will begin by surveying the relevant literature regarding both general theories of ethnic conflict and the Sri Lankan case in particular. Then, the historical factors that contributed to the Tamils rejection of Sri Lanka and demand for secession will be explored in more detail. Finally, I will analyze the reasons why (a) the Tamil movement became distinctly secessionist and (b) why it took on such a violent nature. In conclusion, some insight will be provided for future developments regarding the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka: although the Tamil Tigers have been removed, if the Sinhalese continue to neglect the needs of the Tamil people and foster distrust among them, it is only a matter of time before another group of Tamil youths give up hope in the Sri Lankan state and resume the war for Tamil Eelam.

### Relevant Literature

#### *General Theories of Ethnic Conflict*

Donald Horowitz, in *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, has contributed the major theory explaining the root causes of ethnic conflict and secessionist movements.[4] Although writing just at the beginning of the Sri Lankan conflict, his general theory posits a framework that is highly applicable to the Sri Lankan case. He argues that, in the general case, two factors are conducive to the development of a distinct movement for a nation-state. First, an ethnically-based party system, especially when the majority group in control is divided by intraethnic party divides, can cause the exclusion of a minority group.[5] Second, "the loss of group members through assimilation and the migration of ethnic strangers into the potentially separatist region" heightens the chances of secessionist demands.[6]

Horowitz then delineates a number of specific secessionist subtypes, one of which, the 'advanced group' in a 'backward region', is applicable to the Sri Lankan case.[7] Advanced groups can compete outside of their home region, especially for civil jobs and higher wages. Therefore, they tend to migrate out from their traditional homeland and are not going to be easily pushed into demanding secessionist movements. Horowitz argues correctly that, "advanced groups in backward regions have a much higher threshold of tolerance for political events inimical to their interests than backward groups do." [8] Due to their ability to compete outside of their home region and their often

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dispersed populations, advanced groups in this situation will try all other means before attempting secession. These groups demand secession only once the benefits of remaining in the state are far outweighed by the difficulties of remaining as part of the state.[9] There are two main factors that lead to this shift of the scale: Discrimination against the advanced groups that limit their previous opportunities, and violence against them from the majority group.[10] All four of the factors listed by Horowitz – an ethnic based party system, migration into the potential secessionist region, discrimination limiting opportunity, and violence directed at a minority – are present in the Sri Lankan case. As well, the Tamils exhausted all other options and suffered over two decades of subordination before turning to violent secession. His theory therefore provides a thorough basis on which to rest an analysis of the factors that led to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

## *The Sri Lankan Case*

The literature regarding the Sri Lankan conflict has revolved around providing primordialist, constructivist, and instrumentalist explanations to the growing hostilities.[11] Political scientist Neil DeVotta, while incorporating these perspectives into his theory, focuses on an institutionalist explanation to the question of why the Tamils' demanded secession.[12] In his comprehensive book *Blowback*, he outlines his theory as follows:

The more particularistic interactions permeate institutions representing the state, the more likely it is that those marginalized will mobilize in opposition. The more ethnically based such particularism is, the more the state would likely regress to ethnocracy. And when such an ethnocracy and its accompanying institutional decay forces those dispossessed and discriminated against to retaliate by mobilizing along ethnonational lines...the stage will be set for ethnic violence.[13]

This, he posits, is exactly what happened in Sri Lanka. However, in his analysis he emphasizes the large role played by the Sinhala Only language movement as the impetus to the secessionist movement.[14] Although it was a strong catalyst for Tamil grievances and led to much of the other discriminatory policy against the Tamils, DeVotta does not devote enough time to discussing the root cause of all these discriminatory policies: the failure to amend the democratic system inherited from British colonial rule, which allowed for a Sinhalese majority to dominate. As well, he does not give enough credit to the other factors listed by Horowitz, such as migration into the Tamil homeland and the role that violent oppression plays in delegitimizing the state. Therefore, linguistic nationalism is only one of many reasons for the eventual demand for Tamil Eelam by the Tamil people.

Insight can also be drawn from primary sources regarding the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict in Sri Lanka. Vaithianathan Navaratnam was a Tamil Nationalist and a member of parliament from 1963-1970. In *The Fall and Rise of the Tamil Nation*, he provides his personal account of the events leading to the Tamil war of independence. As he knew many of the prominent figures personally and actively participated in much of the history, his memoir is a valuable resource in analyzing the causes of the separatist conflict. In particular, he is highly critical of the failure of the Tamil and Sinhalese leadership alike to change the political structure at independence, an issue that is somewhat overlooked in DeVotta's analysis.[15] Although his judgements may contain personal bias, it is nonetheless a valuable source in trying to encompass the full scope of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

## **Historical Factors**

There were multiple, overlapping factors which led to the abandonment of the Sri Lankan state by the Tamils. Most, if not all, of these factors fit into Horowitz's theory on ethnic conflict and secession. Both DeVotta's focus on linguistic nationalism, as well as Navaratnam's criticism of the political elites, will be included. However, the colonization of the Tamil homeland by Sinhalese settlers and the use of violence by the state against the minority also contributed to the demand for secession and cannot be left out of the analysis. As well, the failure of the Tamil leadership's attempts to work through government institutions, the repeated attempts at non-violent protest, and the subsequent disintegration of trust between the Tamils and Sinhalese will be shown to have caused the violent means eventually used by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

## *Colonial Period*

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Under British colonial rule, the strategy of divide and rule was implemented to exacerbate differences between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority.[16] This tactic was often used. The British would privilege a minority group with better education and government employment. This way, the majority group that was being discriminated against would direct their grievances towards their ethnic counterparts instead of the British colonizers. In the Sri Lankan case, the location of more Christian missionaries in the North meant that Tamils had more access to an English education, which was paramount to gaining employment in the civil service.[17] Over time this meant that, "Sri Lankan Tamils came to occupy a large share of civil service positions and acquired a considerable degree of economic clout." [18] This marked the beginning of the socioeconomic divide between the Sinhalese and Tamils. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed and more of the population became enfranchised, the Tamils began to see their political dominance fade. However, they remained dominant in the universities and the business sector. The Tamil domination would later be used as a major justification for the Sinhalese preferential policies, which attempted to reverse these positions. Therefore, the colonial circumstance laid the groundwork for the eventual Sinhalese domination and cannot be ignored as one of the preconditions leading to the secessionist movement.

## *Independence*

At the time of independence, one crucial mistake was made: the Tamil and Sinhalese elites failed to amend the political set-up of the new state to prevent complete domination by an ethnic majority. In 1931, universal suffrage had been granted to Sri Lanka.[19] This had an immediate effect on the elections: "Of the councillors elected in 1931, 38 were Sinhalese, five Tamil, two European and one Moor." [20] Therefore, by the time of independence, the issue of the electoral nature of an independent Sri Lanka became paramount. G.G. Ponnambalam, a Tamil representative, campaigned for 'fifty-fifty' representation, in which the Sinhalese would occupy fifty percent of the seats while the remaining fifty were distributed among the minorities.[21] Instead, a system of proportional representation was insisted upon by the Sinhalese majority.[22]

Although it was supposed to provide a check against majority domination, this changed soon after independence: one of the first laws passed by the new administration was to remove the vote from almost all Indian Tamils living in Sri Lanka, guaranteeing that the Sinhalese could achieve the two-thirds majority needed to enact constitutional changes without the minority vote.[23] The Tamil leadership had made a crucial mistake in not making sure to sufficiently protect against Sinhalese domination. Navaratnam is extremely critical of the Tamil leadership at this crucial moment, stating that,

The record of the Tamil leadership of this period stands out as the most shameful performance of the century...At a time when the highest calibre of statesmanship and the most unselfish devotion to the interests of the people at large was called for this inane leadership only looked after their own interests and those of their class.[24]

He goes on to chastise the Tamil leadership for trusting the Sinhalese instead of ensuring Tamil representation. Tamil elites trusting the Sinhalese government would become a recurrent theme in Tamil-Sinhalese relations, and would lead to the eventual distrust of both the Sri Lankan political system and the Tamil political parties as means to achieving any worthy ends. The Tamil leadership were only concerned with their personal, short-term interests and not the long term interests of the Tamil people, which "Expose[d] the leadership to the charge that they betrayed the Tamil people at the most critical hour in their history." [25] Although a harsh assessment, it is also correct. The failure to realize that these institutions would not guarantee the safety of the Tamil people allowed for thirty years of Sinhalese domination and continued subordination of the Tamil minority. Sinhalese political domination is the root cause of the ensuing developments and the eventual Tamil demand for secession.

## *Sinhala Domination*

One development that resulted from this Sinhalese domination was the Sinhala Only Movement. Prior to independence, Swabasha (self-language) referred to the switch from English to both Tamil and Sinhalese at the time of independence.[26] At this point, it was meant to provide upward mobility to members of the lower class, who thus far had been denied government jobs due to their lack of English. Up until independence, party politics had not taken hold so the Sinhalese elites saw no reason not to co-operate with their Tamil counterparts.[27] Even after

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independence, the ruling United National Party (UNP) made numerous guarantees to the Tamil people that their language rights would be protected.[28]

However, there was increasing resentment from the Sinhalese population regarding the inclusion of Tamil as a national language. The Sinhalese, who were far behind the Tamils in university enrolment and government employment, began to mobilize to demand preferential language policies to counter this inequality. With the upcoming 1956 election and the need to secure the Sinhalese vote, Sinhala party leaders now began adopting the Sinhala Only Act as their platform. The Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), the main Sinhalese opposition to the UNP, did just this: during his campaign, Bandaranaike, leader of the SLFP, promised to make "Sinhala only" a reality "within 24 hours." [29] Subsequently, this led to Kotelawala, leader of the UNP, to renege on his commitments to the Tamil people, stating, "Whatever my majority my first resolution in parliament will be the 'Sinhalese only' motion." [30] Once again, promises to the Tamil people had been forgone for political gains.

The 1956 election and the adoption of the Sinhala Only Movement also marked the beginning of ethnic outbidding in Sri Lankan party politics. The Mahajana Eksah Peramuna (MEP, People's United Front) coalition led by Bandaranaike won a landslide election, and soon after passed the Sinhala Only Act. What frightened the Tamil people was the fact that the Act, "paved the way for a quick assimilation into the majority Sinhalese mainstream, and threatened the very survival of the Tamils as an ethnically and culturally distinct people." [31] This fear would only be heightened by subsequent Sinhalese policies.

Under the presidency of Bandaranaike's wife, Sirimavo, the Sinhala language policy and its repression of the Tamil people only grew worse. [32] Unfortunately, the Tamil leadership failed to learn from its past mistakes and once again trusted this government to ensure the protection of Tamil language rights. They encouraged Tamils outside of their constituencies to vote for Mrs. Bandaranaike, solidifying her majority in government. [33] However, "When the election ensured that the SLFP has a majority to govern on its own, Mrs. Bandaranaike cavalierly disregarded the unwritten promises made to the Federal Party (FP) leaders." [34] She went on to censor Tamil entertainment and entertainers, passed the Language of the Courts Act, which expanded the use of Sinhala in courthouses, and completely ignored the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act that was passed in 1958. [35] The effects on the Tamils were enormous:

While 30 percent of the Ceylon Administration Service, 50 percent of the clerical service, 60 percent of the engineers and doctors, 40 percent of the armed forces, and 40 percent of the labour force in 1956...By 1970, they had plummeted to 5 percent, 5 percent, 10 percent, 1 percent, and 5 percent respectively. [36]

The Sinhala Only movement also bled into other forms of Tamil subordination, such as the colonization of the Tamil homeland, discussed below.

## *Resettlement*

Colonization of the Northern and Eastern provinces was another way in which the Sinhala government pushed for cultural assimilation while completely neglecting the needs of the Tamil people. The resettlement scheme had two aims: firstly, to decrease the voting strength of the Tamil people in these areas; secondly, to delegitimize Tamil claims that these were their traditional homelands where they had a significant majority. [37] Re-settlement induced fear in the Tamils that their distinct territory may be lost, and with it their distinct culture. Later, once the violent secessionist movement had begun, "the long standing government policy of resettling Sinhalese on Tamil land [became] a constant catalyst for massacres." [38]

## *Failure to Compromise*

Before the demand for secession was made, the Tamil leadership tried on numerous occasions to work through the government to achieve its goals. On all these occasions, although promises of parity and protection were often made to the Tamil people, their demands were ultimately ignored. In the mid-1950s, the FP, then lead by Chelvanayakam, made demands for a federal structure, linguistic parity, the end to Sinhalese colonization, and the re-enfranchisement

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of the Tamil Indians.[39] The demands sought to work within the state structure and in no way hinted at a secessionist movement.

The initial result of these demands was a compromise reached between the FP and the MEP known as the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact (BC Pact), which saw the FP making large sacrifices in its demands in order to work peacefully with the government.[40] Even so, under pressure from Buddhist monks and the opposition party, Bandaranaike, “tore up a copy of the pact in front of the assembled monks who clapped in joy.”[41] This is another example of where the Sinhalese leadership broke promises to the Tamil people in favour of satisfying the Sinhalese majority, entrenching the mistrust that the Tamil people had begun to feel towards the Sinhalese government. Navaratnam, who was present with Chelvanayakam during the drafting of the BC Pact, expresses his image of the Sinhalese people after its failure: “The repudiation of that settlement conveyed only one message, namely, that the Sinhalese people and their Government were in no mood to deal with the Tamil-speaking people except on terms of Tamil subservience.”[42] In time, these terms of subservience would come to be whole-heartedly rejected by the Tamil youth in exchange for a violent struggle for independence.

Another attempt at compromise was the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act passed in 1958.[43] However, it suffered from the same problems as the BC Pact. First, the provisions laid out in it were wholly inadequate. Moreover, although it did not infringe upon Sinhalese rights at all, it still led to the assassination of Bandaranaike by Sinhalese monks.[44] This exemplifies how, as early as 1958, the politics of ethnic outbidding and the inability to make concessions had become deeply engrained in the political system of Sri Lanka. Most importantly, the Tamil Language Act was never even implemented and, “made no difference whatsoever.”[45]

The 1956 election confirmed that attempting to work through government institutions was futile for gaining Tamil rights and protections. In the election, the UNP needed the support of the FP to gain a majority, so it agreed to the Senanayake-Chelvanayaka Pact (DC Pact).[46] This would ensure Tamil language rights in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, as well as stop the colonization scheme and recognize these two provinces as a distinctly Tamil region. Similarly to the BC Pact, no mention of secession or separatism was made by the FP, which still hoped to work within the Sri Lankan government. Not surprisingly, the DC Pact, like its predecessor, was abandoned due to pressure from the Sinhalese majority. The continued betrayal of the Tamil leadership by the Sinhalese government, “left the FP and the Tamils with no alternative but to turn their backs on the single federalised island entity they had striven for.”[47] From this point onwards, their demands switched to a call for a separate Tamil Eelam (homeland).

## *Violent Oppression*

Prior to the extreme violence and terrorism of the LTTE in their fight for Tamil Eelam, the Tamil people attempted to use non-violent protest to achieve their political goals. Satyagraha (non-violent) campaigns were mainly espoused by Chelvanayakam, who hoped to emulate the successes of Ghandi in India.[48] The first instance of satyagraha was in response to the passing of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956. This was met with immediate violence from Sinhalese.[49] The violence soon expanded, and resulted in the Anti-Tamil Riots of 1956. The irony here is that it is hard to pinpoint exactly what the Sinhalese were rioting over, for it was the Tamil language that had just been suppressed by law. What was even more disturbing was the conduct of the security forces, who were accused of allowing for much of the violence to occur and of being partial to the Sinhalese rioters.[50] The result of this was that, “the partial treatment meted out to those involved in the riots undermined Tamils’ confidence in the country’s governing institutions.”[51] However, if the security forces treatment of the Tamils in this case undermined their confidence, its subsequent treatment of Tamils during non-violent campaigns would lead to the complete rejection of the Security Force as a legitimate institution.

When the Sinhala Only Act took effect in 1961, the second major satyagraha campaign commenced. This time, when the military intervened, they imposed a brutal state of emergency: “Tamils were ordered about and searched in humiliating fashion, beaten, and stoned by soldiers passing by in military vehicles, and Tamil women were occasionally raped, so that by the mid-1960s, the army especially was seen as a Sinhalese occupation force.”[52] By this point, the military, along with the government behind it, was viewed as completely illegitimate by the Tamil people. The Sinhalese-Tamil divide had become so sharp that the government and military, which are meant to

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protect their citizens impartially, had taken to defending the Sinhalese while showing no regard at all for the lives and livelihood of the Tamil people. This also led the Tamil people to reject non-violence as a useful means to their political goals:

Tamils had become especially convinced that resorting to satyagraha was meaningless against successive Sinhalese governments that did not respect fundamental civil liberties, displayed no qualms about using violence to suppress peaceful protest, and were determined to create a Sinhalese ethnocracy.[53]

From this point onward, the Tamil people would seek to achieve their goals through violent means.

Once violent interactions become the norm, retributive violence led to a mutually-enforcing hostile environment between the Tamils and Sinhalese. As noted above, the Sinhalese people and government were the first to use violence. As well, although the LTTE is often sighted for its acts of terrorism, it should be remember that the first major assassination in 1956 of Bandaranaike was committed by two Sinhalese Buddhist monks.[54] Therefore the use of violence, both for suppression and terrorism, had been legitimized before the Tamil people resorted to violent tactics. However, by 1977, Tamil youths had become extremely dissatisfied with the Sinhalese government and the Tamil leadership alike. They had begun resorting to terrorist activity, committing assassinations of Tamil 'collaborators' and police officials while robbing banks to fund their activities.[55]

This instigated the 1977 Anti-Tamil Riots. These were led by the armed forces, were extremely brutal, and simply led to the marginalization and radicalization of more Tamils. Then, in 1983, the LTTE successfully carried out an attack which killed 13 soldiers.[56] This sparked retaliation by soldiers, who took to terrorizing Tamils in Jaffna. The result was the worst violence yet in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The cycle of terrorist activity, responded to by Security Force crack down, which leads to more terrorist activity, shows how once violence became normalized, it became mutually reinforcing and only heightened the divide between Sinhalese and Tamil. This can be seen as the last factor which guaranteed that the ethnic conflict would turn out to be a bloody and violent secessionist movement, with little compromise and no mercy involved.

## Conclusions

### *Demand for Secession*

In conclusion, the demand for a separate state resulted from the realization that Tamil interests and security could not be provided by Sri Lanka. Since independence, the Sinhala Only policy, coupled with the colonization schemes, have severely limited the opportunities afforded to the Sri Lankan Tamils. Some Sinhalese elites, such as Perera, had enough foresight to see that subordinating the Tamils would, "Be disastrous for the welfare of this country, [for] we shall have a perpetual division of the country, we shall never get a united Ceylon and we shall have a tremendous amount of bloodshed." [57] Furthermore, the partisan violence exhibited by the Sri Lankan armed forces has convinced the Tamil people that their physical security is not provided by the Sri Lankan government. These two taken together led the Tamil people to lose all faith in the Sri Lankan state and its institutions and demand their own state.

### *Adoption of Violence*

Similarly, the recourse to violence arose because in the same way that their interests and security could not be gained through the Sri Lankan state, neither could their independence. This was mainly due to the consistent and repeated inability of their own leadership to achieve any meaningful gains through government institutions, as well as the failure of non-violent means of achieving their goals. Tamil youths saw their leaders repeatedly fall for the false promises held out by the Sinhalese governments, only to see these promises repeatedly broken. Similarly, non-violence achieved little more than police brutality and rioting against the Tamil population. As these methods had proved inadequate, the Tamil youth were left with only one alternative: violent confrontation.

### *Future Considerations*

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Overall, the Tamil people had no faith in the Sri Lankan state by 1983. Not only had it lost faith in the Sinhalese leadership's ability to meet Tamil needs, it had also lost faith in the Tamil leadership's ability to bring about those changes through peaceful government institutions.

Today, little of this has changed. Although the LTTE has been defeated, the Tamil people still have no faith in the Sinhalese rulers of Sri Lanka and do not trust the military to protect them. Although concessions have been made over the past 30 years regarding autonomy and language issues, it has been shown that promises made by the Sinhalese government rarely materialize in reality. A certain level of trust must be fostered between these two groups in order for them to occupy the island together in relative harmony. The Sinhalese government cannot simply occupy the Tamil areas and rule through force. Lasantha Wickrematunge, a Sri Lankan journalist who was assassinated in 2009 by the government, summarizes well:

Military occupation of the country's north and east will require the Tamil people of those regions to live eternally as second-class citizens, deprived of all self-respect... The wounds of war will scar them forever, and you will have an even more bitter and hateful diaspora to contend with. A problem amenable to a political solution will thus become a festering wound that will yield strife for all eternity.[58]

The Sinhalese must be sincere this time around. They must keep their promises to the Tamil people and show them that their interests and security can be provided within a united Sri Lankan State. If not, it is only a matter of time before they resume their violent struggle for a state of their own.

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# **Sri Lanka, Ethnic Conflict, and the Rise of a Violent Secessionist Movement**

Written by Declan O'Briain

[54] O'Balance, Edgar (1989); op. cit., p. 3

[55] DeVotta, Neil (2004); op. cit., p. 169

[56] O'Balance, Edgar (1989); op. cit., p. 21

[57] DeVotta, Neil (2004); op. cit., p. 58

[58] Anderson, Jon Lee (2011); Death of A Tiger. New Yorker

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